

RELIGION ONLINE

Mythmakers: Gospel, Culture and the Media

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Chapter 2: How Christians Interpret the Gospel

We live not by things,

but by the meaning of things.

It is needful to transmit the passwords

from generation to generation.

-- Antoine de Saint-Expuery

The Gospels in the New Testament are only the beginning of "the gospel." "The gospel" has a second source which is not found in the written record of the Bible at all: the historical witness and testimony of almost twenty centuries of Christian believers. While Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are essential elements in the Christian experience, so are the faith responses of Christians throughout history, and both are part of the gospel in our time. For almost two thousand years Christians have been interpreting the gospel in terms of what they knew about the Old and New Testaments, their own cultures, their media, and their experiences. Each generation of believers has incorporated its own life and times into what the gospel means. So we need to know something about that interpretation over the centuries, because it forms a crucial living link between Jesus and ourselves.

The Gospel Always Comes Wrapped in a Cultural Context

As we said in Chapter One, we simply can never expect to transport ourselves back to first century Palestine and experience the "real" gospel in its "real" culture. That very human desire was the trap that the "quest for the historical Jesus" scholars fell into. In reality, there is no "real" gospel except as it has been transmitted to us in the Bible and through the faithful for whom it has had meaning over the centuries. Each generation has had to face anew the question "Who is Jesus?" and to work out its own answers, in terms of its own culture.

The gospel always comes wrapped in a particular language, particular customs and traditions and ways of doing things, particular unwritten rules about politics and religion and the family -- in other words, in a particular culture. Culture has many complicated meanings, but I use it here simply to describe a system of beliefs (about God or reality or ultimate meaning), of values (about what is true, good and beautiful), of customs (about how to behave and relate to others), and of the institutions which express the culture (government, church, law courts, family, school and so on) -- all of which bind the society together and give it meaning. ¹

We can never get completely "out" of our culture. Our culture was there before we were born into it, and we became human as we interacted with it. While we may pick and choose to emphasize certain aspects of it, and even change it slightly during our lifetime, our culture is like the air we breathe -- something we take for granted, but without which we would cease to be who and what we are.

In the last two thousand years, Christianity has been experienced in many different cultures. Therefore, Christians have interpreted Christianity in widely different ways over the centuries. Jaroslav Pelikan, an eminent church historian, has devoted an entire book to the ways people of different times have understood Jesus. He shows that "For each age, the life and teachings of Jesus represented an answer (or, more often the answer) to the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human destiny, and it was to the figure of Jesus as set forth in the gospels that those questions were addressed." ²

The Jesus of History

During the first three hundred or so years after Jesus, Christians regarded their gatherings not as a society for the promotion of personal salvation, but as a way of proclaiming the Lordship of the God of Jesus, the God of love, peace and justice. According to Leslie Newbigin, the message of Jesus to these early followers "was about the kingship, the

universal sovereignty of God. It was not a message about the interior life of the soul considered in abstraction from the public life of the world."³

Newbigin places these first century Christians and their role in society in stark contrast to the role of churches in the Western world today. If these early followers had been content to withdraw from and forget their relationship to the rest of society, Newbigin says, they would have posed no threat to the Emperor and his power: "[the first century church] would have enjoyed the protection of the law -- the same protection which churches enjoy in our modern culture, available for exactly the same reason -- namely, that they pose no threat to the ideology which controls public life."⁴ Instead, Christians refused to bow the knee to Rome, because Almighty God, not the Emperor, was the Lord of all. They called their gathering the ecclesia Theou, the assembly of God -- a public assembly to which all humankind were summoned and which was called together not by the town clerk but by God, an assembly where no earthly emperor could claim absolute supremacy. This was the kind of assembly Roman power could not permit. Therefore, Christians understood their lot to include persecution and, often, torture and death, and they lived in hope of the return of Jesus: "Truly, I say unto you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Matt. 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32). Evidence of their persecuted status is still visible in Rome, where the catacombs reveal thousands of martyrs' bones and rude stone caskets record hundreds of deaths in the faith.

