

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 14: Contextualizing the Gospel to the Culture

Culture requires special study by foreigners to avoid misunderstandings and to present the gospel in the most relevant and appropriate ways. In his essay "On Liberty," John Stuart Mill remarked on the widely different values and assumptions of different cultures: "No two ages, and scarcely any two countries, have decided it alike; and the decision of one age or country is a wonder to another. Yet the people of any given age and country no more suspect any difficulty in it, than if it were a subject on which mankind had always been agreed. The rules which they obtain among themselves appear to them self-evident and self-justifying." The Apostle Paul recognized that different groups of people had different needs and concerns: "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:22). He integrated an understanding of local culture and contemporary needs into his preaching and demonstrated similarities between the gospel teachings and cultural ideals in his discourse to the Athenians on Mars Hill by citing the work of Greek poets: "For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring" (Acts 17:28). He wrote: "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

Paul could not have tailored his message to different cultures without careful study of cultural values, priorities, and real and perceived needs. Similarly, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were all directed to different audiences -- Jews, Romans, Greeks, and "all the world," respectively -- with each version presenting Christ's teachings and ministry in a manner most convincing and relevant to the target culture. Would the early church have experienced the same initial growth if the authors had presented the gospel message to everyone in the same fashion without regard to cultural considerations, local conditions, or personal needs? Yet Jews, Romans, and Greeks were all united under the single government of the Roman Empire. If each of these groups required a different approach to maximize receptivity, how great a need do we have today to contextualize the gospel message to the tens of thousands of people groups and cultures in over 250 nations around the world?

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Find Out About the People in your Country and Area

Evangelist Rick Warren wrote: "Targeting for evangelism begins with finding out all you can about your community. Your church needs to define its target in four specific ways: geographically, demographically, culturally, and spiritually ... I must pay as much attention to the geography, customs, culture, and religious background of my community as I do to those who lived in Bible times if I am to faithfully communicate God's Word."[144] A missionary should consider: What are cultural beliefs that share common ground with the gospel? What approaches are considered to be appropriate or inappropriate within this culture? What do people consider to be their greatest needs? What cultural beliefs might present obstacles for potential investigators, and how can they effectively be addressed? When missionaries are fully aware of local needs, beliefs, and opportunities, they are able to direct their time and energies much more effectively.

Cultural Issues Today

Brigham Young University sociologist Lawrence Young noted: "Mormonism attempts to take the form of a community that was developed in a specific place -- where the Mormon Church is one of the most powerful social actors -- and to transport that community to other host societies that are not well matched."[145] Sociologist Tim Heaton reported that by the late 1980s, 80 percent of church growth occurred outside of the United States, and Utah accounted for only 3 percent of membership growth -- overwhelmingly from baptisms of children of record rather than convert baptisms.[146] In 1987, Elder Boyd K. Packer reminded a group of Church leaders that "we can't move [into various countries] with a 1947 Utah Church! Could it be that we are not prepared to take the gospel because we are not prepared to take (and they are not prepared to receive) all of the things we have wrapped up with it as extra baggage?"[147]

The universality of the gospel message does not eliminate the need to present this message in a culturally relevant and

understandable fashion. Neither a 1947 Utah Church nor a 2007 Utah Church can be readily transplanted to other cultural settings without differentiating between the principles of the everlasting gospel and American cultural baggage. This mismatch is often perpetuated by missionary research that continues to be conducted primarily in English-speaking areas under the assumption that U.S. outreach findings will be applicable to the rest of the world because "there is one gospel is for all people." The large discrepancy between LDS convert retention in the United States (approximately 40 percent) and international areas (20 to 25 percent) suggests that LDS programs developed in North America unwittingly draw too much from the cultural setting of the American church and, at least in part, fail to tailor approaches in a fashion appropriate for other cultures and conditions.

In many nations, slow church growth has been related in part to a failure to present the gospel in a culturally relevant manner, rather than to hard-heartedness of local people. German LDS member Peter Wollauer pointed out the problems of exporting Utah-based missionary paradigms to other cultures: "German missionary work was slow for a long time because mission presidents from the United States used American methods of contacting and teaching potential converts. With more German mission presidents, stake and ward leaders 'emancipated' from U.S. leaders, the conversion rate has picked up. That does not mean that we ignore the counsel and suggestions of General Authorities, but it does mean that we feel free to find our own German and Austrian way to put these suggestions into practice."[148] He noted that all Church instruction manuals and videos are produced in the United States and are often less relevant or understandable for those of other cultures: "The videos intellectually bring the message, but emotionally there is a lack of identification -- high school, problems with dating, a teaching moment in the desert. The young people are not able to feel the situation, because the school system is very different, the tradition of dating is very different, and there is no desert in Germany." Former German missionary Helmut Lotz wrote: "When I served a mission in Germany in 1985, I was called to a committee that had to review the missionary discussions for cultural adaptation ... To date, the church has not even corrected the grammatical mistakes. Nor has anybody made an effort to use illustrations that would be compatible with German culture ... There is no gospel reason why every Mormon needs to become half an American. Evangelicals and Pentecostals seem to adapt to non-American cultures more effectively."[149] Similar difficulties have been noted by members from many other cultures. In an age where increasing numbers of LDS members live outside of the United States, this transfer of Utah culture along with the gospel message may help one to understand why the LDS Church is still commonly regarded as an "American Church" by most of its own international members, even in English-speaking nations.[150]

If Utah-based materials and methodologies are less relevant in Germany, which shares Western heritage and close ties with the United States, the challenges of transplanting them into non-Western cultures are even greater. For example, the Missionary Guide (1986-2004) carried role-playing dialogues suggesting that approaching nonmembers with tangential small talk and then leading into a gospel conversation was universally more effective than a direct approach. Yet as a missionary in Russia, I found that an indirect approach by strangers was often perceived as being evasive or even dishonest, while a direct approach was more effective.

The new Preach My Gospel manual offers no specific insights into different cultures, but it removes many of the U.S. culture-based tactics found in past editions that were unsuitable in other cultural settings and encourages missionaries to develop and use their own cultural insights rather than following a formula. Better research, careful study, and involvement of local members will be required to develop effective ways of presenting LDS beliefs in non-Western cultures and among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other non-Christians.

[144] Warren, Rick, The Purpose Driven Church, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995, 150.
[145] Young, Lawrence A., "Confronting Turbulent Environments," in Contemporary Mormonism Social Science Perspectives, eds. Marie Cornwall, Tim Heaton, and Lawrence Young, Chicago: University of Illinois, 1994, 56-60.
[146] Heaton, Tim B., "Vital Statistics," in Encyclopedia of Mormonism, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, New York: McMillen, 1992, vol. 4:1522.
[147] Packer, Boyd K., as quoted in Dialogue, 21 (Fall 1988):97.
[148] Stack, Peggy Fletcher, "As Mormon Church Grows, Global Challenges Arise," Salt Lake Tribune, August 20, 1994.
[149] Lotz, Hellmut, personal communication, July 14. 2004.
[150] Newton, Marjorie, "Towards 2000: Mormonism in Australia," Dialogue, Spring 1996, 193-206.