Lutheran Mission Matters



St. Paul's Cross-Cultural Mission Strategy and Bunkowske's Cultural Onion Model

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Abstract: Connecting St. Paul's mission strategy as described in his encounter with the Athenian philosophers in Acts 17 with Dr. Eugene Bunkowske's *Cultural Onion Model*, this article seeks to combine biblical mission principles and anthropological insights about the key questions and appropriate mission activities that can lead to spiritual transformation. Today's missionaries and faithful witnesses must use such principles and insights to discern what matters most to a particular unreached individual or people group. In addition, the paper explores the question of how to build potential bridges to connect a mission agent with a not-yet-reached individual or group at their deepest level so that the Holy Spirit can change their ultimate allegiance to follow Jesus and confess faith in the triune God.

Introduction

Austin, Texas, the live music capital of the world and a growing technology Mecca, prides itself in being different as demonstrated by the city's motto: "Keep Austin Weird!" South by Southwest (SXSW), a major annual mega-event attracts



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thousands of entrepreneurs, musicians, and artists from all over the world, and the city also regularly hosts one of the world's largest tattoo conventions.

Austin is a young city, and although geographically located in the Bible belt, the city has attracted a growing number of young people who are definitely not looking to the Bible for answers. In fact, a recent Barna Group study showed the city to be among the top 35 post-Christian cities in the United States.¹

My wife and I moved to Central Texas to be part of ACTS, an LCMS Texas District church-planting network, with the goal of reaching the large unchurched population with the Gospel and planting new churches throughout the metropolitan area. The network now has four churches and continues to look for effective ways to connect this growing community to Jesus and His Church. What mission principles could St. Paul teach us about reaching unique people groups like high-tech Texans, or for that matter, an unreached tribal group in South America?

To answer this question, I decided to look more closely at the story in Acts 17 of how Paul connected with the Athenian philosophers in his day. In addition, I

remembered a resource my mission mentor, the late Dr. Eugene Bunkowske, shared with mission students and missionaries that he called the Cultural Onion Model. While Bunkowske's model is based on his anthropological studies and missionary background, I believe it also faithfully reflects biblical mission principles and complements St. Paul's missionary strategy. The missionary's outreach goal is to understand a particular culture's worldview and ultimate allegiance, in order to achieve more

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effective mission results, as we faithfully witness in our unique "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and ends of the earth" mission arenas (Acts 1:8).

Examining St. Paul's missionary model, I have identified four principles: Look, Listen, Leverage, and Link. My chart on the following pages is an attempt to illustrate the key questions a missionary should ask in any cross-cultural situation, along with the appropriate mission actions to consider when engaging with an unreached people group.

In addition, the chart outlines the passages in Acts 17 that illustrate the key questions and mission action steps followed by St. Paul in Athens. The two columns on the far right of the graphic describe the actions, cultural questions, and onion layers in Bunkowske's model. The chart shows the relationships between the Acts 17 mission strategy and Bunkowske's model and suggests appropriate questions and actions for today's cross-cultural missionaries and faithful Christians who seek to reach their unchurched friends and neighbors.

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Paul's Cross Cultural Mission Strategy and Bunkowske's Cultural Onion Model

Key Descriptive Words	Key Questions	Key ACTS 17 Passages	Appropriate Mission Actions	Onion Diagram Actions and Questions?	Onion Diagram Layers:
LOOK	What is the environment of the target audience? What do we need to look for?	"For as I walked around and looked carefully" (Acts 17:23)	Prayer walking & Spiritual Mapping	Looking at the objects, artifacts, and behaviors of a particular culture in order to get some clues about what is important to them.	Artifacts Behaviors OUTERMOST LAYER
LISTEN	What matters most to the target audience? What is their key value?	"All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." (Acts 17:21)	Asking the right questions and actively listening in order to understand at a deeper level. (Ethnographic Research)	What feelings do we observe as people in a particular culture relate to one another? What is important to the culture? What is true and false?	Feelings Values Beliefs MIDDLE LAYER
LEVERAGE	What can we do and say to get the attention of the target group and make a positive connection?	"Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22)	Identifying connections between where a target audience is and where God wants them to be.	What is the basic mental perspective of the target individual or group? What is their Foundational Center?	World View Ultimate Allegiance INNERMOST LAYER

