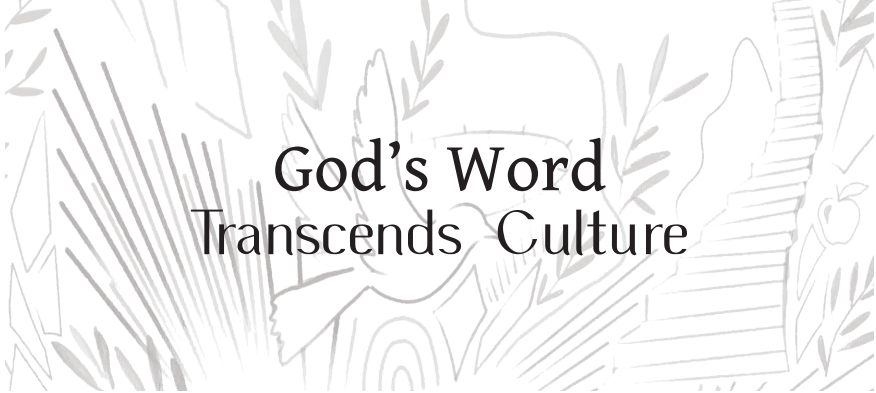




CHAPTER 1

God's Word Transcends Culture

*It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves,
but you, in these things which now have been announced to you
through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit.*

– 1 Peter 1:12 NASB

One degree off course, and in one foot you'll miss your target by 0.2 inches—according to many leadership trainings that commonly emphasize the “one-degree principle.” Insignificant as 0.2 inches might be, you might notice being off target by 5.2 feet after 100 yards. Traveling in California from the Bay Area to Orange County, you would miss your targeted location by 6 miles. Traveling to the moon, one degree of variation would send you off target by over 4,000 miles; and to the sun, over 1.6 million miles. Scrutinizing one degree off target in the here and now seems nitpicky and petty. But over time, if left unchecked, one degree of theological-missiological drift can degenerate into error so wide and so deep it is beyond modification, apart from extraordinary reformation and revival.

Deeds, not creeds. Jesus, not Christianity. A relationship, not a religion. Doxology, not theology. Jesus unites, but doctrine divides. Such was the sentimentalism of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theological liberalism. And such is the minimalism of twenty-first-century evangelicalism. While many who have studied theology and esteem its benefits might dismiss this as trifling, we should beware lest we assume the gospel. We can too easily set aside “old-fashioned” doctrines with our own creative ideas that we deem more sophisticated and erudite. Many missionaries and culture warriors are conversant enough with theological categories that they feel immune to error. So, dressing up their culturally savvy nuances with winsome “gospel-centered” language, their off-center “new perspectives” creep in unnoticed.

Let us remember, no matter how many years of ministry we have behind us or how much the “gospel-centered movement” has influenced us, we are vulnerable to deception. We are susceptible to assuming the gospel, growing bored with the gospel, reimagining the gospel, and misapplying the gospel. Innovating the gospel often comes from confusing its consequential implications with its central indicatives.

Typically, on the mission field and in missiological literature, issues of target culture, degrees of contextualization, and methods of relevant communication dominate missiological discussions. Occasionally, field practitioners and missiologists affirm that theological foundations and apologetics are important. But many give meager attention to them, compared to the overwhelming attention devoted to culture and contextualization. The majority of missionaries are incredibly skilled at diplomacy, mediation, and communication because they have learned how to read people and speak their language, literally—no small feat.

In all candor, much of these widespread emphases on missiological praxis over against historical evangelical doctrines comes from the motivation of not committing the culturally offensive errors of previous generations of missionaries. To be sure, the

history of the Western missionary movement is littered with sins, errors, and cultural offenses. Volumes of literature record the negative effects of European missions blending with state power to civilize the non-European world. Nevertheless, the legacy of missions in the West has matured much over the generations. Christ has been gracious and faithful to build His church in spite of us, not because of us.

Here's the point: the challenge is that because analyzing and evaluating culture and contextual nuances is so second-nature for most missionaries, a slow

abdication of scriptural authority and scriptural sufficiency can occur. Some gradually but increasingly focus on the target culture's interpretation of terms and meaning more than on the Bible's transcultural terms and doctrinal meaning. Missi-

A missionary who is mainly seeking to *relevantly contextualize* the gospel might unintentionally change the gospel to fit it within the target cultural value system. But a missionary who is mainly seeking to *rightly communicate* the gospel will seek to understand their cultural value system and their language.

ologists must have a formidable Bibliology that dominates their interpretation of doctrinal truth and guides their hermeneutical priorities. Such grounded Bibliology should steer their study of cultural values, cultural anthropology, communication theory, linguistics, translation, and discipleship. Few pieces of missiological literature commence with or even include a chapter on the uniqueness, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture. That observation is quite revealing.

