22 Pastoral, Evangelistic, and Missionary Discourse[1]

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Is there anything wrong when a missionary just translates a successful sermon he preached as a pastor in North America and then delivers it in India or Africa? Communication specialists say there is, so let's find out why.

Recently, Jean-Pierre van Noppen wrote an essay on religious communication in which he distinguished between what he called "missionary discourse" and "pastoral discourse."[2] He defined the former as discourse which requires the source to make explicit the unspoken premises upon which his/her message is based, such as when a Christian, especially a professional church worker, reasons with a non-believer or tries to teach a catechist who is not yet conversant with the Christian message. However, in situations in which the source and the receptors share the same body of beliefs, as in the case of a pastor and his mono-cultural congregation, the former usually merely reaffirms their shared beliefs or tries to stimulate the parishioners to put these shared beliefs into practice. Communication of this nature van Noppen calls "pastoral discourse."

As soon as I had read van Noppen's definitions, I found myself trying to apply his distinction to missionaries proclaiming the Christian message in cultures other than their own. It seemed to me that if I added cross-cultural communication by expatriate missionaries to the consideration, I would have to distinguish at least three discourse types: pastoral, evangelistic, and missionary.

For the purpose of this essay I join van Noppen in defining "pastoral discourse" as discourse characteristic of situations in which the source and the receptors share both a common culture and a common religious belief system. As already indicated, in such settings the aim of the communication is not to introduce new ideas nor to convince people of a different point of view; it merely serves to reaffirm what the people already believe and to stimulate them to put these beliefs into practice.

I would like to characterize "catechetical" or "evangelistic discourse" as discourse appropriate to situations in which the source and the receptor share a common culture, but not the same religious belief system. In such situations the aim of the communication is to make the message understandable and convincing to outsiders or new converts by making explicit the necessary, but usually unspoken, underlying religious premises. This would apply as much to pastors in a North American setting as to national pastors speaking to their non-Christian tribespeople in Burkina Faso.

In "missionary discourse" situations, however, the expatriate source shares neither the cultural nor the religious belief system of his receptors. Here too, the aim should be to make the message understandable and convincing to the hearers, but in this case the message must include not only the necessary religious presuppositions but also the expatriate speaker's cultural presuppositions. It must further anticipate the different religious and cultural presuppositions of the hearers.

It soon will be four decades since I began observing or personally engaging in preaching in cross-cultural missionary situations. I must honestly confess that I can recall hearing only relatively few sermons by expatriates on the mission field in which the speakers were, in actual fact, engaging in genuine "missionary discourse." More often than not, the missionary speakers were merely "translating" messages originally prepared in pastoral discourse style for home-country congregations. They were making little or no attempt to make explicit either the religious or the cultural presuppositions that undergirded their message. Nor did they take into account the differing religious and cultural presuppositions on which their mission-field audience was operating. The best one could say was that some made attempts to use evangelistic style discourse, but even then they seldom made enough of the underlying religious premises explicit.

At first I wrote off such messages as "stale", i.e., they had not been freshly prepared for the situation in which they were being delivered. Then, as I became more culturally conscious, I described them as lacking pre-programming for the cultural situation in which they were being delivered. But I was never able to put my finger on what was actually wrong. I think van Noppen has done just that when he points out that when speaking to people who do not share one's culture nor one's religious belief system one needs to spell out all the pertinent underlying assumptions in both of those areas. A truly well pre-programmed message by a missionary in a mission setting would go even one step further: it would anticipate the points at which the belief system of the worldview of the receptors would create difficulties for understanding the message.

The rest of this essay will now try to elucidate: (1) what causes well-meaning, highly motivated missionaries to use incongruent styles of discourse; (2) why

a missionary's home country "pastoral discourse" style is so inappropriate in a different cultural setting; and (3) what missionaries can do to achieve more meaningful "missionary discourse."

Why do Missionaries so often use Home-Country "Pastoral Discourse" Abroad?

The first and most obvious reason, of course, comes from the fact that most missionary candidates have been conditioned to hear and to expect pastoral style discourse whenever people talk about religious matters. If they were churchgoers (and most of them were), they were exposed to this style of discourse every time they went to church. Furthermore, in their training for the ministry or for missionary service they were taught, often even drilled, to use this discourse style. Even during their specialized "missionary" training only a small percentage of the candidates were exposed to any sort of training in cross-cultural communication.