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Chart continued

Key Descriptive Words	Key Questions	Key ACTS 17 Passages	Appropriate Mission Actions	Onion Diagram Actions and Questions?	Onion Diagram Layers:
LINK	What is the ultimate goal and final result of looking, listening, and leveraging?	"God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." (Acts 17:27)	Building a bridge to connect lost and hurting people to the God who made, redeemed, and is ready to guide them into a deep relationship with Him.	How do we relate to a specific cultural/people group or individual in order to connect with them at their deepest level and so that the Holy Spirit can change their ultimate allegiance to the Triune God?	As an individual and/or a people group embrace Jesus as their Savior and Lord, it affects and changes the other layers in their lives and they themselves become disciplemakers.

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1. LOOK: What is the environment of the target audience? What do we need to LOOK for as we carry out God's mission mandate?

Paul's "looking" in his dealings with the Athenians is evident in the phrase "For as I walked along and looked carefully..." (Acts 17:23). This phrase indicates that he was closely observing and actively seeking God's guidance in order to take the right steps to effectively share the Good News of Jesus with that unique Greek subculture. Paul saw the numerous altars and temples the Athenians had dedicated to different gods. From this observation, Paul concluded that the Athenians were spending a lot of money and time on their religious life!

The Cultural Onion Model identifies artifacts and behaviors on the outside skin of the onion. As Bunkowske states, "The outer layers of the cultural onion, artifacts and behaviors, are immediately apparent and accessible." This is what we can easily see without cutting into the onion. But while it is only the beginning point in our attempt to understand a culture, it can reveal a great deal if we will look carefully!

In the Bunkowske model, the altars and temples on Mars Hill in Athens are the outer skin of the cultural onion. By carefully peeling away that outer layer, St. Paul sought to ultimately identify the Athenians' beliefs, values, and worldview around which they ordered their understanding and relationship to the world.

As we seek to apply Paul's missionary approach and Bunkowske's model today, we must like St. Paul look at a target audience with God's eyes and discernment in order to understand not-yet-reached people at a deeper level and consider effective

ways to connect with them. This critical missionary task requires observational skills much like those of a good detective.

One of the most appropriate tools for helping any missionary "see" with God's eyes is *prayer walking*. While widely practiced during the past twenty-five years by missionaries, the process is biblically based. For example, we see in Numbers 13:18–20, Moses' instructions to the twelve spies, a strategy to help assess the people they would encounter in battle in order to help him prepare for the battle to come. As twenty-first century missionaries prepare to enter a new unreached

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people group, prayer walking is one way to prepare for the "spiritual battle" they can expect as they interact with and seek to reach people of another culture with the Gospel.

Prayer walking focuses on "looking" with prayer and helps the missionary to "see" with God's eyes. This activity responds to what one sees while walking through a neighborhood or community. For example, suppose several missionaries are prayer walking and come to a small public school. They might pray as follows: "Dear God, as we are passing this school, we see and hear children playing games in the playground. We hear teachers instructing other students, and while we don't fully understand what they are saying, we pray, Lord, that these teachers might be motivated to see each child as a unique individual made in Your image. Help the students to discover their gifts and be motivated to develop them. Help these young people to be inquisitive and to ask penetrating questions. And then, help our group to find some effective ways to come alongside of the teachers and students to help this school be a more effective instrument of your Grace. In Jesus name. Amen."

Such a prayer can help the missionary visualize and look for what God is already doing in a community or among a specific people group. And, such prayer helps a missionary to consider unanswered questions and to seek God's direction in order to formulate a mission strategy.

