



# Cultural Discipleship as a Means of Preserving the Christian Faith

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## ABSTRACT

This article examined how understanding of culture and gospel engagement can lead to the transformation of culture in a process called cultural discipleship which in turn, can lead to the preservation of the Christian faith. The research was predominantly literature-based research which gathered data from books, and articles. The literature revealed that the Christian faith and culture have always transformed each other and hence culture can be transformed (discipled) to respond appropriately to the gospel and this will serve as a means of preserving the Christian faith. The paper contributes to the public theological discourse on how the gospel relates to culture. It also enlightens Christians on how to practically engage culture with the gospel instead of seeing culture as evil.

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## INTRODUCTION

The biblical fact that God accepts humankind by grace through faith alone, and not based on a particular identity or on the grounds “of what we have become or are trying to become,”<sup>1</sup> is indicative of the fact that God does not intend to isolate humans from their various cultures. Indeed, “the process of communicating the gospel cannot be isolated from the human culture from which it comes, or from that in which it is to be proclaimed.”<sup>2</sup> The above quotation, which reflects one of the major concerns of the July 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism is still relevant today insofar as the dialogue on Gospel and culture is concerned. To underscore the relevance of Gospel and culture engagement, as well as the challenges culture poses to World Evangelisation, the Lausanne Movement, after its 1974 Congress on World Evangelism organized a consultation specifically on the subject of gospel and culture in January 1978 via its committee on Theology and Education. This meeting, which brought Thirty-Three (33) theologians, anthropologists, pastors, missionaries and linguists from all six (6) continents centred on the study and understanding of the relationship between the Gospel and culture with implications on interpretation, communication, the preacher and the audience.<sup>3</sup> The attention that was given to the relationship between the Gospel and culture only reveals how culture can become a barrier to the gospel if not understood and handled properly. Robert Park expresses it this way:

One can transport words across cultural boundaries (like bricks) but interpretation will depend on the context which their different interpreters bring to them. And that context will depend more on past

<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Akropong-Akuapem: Regnum Africa, 2017), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, ‘The Willowbank Report: Consultation on Gospel And Culture’ Lausanne Occasional Paper 2 (Lop 2), 1978. Accessed 18/02/2023, <https://lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-2>.

<sup>3</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, ‘The Willowbank Report.’

experience and present temper of the people to whom the words are addressed than on the good will of the persons who report them.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, what the modern preacher needs is not just an interpreter, but an understanding of the worldview and culture of his or her audience in order to make sense. For example, a story is told of an evangelist who travelled to a people of a different culture to evangelise. In seeking to illustrate how Jesus cares and will give His children the best of life, the evangelist quoted from Luke 11:11 (GNT): ‘Would any of you who are fathers give your son a snake when he asks for fish?’ After explaining how Jesus would never give them a snake instead of a fish, the people began to walk away one by one. It was after the evangelist sought to understand why they walked away that he was told snake is their best choice of meat and hence if Jesus will not give them their best meat then He is not a loving God. This is how culture can become a barrier to the gospel if it is not understood by the preacher of the gospel. But every culture has some aspects that align with the gospel as well as aspects that contradict it.<sup>5</sup> In this vein, the relationship between Gospel and culture has given rise to a number of positions. Richard Niebuhr classifies these positions as: 1) Christ against culture 2) The Christ of culture 3) Christ above culture 4) Christ and culture in paradox and 5) Christ as a Transformer of culture.<sup>6</sup> Some also believe Christ is not against culture but he transforms culture. This work seeks to demonstrate that culture can be transformed (disciplined) to respond appropriately to the gospel and this will serve as a means of preserving the Christian faith. The paper will employ predominantly, literature-based research by dialoguing with data from books, and articles.

