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Confessing the “Real Present Jesus”: The Power to Overcome Cultural Barriers with the Good News of the Gospel

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Abstract: When the church confesses the incarnate nature of the Gospel message, what are its implications for mission work? What are the implications for the proclaimer as well as the hearer? If the Gospel message is not merely a “teaching of religious dogma” but an encounter with the one who saved and redeemed you, what does this say about the nature of our “confession of the faith?” This article will explore the sacramental gospel and its implications for mission by examining the sociological implications derived from incarnational, sacramental theology and by critiquing such sociological implications in light of the nature of the sacramental word.

The Sacramental Gospel and its Implications for Mission

When the Church confesses the incarnate nature of the Gospel message, what are its implications for mission work? What are the implications for the proclaimer as well as the hearer? If the Gospel message is not merely a “teaching of religious dogma” but an encounter with the one who saved and redeemed you, what does this say about the nature of our “confession of the faith”? First, we will examine the



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sociological implications derived from incarnational theology. Secondly, we will critique such sociological implications in light of the nature of the sacramental word.

The Sociological Implications of the Incarnational Message—A Mission Methodology

The incarnation of Jesus has become a paradigm for modern, cross-cultural “mission methodology.” The very birth of the Son of God in a manger to a peasant family from Nazareth demonstrates the lengths that God is willing to go in order to communicate the message of the Gospel to a sinful, disobedient, even deaf world. The pericopes of Jesus’ washing the disciple’s feet (John 13) and the narratives of His death on the cross (Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19) proclaim both the message of salvation and the servant nature of its communication. As the incarnate servant, Jesus Himself communicates, even translates, the “good news of the cross” into the language of the people to whom He was sent. This Gospel message of God, embodied in the form of a servant, fulfilled in the death of Christ on the cross and translatable to the common man, is what makes the Christian message unique. In his work, *Translating the Message*, Lamin Sanneh describes this uniqueness, this translatability of the Christian message:

Conversion that takes place rests on the conviction that might be produced in people after conscious critical reflection. What is distinctive about this critical reflection is that it assumes, either implicitly or explicitly, a relativized status for the culture of the message-bearer.¹

The message of the Gospel honors the “receptivity” needs of the receiving culture. All “incarnational” mission methodologies stress this obligation for communication on the “proclaimer” by emphasizing the primacy of the receptor cultural forms. The proclaimer needs to be vulnerable to that culture so as to become an authentic voice from within. Lingenfelter calls this becoming a 150 percent person, one who has begun to shed “sheddable” aspects of his home culture while earning the right of being an authentic member of the new culture in which one serves. In his words,

Missionaries and others who accept the challenge of cross-cultural ministries must by the nature of their task, become personally immersed with peoples who are very different. To follow the example of Christ, that of incarnation, means undergoing drastic personal and social reorientation. . . . Cross-cultural workers must be socialized all over again into a new cultural context.²

The sacramental Gospel is a translatable one because God is making use of the earthly form. Whether it was God coming to Adam in the garden in ways that he could understand, or locating His promise of salvation in a people group born of Abraham, or assuring His people of their forgiveness through Old Testament temple

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sacrifices and the presence among them in the temple (1 Kings 8), God “condescends” to the level of the people He wishes to save so that they might receive the grace He wishes them to have.

In this sense, the message is receptor-oriented. It is not that the message is determined by the culture, but that the proclaimer of the message is the one who is accountable for its delivery. It is the work of the “incarnate” one to strive continually to find the right metaphor, the comparable analogy that might unlock the meaning of the Gospel to the culture in which one serves.

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In my work in New York City, in Los Angeles, and now as Lutheran Hour Speaker, I am constantly reminded never to take for granted the fact that each neighborhood and circumstances brought unique challenges and opportunities to proclaiming the Gospel. While the Bible speaks about the reality of sin, the ravages of sin from which our Lord has redeemed us may manifest in very different ways among the culture groups that we serve. Often in my work in urban communities, such things might appear as alienation and disenfranchisement from society. People are literally “kept out” from the broader community by virtue of their powerlessness and isolation. Within that alienation is also the personal failure and sin that plagues all people, but together builds a hopelessness that seems insurmountable. To be an incarnational bearer of the Gospel is to enter into that alienation and participate in the hopes and fears of the community. Yet, even as one seeks to earn the right to share the Gospel, one is already speaking a “sacramental” word from within that alienation that builds the hope, joy, power, and peace that only Christ can build in both the sharer and the receiver.

