

MISSION COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

Haile Sadins Sabab, Rev. Dr.
Dean of MYS Graduate and Undergraduate Studies;
Lecturer in Missiology

Abstract: Since mission belongs to the Triune God and encourages the proclamation of the Gospel to specific groups of people, the use of different approaches becomes important to communicate the Gospel to such people in different cultures. Scripture points us in that direction: the Incarnation of the Son of God, the use of different languages by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the Apostle Paul's approach to communicating the Gospel are among the ways the Church engages different cultures in her mission to the world. Thus, contextualization is the translation of the unchanging (timeless) content of the Gospel into expressions meaningful to people in their distinct cultures and within their particular existential situations. The use of the terms indigenization and contextualization in Christian missions must be carefully explained to help the church in her mission by learning the cultures and languages of the people and translating Scripture into their languages. However, it is argued that, though considering culture is essential in missions, communication, and evangelism, there remains a tension between the Church and culture because she is in the world but not of the world. That is why scholars in missiology and mission communication remind us that we must be careful not to lose the Gospel in the adaptation to differing cultures. Thus, it is inevitable for the Church to confront the world and its diverse cultures with the salvific Gospel. In line with the above argument, this paper will briefly describe the process and structure of communication. Then it will discuss the importance of culture to mission communication, with a Biblical basis for mission communication. Finally, the paper will consider the tension between church and

culture, the defects in recipient-oriented communication, indigenization, syncretism, and language, symbol, and meaning.

COMMUNICATION AND THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION

Communication is the giving, transmitting, receiving, or exchanging of ideas, information, signals, or messages through appropriate media, enabling individuals or groups to persuade, seek information, provide information, or express emotions. The Latin origin for the word “communication” is *communicare*, meaning “to share” or “to participate.”¹ As Josh Misner and Jeff Carr state, communication is “share[ing] information via a process of joining others together. Communication, in this sense, defines how people make sense of their life experiences and provides a tool by which they can relate those experiences with others.”² Communication is a two-way process in which ideas, thoughts, feelings, and opinions are transmitted between two or more persons with the intent of creating a shared understanding. For A. Scott Moreau, communication is “a dynamic process that maintains stability and identity through all its fluctuations.”³ Again, for him, “Communication is contextual: it always happens in a larger context, be that the physical environment, the emotional mood of the communication event, or the purposes (which may be overt or hidden) behind the communication.”⁴

Missiologists, such as Eugene Nida, contributed to the field of linguistics and mission communication. For Nida, communication is the transmission of information and ideas with the purpose of persuading

¹ Josh Misner and Geoff Carr, *Messages That Matter: Public Speaking in the Information Age*, 3rd ed. (Coeur d’Alene, ID: North Idaho College, 2023), 5, <https://nic.pressbooks.pub/messageshatmatter/>.

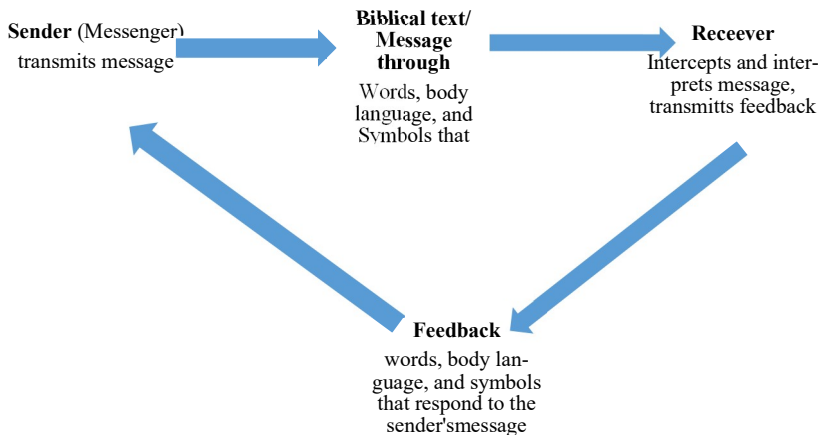
² Misner and Carr, *Messages that Matter*, 6.

³ A. Scott Moreau, Evvy Hay Campbell, and Susan Greener, *Effective Communication: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 12.

⁴ Moreau, *Effective Communication*, 12.

and influencing others.⁵ Communication begins with the sender conceptualizing ideas, who transmits the message to the receiver, who, in turn, provides feedback in the form of another message or signal. The following diagram illustrates a simple process of communication, which also applies to missions.

Moreover, communication is not only a process of transmitting messages but also an advanced area of study. That is why K. Detlev Schulz argues, “Communication represents a complex linguistic affair that requires one to study the mechanism of encoding and decoding a set of signs between two or three parties: the messenger, the Biblical text, the hearer.”⁶



TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

There are two types of communication: verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication is the use of language in the process of communicating.

⁵ Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith*. Revised Edition (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1990), 5.

⁶ Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 168.