By the fourth century a shift in the status of Christianity affected the understanding of the gospel. A Roman Emperor, Constantine, passed from paganism to Christianity. History is ambiguous about the reasons for his conversion, but we do know that in 312, at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, "Constantine was directed in a dream to cause a heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle."⁵ He marked his shields with the Chi-Rho (in Greek, the first two letters of "Christ"), an emblem of Christianity. The battle was won, and shortly thereafter Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Empire. When he built Constantinople as the New Rome, he constructed huge Hagia Sophia, one of the grandest of all churches. In its southern gallery one can still see today a golden mosaic depicting the Constantinian transformation to imperial (and triumphal) Christianity: Christ as King (Pantocrator) is seated in the center on a throne, flanked by the Emperor Constantine on one side and the Empress Zoe on the other. Spiritual and temporal power were united.

This understanding of the gospel as earthly power resulted in struggles for authority and territory between medieval European rulers and the Western church centered in Rome. This perspective also set in motion the Crusades that flourished from the 11th to 14th centuries. To "take up the Cross" meant literally to sew a red cross on one's garment, and to go off to war against the Turk in Palestine. As judged by a modern historian, Steven Runciman, this "Crusading fervor always provided an excuse for killing God's enemies" -- in Jesus' name.⁶

But another understanding of Jesus and the gospel began to take form. During the Middle Ages the church became increasingly institutionalized through the monastic movement. Thousands of men and women who turned to a cloistered life patterned themselves closely after Christ. And "by the time they were finished," Pelikan observes, they "were likewise patterning Christ after themselves." Through the monastic life they demonstrated how to "share by patience in the passion of Christ and hereafter deserve to be united with him in his kingdom." Theirs was a simple, direct formula: "not to value anything more highly than the love of Christ."⁷

St. Francis is perhaps the most revered of those who understood Jesus in terms of his humility, poverty and self denial. Early in the thirteenth century Francis created a monastic order founded on the principle of conformity to the life of Jesus "in all things." Toward the end of his life this principle was dramatized when "the marks of nails began to appear in his hands and feet, just as he had seen them in the vision of the Man nailed to the Cross."⁸ For thousands of followers of Francis, Jesus became the literal model for all of life. And many monks and nuns, in response to the gospel stories of Jesus' ministry, became active in the world, serving as missionaries to areas of Europe not yet Christian, caring for the poor, preaching and teaching.

In the Middle Ages the church was the institution that preserved documents and provided most education. But the gospel story itself was communicated to most of the faithful through pictures, carvings, stained glass, drama, music and spoken words rather than through books. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the understanding of Jesus and the gospel emerged in a renewed way into daily life. Gospel stories were often consciously allegorized into everyday terms. Painting, especially in Italy, became a valued means of communication, through such artists as Giotto, Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci. The Bible came to life on their canvasses, as every parable, saying and deed of Jesus' life was rendered in vivid color and with increasing realism and depth of perspective. The culture of the time guided the artist's eye. The Madonna became a round and rosy Italian

maid, the Baby Jesus a bouncing Italian bambino, while Roman governors, disciples, saints and martyrs were all depicted as Medieval Italians against an Italian landscape.

To the north in sixteenth century Flanders and Germany, the genius of Peter Brueghel and Albrecht Durer brought the Bible to life for anyone who could see their paintings and drawings. Old and New Testament figures became burghers and hausfraulein, and the biblical scenes were set among the familiar barns, haylofts, farmhouses and countryside of everyday life.

The understanding of the gospel in the culture of its time reaches a musical apex in the 18th century. In the St. Matthew Passion and St. John Passion, as well as many of his cantatas, Johann Sebastian Bach portrayed the gospel story in vivid, dramatic detail. The Evangelist tells the story in direct narrative style, soloists act out the various roles of Jesus, Mary, the High Priest, Peter and others, while the chorus comments on the betrayal, death and resurrection. The story was old, the musical setting the work of genius, but the music, at the time, was familiar; Bach employed scores of earlier hymns and even popular songs, and of course the language was German, with the result that the average Protestant churchgoing listener had a new experience -- the words and music of the time were recast to provide religious relevance and meaning.

Of all the interpretations of the gospel during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, few were more direct and at the same time more communicative than hymns. A century earlier John Wesley and his brother Charles had written hundreds of hymns which stirred working class people in England, and this tradition continued in America through such writers as Timothy Dwight, Samuel Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and more recently Henry Sloane Coffin and Harry Emerson Fosdick. While hymns covered just about every subject, those which found particular favor in nineteenth century America were based on a personal experience of Jesus and the gospel, particularly in regard to faith ("Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine"), the atonement of Jesus ("When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"), confession ("Just As I Am, Without One Plea"), dedication ("Nearer, My God, to Thee"), following Jesus' example ("Saviour, Like a Shepherd Lead Us"), and salvation ("Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound").