Another activity, *spiritual mapping*, is closely related to and often accompanies prayer walking, but ideally goes to a deeper level as it seeks to penetrate below the

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outer layer of the cultural onion. What is spiritual mapping exactly? In his insightful article, Tai M. Yip describes spiritual mapping this way: "By definition, proper spiritual mapping looks at the world with spiritual eyes to see spiritual realities."3

Author F. Douglas Pennoyer, in his book, Wrestling with Dark Angels, adds to Yip's definition: "Since spiritual mapping is concerned about social groups rather than individuals, the strongholds we want to study are not individual strongholds. While individuals can be under the captivity of demonic strongholds, how can we describe the demonic captivity of a society?"4

Pennoyer answers this question by explaining that

there are four levels of collective captivity: distraction, deception, dependency, and domination. Demons work on distracting people through the details of life and their desire for power and prestige. At the next level, demons work on deceiving people into accepting false beliefs. As deception advances, people become dependent on the false beliefs to cope with life. The highest form of dependence is domination when the false beliefs control people's lives and they become demonized.⁵

By means of spiritual mapping, we seek to see things as they truly are and not simply as they appear to be, or as we wish them to be. And, we can begin to see at what level of collective captivity a particular people group might be operating. Following the thought of 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, we ask: How has the god of this age blindfolded the minds of the target audience so that they cannot see the Light of the Gospel? And, if spiritual strongmen must be bound in order to bring about the deliverance of their captives (Mt 12:24-30), how exactly are they to be identified and resisted?

While I directed the Central American Lutheran Mission Society (CALMS), we always began our work in economically challenged villages with prayer walking and by combining ethnographic research with spiritual mapping. We tried to answer research questions like: Which churches are active in this community, and who are their leaders? But we also tried to go beyond the answers to these more basic questions to see below the surface.

The process of spiritual mapping might be compared to a doctor examining a patient with and without equipment to determine if they have pneumonia. "Without an X-ray, the doctor can't be 100% sure about a certain diagnosis for pneumonia. But with an X-ray, he can 'see' evidence of pneumonia in the lungs of his patient and then begin a proper treatment."6

Invariably, going beneath the surface of a particular culture compares to going below the first layer of the cultural onion described in Dr. Bunkowske's model. It is therefore not enough to describe the church buildings and to list the church leaders of a particular community. We will need to go to deeper levels of the culture if we are to fully understand what spiritual issues might lie beneath the surface and might affect the way people interact with one another and respond to conflicts and challenges that come their way.

Spiritual mapping seeks answers to deeper questions like: What historical and cultural realities might be influencing the way this group of people understands God and how to connect with Him? Is there evidence of this particular culture or community group combining the Christian faith with some other belief system as is often the case in Central America where indigenous people might overlay the Christian faith with traditional rituals?

For example, on numerous occasions, I witnessed indigenous people performing a traditional ritual in front of a church, and then upon completion of the ritual, going into the church to hear God's Word and even receiving the Lord's Supper. What do such rituals and the syncretism observed in such instances reveal about the religious beliefs of a certain group of people?

These are the kinds of questions St. Paul tried to answer as he related to people on his missionary journeys. In effect, I believe St. Paul was peeling away the layers of the cultural onion in order to understand what mattered to a potential target audience and in order to consider an appropriate response.

2. LISTEN: What matters most to the target audience? What are their key values? What are their resources and challenges? How can we ask the right questions and listen actively and intentionally in order to better understand what is important to people of a particular cultural group?

A key value of the Athenians was seeking knowledge and new ideas. "They spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21). Thus, they were open to hearing from Paul something new that they had not heard before. They said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" (Acts 17:19).

From the text, it is obvious that Paul didn't just look at the outer layers of the Athenians' culture. Rather he connected the dots between what he saw and the values of the target audience. That led him to realize that the Athenians were "very religious" (Acts 17:22).

In describing his model, Bunkowske says, "The outer layers of the cultural onion, artifacts and behaviors, are immediately apparent and accessible." He goes on to say, "In-depth linkages are only available as credible connections are made with the core layers of worldview and ultimate allegiance in a person's culture." He then adds this important fact, "Developing these kinds of in-depth relationships normally takes a good deal of time and effort."

In most cross-cultural mission situations, this search to understand a culture's values implies spending time with individuals, developing relationships, and ultimately gaining their trust.