Non-verbal communication is the type of communication that uses extra-verbal acts such as body movements, signs, posture, gestures, and other non-verbal language codes. Both verbal and nonverbal communication are used in many cultures worldwide. However, their usage, emphasis, and importance depend on the cultural context. Some cultures use nonverbal communication more than verbal communication, while others emphasize verbal communication in interaction.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, more importance is given to verbal symbols than visual images. The prophets could hear the voice of God; thus, the prophetic formula was "Thus says the Lord." They believed that God could not be seen, but he could be heard in the still, small voice of his Spirit. This shows that verbal communication was an integral element of revelation. For Martin Luther, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the preached Word, although the preaching is from the written Word. For Luther, "The church is not a pen-house but a mouth-house."⁷ Thus, preaching is the primary tool of missions and evangelism in fulfilling Christ's command to go out and preach. Audible preaching is the main instrument of missions and evangelism. "And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him [Christ]... So, faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of God" (Rom 10:14–15, 17). To create faith in the hearer, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is primarily proclaimed through verbal communication, though nonverbal communication is also involved, as in expressing our faith through life examples, such as living a good life and caring for others regardless of their faith. Stephen Neill argues that one reason for Christianity's expansion in the Roman Empire was Christians' practical love for people in need, such as orphans, widows, prisoners, and travelers. Emperor Julian attributed the growth of the Christian faith to its practical expression of love. He noted that observers were struck by the Christians' universal hospitality and their commitment to burying the dead—a practice rooted in their refusal to let the "image of God" be abandoned to wild

⁷ Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study with Special Reference to Luther's Bible Exposition*, trans. Dean Apel (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 207.

animals.⁸ Now that the foundations and importance of communication have been established, the structure of communication in Christian mission will be examined.

THE STRUCTURE OF COMMUNICATION

According to Nida, communication has three essential components: the source, the message, and the receptor.⁹ “These are essential for there can be no message unless there is some source, there can be no communication unless someone receives the message.”¹⁰ Nida’s description of the process could apply to communication in general, but in the context of the Christian mission, it appears to have at least two problems. First, Nida regards the messenger as a source of the message since Nida’s structure of communication is Source→ Message→ Receptor. However, in Christian missions, the source is not the messenger, but the Word of God or the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is entrusted to the Church to be preached to all nations of the earth. Schulz proposes a different structure in which Christian communication is connected with the proclamation of the Gospel through witnessing, preaching, and non-verbal communication.¹¹ For Schulz, “Communication represents a complex linguistic affair that requires one to study the mechanism of encoding and decoding a set of signs between two or three parties: the messenger, the Biblical text, the hearer.”¹² Schulz stresses the divine character of communication.¹³ That is to say that, in Christian communication, it is God who communicates through the messenger or missionary. The messenger is not the source but the channel through which God presents or proclaims the Gospel to the people. That means the messenger must not depend on his techniques and methods but on God and his Word. That is why the *Book of Concord* asserts, “Without his

⁸ Stephen Neill, *A History of Missions* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 37–38.

⁹ Nida, *Message and Mission*, 38.

¹⁰ Nida, *Message and Mission*, 38.

¹¹ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 168.

¹² Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 168.

¹³ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 168.

(God's) grace our 'will and effort,' our planting, sowing, and watering are in vain unless he gives the growth (Rom 9:16; 1 Cor. 3:7)."¹⁴ The messenger can use different methods and strategies in conveying the Gospel to the people. But, seeing the messenger as a source who can bring the hearer to believe in Christ is problematic. That was why Jesus advised his disciples to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit, who would help them communicate the Gospel and be effective witnesses to Christ (Luke 24:49; John 14:26; 15:26; 16:12; Acts 1:8).

The second problem with Nida's proposal is that he bases communication on the reception of the message. He argues that "there can be no communication unless someone receives the message."¹⁵ Here, Nida appears to say that the message's reception depends in part on the recipient. However, the reception of the Christian message is not dependent on the recipient but on God and His Word to be proclaimed. That is, as Schulz put it, when he said that the hearer has two ways to respond to the message: either to receive it and come to believe in Christ or refuse and reject it. There is no third zone (intermediate zone).¹⁶ But if Nida's "reception" of the message is about presenting the message in a clear and understandable way, he is quite right, as we need to communicate the Gospel in an understandable language and use possible contact points in the culture of the hearers. Yet, the responsibility of the messenger is not to persuade the hearer but to proclaim the Word or the Biblical text. Then, it is God the Holy Spirit who will use the preached Gospel to persuade a hearer to believe in Christ. Unless the Holy Spirit preaches the Word to the Church through the preacher, people cannot understand it or come to believe in Christ. In this way, mission communication concerns divine address. It is God who speaks to the unbeliever by stepping into his life and completely transforming him from what he has been before. Yet the messenger, or missionary, is expected to convey the Gospel to the nations across different cultures through various

¹⁴ Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 470.

¹⁵ Nida, *Message and Mission*, 38.

¹⁶ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 169.

approaches. That is why Paul writes, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22b).

THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF MISSION COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

According to Genesis 1:26-27, humanity is created in the image of God to rule the creatures of God. The image of God in humanity helps human beings create something in the world. Though they cannot create out of nothing, they are given the capacity to create out of something. In Genesis 2:15, God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, depicting human beings as creative cultivators. This distinguishes humanity from the rest of God’s creation because people are created in the image of God with the capacity to make something of God’s creation. So, as beings created in the image of the creator God, people create culture. As Andy Crouch puts it, “Culture is not just what human beings make of the world; it is not just the way human beings make sense of the world; it is in fact part of the world that every new human being has to make something of.”¹⁷ In other words, culture comes from particular human acts of cultivation and creativity. It is part of the world, central to people’s lives, and to being human. Furthermore, Crouch argues that, as an Incarnated God, Jesus was a cultural being and spent his prime years absorbing, practicing, and passing on his culture even though he was the image of the invisible God.¹⁸ Culture is God’s gift, and it is not people who make the change in culture but God. Crouch explains how culture finds its true potential and how it becomes worse:

From the leather skins of Genesis 3 to the supper in the upper room, culture finds its true potential when God blesses it with his presence and offers it, transformed, as a gift back to humanity. And from the fig leaves to the tower of Babel to the cross, culture

¹⁷ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 25.

¹⁸ Crouch, *Culture Making*, 136.

is at its worst when human beings take on the role of cultural strategies, attempting to provide for themselves apart from God.¹⁹

For Nida, the revelation of God about his own communication with humanity is the foundation for communicating the truth of God, “within the narrow confines of human language and culture.”²⁰ The question is how to communicate the one Gospel of Jesus Christ for the people in different cultures. Crouch contends that,

[I]f all we do is condemn culture—especially if we mostly just talk among ourselves, mutually agreeing on how bad things are becoming—we are very unlikely indeed to have any cultural effect, because human nature abhors a cultural vacuum. It is the very rare human being who will give up some set of cultural goods just because someone condemns them. They need something better, or their current cultural goods will have to do, as deficient as they may be.²¹

However, the Gospel is genuinely transcultural. It is expressed in terms of culture and should be transferred from one culture to another in a rich variety of ways. God’s mission (*missio Dei*), both in the Old and New Testaments, involved the dynamic use of culture in communication. In the Old Testament, God used intelligible languages to communicate his message. He communicated with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the Israelites in different ways but in the languages they could each understand. The Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek by the seventy. God’s Word is not limited to one nation or one language but is for all people of the world. In the New Testament, Jesus is the way by which God communicates with human beings or the world in general. People can know God the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, who is both the Logos Word and the redemptive Word sent to the earth. Thus, the Incarnation of God, proclaimed in a particular (Jewish) culture (John 1:14), can show the need to incarnate the Gospel in every culture. The Incarnation of God is the model for evangelism. In the Incarnation, God became a Jew because Jesus Christ was born a

¹⁹ Crouch, *Culture Making*, 182.

²⁰ Nida, *Message and Mission*, 27.

²¹ Crouch, *Culture Making*, 68.

Jew in first-century Palestine, with Aramaic as his mother tongue.²² He was not born as a universal man, but a Jew for he came to his own people even though they rejected him (John 1:11). He learned to be a carpenter and lived as his people except he did not sin (Mark 6:3; Heb 4:15). This does not mean that God's message through Jesus was limited to the Jews only; God's purpose is to unite the whole world in Jesus Christ. Yet God becoming a human being at a particular moment of history in a specific geographical location is one of the keys to understanding the relationship between the Gospel and culture. Walls argues, "The divine Son did not become humanity in general, but a specific man in a specific place and culture; he is, as it were, made flesh again in other places and cultures as he is received there by faith."²³

After His resurrection and before His ascension, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go to all nations to proclaim the Gospel, to baptize, and to teach the converts to be the followers of Jesus Christ (Matt 28:19–20). The "all nations" in Matthew 28 refers to people groups worldwide with diverse cultures and languages. Thus, using the languages and cultures of the nations in mission communication is not a choice but a must if the Gospel is to be heard and understood. This is what is learned from Pentecost in Acts chapter two.

The Gospel was preached in different languages from the beginning of the Church, through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The lesson to learn from the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is that the people must hear the Good News in their own languages in

²² There are words and phrases in the Gospel writings that reflect Jesus' use of Aramaic such as "*Talitha cumi*" (Mark 5:41, "Little girl, get up"), "*Ephphatha*" (Mark 7:34, "Be opened"), "*Abba*" (Mark 14:36, "Father," an intimate term), and "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*" (Matthew 27:46/Mark 15:34, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). To get more information about the influence of Aramaic-Language traditions in the Gospel texts, the reader may consult books such as Bruce Chilton, *Aramaic Jesus: Tradition, Identity, and Christianity's Mother Tongue* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2025) and Stephen Andrew Missick, *The Language of Jesus: Introducing Aramaic* (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010).

²³ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 47.

order to understand it (Acts 2:8). Acts 2:6–11 from NRSV puts the occasion like this:

And at this sound, the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt, and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.

That is why proclaiming the Gospel in the language of the hearer and translating the Bible into different languages are necessary for spreading the Gospel in people's own contexts.