Our own century provides understandings of Jesus and the gospel that in some ways differ from previous understandings, but nonetheless are linked to earlier traditions. Think of the coronations in the United Kingdom, where the civil head of state is crowned in Westminster Abbey by the Archbishop of Canterbury attended by all the prelates of the church, in a centuries-old religious ceremony replete with choirs, trumpet fanfares and

processionals, seen and heard worldwide by millions on radio and television. Similar coverage is accorded the Pope's visits to North America and other continents, including special jets, cars with special bullet-proof glass, hordes of police and press -- a modern-day evocation of the church triumphant that goes back more than a thousand years.

In stark contrast, this century also witnessed Gandhi's Long March to the sea, which, because it was picked up by London and New York newspapers, focused world attention on the plight of the Indians under their British rulers. Later the world saw a similar drama, this time on television, enacted in Selma and Birmingham, as Martin Luther King Jr. joined hands with religious leaders from throughout the United States to protest against injustices which led to major legal reform in civil rights. In both cases, the image of the gospels displayed to participants and spectators alike was Jesus' emphasis on community, suffering for others, and self-giving love.

Other twentieth century views of Jesus have aroused widespread response. Picasso's "Guernica" depicted the horrors of the bombing by Nazi planes of a tiny village during the Spanish Civil War, making striking use of the cross to drive home the inhumanity of modern warfare. In a score of powerful "Miserere" paintings and prints, Georges Roualt interpreted suffering and death as the essence of Jesus' way. Fellini's film "Jesus of Nazareth" emphasized the starkness of Jesus' time; its image of the Sermon on the Mount delivered in a howling storm is unforgettable. A few years ago in Canada, empathy and protest were aroused by the sculpture "Christa," in which the figure on the cross was female.

These scattered examples illustrate that Christians of every generation have needed to come to terms with the meaning of the gospel of Jesus, and that they have expressed their understanding in terms of their own life and times. We cannot judge whether any particular understanding was more or less "true" than that of another generation, but we must understand that, for those Christians it was true. It was by that particular understanding of the gospel, wrapped in the culture of their days, that people guided their lives, spent their time, took certain actions and avoided others. In a sense, they "bet their lives" on the meanings of the gospel they found, created and celebrated within their own culture. Our challenge today is to engage in a similar process of understanding, creation and commitment.

The Jesus of Geography

The meaning of the gospel depends not merely on time but also on location. Today the gospel is given very different interpretations by people in different cultural settings.

A few years ago in Japan, my wife and I visited an old friend, Masao Takenaka, professor of Christian Ethics at Doshisha University in Kyoto, the spiritual center of Japan. One afternoon Masao led us to a lovely garden behind his office where we were served tea according to the traditional ceremony, sitting on straw tatami mats and using hand-molded cups three centuries old. Then he presented us with his book called Christian Art in Asia, the very first compilation of the works of Asian artists on Christian themes. In those pages the gospel is made flesh within the Asian experience: Jesus calling Japanese fishermen; the nativity in a Korean barn; a beautiful Indian "Blue Madonna;" an Indonesian madonna and child; an Indian Last Supper; a Sri Lankan Christ; a crucifixion in the midst of the Philippines.

Two decades earlier I experienced other unique gospel interpretations, this time in Africa, most often through music. I shall never forget visiting a Methodist girls' school in what is now Zimbabwe, where, for a foreign visitor, the teen-agers sang "Just As I Am, Without One Plea" to an accompaniment of rattles, drums, tinkling spoons and Coke bottles, and at a pace and syncopation, that simply made you want to dance.

And in Bolivia, where I had gone to make a film about missionary activity, the music again was Christian, and again unique. This time a young woman, completely uneducated, came into a studio in La Paz, ten thousand feet high in the Andes, and sang lullabies and folk songs that sounded as if she had been studying music all her life. The record sold thousands of copies, long before the Beatles and others discovered the riches of Bolivian folk music. But this folk music was transformed by a Christian perspective.

