My model for judging biblical passages as "revelation applicable for African churches"

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INTRODUCTION.

We are dealing with at least seven factors here. One, the Christian revelation as recorded in the Bible. Two, the desire to communicate this revelation to non-Western peoples. Three, the fact that there is a process called cross cultural communication which must take place before this task can be carried out. Four, when we received the Christian Revelation ourselves this same cross cultural process took place for the Bible was not originally given in English but in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

Five, in any process of cross cultural communication, both the communicator as well as the recipient face the tremendous task of separating that which is cultural from that which is supra-cultural so that the true message, nothing more, nothing less, uncolored by the components of either culture, is both given and received. Six, we assume that the Revelation we now have in the Bible is close enough to the original so that it can be transmitted across the cultural barriers that separate us from the Asian, African and Latin American world in such a way that they will have the full revelation of God in their own languages and dialects in full harmony with the non-offensive components of their culture.

Seven, there will have to be a selecting process on our part as we attempt to do this task. We have to become so accustomed to such purely local Jewish and Greek world practices which are found in the New Testament, such as, the "holy kiss", washing of feet in ceremony, women with their heads covered, etc., that we automatically dismiss them as components of the cultures of those days with no direct application to us in our day that we fail to realize how those of another culture will understand these commandments. Thus we will have to have some guidelines to help them see what is really only cultural, only for those people of that day, and what is supra-cultural, for all people in any period of the Church's history in this world.

I. CHRISTIANITY IS SUPRA-CULTURAL.

We must understand the nature of the Christian Revelation as being essentially "supra-cultural" (Kraft 1970;7) or "super-cultural" (Smalley 1955; 60). This is very important in light of the fact that the record of that Revelation was given to the Jewish nation. The tendency of many is to dismiss whatever in the Revelation is particularly offensive to them as being "the way the Jewish people of that day saw the matter, but of course not binding on us today". When one understands that the Revelation is supra-cultural (which I will use instead of super-cultural), then we are facing a different matter.

When I speak of Christianity as being essentially supra-cultural I mean at least two things.

One, the Christian God is the only true god. Therefore the Christian Faith is the only true faith. Thus it is binding on all men of all cultures. This is what Jesus Himself meant when He declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me! (John 14:6). It was for this reason He gave the Great Commission. It was for this He sent the Holy Spirit into the Church and into the world. This is how the Apostolic Church understood
the nature of the faith they were commissioned to proclaim. "Neither is there salvation is any other. For there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Two, the message proclaimed by that God is adaptable to all men of all ages of all cultures. Christianity is "Beyond Culture". It is transcendent above every culture and applicable to all of them. It cannot be identified with any of them, for they all are the work of man, therefore sinful as all that man does is tainted by sin. Yet it can identify itself with all of them for it was made for men and men are imprisoned by their cultures. It could never reach a single man if it did not do so in terms of his culture, for only in these terms can man even act or think. You cannot point to any culture and say, "there is Christianity". At the same time you cannot point to any culture and say, "Christianity could never be seen there". Christianity is supra-cultural, it is for all men of all cultures yet will refuse to be exactly identified with any of them.

11. CHRISTIANITY IS NOT ANTI-CULTURAL.

Missionaries have often been mistaken at this point. Some have felt that the only culture cannot contain Christianity. Thus it must be reshaped before the people can become true Christians. It must gradually lose its distinctiveness. The "Christian culture" must take its place. By "Christian culture" of course, they mean the missionary’s culture.

Such missionaries fail to discern at least three things. One, there is no such thing as a truly Christian culture, but only cultures in which Christian are: living, or cultures that have experienced the Christianizing influence of a larger number of Christians over a period of time and thus conform more to the Christian ideal. Two, men like to become Christians in terms of their own cultures not that of foreigners. I could even add to this the idea of coming to Christ with groups of their fellows for they are an essential part of their culture. Three, Christianity is not anti-culture. It does not destroy men's cultures before it can make them truly Christian.

What is the attitude of Christianity towards the multitudinous components which make up any culture?

A. IT IS INDIFFERENT TO THE MAJORITY OF THEM.

"The Kingdom of God is not a question of eating or drinking", the Scriptures say. Most cultural components represent just this sort of thing. Therefore the Faith will have nothing to say to them. It is concerned with much larger issues.

B. IT WILL WELCOME OTHERS OF THEM.

Even the so-called weaker cultures may often contain cultural components that are more "Christian" than those of other stronger cultures. The Hebrew Old Testament practice of leaving grain in the fields of the rich for the poor to glean is certainly more "Christian" than the U.S. practice of destroying surpluses in order to keep the prices up. These sorts of cc's (cultural components) are welcomed by the Christian faith.