After Pentecost, the apostles preached the Gospel and accomplished all their works using different methods of communication to different people. For example, Paul did not use the same method when preaching the Gospel to different audiences. For example, in Acts 13:16-41, Paul used the Exodus as a starting point for preaching the Gospel to the Israelites, but to the Greeks he began with the “unknown God” (Acts 17:22–31). Paul also said, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:19-23). Paul’s methods of evangelism teach us that the Gospel must be incarnated in every culture to be understood by its recipients. But this does not mean the messenger should blindly accept all practices across cultures without question or correction. There may be some cultural practices that need to be corrected or transformed by the Gospel. That is why Schulz argues that considering cultural traits, such as learning the language and customs of the people, is important when spreading the Gospel across different cultures without compromising its truth.²⁴

²⁴ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 23.

The Church, after the apostles, continued to carry out the definite mandate commissioned to her to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments through different languages and cultures. As we know, the New Testament was written in Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic. According to John Terry, one factor contributing to the expansion of the Church at the end of the Apostolic age was the use of Greek, which was spoken in almost all of the Roman Empire as a language of trade and education.²⁵ The early Church Fathers used the Greek language and philosophy to spread the Gospel and develop Christian theology.²⁶ Today, the Holy Scripture is translated into many languages to promote understanding and the spread of the Gospel. Translations of the Lutheran confessions into different languages are also helpful in teaching Lutheran Christians to understand the true meaning of the Scripture, which is foundational for missions.

As demonstrated at Pentecost in Acts 2, preaching and teaching the Gospel in the languages of the audience helps create faith in the hearers. A person cannot hear and understand if a foreign language is used to preach the Gospel. Paul underlines the importance of hearing the Gospel in creating faith in the heart of the unbeliever. He states, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace,' who bring glad tidings of good things" (Rom 10:14–15 NKJV). Here, the Holy Spirit uses the Word that the unbeliever heard to create faith in the believer's heart. Without hearing the Word, the unbeliever cannot receive salvation in Jesus Christ. This is what lies behind Paul's comment that "the gospel is the power of God for salvation" (Rom 1:16). To understand what they are hearing, they need to hear it through the language which they know and speak.

²⁵ John Mark Terry, "The History of Missions in the Early Church," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 142.

²⁶ Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), xviii, 1.

God uses the different languages through the missionaries to bring the hearer to faith in Jesus Christ and be saved. The event at Pentecost is the best example of how God wants Christians to accomplish his mission among people with different languages and cultures.

Therefore, when communicating the Gospel across cultures, missionaries should allow some cultural practices to remain as they are unless they contradict basic Biblical doctrines. That was why Luther argued that God did not demand heathens to change their culture but to cease their idolatry.²⁷ For Luther, the Church is sent to the Gentiles not to change their customs but to preach the Gospel. Thus, the Church's focus is not on changing culture but on proclaiming the Gospel. In this way, the focus of preaching the Gospel is to replace unbelief with belief in Christ, not to transform cultures.²⁸ As long as the Gospel and faith in Christ for salvation are not compromised, Luther supports contextualization.²⁹ According to Schulz, Luther argued that the Gospel should be taught and preached in people's indigenous language and be expressed within that particular cultural context.³⁰ He said a good preacher and missionary should use the language of the common people, such as “the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace.”³¹

Thus, the communication of the Gospel involves first sowing the seed and working in and with the indigenous church and unique culture, not attempting to replace one culture with another. That means different resources can be used in the culture, but without compromising Christ and his message. That is why Ezekiel A. Ajibade wrote, “The Word of God which is unchanging and eternal should continually be made incarnate to everyone in every generation and while partnering with God in this communication task, it demands that the integrity of this Word be preserved as it was given and making it ‘flesh’ in every conceivable

²⁷ Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 114.

²⁸ Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 141.

²⁹ Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 141.

³⁰ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 55.

³¹ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 55.

way.”³² Yet, there remains tension between the Church and the culture as discussed below.

THE TENSION BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND CULTURE

Although the Gospel is transcultural and not bound to any culture or language, it is conveyed through different cultures, yet there is tension between the Gospel and culture. That can be observed from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as his ministry approach conflicted with the Jewish traditions, such as the abolition of the Jewish food laws. For Jews there are clean and unclean foods, but by the Gospel the distinction between “clean” and “unclean” was abolished (Mark 7:19, Acts 10:15). This was not easy for Jews because it was part of their identity, and they had to break their rules in order to eat with Gentiles whom they regarded as ‘unclean’ (Acts 10:15; 15:1ff). Furthermore, the Gospel demanded full and equal status for both Gentiles and Jews (Gal 3:28). According to Paul, the division among the Corinthians at “the table of fellowship” was a distortion of the Gospel (1 Cor 11:17–22, 33–34). The same was true with Peter when he separated himself from Gentile Christians, fearing the Jewish Christians. He distorted the Gospel (Gal 2:11–14). The Gospel opposes cultural practices that cause division within the Church. Cultural norms should never divide Christians. Rather than enforcing uniformity, we should embrace “unity in diversity” – the blessing that occurs when faith is expressed through various languages and cultures.³³

The tension between the Church and culture will continue to the end of time. The tension results from the question of how to spread the same pure Gospel of Jesus Christ in different cultures. The tension arises in the effort not to compromise the true doctrine of the Gospel while still spreading it in different cultures. Although people should consider traits

³² Ezekiel A. Ajibade, *Contextualization of Expository Preaching: Engaging Orality for Effective Proclamation in Africa* (Ogbomoso, Nigeria: Publishing Unit, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 76.

