

Delicate Issues in Mission
Proclaiming a “Theologyless” Christ

by *Herbert Hoefler*

The Problem of Cultural Theology

Theological Diversity

One of the great difficulties in effective cross-cultural evangelism is how to present the Gospel without cultural baggage. In specific, we have the on-going dilemma that we are called to share our faith, but our faith is inevitably framed in our own personal cultural worldview. We end up trying to get people to accept the good news of God in Christ according to our own understanding of it.

Yet, we know that all through church history there have been many different theologies, beginning from the Scriptures themselves:

Could Luke’s audience have understood the theology of the book of Hebrews?

Could St. Paul and St. James have understood each other?

Could the Gentile churches and the Jerusalem church have understood each other?

When it comes to Holy Scripture, we have become comfortable to accept that there are various viewpoints, some which often seem quite contradictory. Since the Bible is authoritative, we embrace that tension between cultural viewpoints as part of the richness of the revelation.

However, we tend to be less able to live with theological diversity and tension in contemporary church thinking. We tend to be sure that our understanding and framing of the Gospel is correct and necessary. We accept others as fellow believers only if they say the same words of confession as we do. We often act much like the Judaizers who were Paul’s great nemesis.

These theological battles within the church have always been there, also from biblical times. However, my concern is when these hardened viewpoints come into our evangelistic efforts. I have written elsewhere about the difficulty people of major religions and also post-modern Westerners have with the traditional framing of the Gospel as substitutionary atonement (“Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord,” *Missiology*, October, 2005). The question then becomes, “How do we develop a presentation of the Gospel that

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enables the hearer to theologize within his/her own cultural framework?”

Theological Silence

I have long mused on the “theologyless” character of much of our authoritative documents in the church. For example, in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) it is striking that there is no explanation of what happened on the cross. The fact of Jesus’ death and resurrection is presented, but why this had to take place is not explained. The Gospel of John is a whole different phenomenon, for it comes at a much later stage in the church’s development and presents much of its theological reflection. In the initial gospel accounts, however, no theological explanation is imposed. We just have a story that is told, and the hearer must do her/his own reflecting, self-discovery, and self-convincing.

A second example of “theologyless” proclamation of Christ in the New Testament are the earliest evangelistic sermons of the church. In Acts 2 and 7, both Peter and Stephen proclaim that Jesus died and rose, but they offer no theological explanation as to why this had to happen. Similarly, Paul’s evangelistic sermons recorded in Acts 13, 16, 17, and 26 provide no theology of the cross and resurrection. One hint of Paul’s theological explanations in his epistles is found in 13:39:

Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

However, also here, the fact of justification is simply proclaimed, not explained. Faith arises in the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit, not in the mind by the power of a theological construct.

A third example of this “theologyless” presentation of the facts is in the classical creeds of the church. In both the Apostolic Creed and the Nicene Creed, we are called to profess simply the facts, that He “was made man... was crucified... buried... rose... ascended... sits at the right

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hand of the Father.” Why Jesus had to do all this is not confessed. The theological framing of these truths is left to the believer in each time and place.

What we do find in all three of these instances (in the gospels, the early church sermons, and the creeds) is that two effects of Jesus suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension are included in the proclamation: forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the creeds, these blessings are confessed in the third article: “I believe in the Holy Spirit... in the forgiveness of sins.”

The creeds and the evangelistic sermons also clearly call for recognition that this Jesus is Messiah and Lord, and repentance and allegiance to Him are expected. Once again, this call is made, but strikingly no theological explanation of why this is necessary is provided.

“Theologyless” Proclamation

“Repent, believe, receive” is the Gospel proclamation. How repentance and belief enable us to receive the blessings of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit is not explained. How much theology of atonement did the jailer at Philippi or the centurion Cornelius or the 3000 at Pentecost or even Saul know at their baptism? It was not their intellectual acceptance of a theological system that made them a Christian. It was their acceptance of the living Lord into their lives and hearts.

Is there a highly significant message and model for us here in our evangelistic work?

What would happen if we simply called people to know and accept the facts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection in our evangelistic work?

What if we taught the story and let its spiritual meaning arise inductively rather than deductively, trusting the Holy Spirit at work through the Word?

Might we allow new believers to frame their theological explanations with the same diversity as we see in the New Testament and throughout the history of Christian theology?

Might they come up with even different approaches to acknowledging Jesus’ blessings and lordship?

Or will we try to compel people to mouth the words that make sense to us, even though they make little sense to them?

