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The Bicultural Bridge¹

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How does the gospel move from one culture to another? In our day of mass media and modern technology, we are tempted to think in terms of radio, television, and the printed page. Rather, communication of the gospel across the chasms of cultural differences rests upon the quality of interpersonal relationships between human beings—between missionaries and the people they serve. This relationship of people of one culture to people of another culture is what we call the bicultural bridge.



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The Biculture

Communication across the bicultural bridge takes place within the biculture: a new culture created by people from two different cultural backgrounds. (See Figure I.) When missionaries leave their first culture to enter a new society, they take with them their cultural maps. They have ideas of what is food and how to cook it, who should raise the children and what values should be taught to them, how to worship properly, and a great many other things. No matter how hard they try, they cannot “go native.” The earlier culture of their childhood can never be fully erased. On the other hand, for missionaries to totally import their culture is impossible, even if they try. They are influenced to a great extent by the culture they enter—their second culture.

To the extent local people interact with the missionaries, they too become part of the biculture. They have their own ideas of food, child rearing, values, and worship. Even though they may not leave their country, they are exposed to new ideas and beliefs. In order to relate to each other, missionaries and nationals must create new patterns of living, working, playing, and worshipping—in other words, a new culture. Much of the effort of a bicultural community, in fact, is spent on defining what that culture is. What types of clothes should be worn? Should missionaries and nationals each wear their own type of dress? Should they both wear Western clothes or the clothes of the local culture? What type of food should they eat? What type of house should they build? Should missionaries have cars, and, if so, should national leaders also have them? Where should the children of the two groups go to school, and in what medium of instruction? How should missionaries and nationals relate to each other? These and a thousand other questions must be answered in order to build a stable biculture that enables foreigners and nationals to communicate and work together.

While the biculture may borrow from the different cultures of its participants, it is more than the sum or synthesis of those cultures. New cultural patterns often emerge out of the interaction. In the end, if communication is to take place between people of different cultures, a satisfactory biculture must be worked out in which both sides find a measure of mutual understanding and satisfaction. Without this, for the gospel to cross the bicultural bridge is difficult. The bicultural bridge is only one stage in the multi-stage communication of the gospel from one culture to another. The missionary has been trained by parents, pastors, and teachers before going to a new society. There he or she generally works most closely with national Christian leaders who are part of the same biculture. They in turn communicate the gospel to other people throughout the land. The greatest share of village evangelism and church planting has been done by national workers.

Our concern here is with relationships between missionaries and national church members, for it is here that the gospel and church are translated into a new culture. Whether

people trust the gospel and whether they see the church as foreign or indigenous to their culture depends to a great extent upon the nature and quality of relationships of this bicultural bridge.

Generationalism in the Biculture

As in other cultures, generational differences emerge within the biculture. There are newcomers—the missionaries and nationals who have recently entered the biculture. And there are old-timers—those who have spent much of their lives in the biculture.

First-Generation Missionaries

First-term missionaries belong to the first generation of the biculture. For the most part they are idealistic. They have taken an assignment because they have a great vision of the work and tremendous zeal. The goals they set for themselves are high—at times unrealistic. They will evangelize all of India in five years, or, if not all of India, at least Andhra Pradesh. Or they will build a large hospital or Bible school. Moreover, they are ready to sacrifice everything in order to complete their mission. They have little time for family or relaxation.

First-termers are often called plungers because of their willingness to identify more closely with the national culture than do many of the old-timers. If they are encouraged in this identification, they can be bonded to the local culture and people. However, if they are acculturated into the missionary culture, they will acquire the belief that it is impossible to fully identify with the national people.

The success or failure of first termers depends to a considerable extent upon their place within the structure of the biculture. Placed at the top of a new venture, such as opening a new field, starting a new hospital, or building a new Bible school, they can be a tremendous success. They begin with nothing. When they leave there is a church or an institution. No precedents hinder them, and they have the power to build a program according to their own plans. For example, when the first missionary doctor moves to an area, there is often only an empty field. When he or she leaves, there is usually a hospital, complete with operating rooms, admissions offices, and wards. On the other hand, first termers placed at the top of new ventures can be tremendous failures. They have no institutional constraints and often no peers to check their bad decisions. They set the direction for new programs which are often difficult to change later.