³³ Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 27–28.

of culture in communicating the Gospel, they should be cautious not to compromise its content.³⁴

In his book *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr argues that there are about five positions Christians have taken in response to the ongoing problem of culture.³⁵ The first approach is "Christ against culture," which is a rejectionist posture, in which the affirmation of the Gospel leads to a negative perception and attitude toward culture. A second approach is "Christ of culture," which turns Jesus into a cultural hero whose own life, deeds, and teaching constitute immense cultural creativity. The emulation of Jesus in this approach may lead to a universalizing principle, identifying the Christ figure in all cultures. One example of this is the depiction of Jesus as a black Messiah in African/black theology. Third is the idea of "Christ above culture," which argues that no cultural expression fully comprehends the full meaning of Christ. A fourth approach examines "Christ and culture in paradox" and explores the elements of discontinuity, continuity, tension, and polarity. The final approach is "Christ, the transformer of culture," which "looks forward to what human culture can be, a transformed life, and to the glory of God. He sent his Son to the world, not to condemn it, but to reveal God's love and redeem all those who believe. The eschatological hope of believers includes the transformation of the world of nature, which groans under abuse."³⁶ Niebuhr appeared to fully support the fifth point, Christ the transformer of culture, as he did not criticize it. The problem arises when people think this world will be transformed by Christ into a paradise, which is not the goal of the Gospel. For Andrew Kirk, Niebuhr's fivefold typologies may be used at a time when Christians face diverse challenges across cultures and ideologies. Where, for example, the Church is under pressure to compromise with a particularly distasteful political regime or senses the abandonment of ethical norms given by God for human well-being, it may have to take a stance against

³⁴ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 23.

³⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 190–195.

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture*, 194–195.

culture.³⁷ However, "All will acknowledge in principle that the gospel cannot be completely domesticated within any culture. The Christ who is presented in Scripture for our believing is Lord over all cultures, and his purpose is to unite all of every culture to himself in a unity that transcends, without negating, the diversities of culture."³⁸

According to John 17:16, although the Church is in the world, the Church is not of the world. The Church is in the world to fulfill God's mission, and she has this message entrusted to her by God. Although the Church uses different cultural channels to proclaim the Gospel, the message itself is not different across cultures. It is the same Gospel of salvation. So, Christians have no right to reduce or add to the message of the Gospel of salvation. That means that, though different methods and approaches can be used for different people groups within their cultures, missionaries cannot adjust the message to make it more relevant or suitable to the hearer. Adjusting and or compromising the content of the Gospel must be avoided. Yet contact points across cultures can be used to clarify the Gospel message to hearers without reducing its content. Thus, the message must not be recipient-oriented as discussed below.

RECIPIENT-ORIENTED COMMUNICATION

Nida's approach to Christian communication appears to be recipient-oriented, because, for him, successful communication depends on adjusting one's message to the context and backgrounds of the audience. This involves a good deal of adjustment, as the source must consider the audience's backgrounds.³⁹ Similarly, for Lovejoy, the God of the Bible is a recipient-oriented communicator.⁴⁰ The danger in recipient-

³⁷ Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Exploration* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 93.

³⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1978), 149.

³⁹ Nida, *Message and Mission*, 84.

⁴⁰ Grant Lovejoy, "Cross-Cultural Communication," in *Missiology, An Introduction to the Foundations, History and Strategies of World Missions*, edited by John Terry Mark (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 259.

oriented communication is that the messenger may compromise the true Gospel to make it acceptable to the recipient. The message may be told in the way the hearer wants to hear. However, missionaries are sent to the world with the message of God, which God wants sinners to hear in order to turn them to faith in Christ. So, the message must not be recipient-oriented but Gospel-oriented. However, the one Gospel can be explained by using some useful resources among the hearers without compromising its content. That is what was mentioned above regarding Paul the apostle's strategy. When Paul the apostle preached the Gospel to the people in different cultures, he used different approaches but with the same goal. When he preached to the Jews in Acts 13, he used the history of Israel and Exodus, but when he preached to the Greeks in Acts 17, he used the concept of the "unknown god." However, his goal was the same: to proclaim that salvation is through the resurrected Christ (see Acts 17:31). He never said, "Your way of worshipping the unknown god was right," but he knew that the God they did not know was the Creator God. He told them that this God decided to save humanity through faith in Christ alone. Although he used cultures, Paul never compromised the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ, and his goal in using any method was to proclaim Christ for the salvation of sinners. According to Eckhard Schnabel, "The normative center of the missionary's accommodating behavior is the gospel, not pragmatic effectiveness: 'I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings' (1 Cor 9:23). The phrase 'for the sake of the gospel' excludes the abandonment of the gospel."⁴¹ Thus, indigenization must not lead to compromise or syncretization or mixing the Gospel with components of other religions, as briefly presented below.