Of course, wherever one encounters Latin American Christianity, there is music, whether in the streets of Rio de Janeiro or Miami or Los Angeles. Singing and dancing are a way of life, and Christian interpretations of Jesus' life, death and resurrection are commemorated in dozens of Latin American festivals and carnivals. In 1988, when Latin American and North American Christian communicators met in San Juan, Puerto Rico, a highlight of the week was the presentation of indigenous songs and dance by Puerto Rican Christians who carry on a rich and sophisticated religious musical tradition for the sheer joy of it.

One of the most powerful cultural interpretations of the gospel came to America through the experience of African slaves. James Weldon Johnson celebrated the unique sermon

style of black preaching in his book God's Trombones, which includes a famous passage from "The Creation":

Then down between

The darkness and the light

He hurled the world;

And God said: That's good!⁹

Martin Luther King, Jr. was formed out of this tradition, and he used it to create a preaching style that stirred the moral imagination of both black and white audiences and was a significant element in validating his leadership of the civil rights movement. For example, imagine King's voice as he told his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta how it will be when God judges the world:

Oh, there will be a day. The question won't be how many awards did you get in life. Not that day. It won't be how popular were ya in your social setting. That won't be the question that day. ... The question that day will not be concerned whether you are a Ph.D. or a No.D, will not be concerned whether you went to Morehouse or ... No House.... On that day the question will be what did you do for others. Now I can hear somebody saying, "Lord, uh, I did a lot of things in Life. I did my job well... I went to school and studied hard. I accumulated a lot of money, Lord, that's what I did." Seems as if I can hear the Lord of Light saying, "But I was hungry, and you fed me not. I was sick and ye visited me not. I was neck-id in the cold, and I was in prison and you weren't concerned about me, so get out of my face!"¹⁰

The spirituals, the participatory sermon styles ("Amen!"..."God Almighty!"), the dynamic worship experiences -- all testify that African-Americans found ways to express their gospel of liberation, freedom and salvation in the midst of oppression and hardship in America. A contribution not yet so well recognized is that of the Native Americans, bringing profound identification with nature, deep appreciation of the continuity of all things, and a connectedness with ancestors that has greatly enriched religion in North America.

Finally, popular music, while not great poetry, is nevertheless full of metaphor and meaning, and some of it sees the gospel in the light of secular experience. An example is

"The Tree Springs to Life," from a contemporary hymnal:

They hung him in Jerusalem,

And in Hiroshima,

In Dallas and Selma too,

And in South Africa.

We hear you, O Man, in agony cry,

For freedom you march, in riots you die.

Your face in the papers we read and we see,

The tree must be planted by human decree.^[11]

Missionary Implications

Cultural differences of the kind we have been describing have posed particularly difficult problems for missionaries. In their attempt to "bring Christ" to people in other cultures, missionaries (and until recently most Christian missionaries were sent from either North America or Europe) sometimes confuse "the gospel" with "the culture," namely, their own.

Charles Kraft, missionary and professor of missions, recalls an experience in a pre-scientific culture in Northern Nigeria:

One day I was presenting the gospel message in the best way I knew how and came to the point where I asserted that the supreme proof that the message of God is true rests in the fact that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. "Very interesting," one of my hearers replied. "My son rose from the dead just last week, and my uncle last month. My uncle was climbing a tree and he fell out of the tree, died, and, after half an hour, rose from the dead." What does one say to people for whom death and unconsciousness are in the same category?^[12]

Culture shock can also flow in the opposite direction. Alice Hageman, a lawyer, Presbyterian minister and part-time teacher in Cuba, tells of talking with Sergio Arce, professor of theology at the Protestant seminary in Matanzas. When Professor Arce is speaking in North America and Europe, he finds he is often asked, "How is it possible to be a Christian in a communist country?" To which he replies: "How is it possible to be a Christian in a capitalist country?"¹³

Too often in the past missionaries have been content simply to export "the gospel" as they knew it. Festus Asana, former principal of the Presbyterian Theological College in Cameroon, reports that "I saw snow for the first time when I left Africa, but years back in Cameroon, during our dry and brown, dusty Christmas season, we would sing:

In the bleak mid-Winter,

Frosty wind made moan,

Earth stood hard as iron,

Water like a stone;