When first-generation missionaries are placed at the top of old, established programs, they have a potential for moderate success. They have the power to institute their own ideas, but they inherit a legacy from the past. When they try to change established procedures, they will be reminded that “that is not the way the founder did it or the way we have always done it.” Later leaders of the program can never measure up to the

remembered image of the founder whose picture hangs on the wall in the central hall. What the founder established as an *ad hoc* procedure, by the second generation becomes law and by the third becomes a sacred rite. But if first termers can be only moderately successful in initiating their programs, they can be only moderate failures. They are guarded from making great mistakes by the institution which has begun to acquire a life of its own. An institution has a way of staying alive and of tempering the failures of its leaders. By now too many people have vested interests in the institution to let it die easily.

First-generation missionaries placed at the bottom of old programs have little possibility for success or failure. They have little power to initiate change; this, combined with their vision and zeal, generally leads to frustration. A special type of person is needed to serve in such a position and to do so with a measure of joy.

One of the primary characteristics of missionaries' first terms is culture shock. Often for the first time, the newcomers have to come to terms with another culture—to learn its ways and to respect, even love, its people and their customs. The types of attitudes and relationships worked out during the first term will generally characterize the missionaries' ministries for the rest of their lives.

Second-Generation Missionaries

Second-generation missionaries are those experienced in the work they are doing. Often they are on their second, third, or fourth term of service.

Second-generation missionaries share certain characteristics. First, they tend to be more realistic in their assessment of their work. They have come to grips with the fact that they cannot evangelize all of Japan—or even Osaka—in five years. They realize that it is worth their life to build up a Bible school and to train a number of good leaders or to plant four or five strong churches.

They are more realistic, too, about their own lifestyles. They become increasingly aware that they have only one life to live. If they are going to have time with their children, they will have to do it now, before the children are grown. If they are to have rest and relaxation, they must do so at the expense of some other activities. They are no less committed to the task. In fact, their commitment has become a long-term one. But they are no longer willing to pay any price to attend meetings, classes, and wards. They begin to realize that their children and they themselves are part of the greater work of God.

The second-generation missionaries together with their experienced national co-workers do the greatest share of the mission work. For the most part they have solved the logistics of keeping alive. They know the language and the local customs. Consequently, they are able to give themselves to the long, hard labor required to plant the church.

One of the important tasks of the experienced missionaries is to help first-termers adjust to the field. Even when this task is turned over to the church, experienced missionaries have an important pastoral role in helping the new missionaries to deal with culture shock.

Third-Generation Missionaries

Third-generation missionaries are sometimes referred to as the old-timers. In the study by John and Ruth Useem and John Donoghue (1963) in which the concept of bicultural generationalism was first presented, the old-timers were those who served abroad during the colonial era. Many of them, with some notable exceptions, accepted notions of Western superiority and colonial rule. They assumed that the missionary should be in charge of the work and live like foreigners with their compounds and bungalows. We are not to judge them, for they, like us, were people of their times. Many of them sacrificed much more than do modern-day missionaries. Missionaries then served seven or more years before going on furlough. Most of them buried spouses and children where they served, and many could not take vacations in the summer hill stations because the journeys by cart or boat were too difficult and long.