I saw the importance of this principle of active listening in my ministry in the remote La Union area of western Guatemala where CALMS worked for many years with economically challenged villages. After several years of pursuing wholistic ministry focusing on infrastructure, educational projects, spiritual life, and health-related issues, we noticed that a growing number of families in the villages were made up of three and even four generations. So we began to consider the possibility of helping young married couples who were living in very crowded conditions with their children, parents,

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siblings, and grandparents under one roof to acquire a home of their own.

Instead of peeling away the layers of the cultural onion as Dr. Bunkowske might have done, we jumped to the conclusion that we could build a whole new village for young families from the area villages. We even came up with the creative idea of developing a new village from the ground up that could become a model Christian community. We also hoped that we could include a strong discipleship component that we could then use to help demonstrate what we wanted to see in all the area's villages.

However, at this point in our ministry, we had not yet "peeled away enough layers of the cultural onion" to fully understand what was really important to these couples and their extended families. Instead of seeking to understand their true values as related to their families, we eventually discovered that we had projected our own North American attitudes and values. This caused us to conclude that living so close together would not give young couples the privacy they wanted and needed.

Thankfully, as we began to actively listen to more and more of the young couples and their extended families, we discovered that almost without exception they wanted to stay living in their multigenerational families. Even though we were proposing to build a new village within a short distance of their home villages, they could not conceive of moving to a different community or living so far from their parents and grandparents. By listening to what were most important to young couples, our mission team came to see that young couples invariably valued being physically close to their extended families. By listening at a deeper level, we eventually came to understand that this value was deeply rooted in their tribal heritage.

This episode in our mission experience taught us to avoid jumping to conclusions without first peeling away more of the cultural layers. This approach of looking

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beneath the cultural layers to understand values, beliefs, and worldviews, invariably led to better decision-making as we worked with our cross-cultural partners. In the end, we responded more appropriately to the housing issue in these villages by helping families improve and expand their existing homes. This approach allowed multigenerational families to continue to live together, but with some additional space and improved hygiene.

As we engage with a new culture, we missionaries should seek to combine ethnographic research with biblical methods and principles as demonstrated by Paul at Athens. We should also seek to understand how a specific culture is organized and to understand what is truly important to that people group. In other words, as effective

missionaries we will want to look beyond the artifacts and outward behaviors so easily observable, to see what is really motivating that behavior and what is really important to the people.

Bunkowske's *Cultural Onion Model* describes the middle layer as focusing on beliefs, values, and feelings. He calls this layer the evaluating level since it "provides a system for evaluating and drawing conclusions about the experiences of life in terms of true and false, good and bad, and a calibrated scale of emotions."

As effective missionaries we will want to look beyond the artifacts and outward behaviors so easily observable, to see what is really motivating that behavior and what is really important to the people.

As our experience with the villagers in Guatemala showed, they evaluated the suggestion to move to a new community against the backdrop of their values and beliefs. Their reaction to the suggestion of moving was strongly affected by their evaluation system of what for them was true and false—good and bad.

In the end, as a missionary develops an effective missionary strategy he or she will invariably want to ask: What is most important for this culture? In the previous mission example, we saw how important the extended family is to the culture of indigenous Guatemalans. This issue really mattered to the Guatemalan villagers, and it was essential to understand their values in order to effectively serve and minister with them.

3. LEVERAGE: What can we do to get the attention of the target audience and make the greatest positive impact? How can we create a bridge between ourselves as Christ-followers and a specific group of people or an individual we are seeking to reach with the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection and His claim on their allegiance?

These are the questions missionaries need to ask once they have the answers to the question of a culture's ultimate allegiance.

As noted earlier, Paul correctly observed that the Athenians were highly religious. This understanding created a connection for him and his message. As he looked deeper, he saw that there was one altar to "an unknown God" (Acts 17:23). Then Paul offered to tell the Athenians about this "unknown god" they had already been worshiping. St. Paul saw the bridge he needed to cross, and he was able to cross over that bridge to share his message with an audience that was predisposed to hearing what he had to say.