### The Nature of the Christian Faith

In describing the nature and character of the Christian Faith throughout the centuries, Andrews F. Walls traces how the Christian Faith has been transformed from its inception in Jerusalem in about 37 AD to the 1980s in Nigeria, using an imaginary “Professor of Comparative Inter-Planetary Religions perhaps – who is able to get periodic space-grants which enable him to visit Earth for field study every few centuries”<sup>7</sup> using “Baconian induction, observing the practices, habits, and concerns of a representative sample of Christians.”<sup>8</sup> According to Walls, when the Professor visited some of the first-generation Christians in Jerusalem in 37 AD, he observed the following about them: they were all Jews who met regularly in Jewish Temples; they offered animal sacrifices, observed the Sabbath day and male circumcision assiduously; they followed cautiously the Jewish rituals and delighted in the reading of books of law; they appeared to be like those who practiced the general religion of the Jews, called Judaism, only that they identified with a Jesus of Nazareth whom they called the Messiah, Son of Man, and Suffering Servant; in addition, they ate in each other’s homes very often. The professor sees law and joyful observance as the main characteristics of their religion which they call Christianity.<sup>9</sup> They were Christians but their culture as Jews was not destroyed. In his second visit in 325 AD, the Professor, according to Walls, attended a great meeting of Church leaders in which the people had come from all over the Mediterranean world and beyond without a single Jew and made the following observations: they were hostile to the Jews and abhorred animal sacrifices; they did not marry; they treated the Sabbath as an ordinary day; they attached serious value to a book they called the New Testament and tended to call Jesus ‘Son of God,’ and ‘Lord;’ their preoccupation was metaphysics and theology. For example, was the Son *homo-ousios* (of the same essence) or *homoi-ousios* (of similar essence) with the Father?<sup>10</sup> Three centuries later, this Professor, according to Walls, visited Ireland and found a number of monks with some reciting the psalms and some praying silently. In 1980, the Professor visited Lagos, Nigeria and found a number of white-robed churchmen dancing and chanting through the streets as they went to church and inviting people to come and receive personal messages from God to them and healing. Their focus seemed different from the earlier groups as well as the style of worship.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Park, ‘Reflections on Communication and Culture,’ in Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz (ed.), *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*, 2nd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1966), 167.

<sup>5</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 115.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Incop., 1951), 45-190.

<sup>7</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 5.

The message and fundamental truth of all the groups visited remained the same but their expression of this truth differed significantly. In fact, one group opposed another group's mode of expressing faith. Why could we not have the same form of Christianity as it travelled from Jerusalem to other parts of the world? The answer is simply because God's personal revelation is culturally conditioned; It takes the culture of the receiving communities to build an interpretative framework for an understanding of God's revelation. What is seen in the different observations of the imaginary Professor, is how the culture of the various groups affected what they thought was an appropriate way of worshipping God. The Christians in Jerusalem practiced Christianity as if it was Judaism. Those in Africa also employed African traditional spirituality. One agrees with Walls that variant expressions of the Christian faith have been possible without its fundamental truth getting lost because it is impossible to separate an individual from his or her culture.

Another characteristic feature of the Christian Faith, as identified by Walls is that "the demographic and geographical centre of gravity of Christianity is subject to periodic shifts."<sup>12</sup> According to Walls, Jerusalem and other places such as Egypt and Syria, that used to be major centres of Christianity are now full of unwanted churches.<sup>13</sup> There is, therefore, the need to indigenize and enable individuals to express their Christian faith through the lenses of their cultures.<sup>14</sup> The first centre of gravity of the Christian Faith was Jerusalem. The Jewish expression of the faith, however, ceased by AD 70, during the fall of Jerusalem. Because Christianity had spread to the Gentiles by that time, the cross-cultural diffusion resulted in the Hellenistic-Roman expression of the faith which became the next centre of gravity of the faith by the fourth century.<sup>15</sup> Christianity crossed the Hellenistic-Roman cultural boundary to the Barbarian (European) Age as Roman rule was subdued and more and more Barbarians converted. The Western empire collapsed and gave in to Islam. At this stage, it was the Faith, as expressed in the Barbarians that saved the Christian faith and hence became the next centre of gravity of the Christian Faith. With time, Christianity crossed the European cultural boundary with the Southern Continents as the Faith receded in the West. Africa, South America, Asia and the Pacific Islands are now the representative Christians. This period was characterized by a penchant for spiritual power to enable a life of well-being. These new centres became vital points as they expressed the Christian Faith in their cultures and hence owned it.

