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# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND THE GOSPEL: A CASE STUDY OF A JAPANESE CHURCH

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It has been a long time since the need for contextualization of the gospel was realized by Christians everywhere. In the case of Japan, in spite of a century and a half of evangelistic efforts since the lifting of the banning of Christianity, still less than one percent of the population is Christian today, including both Catholic and Protestant. After the defeat of World War in 1945, the Allied Powers sent Douglas MacArthur to Japan as the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers and attempted to reform and reconstruct the post-war Japan for the following six years and eight months. Among the major reforms were demilitarization and democratization policies for the country. In regards to religious policies, the State Shinto, which had control over all the other religions, was disorganized, and the separation of the state and the religion policy was implemented. In one year, all the religions were liberated from bondage and allowed to practice freedom of religion.

The Occupation forces did not necessarily give privileges to Christianity alone, but the Supreme Commander General MacArthur was a believer from the Episcopal Church, and he had a strong conviction that the democratization of Japan could be fulfilled only through Christianization of the people of Japan. The letter which MacArthur wrote to the chairperson of the American Baptist Federation was printed in Asahi Newspaper of December 4, 1946. The following is an English translation of the letter which was originally printed in Japanese.

Now is the best opportunity to spread Christianity among the Japanese people, since there is a spiritual vacuum in the people's heart brought by the war. If this opportunity is understood fully by the Christian leaders in the United States, the most fortunate spiritual reformation will be realized for the progress of civilization, which will be far greater than any economic or political reform has ever attained in the history of the world.<sup>1</sup>

As is clear from the letter, MacArthur requested American churches to send as many missionaries as possible to Japan and in response to his request, the mission organizations of both American and European countries sent missionaries to Japan far more than to any country in the church history of the world. They provided strong support for the reconstruction and evangelization of Japanese churches.

Under these circumstances, the evaluation of the Japanese people toward Christianity changed 180 degrees and huge crowds of people flocked around churches, and an unprecedented boom of Christianity took place. The Japanese leaders sensitively felt the intention of the Occupation forces and radically changed their attitude toward Christianity. Many Christians who were once marginalized from the mainstream were used as leaders of the society. Owing to the strong support of the American churches, the former denominations were reorganized, new denominations were born, and new Christian universities and social welfare organizations were promoted. Christian churches grew very rapidly.

However, when the Occupation period ended and MacArthur left Japan as a result of the San Francisco Peace Treaty which liberated Japan from the Occupation forces, the Christianity boom receded as the tide ebbs and Christian churches again became isolated from the society. Why did this happen? From hindsight we can say simply that the gospel could not take its roots in the Japanese culture. We cannot help but think that there were some strange alien elements in Christianity. And the Japanese people could not adapt and assimilate Christian faith, especially its doctrines as something inharmonious with them. And Christianity survived only among the upper intellectual people who

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas MacArthur, *Memoirs of MacArthur* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun Inc., 1964).

adopted western culture which was quite different from Japanese traditional culture.

Today Christian churches in Japan are struggling in order to fight against the difficulty and futility of evangelical attempts among the general public. One factor which makes the propagation of the gospel in Japan difficult is the fact that Japanese Christians take it for granted that they (we) understand Japanese culture and its people. But in actuality we lack objective recognition and understanding of both. In other words we have not yet been able to come to conscious realization of our own culture and people. Without grasping and facing the essential nature of our own culture, we would not be able to illuminate our own culture and people, nor would we be able to recognize the values and ways of thinking of foreign cultures and people. It is a very difficult task to accept, digest, and absorb foreign worldviews. Japanese Christians today find it difficult to effectively communicate the gospel even to their own people.<sup>2</sup>

### Culture and Communication

The cultural anthropologist, Edward T. Hall says that culture itself carries communication value as “silent language” which is not verbalized. This is to say that “culture itself is communication.” He further says that human life as a whole is communication. Language sometimes does not have any meaning as language alone. In many cases, means of communication other than language are far more important.<sup>3</sup> According to one report, 65 % of interpersonal communication is occupied by non-verbal messages, and according to another report 93%.<sup>4</sup> These facts show evidence for my contention that we have to understand our own culture in order to communicate the gospel to our own people.

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<sup>2</sup>Mikio Sumitani and Kazu Yamamoto, eds., *Nihon niokeru Fukuin to Bunka* (The Gospel and Culture in Japan) (Tokyo: Kyobunkan, 1967), 3-8.

<sup>3</sup>Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Doubleday, 1959) translated into Japanese as *Chinmoku no kotoba* by M. Kunihiro et. al (Tokyo: Nanundo, 1966).

<sup>4</sup>Gyo Furuta ed.,  *Ibunka komyunikeshon* (Cross-cultural Communication) (Tokyo:Yuhikaku, 1987), 91.