C. STILL OTHERS IT WILL SEEK TO CHANGE.

Primarily those that have religious connections or violate Christian moral sentiments will fall under this heading. In the case of the former it will act...
always seek to eradicate the form but often only the function by providing, wherever feasible and necessary, a functional substitute for the offending item. Harvest festivals formerly dedicated to the gods would be a case in point. A Christian festival can be substituted which is dedicated to the Lord. Thus a void is not left in the culture and God receives all the honor.

The latter components violate the core of the Bible, represent a more serious matter. Here where the Word of God speaks the Christian leader must act. Widow burning and female baby strangulation would be cases in point. Here again all must be done to identify the cause behind the practice and deal with it. Otherwise the practice will go underground and may appear again in the far future as a motive for anti-Christian feelings or in an anti-Christian movement.

III. CHRISTIANITY HAS TAKEN UPON ITSELF "CULTURAL CLOTHING" IN ORDER TO BE INTELLIGIBLE TO MEN.

Charles H. Kraft has written,

The Christian God is represented in the Bible as desirous of communicating Himself to men. We observe from the biblical record that this communication has taken into account the cultures in which men are wrapped. We gain the impression that God views the cultures of men as channels usable for the interaction between Himself and men.... God saw fit to reveal Himself to the Hebrew people in terms of the Hebrew culture and language. The New Testament shows the same God beginning to reveal Himself to the Greco-Roman world in terms of first century Greco-Roman language and culture (Kraft 1963; 179).

It is precisely at this point where the trouble begins. We have a supra-cultural message revealed to men immersed in culture. Are not the limitations of that culture such that it will distort essential parts of the supra-cultural message and make it cultural?

We can be very confident about this matter because God not only "spake in times past ... by the prophets, ... (but) hath in these LAST DAYS SPOKEN UNTO US BY HIS SON" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God Himself became flesh to communicate to men. Thus He not only understands "Lo Humano" (what it means to be human) by virtue of being God, (as if that were not enough) but He became man. Thus His revelation is given in exactly the words and thought patterns that can be understood by all men of all ages and of all cultures.

If all men were Hebrews and all missionaries were Hebrew Christians like on the day of Pentecost (Speaking very generally, I am including the Gentile "God-fearers" as Hebrews for the sake of argument) we would have little further problem in communicating the Gospel at least in intelligible terms. The matter becomes much more complicated however, when we engage in cross cultural communication. And that is exactly why the Church has been left in this world.

Now we come to the heart of this paper. How do we communicate cross culturally this supra-cultural message so that its essential supra-cultural nature remains perfectly intact? I say perfectly on purpose. We cannot rest on the assumption that though we are able to get most of the essentials of the message over without leaving them colored by local cc's, yet admit that other essentials are possibly so colored that they are scarcely distinguishable any longer. This would mean the destruction of the Faith or at least lead to a syncretism that will always produce a sub-Christian experience.
As Kraft points out, this is essentially the type of communication problem Peter had when he proclaimed the Gospel to the household of Cornelius. (He could have chosen a better example for Cornelius was a 'god-fearer'. We will have to forget about this point and follow through with the illustration).

The diagram tells us the story. God communicates to Peter. Peter responds to God. The end view God has in mind in this contact with Peter is not the Apostle himself but a Gentile. He is going to use Peter to evangelize. He knows that Peter has never engaged in cross cultural communication before. Thus he will automatically color the Gospel in terms of his Hebrew cc's and probably confuse the matter pretty badly for the foreseen target of the message. Peter will certainly inject elements in the message which are purely cultural, not theological, for, as yet, Peter cannot tell the difference between the two. Thus God has to put him through a crash course in cross cultural communication. All this takes place in Acts 10:9-20. A bit bewildered by it all Peter is at least ready to comprehend that the CORE must be communicated at all times in cross cultural missionary communication but not the periphery, and that most of this 'Jewish Stuff' is purely periphery. He is now convinced that not only Jewish culture but also Roman culture can be a satisfactory channel of divine communication. This was a great step on Peter's part and he later got in trouble with his colleagues who had yet to learn this lesson. They were soon to learn it from Peter himself.

What was the result of this divinely arranged missionary journey? Gentiles could now become Christians without first becoming Jews, a thing unheard of in those days. With perhaps the exception of Paul and Barnabas, the early Church leaders all felt that for Gentiles to become true Christians, they first had to take upon them certain of the 'essential' Jewish customs. Circumcision would be a classic example. Kraft comments,

Rather naturally, the apostles regarded the culture into which God had come personally in Jesus Christ both as a particularly well suited vehicle of God's self manifestation, and (wrongly) as prescribing the only proper forms of human response to God.