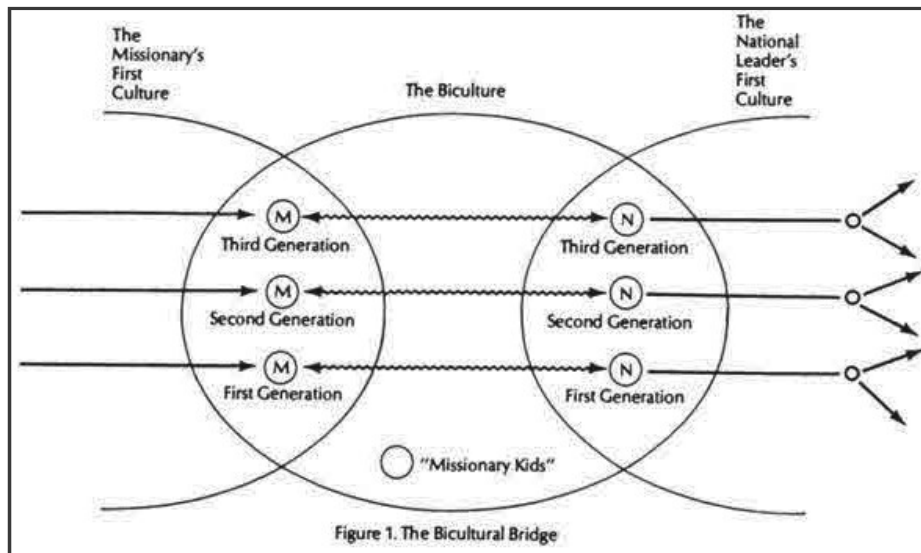
But times have changed. No longer do we live in a world in which colonial rule and foreign superiority are accepted. Today, we need missionaries who identify with the people and their aspirations. Consequently, we find a generation gap between those who look back with nostalgia to the colonial era when missions played a central role in the life of the church and those who see the task of missions to be one of partnership in service with an autonomous church.

Generationalism among National Leaders

Generationalism is also evident among the national leaders in the biculture. The young often have a great vision and zeal for the work. In our day of increasing nationalism, this is often linked to strong convictions that the national church should take responsibility for its own affairs. Like their missionary counterparts, they are usually willing to pay almost any price for the sake of the work. In many cases they have to sacrifice the support of families and kinsfolk who may have planned more traditional careers for them. First-generation leaders given responsibility for important tasks can be great successes—and great failures. Placed in a position of little authority and not allowed to lead, some of the best of them leave to join other (often nativistic) churches or to start movements of their own. Too often we have lost our best young men and women because we have not entrusted them with responsibilities.

Second-generation national leaders are those who have committed themselves to long-term work in the church or mission. Paired with experienced missionaries, they carry out the major share of the work.

Third-generation national leaders are those who grew up during the colonial era. For many of them the rapid movement toward nationalism is frightening and unsettling. They look back with nostalgia to the day when the mission was in charge and there was a great deal of security.



Stress Points in the Biculture

The biculture is a culture in the making. It has little time depth and is created by people from different cultures who have little or no idea of what the new culture will be like. It is not surprising, then, that there are points where stress appears. Furthermore, stress likely will remain part of the biculture for some time because few areas of the world have changed so rapidly as have international relationships. The shift from colonialism to nationalism—and now to internationalism—and the change in world powers as one nation and then another rises and falls in world power and prestige influence the biculture greatly.

The Creation of the Biculture

One area of stress has to do with the creation of the biculture itself. What shape should it take? What should be borrowed from each of its parent cultures? Should missionaries and nationals relate as parents and children, as contractual partners, as undifferentiated

equals, or as what? If national leaders in developing countries receive the same salaries as missionaries, will they not be alienated from their people and many be attracted into the ministry by the affluent lifestyle? On the other hand, should there be differences that speak of cultural distance and segregation?

Today considerable emphasis is on the missionaries' identification with the culture to which they go. To the extent possible, missionaries should live within the cultural frameworks of the people to whom they go, for in doing so they are able to bring the gospel most of the way across the bicultural bridge. The distance between cultures is often great, and someone must bring the gospel from one to another. The further the missionaries bring the gospel to a new culture, the more effective will be its acceptance and the less distance the national leaders must carry it to make it indigenous in that culture.

Early attempts at identification often focus on visible cultural practices regarding food, houses, clothes, cars, and lifestyle. Identification on this level is important, although we must recognize the limits of human adaptability. Some people must retain more ties than others to their cultural past in order to maintain psychological balance and effective ministry.

But identification on the level of practices can hide feelings of distance at deeper levels. On the level of roles, missionaries may feel that they should not work under the direction of nationals. On the level of attitudes they may be convinced of the superiority of their culture or race. No identification on the surface nor attempts to cover them will follow.

Search for Identity

One of the big questions facing members of the biculture has to do with their cultural identity. To a great extent our personal identity is tied to our identification with a society and culture. Bicultural people belong to two sociocultural worlds.