Snow had fallen, snow on snow,

Snow on snow,

In the bleak mid-winter

Long ago"¹⁴

And even when the gospel message seems clear, traditions, customs and unspoken assumptions can alter what the words mean. A former missionary to New Guinea points out how some basic biblical injunctions can be interpreted differently:

Even such clear statements as the Ten Commandments have as it were, fuzzy borders. For instance, is it stealing to pick up a child's toy from a suburban sidewalk? Yes, in the United States. No, in Mexico. In ancient Israel one could pick and eat fruit while passing through another man's orchard, but that would be recognized by everyone as theft in present day Southern California. Many Papua New Guineans see my culture's practice of leaving the care of the elderly to the state as a clear violation of the fifth

commandment. My Bahinemo [New Guinea] brethren do not see taking a second wife as adultery, but it would be for me. It seems that the essence of each commandment is clear, but the edges are defined differently by different cultures. God's universal standard must be realized in different situations by different behavior.¹⁵

One solution is to try to sort out what is fundamental to the gospel from what is "merely cultural." But this approach is unsatisfactory, as Kraft discovered when a Nigerian church leader pointed out to him that the Bible commands both that we not steal and that we not allow women to pray with their heads uncovered, and then asked why missionaries teach that the one command be obeyed and the other ignored: are they using a different Bible? In reality both the commands are expressed in terms of customs current in biblical times and places. The solution requires two steps. To understand the original meaning, missionaries (and all Christians) need to look beyond the biblical commands to discover how the words and customs were understood by those who wrote them and those who first heard them. To understand the relevance for today, the missionaries (and all Christians) must also examine the culture we find ourselves in, and ask what is God's will in the context of all of the ways God is revealed, through Scripture, tradition and personal witness.

An even more serious problem is the unconscious assumption on the part of some missionaries that not only is their gospel "the gospel," but that their mission is to "bring" it to others by whatever means available. Kraft, who was trained in anthropology as well as theology, describes a situation he encountered in Nigeria:

I observed in one of my colleagues a disturbing type of behavior that I wanted at all costs to avoid. He took a great interest in the culture of the people he worked among but, when he discovered their secrets, he consistently used this information against them. His attempts to communicate the gospel constantly compared their customs with what he called "the Christian custom." When he described "the Christian custom," however, it always bore a striking resemblance to an idealized version of an American custom.¹⁶

Then Kraft began to recognize his own cultural biases:

"I, like the majority of my generation of evangelical Protestants, had been taught to fear heresy above almost anything else in the world. I had been taught to respect the nearly two thousand years of western theological study and to assume that such dedicated theologians had answered just about every problem worth answering. ... I had been

taught to preserve my orthodoxy by closing my mind to other options....I began to realize that, if I were to face the problems of the Nigerian situation squarely, I would have to become more open than I had been. ... I was becoming ...open to learning things from people of a different culture concerning what biblical Christianity should look like in their culture. There was nothing in my church background or theological training that would enable me even to counsel those who were interacting with God in terms of a different culture." (emphasis supplied).¹⁷

Kraft's insight not only reveals the cultural biases of some missionaries. Even more important, it shows the problem all Christians face in understanding the meaning of the gospel in their own cultures today. North American culture has changed radically in the last hundred years. Dress and diet and leisure time activities are strikingly different. And beneath the surface are more crucial changes in the ways we find out about the world, create our assumptions, and make our decisions.

It is the thesis of this book that the mass media of communication have placed Americans in an environment so different from former times that our values, assumptions, perspectives and worldview, and therefore our understanding of religion, are affected at their roots.

The mass media have radically altered the nature of meaning in our lives. This is why Kraft's comment is so apt. Today we live, in effect, in a "different culture" from the culture of thirty years ago, even though we may be still be living in the same place we always did. In a sense, time has speeded up. Since the Second World War we have moved into a new kind of culture -- a mediated culture, where for the first time in history, whole nations get more of their information and ideas from the mass media than from home, church and school. We have to learn to understand what this new mediated culture is saying about religious values if we expect to be able to conduct our own quest for meaning within it.

People in North America are "interacting with God in terms of a different culture" -- not different in location, but different in terms of the radical transformation that has resulted from the technological revolution. Part of our task is to try to understand the ways this technological revolution, and especially the revolution in communications, shapes culture, and it is to that task that we now turn.

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