It is not my intention in this address to give answers to such an audacious topic as clarifying the whole Japanese culture. But I would like to highlight some of the primary characteristics of Japanese culture in its connection with, and transformation, acceptance, and contextualization of foreign worldviews, including my own cross-cultural experiences.

My first encounter with a different culture was my contact with American missionaries, Rev. and Mrs. Moore, during my senior high school days. Mrs. Moore held an English Bible Class every Saturday afternoon at their home and usually about ten high school students participated in it. It was customary that when Rev. Moore passed by us during the Bible class, he smiled and winked at Mrs. Moore. I was quite amazed at his behavior, for I had never seen my father smile and wink at my mother in my entire life. The shocking scene made a deep impression on my mind. A few years later I went to the United States to study at Northwest Nazarene University and stayed at the girls' dormitory. I studied with my boy friend who is my husband now, and spent four years (including my husband's seminary education), surrounded by neighbor-loving devout Christians. It was a series of surprising experiences one after another which I can never forget. Later in life we went back to the United States for further study which added up to a total of about seven years living in the United States.

Through the experience of living abroad, I was overwhelmed by the cultural differences. Time just doesn't allow me to explain them all, but to my eyes many American behaviors were opposite to those of my cultural behavior. Just to give a few examples, when I count on my fingers, I usually start with my thumb and then to the forefinger and on to the little finger, turning them in from an open palm position, while Americans start with index finger and onto the thumb, opening each finger from a fist position. In counting paper money, Japanese count it folding each paper money into the inside, while Americans count it flipping each paper money to the outside. When cutting a carrot, for example, Japanese cut it from top to bottom with no exception, but Americans often cut it from bottom to top. When we carry a baby, Japanese mothers usually strap the baby on their backs or in front with the baby facing the mother, while in America I witnessed fathers carrying the baby on their backs on a chair-like metal carrier with the

baby facing outward. When using a handsaw, Japanese pull it to cut wood, while Americans push it. Japanese are usually quiet, while Americans seem to enjoy talking. When talking, Americans seem to have direct eye contact with the person they are talking until they finish their talk. This behavior is done in Japan only when people are quarreling or in deep love. In America, women were treated with kindness. When riding on an elevator, women were given priority. Back in those days this was a surprising scene for me, because Japanese women were supposed to walk three steps behind men. (I didn't follow such custom of course.) In America, husbands seem to manage the money matters of the family, while in Japan the husband hands over all the salary to his wife and the wife usually manages the money matters of the family and gives small allowances to her husband. Of course I follow this custom. Granted that these examples are somewhat of an overgeneralization of cultures, and American culture today has become too diverse to articulate. These experiences with a different culture became the starting point of my studies in cross-cultural and interpersonal communication. I began to see myself better with the light of a different culture and the breadth of my thinking grew larger through the encounter with another world.

### **Characteristics of Japanese Culture that Arise from the Comparison with American Culture**

Seiya Matsumoto lists six characteristics of Japanese culture as follows:<sup>5</sup>

1. Human relationships take precedence over principles or fundamental truths. This leads to valuing emotion over reason.
2. Take life as it naturally comes and wait quietly without going against the flow of nature. Less emphasis is upon human power to actively change the flow.
3. Group orientation to achieve something together with others respecting good relations rather than individualistic orientation.

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<sup>5</sup>Seiya Matsumoto, *Nichibei Bunka no Tokushitsu* (Characteristics of Japanese and American Cultures) (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1994).

What restricts the behavior of an individualistic oriented person is consciousness of sin before God. What restricts the behavior of a group-oriented person is consciousness of shame which arises from being different from or inferior to other persons in the specific group.

4. Respect for humility is shown in bowing and introducing one's wife to others as one's silly wife. This contrasts against egalitarian orientation where one calls one's partner as a better half and shake hands with other people at equal footing.
5. *Honne* and *Tatema* are differentiated. *Honne* consists of a person's real intentions and real feelings which are usually hidden from outsiders and disclosed only to relatives or insiders. *Tatema* means a principle or policy which a person shows to outsiders and could be interpreted as a person's public image. Contracts can be often *Tatema* and could be flexible depending on situations. It favors round-about manner of speech rather than straight talk and values the ability to guess other person's real feeling and intentions.
6. Pessimistic orientation thinks of life as enduring unhappiness and sufferings rather than enjoying life now and thinking things positively. While optimistic orientation compliments strength of a child and cultivates his/her talents, pessimistic orientation has a tendency to point out weaknesses of a child and tries to correct them.