Missionaries are often unaware of the profound changes that take place within them. They think of themselves as Americans or Canadians living abroad for a time. When they return to their first cultures, they expect to assimilate back into the culture with a minimum of adjustment. Often, however, they experience severe culture shock. To the extent they adapt successfully to the biculture, they experience a greater reverse culture shock on their return home.

Missionaries are shocked to find their relationships with their relatives and friends strained and distant. They expect these folk to be excited to hear about their many experiences, but after an hour or two, conversation drifts off to local affairs—to local politics, church matters, or family issues. The people at home have no frame of reference

within which to fit these tales from abroad. Their world is their town and state or province. Missionaries, on the other hand, have lost touch with local matters and have little to say in conversations.

The gap is often accentuated by the altered worldview of the missionaries. They return with a bicultural and worldwide perspective that no longer identifies the home culture and nation as right, one which treats all others as less civilized. When missionaries criticize their first cultures, they arouse the suspicions of their relatives and friends. Missionaries are often saddened to find they are no longer close to relatives and friends. They find their closest friends among other bicultural people—people who have lived abroad. It does not matter much which other countries bicultural people have been in; there is a sense of mutual understanding, a common bicultural worldview that draws these people together.

National leaders, too, face a cultural identity crisis. In their relationships with missionaries they adopt foreign ideas and practices. Some travel abroad and become part of a world community of leaders, but in so doing, they leave their traditional cultures. They may find it hard to live in their native houses, dress in their former dress, eat their traditional foods, or even speak their childhood language. Like the missionaries, they belong not to their first or second cultures, but to the biculture that has emerged. When the leaders return home, they are often treated with suspicion or indifference. In the end, they, too, feel most at home with other bicultural people.

Both nationals and missionaries are people of two cultures. While they may resolve the tension between these externally by creating the biculture to order their lives and relationships, internally they must still face the question of reconciling two often divergent sets of values and assumptions. This internal tension may be handled in a number of ways. Some people attempt to build ghettos in order to preserve their first cultures. Too often, then, external withdrawal from the local culture represents a far deeper rejection of it at the psychological level. The result is a biculture far removed from the people, often ineffective in communicating to them the message of the gospel.

A second and opposite response is to attempt to go native in the second culture. Missionaries, for example, may try not only to identify fully with the people of their adoption, but also to deny their first culture. Similarly, nationals may reject their childhood culture and adopt fully the foreign culture to which they are exposed. This response is seldom successful. We can suppress, but never kill, the culture into which we are enculturated as children. It remains buried, but it will rise someday to haunt us.

A third response is compartmentalization: to accept both cultures, but to keep them separated. One or another is used depending upon the occasion. An example of this is the modern African chief who is a member of the national parliament. In the village he dresses in traditional dress, keeps several wives, and speaks his native language. In the

city he dresses in western clothes, has a modern wife, and speaks French or English. In one such case described by Colin Turnbull, the chief had a two-story house. Upstairs was modern, and downstairs was traditional. But the two worlds never met. Missionaries, too, can become cultural schizophrenics. In the long run, however, the tension between the two cultures is not resolved, and the persons live fragmented lives.

A fourth response to the tension of living in two cultures is to seek integration of the two. Parts of both are combined in a new synthesis--a synthesis that is generally based on a multicultural perspective that accepts cultural variance. Rarely is synthesis fully achieved, but in seeking to bring the two cultures together, the individual strives for internal wholeness.

Most bicultural people, with the possible exception of those who deny one or the other of their cultures, maintain symbolic identification with both cultures. For example, Western missionaries in India tend to talk about Western politics, greet all Americans and Canadians as old friends, and go to Western restaurants when they are in the cities. During the war years they received food packages with cheese, Spam, and Fizzles. These were put away for special occasions, to be eaten with American friends in a sort of ritual meal of identification with America. Upon return to the West, these same missionaries tend to talk about Indian politics, greet all Indians as old friends, and eat in Indian restaurants whenever possible. Suddenly Spam and Fizzles carry no symbolic value at all. The same identification with two cultures is found in Indians who are part of a biculture. This ritual identification with each culture is important, for it reaffirms the different parts of the lives of bicultural people.