INDIGENIZATION AND SYNCRETIZATION

The indigenization of the Christian faith means making Christianity relevant by localizing leadership, styles of worship and music, usage of

⁴¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 137.

illustrations, and administrative structures as well as translating texts into local languages and using contact points from the local culture. The first two protestant missionary leaders who formulated the famous "three-self" mission approach were the American Rufus Anderson (1796–1880) and the Englishman Henry Venn (1796–1873).⁴² This approach uses a "definition of indigenous churches as self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting."⁴² Some other missiologists added "self-theologizing," which refers to the Biblical interpretation and the development of theology relevant to their own culture, independent of foreign influence.⁴³ According to Kirk, indigenization is more common in Protestant than Catholic circles, and it means to reformulate and re-interpret the Christian message to make it relevant to the indigenous people.⁴⁴ If reformulating and reinterpreting changes the original meaning of a Gospel passage, it will lead to syncretism. If Christians are not clear with the message of Christ or the content of the Gospel, indigenization may lead to syncretism, which is the mixing of components from other religions with the teaching of the Gospel. Thus, indigenization will compromise the faith when elements of the Gospel are replaced with local components. For example, in some Catholic churches in Africa, ancestral worship is replaced by the veneration of ancestors as saints, which led church members to mix worship of the triune God with worship of saints.⁴⁵ The African Independent Churches mix Biblical teachings with African traditional religious practices. For example, "The church of the Lord *Aladura* (CLA) is one of many African

⁴² Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 115.

⁴³ Gerald D. Wright, "The Purpose of Mission," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 20.

⁴⁴ Kirk, *What is Mission?*, 89–90.

⁴⁵ Fredrick Omollo, "The Communion of Saints in the Light of Ancestor Veneration in Africa and Its Sequels on the Christian Theology of Hope," *Roczniki Teologiczne* 70, no. 2 (2023): 89, <https://doi.org/10.18290/rt2023.19>. Alexander Jebadu, "Ancestral Veneration and the Possibility of Its Incorporation in Judeo-Christian Faith," IFTK Ledalero Repository, accessed March 10, 2026, 5, <http://repository.iftkledalero.ac.id/254/1/Ancestor%20Veneration%20and%20Its%20Possibility.pdf>.

Independent Churches to emerge among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria in the 1920s, as part of the *Aladura* (*ala* owner of, *duura* prayer) movement which selectively combined features of Yoruba and Christian religious traditions.⁴⁶ These forms of syncretism are rejected in the true teachings of the Bible. Leviticus 19:31 prohibits seeking help from "mediums or wizards." Isaiah 8:19 prohibits consulting the spirits and the dead. Exodus 20:3-5 prohibits idolatry. In 2 Timothy 2:5, Jesus is the only mediator. Polygamous marriage is against God's intention for marriage in creation (Gen 1:26-28; 2:18-25) and is affirmed in the New Testament (Matt 19:5; Eph 5:22-33). But both clergy and laity in some of the African Independent Churches practice polygamy by following their African customs.⁴⁷

A balanced approach to contextualization is essential; both under-contextualization (rejecting culture entirely) and over-contextualization (compromising the Gospel) inevitably lead to a syncretistic faith. In situations where under-contextualization is used, some new Christians will seek solutions from their pagan religions secretly. When over-contextualization is applied, the Christian faith will be officially mixed with components from other religions. Paul Hiebert addresses this issue, recognizing

the persistence of a two-tier Christianity around the world despite centuries of instruction and condemnations by missionaries and church leaders. Deeply committed Christians faithfully attend Church services and pray to God in times of need but feel compelled during the week to go to a local shaman for healing, a

⁴⁶ Deidre Helen Crumbley, "Power in the Blood: Menstrual Taboos and Women's Power in an African Instituted Church," in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, ed. R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 85.

⁴⁷ Deidre Helen Crumbley, *Spirit, Structure, and Flesh: Gendered Experiences in African Instituted Churches among the Yoruba of Nigeria* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 78.

diviner for guidance, and an exorcist for deliverance from spirit oppression.⁴⁸

Elizabeth Mburu's questions about African Christians' syncretic life can elaborate Hiebert's points here as she asks, "Why is it that after more than one hundred years of exposure to Christianity, traditional practices such as witchcraft, ancestor worship, and polygamy are still found in Africa? Why is it uncommon to hear of pastors consulting witchdoctors to acquire more "power" for the pulpit and of Christians using witchcraft to grow their business?"⁴⁹ The points from Hiebert and the questions of Mburu show how some Christians live syncretic lives in their daily activities around the world.

The solution, according to Hiebert, is critical contextualization. To avoid syncretism, missionaries need to engage with old beliefs and practices consciously through a four-step process of critical contextualization.⁵⁰ The first step is to study the local culture phenomenologically. This means understanding a person's beliefs before judging those beliefs. The second step is ontological evaluation, testing the truth claims of different beliefs and values by using two tests of truth: Scripture and objective reality. The third step is critical evaluation, involving local people in assessing their own culture in light of the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. This is important because the people know their old culture better than the missionaries and are in a better position to critique it as they grow spiritually through learning, discernment, and the application of scriptural teachings to their own lives. The final step in missiology is transformative ministries that help people move from where they are to where God wants them to be. According to Hiebert, the appropriate and inappropriate responses to culture are summarized in the table below.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiéno, *Understanding Folk Religions: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 15.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2019), 3.