The implication for these two natures of the Faith as discussed above is that when proper dialogue between the Gospel and culture becomes feasible, the Christian faith is preserved because it will become an indigenous faith. Otherwise, it becomes a foreign religion. This is critical because, as Walls noted, we are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by culture in fact. In Christ God accepts us together with our group relations; with that cultural conditioning that makes us feel at home in one part of human society and less at home in another. But if He takes us with our group relations, then surely it follows that He takes us with our group 'dis-relations' also; those predispositions, prejudices, suspicions, and hostilities, whether justified or not, which mark the group to which we belong. He does not wait to tidy up our ideas any more than waits to tidy our behaviour before He accepts us as sinners into His family.<sup>16</sup>

It is this indigenizing principle, which characterizes the nature of the Christian faith and hence displays different modes of expression, as seen by the imaginary Professor, that forms the basis for cultural discipleship. As noted by Walls, God accepts mankind in his/her cultural conditioning. What is important is for mankind to allow Christ to transform that culture instead of rubbing it. Cultural discipleship thus appears to be a *sine qua non* not only for effective evangelisation process but even more, for the preservation of the Christian Faith.

### **Biblical Basis of Culture**

The Willowbank report traces the origin of human culture to the divine command to reproduce, fill and subdue the earth coupled with the rational, ethical, social, creative and spiritual faculties given to humankind by God.<sup>17</sup> This is essential because the foundation of culture includes "our control of nature (that is, our environment) and our development of forms of social organization."<sup>18</sup> It is true, that the fall of humankind, as recorded in Genesis 3, has distorted the likeness to God and hence culture. It has turned the culture away from God, but that does not warrant a total neglect of the culture as if it is evil in itself. It is interesting to note that even though Genesis

<sup>12</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Akropong-Akuapen: Regnum Africa, 2017), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, "The Willowbank Report."

<sup>18</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, "The Willowbank Report."

3 chronicles the fall of humankind, and Genesis 4 also describes Cain's murder of Abel and his punishment from God, "it is Cain's descendants who are described as the cultural innovators, building cities, breeding livestock, and making musical instruments and metal tools (Gen. 4:17-22)."<sup>19</sup> The privilege of stewardship given to humankind then will include the ability to align each culture to reflect the redeemed image of God in humans and not to rubbish it as devilish, having no religious content and affinities. According to the Willowbank report, the triple dimension of people, land, and history provides Biblical pieces of evidence to the understanding of human culture. The people have to do with ethnicity, and who humans are. The land has to do with territory and the history of how man has lived. God formed man and put him in groups; also, he is the provider of the lands and territorial boundaries. As they are used, history is created. But that is not all. A closer examination of the Scriptures reveals how the writers employed the cultural material that was available to them in their writing. For example, in the Old Testament, reference is made to the Babylonian Sea monster, the Leviathan. Again, "the form of God's 'covenant' with His people resembles the ancient Hittite Suzerain's "treaty" with his vassals."<sup>20</sup> One critical element of culture is language. The language they speak holds the key to their understanding of any message or concept. Allison Howell's description of language and culture is relevant here:

A community of people is like a woven cloth. The cloth is made up of threads woven together in different ways to form a pattern. The pattern is the culture. Some threads go up and down: these are the language threads. There are also threads that go across: these are the ideas, beliefs, values; the ways people do things, or the crafts and tools they make. Culture is just like what happens when the weaver weaves the different threads together to make a pattern on a cloth. Like the weaver, people in a particular culture develop particular ways to bring different threads together through their social interaction.... If you want the cloth, you can't just take the threads that go up and down. You will need the threads that go across as well. It is the same with language and culture: they go together. Language is part of the pattern, but the threads have to be woven together to make the pattern. This is done through social interaction and interaction with the land and environment.<sup>21</sup>

One agrees with Howell that once, language, like the thread of the cloth is changed, the speaker is no longer considered part of the group and hence may be rejected. In this vein, God's self-disclosure to the people of Israel was culturally conditioned as He spoke to the prophets in the language they could understand, Hebrew. Jesus in turn spoke the language of His time, Aramaic. While the writings were inspired by God, it is true that the New Testament writers made use of language and thought forms that can be found in both Jewish and Greek cultures. One can talk of how Greek philosophy with its concepts such as *logos*, and phrases like, 'in him we live and move and have our being,' (Acts 17:28) was utilized to make the gospel relevant to its intended audience. Culture in this sense has acceptance in the Scriptures and hence, must be taken seriously insofar as the gospel is concerned.