Alienation

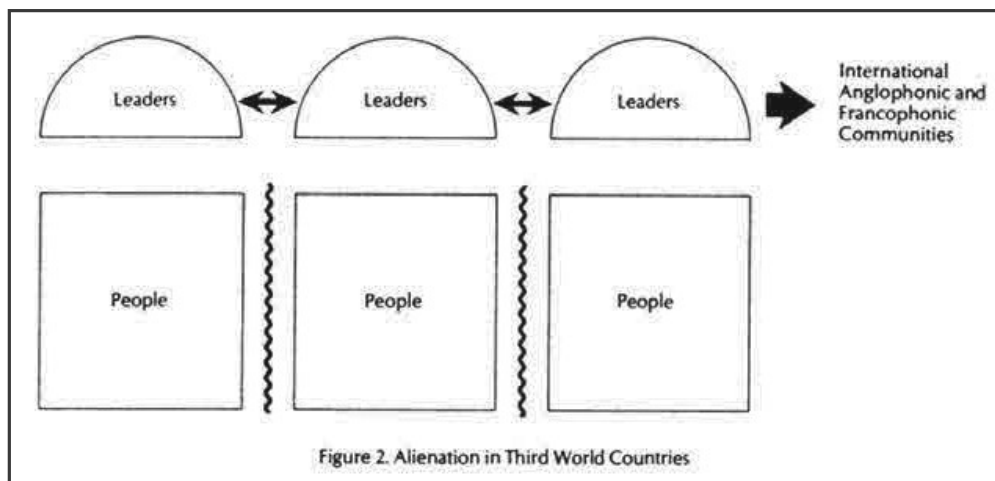
A second problem facing bicultural people is that of alienation from their first cultures. In the case of missionaries, this is less of a problem so long as they live abroad where their primary task lies. On their return to their first culture they sense the growing distance between them and their people.

The problem is more severe for national leaders. While they participate in the biculture, they continue to be involved in their first culture. For them to separate the two cultures geographically is impossible. Daily they must shift gears as they move from one culture to the other. Moreover, their task is to bring the gospel to their native culture, so they must retain close ties with it. If they identify too closely with the biculture, they become alienated from their people and are mistrusted as foreigners.

The emergence of a cultural gap between leaders and people is a serious problem in much of the developing world. (See Figure 2.) This is true in politics and business as well as in the church. National leaders are given advanced training in English or French,

travel around the world, and form friendships with people from other countries. They are often more at home in a plane and hotel than they are in their hometowns. With the emergence of this international leadership, broad strategies for world evangelization can be planned. But these leaders often find it hard to minister directly to the people in their countries. They can no longer serve as village evangelists and health workers. The danger in missions is to concentrate on advanced training for national leaders and to forget that the communication of the gospel requires leaders who can identify with the people. The training of indigenous leaders is one of the greatest tasks facing the church around the world.

Alienation in the case of national leaders creates another problem, that of dependency upon outside support. Many of the top leadership positions in developing countries are dependent upon foreign funds. When such funds are cut off—an increasing possibility in our age of political turmoil—leaders in these positions are vulnerable. Missionaries generally can return to their home countries and find other jobs. The national leaders have lost their support, and because of their training and cultural tastes, they find it hard to take jobs within their traditional society. Moreover, they have become politically identified with the West, and if some anti-American government comes to power, they may be marked for punishment or death. Unlike the missionaries, they cannot leave. In planning mission strategies we must be particularly sensitive to the difficult position in which we may place our national colleagues, and appreciate more the tremendous sacrifices they often have to make.



Missionary Children

Some of the most difficult decisions facing missionaries have to do with their children. First, to which culture do these children belong? Unlike earlier mission

movements when migration to a new country was common, the modern mission movement has been characterized by missionaries seeing themselves and their children as citizens of the missionaries' home country. In times of crisis and at retirement they expect to return to it. They assume that their children will marry and settle there.