The reality of sin among the urban elite, on the other hand, would manifest itself in other, often very different ways. Often, the corporate hopefulness and unbounding temporal opportunities mask a real emptiness and despair. Jesus’ challenge to the rich man with full barns (Lk 12:16–20) is the classic message. But in this case, too, one must enter into the plastic world that keeps real meaning at bay. One must endure its shallowness and learn its language so as to speak boldly of living life “abundantly” in Christ, free from the shackles of wealth and position.³

The incarnation methodology of mission invites the sharer of the Gospel to know the arena in which one serves. Very concrete indigenous metaphors⁴ that bridge the biblical message of the Gospel into the culture in which one serves are not only needed, they are demanded.

This methodology not only makes one aware of the culture in which one serves, it also makes the messenger aware of his or her own cultural limitations.⁵ The incarnational Gospel is more than a method. It is more than a sociological paradigm. This message convicts and saves both proclaimer and hearer. Biblically, “incarnation/sacrament” is still the action of the God who saves, who communicates with the world He created and redeemed. The Bible uses a vast array of metaphors and analogies as well as didactic teaching to convey God’s message of salvation. Jack Preus observes that “The Gospel is alive simply because it is words. It is alive with words and metaphors that are themselves living. These words (used by God) actually make things happen.”⁶

As we communicate the Gospel, we are also communicated to. Rarely is the Word of God “over-translated.” The richness of the sacramental word invites the growth of both proclaimer and hearer. God always transforms the one sent and the one to whom he is sent.

Bridging cultures through “clay-vessel” proclaimers to culture-bound hearers is still possible. Universals do still exist among human beings. Kraft, speaking of human commonality in terms of universal needs and desires, says:

The number and nature of such universals are impressive. For they demonstrate that human beings, though participants in radically different cultural systems, have a great deal in common. And it is this great similarity among human beings that provides the basis on which cross-cultural human understanding and the potential for intercultural communication rest.⁷

While such sociological observations are encouraging and helpful, more must be said. The principal reason that the Gospel is translatable, able to bridge cultures, remains the sacramental character of the message of the cross. The Apostle Paul says:

But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:23–24); and

I am not ashamed of the *gospel*, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile (Rom 1:16) (emphasis added).

Paul demonstrates the limitations of all cultures and their equivalent value before God, while also demonstrating the uniqueness of the ministry and message of Jesus Christ, who was the fulfillment of the promise through the line of Abraham, born from the Jews, sent to the Jew first and then to the Gentile so that all might be saved. No one culture over another “deserves” to be the vessel through which God communicates the message of the Gospel. Therefore, no culture is to be absolutized. But, the fact remains that God chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He redeemed the

Israelites and established them as bearers of His message of salvation by grace alone and birthed that promise in the family of the line of David at the time when “Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Lk 2:2). As one bears the message of the Gospel, every modern witness to Christ finds himself in the dual position of learning the sacramental message “once delivered” and the challenges of “delivering it anew” to the culture that stands before us. Alberto Garcia states it well: “This is the ‘vulnerability of the cross’ and the fragile existence that the missionary appropriates as he/she witnesses to Christ cross-culturally.”⁸

Many of the sociological works that stress the incarnational methodology of mission are very helpful in preparing missionaries for the kinds of sacrifices that will be necessary to engage other cultures as credible witnesses to the Gospel. Assessing culture, both our own and the community to which we are sent, is the beginning of being useful to Christ and community. Allowing the process of incarnational critique allows the missionary to become “ambassador” to a culture different from one’s own. While the sociological ramifications are helpful in preparation for such realities, the sacramental nature of the “word shared” still remains the only confidence for the strength to stay the course of cross-cultural mission work.

The message of the Gospel is not “religious teaching” emanating from neutral cultural constructs, but rather an encounter with the living God who has spoken in history.

Sacramental Gospel: Its Missional Character and Blessing

To take the incarnation seriously, one must be committed to the sacramental nature of the Gospel and its transcultural nature. The unique, sacramental character of the Christian message is its revelatory nature. The message of the Gospel is not “religious teaching” emanating from neutral cultural constructs, but rather an encounter with the living God who has spoken in history. Leslie Newbigin says,

At this point the only relevant questions are: Is there anyone present? Has he spoken? Natural theology ends here: another kind of enterprise begins, and another kind of language has to be used—the language of testimony.