### **Cultural Discipleship Defined**

Culture is considered a complex term that is not easily susceptible to one definition.<sup>22</sup> It can be defined as "the sum of all that has spontaneously arisen for the advancement of material life and as an expression of spiritual and moral life - all social intercourse, technologies, arts, literature and sciences."<sup>23</sup> Culture in this sense involves the totality of the way of life that a particular people learn and share which also enables them to survive.<sup>24</sup> It is the accepted (spoken or unspoken) patterned way in which a group of people lives in a community. The Willowbank Report's description of culture is appropriate here:

Culture holds people together over a span of time. It is received from the past, but not by any process of natural inheritance. It has to be learned afresh by each generation. This takes place broadly through a process of absorption from the social environment, especially in the home. In many societies, certain elements of the culture are communicated directly in rites of initiation, and by many other forms of deliberate instruction. Action in accordance with the culture is generally at the subconscious level. This means that an accepted culture covers everything in human life.

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<sup>19</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, "The Willowbank Report"

<sup>20</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, "The Willowbank Report"

<sup>21</sup> Howell, *A Daily Guide for Culture and Language Learning*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, "The Willowbank Report"

<sup>23</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1943), 107.

<sup>24</sup> Allison M. Howell, *A Daily Guide for Culture and Language Learning*, 3rd Ed. (Abokobi: AmaraZaane Consulting Services Ltd., 2014), 7.

At its centre is a worldview, that is, a general understanding of the nature of the universe and of one's place in it. This may be "religious" (concerning God, or gods and spirits, and of our relation to them), or it may express a "secular" concept of reality, as in a Marxist society.

From this basic world-view flow both standards of judgement or values (of what is good in the sense of desirable, of what is acceptable as in accordance with the general will of the community, and of the contraries) and standards of conduct (concerning relations between individuals, between the sexes and the generations, with the community and with those outside the community).<sup>25</sup>

The above description is indicative of the complex nature of culture. It affects every aspect of the life of an individual such as behaviour, opinions, values, language, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artefacts, technical processes, and even how the understanding of a subject comes about.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to effectively evangelise a group of people with the gospel if the culture is not well understood. This is because culture is inseparably bound up with the people involved. That God put humankind in the Garden of Eden and also marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands where they should inhabit (Acts 17:26) is indicative that humankind needs a unified existence. Partaking in culture then is not an option but a means of providing them with this unified existence, a sense of belonging that gives a particular people their identity, a sense of security, of pride of being associated with a larger whole, "and of sharing both in the life of past generations and in the expectancy of society for its own future."<sup>27</sup>

It is, however, dynamic and hence accepts a change through a gradual process in an accepted manner. It is this dynamic nature of culture, which provides the opportunity for the gospel to influence culture. Culture can thus through a gradual process, accept different belief systems and values.

When it comes to the relationship between culture and the gospel, the debate appears endless. There are those who believe "culture is essentially Godless in the purely secular sense, as having neither positive nor negative relation to the God of Jesus Christ; for others, it is Godless in the negative sense, as being anti-God or idolatrous."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, culture may have its 'negative' aspects in relation to God but just as humans are sinners and yet God through Christ is able to transform them, culture can also be transformed, and nurtured to pick up Christian values and expressions in a process the researcher call 'cultural discipleship' and thus be turned to glorify God.

Discipleship involves the "intentional relationship in which we walk alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ"<sup>29</sup> as well as equipping the disciples to teach others as well. Taking the elements of discipleship from the above definition, Cultural discipleship in this work then refers to the process of understanding another's culture from their point of view and allowing the gospel to shape and transform the aspects of such cultures that contradict the gospel thereby, making the culture more Christ-like as well as an effective tool for the propagation of the gospel. It involves affirming, partaking and engaging in such cultures so as to make Christ relevant to such cultures.

Like the West African proverb which says: "If you don't taste the food, you don't know if there's salt in it or not,"<sup>30</sup> there are several positive elements in every culture that can serve as pointers to the gospel. However, until one makes an effort to understand and be involved in a particular culture with no prejudices, those elements cannot be seen. This failure to be involved in a culture and to seek to understand it is among the principal reasons why "the missionaries saw Akan pre-Christian festivals as evil and demonic and as having nothing to contribute to the gospel and its reception among the people."<sup>31</sup> This was the Western perception of Africa during the missionary encounters. According to Ernestina Afriyie, the primal traditional customs, worldview, and religious heritage of Africa were labelled as incompatible with Christianity.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the

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<sup>25</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, "The Willowbank Report"

<sup>26</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, "The Willowbank Report"

<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 30.