Returning to Bunkowske's Cultural Onion Model, we note that St. Paul observed the Athenians' behavior and noted that they were worshiping many gods including an "unknown god" (Acts 17:23). Paul also observed the Athenians' feelings and beliefs. Their discussions and constant philosophical conversations revealed that they were constantly evaluating and seeking to understand and make sense of their life experiences (Acts 17:21).

How can we hope to get a positive response from a not-yet-reached individual or a specific cultural group in our missionary efforts today—whether it is an urban church-planting effort in Austin, Texas, or a Christian mass media project aimed at an indigenous population in South America? What can we do and say to get their attention? And, how can we make a positive connection that might lead to a positive response to the Gospel? These are the kinds of questions we need to ask ourselves as we seek to leverage where a target group is when we first encounter them and where we believe God ultimately wants them to be?

As St. Paul's example with the Athenian philosophers shows, we can be most successful in communicating the Gospel by demonstrating respect for another culture, by being sensitive to their feelings and to what is important to them, by seeking to understand their values and beliefs, and by being highly relational in our interactions.

Being culturally sensitive in our missionary practice today includes accepting that before we have ever shown up in a new mission setting, God has already been at work. We see this principle at work in St. Paul's encounter with the Athenians. God had already shown up before Paul arrived on the scene. This was demonstrated in their recognition of the reality of an "unknown god."

If we understand and accept the reality of God's presence in a community or culture, it is more likely that we will humbly look for evidence of how God has already Copyright 2021 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

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been at work. And once we have recognized that before we arrived, our missionary God was already present in a particular culture, we can then build upon the foundation of His work and expect to see greater fruit. This is a critical *leveraging* principle that can help open doors for Gospel proclamation and discipleship.

I saw this principle at work often in our mission work in Central America as we began to work in villages where only indigenous leaders had ministered prior to our arrival. If we understand and accept the reality of God's presence in a community or culture, it is more likely that we will humbly look for evidence of how God has already been at work.

Depending on the village, there were almost always spiritual leaders representing a Roman Catholic church, an Evangelical church, and a Pentecostal church. And quite often there was some tension between these various churches and their leaders. Being aware of this reality, we were committed not to add additional division in our dealings with the community. Rather we observed how these spiritual leaders interacted with one another and with the community and sought to understand their values and beliefs.

We also sought to develop a relationship with these spiritual leaders and to equip them to become more effective leaders and Christ-followers. Over time, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we regularly saw these spiritual leaders become co-workers who trusted us and one another more and worked together more effectively to help their community become a spiritually healthier village.

We knew that these spiritual leaders would remain after we eventually left their village, so our strategy involved helping them to look to God's Word to guide their decisions and actions. We believed that with greater unity, renewed commitment to God's Word, and dedication to His mission, they could continue building up and extending the Body of Christ long after we had completed our work and left the community.

Invariably, however, we learned over time that no amount of equipping by our mission teams could produce spiritual transformation that could significantly transform whole communities unless a majority of the people abandoned old allegiances and adopted a new "ultimate allegiance" to Jesus as Lord. As Bunkowske's *Cultural Onion Model* description states, "Ultimate allegiance serves as the spiritual and mental dynamic for a culture's worldview that in turn serves as the 'internal gyro'—the managing center for everything that person thinks, is and does."

In keeping with the importance of helping people proclaim a new allegiance and be guided by the Holy Spirit as their managing center, in our Central American ministry we sought to equip spiritual leaders whose thoughts and actions were controlled by Jesus, "the internal gyro" of their lives.

Helping individuals and people groups reorient their inmost cultural layers rather than focusing merely on more external issues like their artifacts and outward behaviors can lead to significant transformation in the lives of individuals and communities. Having a biblically based "managing center" in turn can lead to other changes in all the other layers of their lives—impacting their values, beliefs, worldview, and even their behaviors. Believing this principle to be true and seeking to fulfill Christ's own command to make disciples of all people (Mt 28:18-20), God's faithful witnesses and missionaries will seek to identify connections between where a group of people is and where God wants them to be. This leveraging process invariably involves helping others put Jesus at the center of their lives.

