

**1 The cultural challenge:** While the Gospel message is universal, its presentation might be tailored to peculiar features of the culture in which it is preached. What cultural elements should be taken into account, and how can this be done without distorting or weakening the Scriptural message?

- Must Christian missions change a culture? If so, how and how much?
- Social and cultural features of [location] that affect Law/Gospel proclamation
- What problems of language translation arise in mission outreach in [location]?
- What can we learn about teaching Bible lessons from traditional story forms in [location]?

**Gonzalo Delgadillo wrote:**

What is culture?  
 What is sociology?  
 Can I describe my entire culture?  
 Can I describe my entire family culture?  
 Do we know the hidden culture?  
 Are we really able to know and understand the cultures of the world?  
 Culture is changing: for example nations or groups declaring themselves gay.

How are the following verses expressed in other cultures		
	NIV 1984	Other cultures
Rm 3.23	for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God	
Mr. 16.16	whoever does not believe will be condemned	
Jn 3.16	“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.	
Mt 9.2	Your sins are forgiven	

Language translations require wide and deep knowledge of the whole Bible, the original language, and the native language.

**Ugis Sildegs wrote:**

The problem of Christian media in Latvia is best illustrated by a recent study dealing with the role of a Christian message in popular culture. The study concluded that a serious Christian

discourse in the secular media is not to be found. If Christianity is mentioned there at all, usually it is something odd and scandalous (financial problems, homosexuality, women pastors etc.), or it is connected with some populist pastors, their personalities or families (for example, a yellow press photo of archbishop's daughter who acts as Marilyn Monroe in a TV commercial!).

So the starting point is a recognition that we (at least in Latvia) have to face a culture with a popular consensus that it is possible to discuss in public space anything you like, except God and Church. It's a sort of general agreement that the Christian religion must be kept as a private matter and imposing faith on others is taboo.

In such a culture and environment we decided that our best option was to go public with a newspaper, *Latvian Lutheran*. We wanted to go against the flow. We hoped to create our own Christian discourse, not only directly proclaiming Christ, but also conveying a wider outlook on life. And the newspaper provided us a necessary context that gave an opportunity to express our faith in public. As one of our ad slogans said: "Latvian Lutheran is a world through the eyes of a Christian."

In essence, we did the work of journalists, observing what was going on in the world around us and trying to report on it. We worked hard through the contemporary Latvian realities to be able to spell out the Gospel message in a way that would apply to our people – if you will, an incarnational ministry. As writers we were always searching for a common rhetorical ground and meeting points with the audience.

*Latvian Lutheran* in many ways tried to provide an alternative to the shallow popular media. But, of course, our aim was not to create a claustrophobic sub-culture or Pharisaic ghetto. No. We wrote about a wide range of topical

issues from different spheres, we interviewed the best experts from various fields and wrote about our common life, trying to speak it all "under the aspect of eternity".

A good deal of our work was a persistent practice to learn the art of turning a secular conversation into a spiritual one, and trying to step down into the "abyss of human existence" to help our people on a deeper spiritual level. We did our best to use all means available to us: our Lutheran doctrine, our Church history and Christian heritage, art and literature, even films and pop-culture phenomena to start a conversation about faith.

***Question:***

We know that our contemporary culture is quite fragmented. How do we deal with that? Do we craft our message in a way that targets a certain segment of our culture? The sociological make-up of our congregations (in the West) mostly consists of white people with university degrees. Do we have to stick with this audience or try to change and reach other cultural segments?

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***Terry Schultz wrote:***

Leogane, Haiti. The twelve Haitian orphanage directors of my Bible class sit in a semi-circle, eyes fixed on the laptop. On the screen is the evangelism DVD, *The Jesus Film* (dubbed in Haitian Creole), depicting Jesus' life according to the Gospel of Luke. After the showing I ask, "What was your favorite part?" Nearly every director instantly responds, "Jesus casting the demons out of that man!"

An analysis of a society's worldview—the cultural filter or lens through which the culture perceives reality—is critical in preparing effective evangelism materials. For example, God's Word provides several pictures of Jesus' work of atonement. John the Baptist joined Old Testament writers in portraying Jesus as the sacrificial lamb. Paul used courtroom vocabulary to excitedly announce that we have been declared not guilty. The atonement analogy that resonates deeply in the hearts of animists

(those who practice animism, the belief system of forty percent of the world's population, which presupposes that all of life is controlled by spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces), is that of Jesus defeating the devil and the demons. After the showing of the film, our evangelism work with the directors focused on contrasting Christian worldview with Haitian Vodou worldview.