<sup>29</sup> Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Howell, *A Daily Guide for Culture and Language Learning*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Ernestina Afriyie, 'Christ, Our Perfect Sacrifice: The Odwira Festival and Christianity in Contemporary Ghana,' *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (June 2014), 26-33 (27).

<sup>32</sup> Afriyie, 'Christ, Our Perfect Sacrifice,' 27.

Commission IV report of the 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, considered the primal religions of Africa as barbaric and lacking no preparation for the gospel.<sup>33</sup>

One, however, agrees with Kwame Bediako that “If Christ has no spiritual value in the religious worlds of other faiths, how can his significance be validated?”<sup>34</sup> In other words, Africans have embraced the Christian message of redemption and restoration partly because of “the ready-made traditional situations requiring salvation as they see it, and partly because they can apply their understanding of redemption to those needs and to new ones created by modern social, economic and political changes.”<sup>35</sup> The implication here is that while others saw no possibility of Africans becoming Christians, those who took the pain to understand it discerned religious affinities and used those affinities as the magnet of attraction.

Cultural discipleship among the Akuapem people of Ghana, for instance, will include understanding the concept of *Odwira* with its sacrificial rites intended for purification and enabling them to see how Christ fulfilled the sacrifice for sins through His sacrificial death. In this sense, when proper engagement has been done, the *Odwira* will be celebrated but with a focus on Christ. This then will incorporate Christ into their culture as the redeemer and cleanser *par excellence*. However, when a preacher stands outside to condemn the *Odwira*, without offering an understandable substitute, the message of the preacher will be rejected in totality. Cultural discipleship in this way, seeks to turn everything in the culture which hitherto, was contrary to what Christ stands for, to Christ and to render it an effective tool for the propagation of the gospel. It seeks to incorporate the gospel into the culture of a group of people. Cultural discipleship is thus very critical and essential for the propagation and sustenance of the Christian faith among a particular cultural group. It is essential because culture has its roots in Scripture.

### Models for Cultural Discipleship

It has been established so far that for effective communication of the gospel, there is a need to translate the gospel into the culture of the audience. Translating the gospel here will mean interpreting the gospel through the culture of the audience and thus making it relevant to the audience. Any attempt to ignore the culture will result in difficulty. When this is not done, people will reject the gospel not because it is not the truth but because they see it as a “threat to their culture, especially the fabric of their society, and their national or tribal solidarity.”<sup>36</sup> This does not mean the gospel will in no way threaten the recipient culture. As long as there are elements of culture which are incompatible with the gospel and need to be transformed, the culture will be threatened. However, that does not also mean that such cultures should be discarded, but rather it calls for a thoughtful dialogue with the local culture, and an honest appreciation of it, especially, the positive aspects.

Another reason why the gospel may be rejected by people of other cultures is when the gospel is clothed in another culture and hence seeks to impose that culture on the audience. The Willowbank report has this to say on this:

Where missionaries bring with them foreign ways of thinking and behaving, or attitudes of racial superiority, paternalism, or preoccupation with material things, effective communication will be precluded. Sometimes these two cultural blunders are committed together, and messengers of the gospel are guilty of a cultural imperialism which both undermines the local culture unnecessarily and seeks to impose an alien culture instead. Some of the missionaries who accompanied the Catholic *conquistadores* of Latin America and the Protestant colonizers of Africa and Asia are historical examples of this double mistake. By contrast, the apostle Paul remains the supreme example of one whom Jesus Christ first stripped of pride in his own cultural privileges (Phil. 3:4-9) and then taught to adapt to the cultures of others, making himself their slave and becoming “all things to all men” in order by all means to save some (I Cor. 9:19-23).<sup>37</sup>

The need to translate the faith through cultural discipleship, therefore, becomes very critical for the spread and survival of the faith among different people groups. The discussion now considers how God, through the incarnation, set a model for cultural discipleship by translating Christ in the process of incarnation. It will

<sup>33</sup> The Missionary Message, 1910: *The Missionary Message in Relation to non-Christian Religions- The World Missionary Conference 1910- Report of Commission IV* (Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 24.

<sup>34</sup> Kwame Bediako, ‘Christian Faith and African Culture – An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews,’ *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (June 2010), 45-57 (45).