The Christian church testifies that in the actual event of this finite, contingent, and yet rational world of warped space-time there are words and gestures through which the Creator and Sustainer of the world has spoken and acted.⁹

Here Newbigin proclaims a God who has spoken. The Lutheran teaching goes even further when it says that God has spoken, and He has still located Himself a place where He can be found. He is not merely here or there, He is located in words, water, bread and wine, so that you might receive him. Thus, Sasse:

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He, the *Deus incarnates*, who for our sake took flesh and blood, stoops down to us so low that He not only lives among us but in us, and we can do nothing else than speak the words of the centurion with the old liturgies of the Lord’s Supper: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.”¹⁰

The implications of God incarnate become obvious. An incarnate Lord is knowable and receivable. The Lutheran Confessions teach, therefore, the “certainty” of salvation, not as a human achievement but as a sacramental reality, a pure gift given and received. Certainty of one’s forgiveness of sins is essential to the Gospel. The Apology states,

“How do we become sure that our sins are forgiven?” . . . This cannot be answered, nor can our consciences find rest, unless they know it is God’s command and the gospel itself that they should be certain that their sins are forgiven. . . . We teach that this certainty of faith is required in the gospel; the opponents leave consciences uncertain and wavering.¹¹

But such certainty is not merely for one people group alone. Even in the choosing of Abram in Genesis 12, God instructs us that it is for the blessing of all the nations. God always speaks particularly so that we can see the uniqueness of His Word, but He also speaks universally for the sake of all. In this regard, the Gospel is a supra-cultural word:

There are many ways to communicate the Gospel. In its diversity, the Gospel overcomes cultural and linguistic barriers. There is a universality about the Gospel not only in the sense that God “wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4), but also in the fact that the very language of the Gospel is universal.¹²

Sacramental Word Empowers Incarnational Sacrifice

What Lutheran theology offers, as noted in the previous section, it has often failed to use to explicate the benefits of the sacramental Gospel and the power of the confession of the faith in response to the critiques of the sociological “incarnational mission methodologies.” Various authors writing from a sociological perspective (Kraft, Sanneh, etc.) are curiously suspicious of “conservative, dogmatic theology” as culturally ethnocentric.¹³ It is true that communication theory from a sociological perspective is a messy business, one that tends to defy absolutes. Genesis 11, the tower of Babel, tells us why. However, no sociological theory of communication can fully account for the fact of “each one hearing the Gospel in his/her own tongue” as recorded in Acts 2. It is not enough merely to state that God wants all people to hear the Gospel in their own language, one must also testify that God has chosen certain means and modes of communication. There are qualitative differences between our speech and the words of the Scripture. Lutherans have the opportunity to offer both

the incarnational and the sacramental message and method of the Gospel for mission. To practice one, sharing the incarnational message with an incarnational sociological methodology, without confessing the reality and power of the sacramentality of the Word and Sacraments, is to risk missing the blessings of both.

There are various ways to express the sacramental, “both/and” essence of the Gospel and its method of proclamation. While sociologists tend to speak of the culture forming the message of the Gospel, one could argue from the biblical data that God and the promise “formed Old Testament Israel.” So much of the Gospel is foreign to any human culture that denying the sacramental power of the Word to form us would be reading the Bible selectively at best.¹⁴ It is clearly not biblical to “relativize” all manner of speech as if the Bible were nothing more than the viewpoints of primitive Christians from a very different era. The sacramental character of the Word that we proclaim resists such under-interpretation. The scope of this article is not adequate to examine all such arguments. Rather, it will finally focus on the two distinct ramifications flowing from the sacramental reality of the words of the Bible being Christ’s life-giving, faith-sustaining Word and their positive implications for cross-cultural mission.

Of first importance is the issue of certainty before God Himself. Sacramental certainty, the “requirement of the gospel,”¹⁵ has implications for mission work. One’s certainty before God is foundational to one’s ability, even “willingness to risk,” in relational ministry. The objective, certainty-giving character of this word can hardly be understated. As the Formula of Concord states,

We believe, teach, and confess that in spite of the fact that until death a great deal of weakness and frailty still cling to those who believe in Christ . . . they should not doubt their righteousness, which is reckoned to them through faith . . . , but they should regard it as certain that they have a gracious God for Christ’s sake on the basis of the promise and the Word of the holy Gospel.¹⁶

The sacramental nature of the word must be part of our testimony. It is not spiritless dogma, but a life-giving, Christ-filled word that we speak. As Jesus institutes the Means of Grace, through words, water, bread and wine, He builds missionary confidence where it belongs, namely amidst our mutual struggles. As one seeks to divest oneself of certain cultural garb and appropriate another, personal vulnerability is overcome in the assurance of Word and sacraments. Such certainty then calls one to empty oneself as servant-sharer

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for the sake of the recipient. If we take sacramental theology seriously, then we have confidence in God’s working for us and in us, as we work to share His Word in words that the recipients of the message can know and understand.