A second, but often less obvious reason, is the fact that very few missionaries have looked at their belief system analytically, and thus they have not become aware of the many premises and presuppositions that undergird the Christian message they preach. In the Bible Institute or Bible College they were taught a body of doctrine which both they and their instructors accepted as right and biblical, usually without even attempting to make explicit the givens upon which the elements of the belief system were based. In anthropological terms, one could say that the degree to which missionaries are unaware of their ethnocentrism, to that degree they will also lack any feeling of need to identify or to make explicit such premises. Missionaries usually accept the Bible as God's word for all mankind, and since they feel "at home" in the Bible they feel that their own unspoken presuppositions about Scripture are universals. Then, because they ignore their own unspoken assumptions, they are also bound to ignore the fact that their hearers are operating on a very different set of unspoken assumptions. They may recognize that the people to whom they are trying to minister often react strangely, but they often do not have the "tools" to discover the cause of the "strangeness" they feel.

What is so Inappropriate about Missionaries using Home-Country "Pastoral Discourse" Abroad?

As we have indicated earlier, the first thing that is wrong with missionaries using home country pastoral discourse style in a cross-cultural setting is that it is based on the false assumption that the audience shares the belief system and the worldview of the missionary source.

The next thing that is wrong is the fact that pastoral discourse functions to reaffirm already accepted beliefs rather than to win people over to accept the new belief system the missionary is advocating.

Furthermore, pastoral discourse is usually highly doctrinal in content; i.e., usually the source tries to highlight a part of the accepted belief system by stating the content of that belief in terms of propositions and by presenting arguments that "prove" the validity of the propositions.

The next problem is with the use of doctrinal statements or propositional truths themselves. Westerners use them in what they consider "logical reasoning." For them logical reasoning is a tool *par excellence* for convincing others. All too many missionaries are unaware of the fact that few, if any, Majority World people habitually use "logical reasoning" to establish their religious values. People "feel, experience," or they "grow up with" religion somewhat like a child who grows up with a favorite blanket. It may be tattered and torn but it still represents security. E.T. Hall[3] recalls meeting Catholic missionaries who were greatly frustrated in their attempts to communicate the Christian message to the Japanese people. He reports finding only one Jesuit missionary who had discovered that Thomas Aquinas' logical reasoning had no impact whatsoever because religious decisions among the Japanese are not made on the basis of logic but on the basis of feeling; and "feelings," says Hall, "are rooted in a totally different part of the brain." This Jesuit priest was successful because he appealed to his hearer in terms of how wonderful it felt to be a Christian. If Hall is correct, we are here dealing not only with different underlying premises but also with a different physical part of the nervous system and the brain.

In a communication situation such as an expatriate speaking in a cross-cultural setting, the source and the receptor do not share very much by way of cultural context or by way of religious presuppositions. Each proposition presented by the missionary must of necessity, therefore, be embedded in the necessary overt and covert context if it is to communicate the intended message meaningfully to the receptor.

For example, a Canadian Mennonite missionary working with native peoples in Northern Manitoba one day saw an Indian boy running around with a jacket that was literally in tatters. He assumed that the boy probably had another jacket and that he must be wearing this one for special effects, so he jokingly said: "Isn't it a little bit early to be wearing your Halloween costume?" To him his remark represented a casual, inconsequential, friendly gesture; however the next day the mother of the boy knocked at his door and said: "My son tells me that you said you want to get him a new jacket." The missionary was completely taken by surprise and stated that he had said nothing of the kind. From his point of view he had merely engaged in

some unimportant communication. If there was any intent, it was to demonstrate his friendliness. On the other hand, from the Indian boy and his mother's point of view the missionary had indicated that he wanted to do something about the boy's tattered jacket. When the mother then confronted him and gave him the occasion to do something, the missionary not only refused to do anything, he denied that he had said anything of the kind. This left the Indian mother with the feeling that the missionary was neither friendly nor honest, while the missionary came away from the experience feeling that Indians were being totally unreasonable.

What can Missionaries do to Achieve More Meaningful "Missionary Communication?"

The ancient sage said "know thyself." This dictum needs to be taken very seriously by missionaries because they have come to communicate a belief system that deals with the realm of the nonmaterial. Furthermore, their knowledge about this belief system is largely framed in terms of propositional truth; thus if they want to communicate their knowledge about the spiritual realm, they must understand the basis on which their beliefs and practices rest. If they become aware of the assumptions and the underlying premises of their belief system, they will be in a much better position to know how much of that "given" information they must make explicit so that people who do not share their premises may be able to understand what they are trying to say.