<sup>35</sup> Mbiti, ‘Our Salvation as an African Experience,’ in B. Lindars, S. Smalley and C.F.D. Moule, *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 407.

<sup>36</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, “The Willowbank Report”

<sup>37</sup> Lausanne Occasional Papers, “The Willowbank Report”

also look at how Paul penetrated through diverse cultures with the gospel without imposing the Jewish culture on them.

### **The Incarnation as a Model for Cultural Discipleship**

That God chose cultural discipleship as His mode of action insofar as the salvation of humankind is concerned cannot be disproved. The whole of the Christian faith rests on the concept of incarnation, which can be described as a process of translation or cultural discipleship in which the *logos* became flesh and dwelt among men (John 1:14). While the Hebrews would not even associate with the Gentiles, God, became human so as to save humankind. In doing so, Jesus Christ taught man how to live to please God. Howell describes this succinctly.

God has a message for all people on earth.... God wanted people to hear his message, so he came to earth AS A HUMAN. By prophetic revelation, He was given the name Jesus. Jesus was human, yet he was God. Jesus humbled himself and learnt Aramaic, the language of the common people. He walked among the people, touched them, answered their questions, understood their challenges, and talked with them about ways to resolve their problems. As a result, people came to understand who God was and what he was like.<sup>38</sup>

Jesus in this way, provided a paradigm for all to follow. He immersed Himself in the culture of the Jews and became like one of them. He spoke their language and ate their food. He spoke to them using parables that were familiar to them. In this sense, Jesus became their true Deliverer. Jesus transformed their cultural understanding of love, neighbour and even the concept of discipleship and leadership. Since most of these principles were believed to have been given to them by Moses and the prophets, there was the need for Jesus to associate with them as Jews before he could address them. In this way, the Jews were prepared and impacted by the gospel.

### **Paul as a Model for Cultural Discipleship**

1 Corinthians 9:19-22 (HCSB)

<sup>19</sup> For although I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, in order to win more people.

<sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law – though I myself am not under the law – to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those who are outside the law, like one outside the law – not being outside God’s law, but under the law of Christ – to win those outside the law.

Paul was an apostle who desired to win people for Christ irrespective of their ethnic group or cultural background. While the Corinthian Christians boasted of the knowledge of God, which knowledge became a stumbling block to the weak in the faith (1 Corinthians 8), the Apostle Paul employed ‘self-denying love’ as a model for his ministry. It is this understanding that enabled him to consider himself a slave to all and he became all things to all people for the purpose of evangelization.

In his approach, Paul distilled the critical and essential conditions for salvation from those that were not necessary for salvation. He then identified the various groups (Jews, Gentiles, and those with weak consciences) he intended to minister to and the cultural differences among them and how he could become part of them without playing down on the essentials of the gospel in order to win them for Christ.

In order to win the Jews, Apostle Paul knew of his freedom in Christ, and the fact that salvation was by grace through faith and not by the works of the law and how he was consequently not obligated to practice the Jewish laws. Yet at the same time, he understood how violation of those laws (which were not sinful acts in themselves) would result in offence insofar as the Jews were concerned, thereby, hindering the gospel. As a result, he became flexible in dealing with Jewish laws. Because of his love for them and desire to save them at all cost, he practiced the law for their sake such as in the circumcision of Timothy (Acts 16:1-3) and the purification rites ending a specific vow (Acts 21:18-26).

To win the Gentiles who did not have any written revelation/law from God, Paul was also flexible toward them and became like one not having the law. In doing this, Paul says he took his place in their culture in order to reach them. But Paul was quick to add that he did not throw away God’s law because even under those circumstances, he still saw himself as under the law of Christ. An example is Paul’s ministry to the Galatians.

While some Jews had wanted the Galatian Gentiles to be circumcised and obey the Jewish laws which had no direct consequences on salvation, Paul did not allow that (Galatians 2: 3-4). Even when it concerned eating with Gentiles at Antioch, Paul, unlike Peter, stood with the Gentiles and ate with them as if he was a

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<sup>38</sup> Howell, *A Daily Guide for Culture and Language Learning*, 11.