Our story represents the first step in the correction of this false notion. The final step was taken in Acts 15 where it was officially recognized that what God had already been doing for several years through Paul and Barnabas was the right thing. Gentiles could receive the CORE of the faith without adopting Jewish culture.

Thus to the Early Church the Core of the Faith was not only discernible from the cc's of the Jewish culture in which it first appeared it was also transmittable in all its essential purity. Its having been wrapped in the cultural clothing of
the Jewish community had not damaged nor colored the faith once men began to learn how to distinguish between the two. Indeed, the Message could be communicated by Jews to Gentiles in terms that the latter could immediately identify with and, in turn, communicate to their fellow Gentiles.

One very important matter must be born in mind. The CORE will always have to be wrapped in cultural clothing wherever it may go. Otherwise it could not be communicated. Men cannot communicate in a vacuum. They have to communicate with other men. This will always involve cc's for man is man in society. Thus our fear of the presence of Jewish or American cc's mixed in with the CORE is no more of a problem than will always be faced whenever men from one culture attempt to communicate the Gospel or anything else to men of another. It is not peculiarly a Jewish or American problem. It is human-divine problem that has no earthly solution.

IV. SOME GUIDELINES TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE CORE AND THE PERIPHERY, THE SUPRACULTURAL AND THE CULTURAL.

A. WE MUST RECOGNIZE THAT, IN THE BIBLE, GOD IS DESIRIOUS OF COMMUNICATING HIS MIND TO HIS PEOPLE. THE BIBLE HAS NOT WRITTEN TO CONFUSE BUT TO ENLIGHTEN US. GOD WANTS US "TO THINK GOD'S THOUGHTS AFTER HIM". (Fuller)

With this clearly in mind our approach to the Bible will be like that of a child to a letter left by his father long ago while the father lived in another country and spoke a different language. The child would not approach the letter convinced that it will be so bound to the culture of that by-gone day and place that he will not be able to discern the CORE of its message. He will easily do so and delight in every word. He will find no difficulty understanding the essence of the letter nor in turn, communicating the CORE of the message to others in a different cultural setting or in another foreign language, if it were necessary.

B. PART OF THE ESSENTIAL OF THE MESSAGE, INSTEAD OF BEING LOST IN THE LOCAL CULTURE FLAVOR, CAN ONLY BE TRULY UNDERSTOOD IN LIGHT OF THAT CULTURE. THUS THE MISSIONARY TO THE AFRICAN OR AFRICAN WILL HAVE TO BECOME AN EXPERT IN BOTH THE HEBREW CULTURE OF THE WORLD OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH AND THE HOST CULTURE.

While the fear that too often, culture traps the CORE is everywhere recognized it is seldom mentioned that the very opposite is more apt to be true. The culture discovers the CORE. God was speaking to the Hebrews and the Early Church. To get over what He had to say he had to adopt the cultural mores of his listeners. They then contain, not cover over, the message. It must be decoded only in terms of the cultures or mores God chose in order to express His mind. Thus the cc's can be the key to unlock the eternal message, the CORE, given in terms of the culture of that day.

C. THE CULTURES OF MEN DO NOT SO DULL THEIR MINDS THAT THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL CANNOT PENETRATE FOR CHRIST IS "THE TRUE LIGHT THAT LIGHTETH EVERY MAN" (John 1:4-9).

We must not let the questions of cultural distortions keep us from our task. We can communicate the supra-cultural message cross culturally for the Spirit of Christ is at work in the hearts of men to prepare them for the message.

D. WE MUST BE VERY CAREFUL TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN FORM AND FUNCTION AS WE COMMUNICATE THE GOSPEL TO ASIAN, AFRICAN AND LATIN CHURCHES.

For example, the Scriptures say "Lie not one to another". How is this to be applied in another culture which has an entirely different view of lying than that
of the missionary or even of the Hebrew? Latin Culture is an example. It is not considered lying to stretch the truth in order to be polite. If the blunt truth will disrupt a vital social relationship Latin culture would look aghast at the crudeness and rudeness of one who would speak the blunt truth. By Latin cultural standards one is expected to be polite and it is not lying to do so. They have their own classification of what they consider to be a lie.

The function of the commandment not to lie is clear. The form it will take will be relative to local culture. If the function is being carried out even though with a different form, the missionary should be satisfied. The same applies in sacramental ceremonial and structural features of the Faith. The form they take must be very flexible so as to be meaningful to all the various cultures of the African world.