⁵⁰ Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religions*, 22–27.

⁵¹ Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religions*, 22.

Religious Beliefs and Behavior in Folk Religions				
<i>Appropriate Responses</i>				
<i>Step 1</i>	<i>Step 2</i>	<i>Step 3</i>	<i>Step 4</i>	<i>Result</i>
Phenomenological analysis	Ontological reflections	Critical evaluation	Missiologi-cal Transformation	Critical contextualization
<i>Inappropriate Responses</i>				Syncretism
Denial and condemnation of Old Beliefs and practices				
Uncritical Acceptance of Old Beliefs and Practices				

Mark Shaw’s argument about the mixing of magic and the Messiah in African churches⁵² is still true as we find such practices in Ethiopian churches today. According to works by scholars such as Tibebe Teklu Senbetu, Henry Stern, Charles Rey, and E. A. Wallis Budge, some Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church believers and ministers mix Christian faith with traditional religions and magical practices, including talismans, amulets, and charms.⁵³ Moreover, there are other forms of syncretism in the practices of the Evangelical Christians in Ethiopia, with some influences or traces of traditional religions on them. One example is the use of the Bible as a magical book, by placing it under a pillow for protection against bad dreams and evil, or by placing it on the sick person for healing and the like. So-called holy water and anointed oil are also used by some who claim prophetic gifts. These physical elements are seen as giving more value to the so-called prophets, and people accept their prophetic predictions without discernment or criticism. For Hiebert, this magical tendency is surfaced “in all fallen human beings.”⁵⁴ As he contended,

⁵² Mark Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity* (Katunayake, Sri Lanka: New Life Literature, 2006), 346.

⁵³ Tibebe Teklu Senbetu, *Worthy Admission to the Eucharist: The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church and 1 Corinthians 11:27–29* (New York: Peter Lang, 2025), 19–20; E. A. Wallis Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 177–211; F. Charles Rey, *The Real Abyssinia* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935), 196–97; Henry A. Stern, *Wandering Among the Falasha in Abyssinia. Together with the Description of the Country and Its Various In habitants* (London: Cass, 1968), 304.

⁵⁴ Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religions*, 378.

Magic is the opposite of Christianity. In magic humans are in control. In Christianity they are called to submit unconditionally to God and his will...Prayer is magic if supplicants believe they must say the right things in right tone of voice accompanied by certain right actions to be assured of the right answers...Some carry Bibles in their pockets, confident that these, like amulets, will protect them from harm.⁵⁵

Moreover, so-called Christian prophets, some of whom came from the traditional religious background of the people, are feared as much as traditional religious prophets and demand that followers not question their prophecies.⁵⁶ This needs to be corrected through sound Biblical and confessional teachings.

LANGUAGE, SYMBOLS, AND MEANING

Quentin Schultze defines the importance of language in communication: "Language enables us to name relationships, to define ideas, and things, and even to create cultural groups with their own identity."⁵⁷ As discussed above, using the native language is very important for the Gospel to be understood by different people. That is why the Bible is translated into different languages today. Yet, as Schulz says,

There is also debate on the character of the language itself. Two groups of linguists stand divided over the issue of language: the so-called purists (or literalists) and those who argue for the dynamic equivalence. While the purists wish to remain faithful to the literal meaning of the word or text of Scripture, there are those who prefer a dynamic equivalence over the literal approach to translation.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religions*, 378.

⁵⁶ Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religions*, 22.

⁵⁷ Quentin J. Schultze, *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 89.

⁵⁸ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 177.

According to Schulz, in translation, "the literal meaning of a biblical term cautions against dynamic equivalency."⁵⁹ Here, the argument is to keep the original meaning of Biblical words or terms. As Schulz argues, "Communicators of the Gospel often need to tinker with the structure of languages and their symbols in an effort to be as truthful as possible to both the text and the listeners."⁶⁰ Thus, Schulz suggests that "the missionary would be required to use the indispensable meaning, even if that concept is foreign."⁶¹ This will be followed by catechization of the members to understand the foreign word or term.

However, for Nida, dynamic equivalence in translation could be used to make the Biblical message understandable. He says the communicator must select from the revelation those features that are culturally relevant and must find cultural parallels that will make such a message significant within the immediate context of people's lives.⁶² For Lamin Sanneh, "The effort of scriptural translators to come as close as possible to the speech of ordinary, everyday life is a remarkable example of their confidence that the profoundest spiritual truths are compatible with commonplace words, ideas, and concepts."⁶³ For Ebbie Smith, to make the Christian message meaningful, relevant, acceptable, and communicative for the local people, the linguistic principle of dynamic equivalence is a useful methodology.⁶⁴ In contrast, Schulz prefers literal translation and suggests that if the word translated literally is difficult to understand, the members can be catechized to understand it.⁶⁵ Schulz's point may help avoid distorting the original meaning of the text. Considering these different points of view, efforts must be taken to keep the original meaning of the word when translating the Bible into different

⁵⁹ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 177.

⁶⁰ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 177.

⁶¹ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 177.

⁶² Nida, *Message and Mission*, 69.

⁶³ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 200.

⁶⁴ Ebbie Smith, "Culture: The Milieu of Mission," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 244.