To put it in practical terms, a missionary who is mainly seeking to *relevantly contextualize* the gospel might unintentionally change the gospel to fit it within the target cultural value system. But a missionary who is mainly seeking to *rightly communicate* the gospel will seek to understand their cultural value system and their language. He does this so he can clearly explain the original

problem of guilt and corruption in Adam and the corresponding solution of Christ's penal substitutionary atonement and imputed righteousness. Such a missionary will then show how Christ secures the good, true, and beautiful aspects of their target culture's perceived values for those who receive Christ through faith alone. For this reason, this chapter focuses on the transcultural and transgenerational nature of Scripture that should guide our doctrine and missiology.

Paul, Peter, and an Off-Center Gospel

Paul describes a time when Peter had been eating unclean foods with Gentile believers but out of fear of the Jews and how they might persecute the Christians, he began compelling them to live like Jews in order to be in fellowship. Peter's conduct was suggesting they must keep the law to be saved (Gal. 2:11–14). The devil was crafty enough to influence Spirit-filled Peter to uphold a false gospel that, in Peter's perspective, honored Christ and the well-being of fellow Christians. So, let us not naively presume that we—or any theologian or missiologist—are invulnerable to such devilish devices. Let us take heed of trusting our good intentions as though sincerity were a barometer for accuracy. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, everyone doing what is right in their own eyes.

Peter wasn't secretly trafficking Satanic contraband. Satan duped him one degree off-center, as it were, likely with noble-sounding reasons. False Christian leaders secretly slipped in and reintroduced law (Gal. 2:4). And do we think that irenic diplomacy, open-minded charitability, and authentic Christian community and conversation will correct any error if we only give it time? Remember that "even Barnabas was led astray" (v. 13). Conversely, Paul's approach to those who covertly smuggled in a counterfeit gospel was to "not yield in submission [to them] even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved" (v. 5). Additionally, Paul did not feel intimidated

by the “influencers.” He snubbed their celebrity status because the truth was at stake and God has no favorites: “And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me” (v. 6). Paul was obviously more concerned with the truth over saving face or building bridges.

When Paul had to confront Peter for propagating a different gospel, he did not treat this as a minor dustup from an in-house debate (see Gal. 1:6–9). Paul straightaway condemned Peter—and to his face, publicly (2:11–14). This public confrontation was because Peter’s “conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel” (v. 14)—his *conduct*, not just his doctrine. Certainly false doctrine is much more destructive than hypocritical conduct. What does this say about us when we, for the sake of being nice, shy away from resisting Christian leaders who espouse false teaching and confuse law and gospel?

Because their culture placed a high value on shame and honor, we can assume Peter lost face, badly. Yet, more concerned to honor God than to save face with his friends, and seeking to please God and not man (Gal. 1:10), Paul knew that speaking the truth in love might not feel loving. He inquired, “Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?” (4:16). We must bear each other’s burdens and keep watch for our own souls and for one another lest we slip into theological and moral transgression (6:1–5).

Life is too fragile, eternity too long, and Jesus too worthy to worry about earning the right to be heard and securing social capital. Too many Christian leaders shield people from the sharp edges of biblical doctrine and God’s law. Their emasculated language sounds acquiescent, chipper, and soft. Such weightless language tiptoes around the tone-sensitive thought crimes of victimhood culture and the doublespeak of political correctness. Let us resolve to never lighten up, change up, or give up the truths of God’s law and God’s gospel.

To Whom Are We Listening?

Like Peter in this incident in Galatians, fear tends to drive missionaries. There is a fear of sharing the gospel too boldly or too frequently and risking the revocation of a visa or the loss of hard-earned relationships. For fear of offending the target peoples' understanding of biblical terms and definitions, sometimes we adopt their categories and upload Christian meaning into them. To be fair, though, among frontier least-reached people groups, that is sometimes a missionary's only option initially with the target language.

Sometimes the missionary, in an early conversation, must *lead* with the target peoples' categories in order to get to the gospel, but that is not always the case. Often a missionary must prioritize what is the most important thing to emphasize in the moment. This could be a potentially disagreeable definition of terms or a kindhearted conversation that creates opportunities for follow-up meetings and gospel teaching.

But other times, lack of definition and precision is, frankly, abdication of faithful evangelism. For instance, in a conversation with a Buddhist, when referencing John 14:6, instead of asserting that Jesus is exclusively *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life, a missionary might convey, "I believe that Jesus is the way, truth, and life for me. But that's just what I believe, and I don't want to force my beliefs on you." Seeking to "earn the right to be heard" and to "open the door for an influential friendship," this communicates that Jesus's teachings can be wise and helpful. But this presents His teachings as the Christian's version of Buddhist or Confucian proverbs. In other words, Christ is a good teacher because He is *useful* to me. This is utilitarian religion. Regardless of how useful Jesus is for me, hundreds of millions of people throughout church history have believed in the exclusivity of Christ. And many have suffered loss of all things for that confession. And even if only an unnoticeable few trust Scripture's claims, it's still the truth.