Research similar to anthropological fieldwork is of great benefit when preparing evangelism materials. We need to produce culturally sensitive material which focuses on a particular people in a particular place in a particular culture. May the Holy Spirit guide and empower our efforts!

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***Paul Hartman wrote:***

The gospel by its nature changes the culture, in the sense that the values and mores of those who become disciples of Jesus Christ are changed. As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (12:2,3). Other aspects of culture, such as language, food choice, dress are not necessarily impacted. Some aspects of family life and relationships in society (monogamy, caste system) are affected while other aspects (type of government) are not. Christian churches survive and grow under dictatorships, oligarchies and Marxist systems.

The production of good translations in some languages is very challenging, because the languages are so different from English and the writing systems are complex. Written Chinese and Japanese are obvious examples in our fellowship. Cognate languages like Spanish present a different set of challenges. "Abandonar" in Spanish means leave; "abandon" in English has much more drastic implications.

Much of the unreached world population is illiterate or "functionally illiterate." Roughly, the

latter means people who read and write at a very low level, who access and process information orally through story-telling, songs, poetry and proverbs. Therefore serious attention in many areas should be given to telling Bible stories (history) and drawing the big truths from those stories.

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### *Jon Lonnquist & Mike Klebig wrote:*

It's believed that early Samoans, responding to the cultural threat of the first Christian missionaries, promptly ate them. Later missionaries fared better. They shared the gospel, developed the written Samoan language, taught literacy, and translated the Bible. Today, the highest person in the Samoan social order is a pastor.

Cross-cultural exchanges challenge the status quo with alternative ideas about religion, literacy, technology, health care, gender roles, politics, and other facets of a culture. To some, Christianity is associated with American culture. This can either open doors or create barriers. In either case, a mission should do its best to separate the two so the focus remains where it belongs –providing opportunities to hear the teachings of Christ.

**Ideas to consider:** (a) Offer the **gospel**, nothing added or subtracted. (b) **Collaborate** with locals to develop a worship style that incorporates their music and customs. (c) **Meet physical needs as an extension** of meeting spiritual needs. (d) Empower and **equip people** to become self-sufficient church groups, able to reach out to others.

**SAMPLES OF WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING** (For information only – not an endorsement of services or content)

- **Kwintessential**  
[www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/country-profiles.html](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/country-profiles.html)

Free guides on language, etiquette, customs, business localization. “Whether it’s a website, app, social media campaign, Facebook page, online

content, video, software or e-commerce platform – we can localize it.” Affiliation: Secular

- **The Joshua Project**  
<http://joshuaproject.net>

Statistics, info on penetration of religions worldwide. “A research initiative seeking to highlight the ethnic people groups of the world with the least followers of Jesus Christ.”

Affiliation: Evangelical

- **Missions Atlas Project**  
<http://worldmap.org>

A mission atlas and educational tool. “The information is helpful in assessing the current status of Missions progress throughout the world.”

Affiliation: Evangelical

- **Global Mapping International**  
[www.gmi.org](http://www.gmi.org)

Global mapping. “GMI is an international team of evangelical research, GIS and IT professionals passionate about informing, equipping, and connecting the Church for more appropriate and effective mission.” Affiliation:

Evangelical/Lausanne Covenant

- See also **Polynesian Cultural Center** on Creative Challenges page: Unusual approach. Leverages profits from a center for cultural appreciation and preservation to benefit the LDS church.

### **CULTURAL CHALLENGES WORKSHEET: MEDIA TECHNOLOGY FOCUS**

1. To what degree has technology reached and permeated this culture?
2. What are the primary ways people seek news and information (person-to-person, radio, newspaper)? Do they trust the information?
3. Where do people congregate for commerce or to exchange news?
4. What is the degree of literacy?
5. Who are primary thought influencers?
6. How do merchants reach this population? How do politicians reach out?
7. What is the best way, with cultural sensitivity, to foster relationships?
8. What steers the local economy and what demands (physical, time) does it place on the people?
9. What forms of entertainment do the people enjoy? (music, film, storytelling)

10. What media resources are currently in place?  
(Radio stations, newspaper)
11. What non-media resources (church bodies, humanitarian aid) are in place?
12. How is Christianity perceived in this region?
13. What other religious or humanitarian aid organizations work in this region and how do they operate?
14. Does the population include people persecuted or oppressed by the government or as part of the social norm?
15. What do you need to learn (e.g. etiquette, customs) to communicate effectively in this culture? For example, does this culture respond to approaches in an agreeable way to be polite?