4. LINK: What is the ultimate goal and final result of *looking* at a culture with God's eyes, listening to discern their values, and leveraging our relationship to understand a not-yet-reached culture's ultimate allegiance?

The fourth "L" word that helps round out St. Paul's Athenian missionary strategy is link. The goal is to successfully engage with a different culture in a way that leads to a change not just in behavior, but a change that goes to their cultural core—the

deepest part of the cultural onion. For an individual or group to be willing to change their ultimate allegiance requires a link to an ultimate truth that they come to recognize is stronger and more significant than the one they must give up.

Mission history, especially in Latin America where I worked for many years, is replete with examples of indigenous people groups accepting some parts of the Christian faith while hanging on to aspects of their native belief systems. Especially in times of trial such as sickness or loss of a loved one, people with strong ties to their original culture will often For an individual or group to be willing to change their ultimate allegiance requires a link to an ultimate truth that they come to recognize is stronger and more significant than the one they must give up.

abandon their Christian practices and revert to non-Christian rituals as they look for answers. Such syncretistic arrangements lead to a hybrid religion that is unfaithful to both belief systems. Most concerning, such arrangements do not ultimately lead to lifestyle choices and changes that reflect the values of the Christian faith.

As we learned in our Central American mission work, it was important to help people living in economically "at-risk" communities to improve their agriculture, health care, education, and community infrastructure. But in the end, if we only focused on these things and failed to link the people to Jesus as their ultimate allegiance, they would still be spiritually poor.

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To measure whether a real link with Jesus, their Ultimate Allegiance, had really occurred, we learned to observe the leaders' behavior and how they interacted with others.

When a link with the triune God took place, we regularly saw commitments at the deepest level of the cultural onion affecting their behavior. And we observed believers acting as change agents who served as instruments of the Holy Spirit to help others embrace a new ultimate allegiance. Such commitment leading to personal involvement in God's mission is the best way to measure whether an individual has been transformed, or a cultural group has really changed its allegiance.

Frank, an unchurched 20-year-old from a small village in Guatemala, demonstrates how a person who is being transformed and grounded in a new reality through the power of the Gospel can himself become a change agent. Frank began to read the Bible our ministry team gave him. Within months he became an active participant in a new discipleship group in his community. As he grew in faith, Frank took on more leadership responsibility, eventually leading Bible study for younger youth and children. He had been living with the mother of his two small children and as a result of his growth in Christian maturity, Frank made the decision to marry his partner in a Christian ceremony. Today, he is a committed husband, father, and Christian leader in his community. Like all Christians, Frank is still a work in progress with some struggles and challenges. Yet, because his ultimate allegiance is focused on Jesus, he is now a useful servant and ambassador of Jesus in his community.

Indeed, a true Christian conversion invariably leads to changes in all aspects of a person's life. As Christian missionaries have regularly observed, a true conversion to Christ inherently produces countercultural challenges and even some new conflicts as individuals re-think their responses to decisions and human relationships. When an individual or a cultural group embrace a new ultimate allegiance to Christ, we can expect to see new behaviors, new values and beliefs—and even a new worldview. As 2 Corinthians 5:17 declares: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

Conclusion

As St. Paul's strategy and Bunkowske's model demonstrate, Paul ultimately wanted and needed to understand the Athenians' worldview in order to gain an audience and to share his important message of God's plan of salvation. Paul knew that the Athenians, like all cultural groups, had a unique perspective to help them organize their mental map and to help them understand what is real and to choose the god to whom they owed their allegiance. Their daily philosophical debates demonstrated that they were in effect mapping and seeking to develop meta-narratives and perspectives to better order their daily lives and society.

In the end, our ultimate goal as Christian missionaries is to understand an individual's or a cultural group's deepest layer—their ultimate allegiance—and then link them to Christ and His mission as active participants in His mission. When we have helped this happen, we can claim to have understood and faithfully followed St. Paul's Athenian mission model and to have gotten to the core layer of the Cultural Onion Model.

Endnotes

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- ⁹ Bunkowske, The Cultural Onion, 2.