⁶⁵ Schulz, *Mission from the Cross*, 178.

languages. However, the translator may be forced to use dynamic equivalence when the literal meaning of the original word is indeterminable.

CONCLUSION

The Church of Christ is not of the world but in the world, communicating the one Gospel of the Triune God to people in different cultures and languages. Thus, it is essential for the Church to use different languages and cultures to make the Gospel understandable to these people groups. As only God can use the preached Word to bring understanding and faith, the Church must depend on the source of the Gospel message, not on communication techniques and strategies. However, using different approaches in communicating the Gospel is essential. The message of the Church must not be recipient-oriented, as this may compromise the content of the Gospel. The salvific Gospel must not be compromised to make it relevant to the receptor. In translation, the original meaning of the text must be preserved, without compromising or distorting the message. However, when the translator is forced to use dynamic equivalence in translation, this must not distort the original meaning of the word. Indigenization must not lead to syncretism, and contextualization must aim to make Christ known to the natives. Thus, indigenization must be guided and checked by the Scriptural and confessional teachings. Avoiding under- and/or over-contextualization through critical contextualization may help prevent syncretism in the process of indigenization and contextualization. All in all, the goal of using different cultures and languages must be centered on the event of the Cross and its proclamation, so that the hearer may come to believe in Christ Jesus for his/her salvation. However, the tension between the Church and culture will continue to the end of time in how to spread the same pure Gospel of Jesus Christ in different cultures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ajibade, Ezekiel A. *Contextualization of Expository Preaching: Engaging Orality for Effective Proclamation in Africa*. Ogbomoso, Nigeria: Baptist Press, 2018.
- Allen, Diogenes, and Eric O. Springsted. *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*. 2nd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.
- Budge, E. A. Wallis. *Amulets and Superstitions*. London: Oxford University Press, 1930.
- Chilton, Bruce. *Aramaic Jesus: Tradition, Identity, and Christianity's Mother Tongue*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2025.
- Crouch, Andy. *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008.
- Crumbley, Deidre Helen. "Power in the Blood: Menstrual Taboos and Women's Power in an African Instituted Church." In *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, edited by R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage, 81–97. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- . *Spirit, Structure, and Flesh: Gendered Experiences in African Instituted Churches among the Yoruba of Nigeria*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008.
- Hiebert, Paul G., R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou. *Understanding Folk Religions: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999.
- Jebadu, Alexander. "Ancestral Veneration and the Possibility of Its Incorporation in Judeo-Christian Faith." IFTK Ledalero Repository. Accessed March 10, 2026. <http://repository.iftkledalero.ac.id/254/1/Ancestor%20Veneration%20and%20Its%20Possibility.pdf>.
- Kirk, J. Andrew. *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999.
- Lovejoy, Grant. "Cross-Cultural Communication." In *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World*

- Missions*, edited by John Mark Terry, 253–64. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015.
- Mburu, Elizabeth. *African Hermeneutics*. Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2019.
- Misner, Josh, and Geoff Carr. *Messages That Matter: Public Speaking in the Information Age*. 3rd ed. Coeur d'Alene: North Idaho College, 2023. <https://nic.pressbooks.pub/messageshatmatter/>.
- Missick, Stephen Andrew. *The Language of Jesus: Introducing Aramaic*. N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010.
- Moreau, A. Scott, Evvy Hay Campbell, and Susan Greener. *Effective Intercultural Communication: A Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014.
- Neill, Stephen. *A History of Christian Missions*. London: Penguin Books, 1964.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978.
- Nida, Eugene A. *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith*. Rev. ed. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1990.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper & Row, 1951.
- Öberg, Ingemar. *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study*. Translated by Dean Apel. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007.
- Omollo, Fredrick. "The Communion of Saints in the Light of Ancestor Veneration in Africa and Its Sequels on the Christian Theology of Hope." *Roczniki Teologiczne* 70, no. 2 (2023): 87–99. <https://doi.org/10.18290/rt2023.19>.
- Ott, Craig, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent. *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010.
- Rey, Charles F. *The Real Abyssinia*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

- Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.
- Schultze, Quentin J. *Communicating for Life: Christian Stewardship in Community and Media*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000.
- Schulz, Klaus Detlev. *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009.
- Shaw, Mark. *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity*. Katunayake, Sri Lanka: New Life Literature, 2006.
- Smith, Ebbie. "Culture: The Milieu of Mission." In *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, edited by John Mark Terry, 235–52. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015.
- Stern, Henry A. *Wandering among the Falashas in Abyssinia: Together with a Description of the Country and Its Various Inhabitants*. 2nd ed. London: Frank Cass, 1968.
- Tappert, Theodore G., trans. and ed. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959.
- Terry, John Mark. "The History of Missions in the Early Church." In *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, edited by John Mark Terry, 141–56. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015.
- Tibebu Teklu Senbetu. *Worthy Admission to the Eucharist: The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church and 1 Corinthians 11:27–29*. New York: Peter Lang, 2025.
- Walls, Andrew F. *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.
- Wright, Gerald D. "The Purpose of Mission." In *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, edited by John Mark Terry, 19–29. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015.