There are several ways in which we can discover some of the unspoken premises of our culture and our religious belief and practice.

First, there is reading about our own culture, its values and presuppositions (see the Recommended Reading).

Next, there is careful observation as to what we find strange about others when observing people or talking to them. By the same token, we must note what others seem to find strange about us. As an illustration of the importance of knowing the receptors' religious premises consider the following experience reported by Don Jacobs.

As a new missionary he was assigned to teach in a seminary for training national pastors and he thought the staff was doing a good job. Then, to his chagrin, he discovered otherwise. During the vacation he joined their graduates in their fields of service and was horrified to hear how seriously they had misunderstood their seminary instruction.

After serious heart-searching, the mission changed its approach to teaching theology. All incoming seminary students were now required to spend the entire first

semester explaining their pre-Christian tribal religion to the members of their class. Since they came from different tribes, there were considerable differences between the views of the Africans themselves. All their differences and similarities were noted. Meanwhile the professors took note of all the points of conflict in content and presupposition between the tribal worldview and that of the Western missionary and also with that of the Bible (since the latter two do not necessarily concord either).

Once the students had made their religious presuppositions explicit, the seminary staff was able to use the presuppositional framework of the Africans to teach Christian doctrine. Points of conflict were anticipated and the adequate context made both the Western and the biblical views understandable. The result was that for the first time their seminary students were getting the presuppositional help they required to understand the biblical instruction they were receiving in the seminary.

In cross-cultural communication, missionaries may need to develop new models at the very beginning of their work just to make it possible for the people in the different cultural setting to understand their message about spiritual verities.

However, we also need to be aware of the fact that the Christian church, like any other institution that has developed a tradition, will have a built-in fear about changing models. In fact, history demonstrates that when Copernicus and Galileo began proposing that the sun rather than the earth was the center of the universe, the church found this new model so threatening that they caused Galileo to recant by threatening to torture him to death.

The same thing, of course, is true in regard to religious models. I remember how an otherwise rather non-orthodox scholar reacted when I proposed that we adjust metaphors like “God as father” and “believers as children of God” in a given totally Muslim context. My reason for suggesting the adjustment was the fact that these Muslims were interpreting these metaphors literally and thus were feeling that the Christians were blaspheming their God by implying that he had a sexual nature. In this way it was not a matter of dropping metaphors or introducing completely different metaphors, it was merely a matter of restating the metaphors as inoffensive similes, e.g., “God our father” could be restated as “God who loves us as a father loves his children.” This scholar’s reaction was that if one tampers with the father-image of God one is taking out an essential core of the Christian message.

All of us need to recognize that none of the existing models in our doctrine or in Scripture are the reality. They merely provide us earth-bound creatures with understandable earth-bound images that help us grasp supernatural or spiritual reality. If we want to communicate these spiritual realities effectively, we will need to use both language models and discourse types that are appropriate for the situation.

Notes

[1] This chapter is reprinted, with permission, from *Direction Journal* vol. 16:2 (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, Fall 1987).

[2] Jean-Pierre van Noppen, ed. *Metaphor and Religion,* Theolinguistics 2, Study Series of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, New Series No. 12 (Brussels: Wettelijk Depot, 1983), 133.

[3] E.T. Hall, ed. *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), 63.

Recommended Reading

Hall, E.T, ed. *The Dance of Life:The Other Dimension of Time*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984.

Van Noppen, Jean-Pierre, ed. *Metaphor and Religion*. Theolinguistics 2. Study Series of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, New Series No. 12. Brussels: Wettelijk Depot 2085, 1983. See especially the following chapters: Delbecque, Nicole. "Metaphors in a Feminine Perspective." McFague, Sally. "Metaphorical Theology." Van Noppen, Jean-Pierre. "Interpretation Errors in Theory and Practice."

Study Questions

1. Can you think of discourses, or even just statements, that you think should communicate the same thing in any culture? Give examples.
2. Loewen wrote the following statements in 1987. Discuss how they might still be true.
    - "well-meaning, highly motivated missionaries … use incongruent styles of discourse … inappropriate in a different cultural setting."
    - "very few missionaries have looked at their belief system analytically"
    - "(missionaries) ignore their own unspoken assumptions"
3. Loewen states in the last paragraph: "All of us need to recognize that none of the existing models in our doctrine or in Scripture are the reality." After carefully re-reading the context, do you agree? Discuss this statement.