Gentile (Gal. 2:11-18). In Acts 17: 16-34, Paul gives another clue in turning a culture to Christ. When Paul argued with Epicureans and Stoic philosophers concerning the many idols in Athens, he was not successful. They saw him as a preacher of a foreign deity. Paul quickly changed his approach when he met them at the Areopagus. He first affirmed their religiosity, 'men of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect' (Acts 17:22). He even went further to affirm what they worshiped instead of condemning it and then proceeded to subtly introduce Christ as that which they were searching for and had made provision for in their culture: "... I even found an altar on which was inscribed: to an unknown God. Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17: 23, HCSB). Having become like them and affirmed them, they were now ready to listen to Paul's message about this deity whom they had some little knowledge about in their own culture. Having then exalted Christ above their deities, Paul now attempted to turn their own culture of idolatry towards Christ. This is indeed cultural discipleship. Paul had become part of them. This prevents cultural imposition and superiority which causes people to reject the gospel at times.

Paul also talks of handling another group who are Christians but have weak faith or conscience. For Paul, dealing with such a group involves accommodating them and refraining from some freedoms as a Christian in order to win them but not lowering the fundamental principles of the faith. The issue of eating food sacrificed to idols is a perfect example here (1 Corinthians 8:1-9). In 1 Corinthians 8, the believers had knowledge that idols were nothing (1 Corinthians 8:4-5). Because of this knowledge, the mature believers did not find anything wrong with eating food or meat sacrificed to idols. However, there were others who were weak in faith and still believed that it was sinful to eat such foods. Eating such foods as a Christian in their presence would offend them and hence the need to lovingly deny oneself for the sake of the weak brother or sister.

In dealing with all three categories of people, Paul lovingly forfeited his freedom without violating the fundamental principles of the faith for the sake of all, that by all these means some may be saved, for the sake of the Gospel. Paul in this way gives a good model for cultural discipleship.

Paul's model in dealing with the Jews, Gentiles and even weak Christians is a good model for cultural discipleship. Paul teaches that for people of a different culture to accept the gospel and be able to turn elements in their culture, which are hitherto contrary to Christ, to his Lordship, there is the need to affirm them as a group. To affirm them in this way is to affirm their culture, and become part of them without denying the fundamentals of the faith. Then one can use their own culture and principles of living that can serve as preparation for the gospel as a stepping stone to preach the gospel and also turn their culture towards Christ without denigrating it.

### **Indigenous Bible Translation as a Model for Cultural Discipleship**

Indigenous Bible Translation is also one of the major means of discipling cultures for Christ. When the Scriptures are heard in the mother-tongue, certain cultural words, phrases and names take on Christian character and expression and hence, become sacred. Translation also preserves the language and culture of the people. When people read the Bible in their own mother tongue, they are able to believe it and apply themselves to it in addition to preaching. Because the Bible speaks on most issues, the transformation of the culture becomes faster. For example, just as Jesus was understood as the Passover lamb for the Jews, and logos for the Gentiles, seeing Jesus as the *mpata*, *nana* and ancestor *par excellence* among the Akan of Ghana will help them appreciate and relate more to the Christian faith instead of seeing it as a foreign religion. This approach is consistent with the nature of the Christian faith as presented in this paper to translate the gospel using terminologies that are culturally appropriate rather than borrowing words from other cultures. It also acknowledges that culture is founded in the scriptures and that Paul's method of discipleship and the incarnation of Christ both drew on the culture of the people. It is in this sense that indigenous Bible translation becomes a good model for cultural discipleship.

### **CONCLUSION**

Christianity was seen as entirely Jewish in its early stage and demonstrated Jewish expressions such as the strict observance of their Law and customs, and the use of the title Messiah for Christ. As the faith entered the Hellenistic regions, the apostles were prepared (after a few confrontations with Paul) to allow the Gentiles to become Christians without first becoming Jews. In other words, the Gentile Christians were not forced to circumcise and to observe Jewish customs. They were also ready to drop the title Messiah for Lord which would have a better impact on the Gentiles. When the Jewish state disappeared in AD 135, it was the faith, as expressed in the Hellenistic culture that preserved Christianity. In the same way, it is evidenced that the Christian faith has been preserved by translating the Faith into the receptor culture. For example, African Christianity is growing because faith is expressed via our cultural categories. Drums and dances that hitherto, would have been

performed in shrines have been directed to Christ. Cultural discipleship is thus the way to go when it comes to spreading and preserving the faith.

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