Here is a fundamental misconception. Children raised in the biculture do not belong to their parents' first culture. For the children, the biculture is their first culture. Their home is neither the American nor the Indian nor the Brazilian culture, but the culture of the American-living-abroad or the Indian-living-abroad. Consequently many of these children suffer culture shock and problems of adjustment when they go (not return) to their parents' first culture. In many ways to them it is a foreign country. It is also not surprising that many of them try later in life to find vocations abroad that will take them back home. Sadly, that world is gone. However, because of their cross-cultural experience, they are often able to adapt to other bicultural situations. Those who stay discover that the foreign community abroad looks quite different to adults who work in it than to children raised in it. Most missionary kids adapt in varying degrees to their parents' culture, but for them this will always be their second culture. The cultural imprint of their childhood can never be erased.

If migrating to their parents' home culture creates problems for missionary children, so does going native. Foreign children abroad have a special role in the society. They attend different schools, speak a different language, and have bicultural values—all of which set them apart from the local people. With few exceptions, they suffer serious culture shock if they adopt local citizenship, marry into the society, and compete for local jobs. They are still outsiders.

When the decision is made that the children should eventually identify with their parents' home culture, the problem of education arises. Local schools generally do not correspond either in language or in curriculum with that of the children's country. In the past missionaries often left their young children in their homeland with relatives for education. Later missionary children's schools became common. In some instances missionary mothers tutored their children at home. Each approach has had its difficulties.

Institutionalization

Bicultural relationships are essential if the gospel is to bridge the gulf between cultures. If they are to be enduring and fruitful, these relationships must take place within a bicultural context. But as is true of any culture, institutionalization sets in. What starts as a means to communicate the gospel across cultures becomes an end in itself. Over time, defining and maintaining the biculture occupies

more and more time and resources, for both missionaries and national leaders have vested interests in maintaining it. Effective evangelists and teachers become administrators and builders. The flexibility that allowed early missionaries and national leaders to respond to local opportunities gives way to rules, policies, and hardening of the categories.

To be effective, mission requires a measure of flexibility and mobility. It is the church in action, reaching out to plant the church in worship. The balance between *ad hocness* and constitutional order—between individual initiative and corporate planning—is a difficult one to maintain.

Implications for Missions

If the success of missions depends to a great extent upon the quality of the relationships between missionaries and the people to whom they go, is there a biblical model to which we can turn for guidance? In the past we have often seen the relationship as parent to child. More recently we speak of partnership. The biblical model is that of incarnation. To bridge the cultural gap between heaven and sinful earth, God became human and dwelt among us, eating our food, speaking our language, and suffering our sorrows, yet without giving up his divine nature. Incarnation is identification, but it does not deny who we originally are. It is, in fact, a bicultural or bipersonal state. Just as God became one with us in order to save us, we must become one with the people to whom we go in order to bring them that salvation.

Notes

¹This chapter is reprinted, with permission, from *Mission Focus* vol. 10:1 (Elkhart: Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, March 1982).

Recommended Reading

Useem, John, Ruth Useem, and John Donoghue. "Men in the Middle of the Third Culture: The Rites of American and Non-Western People in Cross-Cultural Administration." *Human Organization* 22 Fall (1963): 169-179.

Wambutda, Daniel N. "An African Christian Looks at Christian Missions in Africa." In *Readings in Missionary Anthropology 11*, edited by W. A. Smalley. South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1978.

Wolcott, Harry F. "Too True to Be Good: The Subculture of American Missionaries in Urban Africa." In *Readings in Missionary Anthropology 11*, edited by W. A. Smalley. South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1978.

Study Questions

1. The author maintains, "Some people must retain more ties than others to their cultural past in order to maintain psychological balance and effective ministry." Should this affect the missionary's assignment?
2. "If (the national leaders) identify too closely with the biculture, they become alienated from their people and are mistrusted as foreigners." Does this still happen today? If so, discuss why, and what responsibility the outsiders has for it.
3. The author concludes with "The biblical model is that of incarnation. To bridge the cultural gap between heaven and sinful earth, God became human and dwelt among us, eating our food, speaking our language, and suffering our sorrows, yet without giving up his divine nature." Discuss the variety of lifestyle choices that missionaries make in light of this statement.