In post-modern Western societies and in this age of global communications, there is a general awareness of the legitimate multiplicity of viewpoints. Can we look upon our Lord Jesus as a diamond that has many aspects to it?

Can we look upon the church as a house with many doors? It doesn’t matter which door you use to enter. As you explore the house, you will come to fullness of truth. The key to each door in the house is the acceptance of Jesus as Lord of one’s life. How one explains that is a matter of freedom and creativity, in consultation with the others in the house.

Varieties of Cultural Theology **Shame-Based Cultures**

Let us experiment a bit with this. For example, with people from a shame-based social framework, the atoning sacrifice of our Lord on the cross might be understood as joining us in our shame. Jesus “endured the cross, scorning its shame.” (Heb 12:2) Jesus came as representative Man in the Incarnation. We lived in shame by our rebelliousness and sin, dishonoring the Father.

Jesus came to take our shame upon Himself, offering Himself as Man’s apology to the Father. He took the abandonment of the Father that we deserved. (Mk 14:34) By raising Jesus up in glory, the Father affirms that the apology was accepted.

Those who join in Jesus' apology join in the Father's affirmation. God sends them His Spirit in their hearts so they know deep within that they are restored.

Animist Cultures

Most of the peoples of the world live in animist cultures. These societies tend to be tribal in structure with family loyalty as the governing virtue. They also live in intimate awareness of the spirit world and in fear of their uncontrolled, unpredictable power. As people from this worldview look at the saving work of God in Christ, they will emphasize the aspect of Jesus' battle with the Evil One and his hosts.

Animistic peoples know the power of the spirit world, and they fear the evil spirits. It is a great comfort for them to know that Jesus came to "tie up the strong man" in his house (Mt. 12:29), casting out demons. They view Jesus' final days and hours in the larger context of this battle, as the powers of evil array against him through the perpetrators of his suffering and death. Jesus is tempted, He struggles, He suffers, He even dies; but His victory is proclaimed on Easter Day. The evil spirits are conquered, and all who receive the Victor's Spirit share in His victory and "rejoice that the spirits submit" to them. (Lk 10:20)

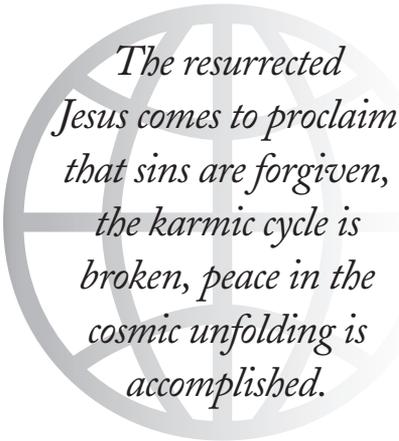
In His temptation, from this worldview, Jesus' greatest agony is in relation to His Father. Jesus is obedient to the command of His Father Who "sent His one and only Son" (Jn 3:16), and He struggles to remain faithful to His Father's will: "Not My will but Yours be done." (Lk 22:42) That is why Jesus shouts in deepest anguish when the Father abandons Him at the cross so that He might experience all the pains of hell in our place. (Mk 15:34) Yet, Jesus remains faithful to the end to His Father's will, overcoming all the temptations to disobedience. By virtue of His total obedience, Jesus, as our brother Man, can intercede on our behalf and gain the Father's forgiveness for our weaknesses in temptation, beginning with the very ones whom the Evil

One used to tempt and crucify Him: "Father, forgive them..." (Lk 23:34)

Muslim Cultures

In a proclamation of the cross to the Muslims, we are confronted by another major obstacle. Muslims understand from the Qur'an that Jesus never died on the cross. God would not allow one of His prophets to suffer such an ignominious death. Rather, God miraculously brought Jesus to heaven, from where he will come again at the end of time.

In this case, might we not responsibly speak of the atoning effect of the



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crucifixion in this way: It is true that God might not allow His prophet to suffer so shamefully. However, in this case, God in His unfathomable love became man and became the prophet Himself. In His love for humankind, God "emptied Himself... was found in appearance as a man... humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross." (Phil 2: 7-8) God Himself became the great "Muslim" ("obedient one") in Jesus: "Father, not my will but Thine be done." (Lk 22:42)

When God raised the divine Prophet on Easter, He affirmed to all the world that He would have mercy upon all who followed Him. Our obedience now is not out of fear of God's eternal judgment. We are filled with the Spirit of Jesus and obey out of love and gratitude.