E. WE MUST FURTHER AVOID MIXING THE CORE WITH IDEAS TAKEN FROM A FEW ISOLATED VERSES WITHOUT JUDGING THEM WITHIN THE OVERALL CONTEXT OF SCRIPTURE.

There will be some cases where it may be difficult to discern if a particular part of Scripture represents CORE or PERIPHERY. A guideline in such cases will be the overall balance of Scripture touching that point. This will usually fully clarify the matter if the missionary can free himself from his own bias and let the Scriptures speak for themselves. Someone has said, "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense seek no other sense".

F. WE MUST NOT TRY TO IDENTIFY AS CORE BIBLICAL DIRECTIONS Plainly MEANT FOR A PARTICULAR TIME OR CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH HAVE LONG SINCE PAST. THE ONLY EXCEPTION WOULD BE IF THE LATER SCRIPTURES TOOK THOSE INCIDENTS AND MADE THEM BINDING UPON THE CHURCH OF ALL AGES.

I remember reading of a missionary working among a savage tribe in Borneo. A large scale people movement took place and thousands came to Christ. After some time the leaders (natives) of the young Church came across the command of God in reference to clean and unclean meats. They discovered that the serpent was one of the prohibited meats for the Jewish nation. It happened that serpent meat was one of the main staples of the tribe. They were greatly disturbed so they sought the help of the missionary in the matter. The missionary nowhere reveals his personal attitude towards the matter in his writings. He evidently refused to reveal them to the church leaders. He asked, "What does the Bible say about that matter?" They answered, "The Bible says that such meat is unclean." "Then you have your answer", was his only comment. Thus the obedient believers sought a way to supplement the void left by the plentiful serpent meat the Christians in the tribe could no longer eat.

The missionary gave the story to show the great faith and obedience of the Dyak Christians. Indeed it is to their credit that when they felt they had a word from God they were willing to obey at any cost. It is to the missionary's shame, however, that he actually allowed the young Christians to be deceived by their lack of full biblical perspective. That command was set aside by the Lord Himself in the New Testament (Acts 10). It was only binding upon the Jews as a nation under the Old Economy. Thus the tribe in question was thrust into an unnecessary stress situation and, furthermore, became weaker in its skill at applying the Scriptures to its daily needs.

G. THE SCRIPTURES THEMSELVES STATE THE ESSENTIAL CORE ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS. IT CENTERS AROUND AT LEAST FOUR GREAT PILLARS OF TRUTH.


3. The record of this reconciling revelation is found only in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. 1 Corinthians 15:1-6; 1 Corinthians 14:37; II Timothy 3:14-15; II Peter 1:16-24.

4. Through the enabling ministry of the Holy Spirit the believer finds in these Scriptures all he needs at all times and under all conditions be he part of any cultural mosaic to live a life fully pleasing to God, both singularly and in fellowship with the community of believers. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16; John 16:13-15; II Timothy 3:14-17; II Peter 1:1-4; I John 2:20 and 24-28.

a) Since the Scriptures have "a shareable meaning which can be made fully intelligible to men of any culture" (Fuller), this principle fully applies in the cross cultural communication of the Christian faith.

b) Though the Holy Spirit will guide the believer and the community of believers into His particular will for them at any moment of time, it will always be in harmony with the normative teachings and the basic principles of the Scriptures.

H. IN AREAS OF DOUBT THE BASIC HUMANISTIC PRINCIPLE SET BY THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL SHOULD BE BROUGHT TO BEAR UPON THE MATTER.

1. "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than those necessary things (that would be of scandal to outsiders) from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well." (Acts 15:29)

2. This is fully in keeping with the example set by the Early Church leaders, like Saint Paul, who adjusted his conduct to the culture of those to whom he was ministering to at the time without denying the "core" of the Gospel. Acts 18:10-21; 21:18-26; Galatians 2:11-16; 1 Corinthians 9:11-23.

I. FINALLY, WE MUST RECOGNIZE AS CORE ALL THAT WOULD FALL UNDER THE FOLLOWING BROAD SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES.

1. Precepts that are clearly given for all Christians of all times.

2. That which is obviously meant to express the ESSENTIALS of the faith, such as, the unity and holiness of God, His mercy and justice, the sinful and lost condition of men, the divine-human nature of the Son, His redemptive work, His bodily resurrection, enthronement, and glorious second coming, etc.

3. Beliefs and practices that were universally held by the Apostolic Church as binding upon all Christians of all times.

4. What the testimony of the Holy Spirit has stressed down through the centuries of the history of the Church as the essentials of the Christian faith.

5. What the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today as reflected in the light gifted and dedicated leaders are receiving as they study afresh the Holy Scriptures seeking to apply them to the dynamic, revolutionary situation the Church faces in today's world.