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***John Lawrenz wrote:***

To be positive, culture is everything in us as Christians that flows from the new man, which after Christ is molded in righteousness and true holiness. Christian culture can be described by quoting the gifts of the Spirit. Paul points out in Corinthians that the Spirit distributes different gifts to different people. All are part of Christ's body, the church. All are needed. All are to be honored. Yet not all are the same. In another place Paul speaks of the manifestations of the Spirit, such things as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy, discernment, plus speaking languages and understanding languages. All of these, Paul says, are for strengthening, encouraging and comforting. Overall we are to cultivate those gifts which build up the church. The church is anywhere where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name. In Galatians Paul talks about the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

To be negative, human culture is everything which has deformed and continues to deform the image of God in which God made mankind. Love of self and assertion of the self is at the center. The selfish person questions God and his Word. His own ideas supplant God's creation of human culture. Culture can be a faux unity that links "me" with those who are like me and

simultaneously excludes those who are not like me in attitudes and conduct. How is deformed human culture manifest? Through folly, ignorance, superstition, violence, lies, doubting what God says, and touting all the abuses of the human nature, using words that defy, cloud, or challenge God's love in Christ.

For Lutherans it is axiomatic that the old man and new man are locked in a struggle. Our life in Christ trumps what arises from our old man every day. It is Christ in us by the Spirit's power to the Father's glory. No two of us are at the same point at the same time with the same issues. Cultures—even Christian cultures—morph and change constantly, yet curiously they also reinforce and perpetuate. The worst and best in Christians find solace and affirmation when people with similar parentage, history, life experience, education and adiaphoristic choices come together to form congregations, synods, and other manifestations of the visible church. A parallel phenomenon occurs in godless cultures, but with one important difference. Christ and his love are absent leaving the "me" in control.

Indeed Christ has the power to overcome culture. He does so through his love in action through the process of repentance and forgiveness that emerges as Godly love. A reading of 1 Corinthians 13 is always in place. Where the old man has held sway for decades, centuries, even millennia, there will be things about a culture that the love of Christ must overcome. Foremost is the overall guiding spirit. Closely following will be all those cultural characteristics which come from the sinful flesh. At the mission frontier, those who are new in Christ are going to find themselves to be "Christians in spiritual formation." This term was coined by a colleague of mine in Hong Kong to define our own struggle with East Asian culture. Paul's description of the conscience of Gentiles who are a law unto themselves with consciences accusing and excusing pretty well sums up what a missionary in East Asia encounters. I suspect this is true everywhere. New Christians struggle to follow Christ. At the same time they want to be true to their heritage as Chinese.

We must be always aware that “Christians with a strong heritage of spiritual/doctrinal formation” are not above culture. Missionaries have always struggled mightily to separate their “druthers” from “Christ’s message.” Application of doctrine—as opposed to the simple teachings of the Savior—can at times overshadow the teaching of Christ without even knowing it. Cultural sensitivity is required of those to whom much has been given.

Here a study of Christian freedom, and the vigorous practice of the same, is essential in the mission field. Do not bind what is not bound. Do not treat lightly what is not “light stuff” for new brothers and sisters locked in terrible struggle. Do not insist on your way of doing things when God has not spoken. Do be all things to all men that by all possible means some might be saved.

In East Asia saving face is an overriding cultural trait. A person coming from the ELS/WELS knows how hard applying Christian discipline in the United States is. Our WELS seminary held a symposium on brotherly admonition this fall on September 17-18. Why study such a thing? It’s a hard go for the new man in Christ to apply the principles of Jesus that he articulated in Matthew 18. It is hard anywhere! It is even harder in East Asia where bending the truth in love to avoid losing face is a cultural norm. Giving face may mean papering over issues that need to be faced. Saving face may be living in denial as a way of life that fools no one, but avoids the devastating consequences of unrepented sin. “Going around the corner” to a third party deflects personal embarrassment, but it raises gossip to a virtue, an outcome that undercuts trust and can result in a paralyzed church. Far better to speak the truth in love!