Hindu Cultures

In proclaiming the cross to Hindus, another facet of the diamond might shine forth with brilliance and

attraction. In Hindu culture, one of the prime signs of a truly "realized person," one who has become grounded in the divine, is the overriding glow of inner peace that is exuded. Hindus admire Jesus so much because they see that divine inner glow in the stories of His life and in the teachings to His disciples.

Even in Jesus' final days of suffering and death, He revealed His divine character. "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth." (Is 53:7) Jesus was slapped and mocked and taunted by His captors and His accusers. He was betrayed, he was disowned, by one of His own. He was abandoned by all but a few women. Yet, even on the cross He had only peace in His heart. He thought only of others: His mother, a repentant thief, even those who perpetrated the crime against Him ("Father, forgive them...").

God came Himself to the suffering of the cross that He might endure all the injustice that Man might perpetrate and yet pronounce that our sins are forgiven. In His resurrection, Jesus went to meet one group of disciples after the other just to proclaim to them this divine assurance: "Peace be with you!" Living in God's gracious forgiveness through Jesus, we too live in inner peace and confidence. We live in His Spirit, which is the Holy Spirit.

Buddhist Cultures

Fourthly, we think of the proclamation of the crucifixion among those of the Buddhist worldview. Gautama the Buddha's analysis of the human condition was that we are all mired in suffering caused by our cravings in life. In his Eightfold Path, the Buddha taught a way for humankind to gain control of these cravings and thereby gain peace in their heart. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, therefore, becomes a clear demonstration of the tragic fact that Gautama recognized so clearly: the world is full of pain. We see ourselves and our plight in Jesus on the cross.

The difference is that Jesus is not suffering because of His own failings. He is suffering as a victim of the

cravings of others. His equanimity on the cross is not for the sake of His own achievement of nirvana. Jesus is the divine "Buddha Nature." As representative Man, God Himself enters our suffering. We see our own selfish cravings in the actions of those who victimized Jesus. God Himself endures the karma that our evil actions create. We are set free from the just results of our cravings and deeds because God has taken them on Himself in Jesus. The resurrected Jesus comes to proclaim that sins are forgiven, the karmic cycle is

when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." (Jn 12:32) He showed the power of the forgiveness of sins so that even His crucifiers were transformed: the centurion at the cross and Nicodemus of the Sanhedrin. Jesus revealed to all the world the gracious heart of God upon which we all can build our lives and our societies. We pray that this Spirit of Jesus might fall upon us.

Theologies in a Global Society

In all of these salvation paradigms we have affirmed the three elements

People could enter into the magnificent mystery of Jesus' atoning work in the way that makes sense to them. Those new theologies would speak to those who are alienated from our traditional paradigms. They would enter into the freeing walk with Jesus in the simple early church profession of faith: "Jesus is Lord!" In my culture. In my worldview. In the yearnings of my heart. **IJFM**

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broken, peace in the cosmic unfolding is accomplished. We now live in the peace and assurance of the Spirit that Jesus sends to His followers.

Post-Modern Cultures

Among post-modern youth around the world, there is a great deal of skepticism about absolutist claims: How do you really know that your worldview is true? For them, the truth is in the results. The crucial question for them is if it works. Does this worldview make for a better human and a better society?

The crucifixion is a paradoxical demonstration that victory is in defeat. The absolutist ideologies proclaim that theirs is the path of victory. But what for? Just for another form of oppression? Jesus' cross proclaims the triumph of freedom. Jesus walked the talk and faced the implications of His convictions. He freely chose the path of love and forgiveness, fully knowing that it would lead to opposition and oppression from the powers in the land. The powers thought they had snuffed out His alternative worldview of respect for all and humble servanthood.

Jesus took the consequence of his worldview right to the suffering and death of the cross, and He won the hearts of the world. He said, "But I,

that the Synoptic gospels, the early church sermons, and the Creeds proclaim: Jesus as the Incarnate Lord, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Each paradigm draws on different facets of the one story, addressing the questions and yearnings of different hearts. These interpretations of the crucifixion can be the nucleus of whole new theologies.

I have tried to imagine how these interpretations might take place. However, I propose that we not even do that in our proclamation. Rather, we trust the Holy Spirit to work faith in these new hearts, allying with God through Jesus in the way that makes sense to them. In time, their theological reflections will come. Just as these various cultures have enriched the world in which we live, these various theologies will enrich the church.

We are living in a global village. People are aware of the many worldviews that are possible. Our theologies must be as varied and numerous as the worldviews people hold. By fostering and offering theologies that derive from a diversity of worldviews, we will enable many different people to resonate with the Gospel message. The theology of the church would be as varied and rich as the cultures of the world.