Secondly, in sharing the sacramental Word of Christ, such certainty then empowers the willingness of any bearer of the Good News of Jesus to risk the securities of comfortable culture, etc., to communicate the Gospel effectively. In urban ministry, one cannot live thirty miles away from a community and drive in for ministry. If you are unwilling to “live with your people,” you will not be able to serve your people. John 13 and Ephesians 5:21 speak about a servant submission that is aspired to from strength, not weakness. Such servanthood opens lines of communication. Such servanthood can only happen if one understands one’s certainty before God in Christ through Word and Sacrament which empowers one to take a servile position for the delivery of God’s good news in Jesus. The call to sacrifice is not to lose one’s identity (for that comes from the certain Word of Christ for/to you), but to become vulnerable to another so that Gospel communication might overcome human barriers.

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This certainty breeds confidence and perseverance in Christ even as it makes one vulnerable to others. Aware of one’s limitations as a human, sinful being, one takes comfort in knowing that God has spoken. He can be found. He has instituted the Means of Grace that will not return void unto Him, and He has called us to such ministry. To risk all, namely the comforts of our tradition, our culture, our language—even life itself—and to watch anew as the Christ incarnates the Gospel in words, water, bread and wine for another is to be emboldened anew in urban, secular contexts that challenge the Church in twenty-first-century America.

Conclusion

Incarnation, sacrament, “in flesh,” this is the nature and missional way of the Gospel. This is the message of the church for itself and for others. This is the confidence of one in cross-cultural mission. Sacramental Gospel breeds both confidence in one’s relationship to Jesus and perseverance to enter the place of mission where the uncertainties and antagonisms of non-Christian people can become bridges not barriers. Finding the vocables that proclaim this biblical message anew in new communities is more than mere sociological method, it is also confidence in the Holy Spirit to transcend our cultural limitations and bridge the

communication gap with the words, water, bread and wine that He has given us to offer. Is the Gospel translatable? Yes, even through people like us, because of its Spirit-filled, sacramental character and because of the method of communication (servant-natured, culture-affirming) it calls its bearers to bear.

Endnotes

¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 29.

² Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Guide for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 119.

³ George Hunter III, *How to Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 44–54. Hunter lists characteristics of “secular” people. In many ways, the people of Harlem and Wall Street are the same. They have bought the lie of secularization and materialism. One lives deprived of the false hope and fights to have what it has not. The other has the “goods” and is driven into the despair of having no restraint for sinful, self-centeredness. Multiple alienations exist for which that Gospel is both the cure and the challenge for purposeful living.

⁴ Jacob A. O. Preus, *Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 209: “There are many ways to say the Gospel. In its diversity (metaphors), the Gospel overcomes cultural and linguistic barriers.”

⁵ 2 Corinthians 4—the idea of being an earthen vessel, yet delivering the good news of God is both terrifying and exciting.

⁶ Preus, *Just Words*, 35.

⁷ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (MaryKnoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 87.

⁸ Alberto L. Garcia and A. R. Victor Raj eds, *The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 19.

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 88.

¹⁰ Herman Sasse, *We Confess Anthology*, Vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 96.

¹¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 202 (Apology XII:88).

¹² Preus, *Just Words*, 210.

¹³ For Kraft, creeds, modes and meanings of Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the sacredness of monological preaching, various forms of church government, refraining from smoking and drinking and the like are “forms of belief” that need to be constantly re-evaluated to proclaim the meaning “behind the form.” (118). Sanneh makes comparison of dogma and experience as being the same as cultural absolutism versus healthy pluralism (69). Here, the sacramental, life-giving character of the “given” word is totally missed.

¹⁴ Such issues as the character of “apostle,” the meaning of “sacred tradition” in 1 Cor. 11, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, etc., could all be shown to be community-forming rather than culturally formed.

¹⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 202 (Apology XII:88).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 496 (Formula of Concord, III:6).