In East Asia the applications of fellowship and the roles of gender are shaped by culture. Asians are inclusive. It is hard in America to say no to an unworthy communicant. It seems only fair to let women take an equal turn in everything. Both run counter to the cultural grain in modern East Asia.

On the other hand I suspect that a century or more of all-male ministerial education in WELS

has left its “cultural” mark on what we men in the WELS ministry believe God intends for the role of a woman within the body of Christ. It is therefore refreshing in East Asia to observe women in a rich and full partnership with men in congregational life without transgressing the headship principle which Scripture requires.

Fellowship among American confessional Lutherans is misapplied and imperfectly practiced when it drifts into isolation or virtual shunning. Such practice robs those who are spiritually deficient of a robust testimony through which the Holy Spirit may work. The inclusive side of East Asians at their best allows public testimony to “other Christians” without sheep-stealing or doctrinal indifference. But the lines can be porous and sometimes are. The opposite is a trap door so tightly shut that testimony fails to escape.

In either of these two examples the extremes are to be avoided and the middle road the preferred destination. Yet it is a struggle!!! Engaging in the struggle may mean living “on the edge,” which, after all, is just another way to describe the narrow road on which our Savior bids us to walk.

What can we do about culture? Learn about it. Study it. Know ourselves. Read the opening verses of Galatians 6 often. There we are told to bear one another’s burdens and admonish with a healthy awareness that admonition is likely to come our way all too soon. Christians remember that Jesus warned against preemptive judgment. Take the words and actions of the other culture in the kindest possible way, neither excusing or ignoring, but dealing with cultural tensions in a way that mirrors what we see in the daily life of Jesus as he dealt with human culture of every kind.

Where do we find culture invading the translation of sound Christian, Lutheran written material? What I have learned—and I am certainly open to debate and clarification on the issue—is that Chinese thought, as it is expressed both in spoken and written form, has “built-in ambiguity.” My confessional Lutheran culture abhors ambiguity as a general rule. In America

we properly oppose post-modern “whatever!” responses to what is right and wrong. We confessional Lutherans won’t buy into the concept that every person has his/her own spark of truth about God and that no judgment is to be made beyond what is politically correct inoffensiveness. Sound doctrine ought to be clear! And it should be confidently asserted where people who need it have ears. Lifestyles clearly condemned by Scripture are sin. Ecumenism without the truth of the Word as a foundation is wrong. Baiting the sinner is also wrong. And so is hiding one’s candle under a bushel.

The century old disagreements in Chinese Christianity over the terms to be used for such things as God, the Holy Spirit, and baptism are widely known to church historians. These controversies have died down. What goes for Gospel in East Asia, however, is rife with synergism. Christ died for you, but you have to come up with the faith! What fosters this in East Asia? What I know about the Chinese written character for “faith,” is that it can be easily rendered “do faith” in places where the Scripture says “justified by faith.” That plops synergism into many texts where it has no right to be. So, it will take a special effort on the part of translators to make certain passages of Scripture absolutely clear lest Christ be robbed of his glory and man be credited with a work that is not there.

Culture is also coping with history, some of it painful and indelible. When Christians were tortured in the Roman world, it was hard for some in the church to find equilibrium when peace was restored. In East Asia much of the Christian clergy of China were wiped out under Mao and it was the women who kept house churches going. Encountering “women pastors” on the mainland requires a special measure of understanding and mature judgment to move toward the restoration of scriptural practice. In China 19 seminaries produce no more than 1500 graduates for Christians numbering in the tens of millions. A colleague has encountered several women in pastoral roles who long for the reassertion of male headship, while they do what

they believe they must do to keep pastor-less fellowships from disintegrating.

Taiwan is a special case in East Asia. The people there speak Mandarin like the mainland. They did not experience the cultural devastation of Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Thus the old religion with its spirits and superstition are still deeply rooted in Taiwan. Sometimes upheavals provide opportunity. For some time now mainland China has been hungry for a spiritual message to replace what was brutally stamped out. That hunger does not exist in a similar way in Taiwan. It may not last on the mainland past our present generation.

One last item about culture. We get our culture in large part because God gives us parents. We did not choose our parents. We look the way we do, and we were raised to adulthood because of the good and bad sides of our personal parenting experience. Culture wars are anathema to the Christian who acknowledges God as the giver of all good things. Overcoming culture is sorting out our earthly inheritance and coming to the conclusion that the inheritance that really counts is the one laid up by Christ in heaven for us.

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