With these understandings of Japanese culture, I now wish to introduce an experiment of a church which communicates Christ effectively to the hearts of the Japanese, grasping, keeping, and utilizing these cultural characteristics of the people.

### **A Successful Ministry of a Church Based on the Japanese Cultural Characteristics**

This model church is located in the northern part of the country, mostly rural area. It is now developing a Christian ministry perhaps most worthy to be acknowledged among Protestant churches in Japan. The distinctive character of their ministry is found in their recognition of the features of Japanese culture and people. They maintain those features carefully, utilize them actively and tie them effectively with

evangelism of the church. The senior pastor of this church, Rev. Dr. Nobuo Tanaka, a graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary, lives with many young people afflicted with psychiatric and personal problems. Based upon the biblical understanding of the gospel, he has developed counseling schools all over the country and has cared for many people who are suffering from all kinds of life problems of modern times. By meeting the needs of people, he leads them one by one to Christ. Many people are not only being healed from these wounds but are becoming counselors themselves or pastors to help others who are going through life's difficulties. Rev. Tanaka says that he focuses his ministry upon non-Christians, but through his ministry many Christians are being helped to live a vital Christian life with joy and hope. He is asked to speak by many institutions and organizations and accepts invitations from any group without discrimination, including all kinds of other religious organizations, and prepares messages with deep prayer. His ministry has now expanded into extension schools for intensive short term courses for counseling at many places in the country, sending of thousands of worship tapes all over the world to many branch churches (which are called Gospel Houses) where people worship using the worship videos of Rev. Tanaka. His influence is reaching not only Christians and non-Christians in Japan but also Japanese people around the world today, and the seeds of the gospel are being planted everywhere. There are not a few people who decide to move to this little town in the northern part of Japan to live near the church.

Rev. Tanaka has four basic philosophies for Christian mission in Japan which he uses through his churches and counseling schools. I would like to here introduce those four philosophies with the permission of Rev. Tanaka.

1. Monistic Life Style
2. Understanding Human Life as a Total Being
3. Understanding Human Life as a Relational Being
4. Understanding the Characteristics of the Japanese People

## 1. Monistic Life Style

The term “monistic” is not used here in the usual theological sense which connotes pantheistic understanding that the nature of all things is one. His philosophy of monistic life style does not understand human life in dualistic terms such as “plus or minus” or “good or bad.” Rather he understands human life based upon Romans 8:28; “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” That is, he perceives reality through the eyes of the completed salvation event of the gospel. In Japanese language, the word “yes” can mean “yes” or “no,” depending on the situation. In English language, I understand the word “yes” means “yes” and “no” means “no” always. In English language, we normally do not say, “Yes, it is not.” But in Japanese language, we can say so. Thus ‘yes’ can mean both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ depending on the situation. He uses this illustration to say that in Japanese culture there is a characteristic to bring two contradictory things into one. He explains that perception of human life brought about by Christ and His gospel brings any clashing life situations, any contradictory events, or any conflicting emotions into one in Christ, for it says in the Bible: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14). Such is his general understanding of monistic life style.<sup>6</sup>

I believe that this philosophy of monistic lifestyle incorporates the natural orientation of Japanese culture without changing the teachings of the Bible. This lifestyle does not differentiate life situations as black or white, or good or bad, neither does it go against the flow of the things with human powers, but rather accept what it is as the wonderful starting point of all blessings. It is a lifestyle of an elevator, waiting quietly to go up. This kind of monistic lifestyle brings such messages to the people who are pessimistic and of an introvert orientation as “you are OK just as you are, and God accepts you however imperfect or weak

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<sup>6</sup>Nobuo Tanaka, *Kaunsela wa ShoKirisuto* (Counselor is a Little Christ) (Tokyo: Shinsei Shuppansha, 1994), 12-23.

you may be.” These kinds of messages are very encouraging to them and give them strength and joy to go forward with life .

## 2. Understanding Human Life as a Total Being

Understanding a person as a total being, Rev. Tanaka explains, means to perceive a person as a whole. He gives an analogy of an apple to explain a person. An apple consists of primarily three parts: skin, fruit, and seed. A person, first of all, has skin, namely, a physical body. A body learns a behavior by practicing it over and over again. And once the behavior becomes a habit, it will stay for a long time. In order to establish a habit on the body, it is essential to continue the practice constantly.

Then the fruit part of an apple is the human soul. The human soul consists of intellect, emotion, and will. When these three are well balanced, soul will become healthy. Intellect is a very highly valued part of human capacity today. But when intellect is valued too much to the sacrifice of other functions, intellectual explanation of the gospel takes precedence over human relationship. What motivates Japanese people is the emotional rather than the intellectual aspect. People are living in a culture which values guessing what other people are thinking without exchanging words so much. So the more you are considerate of the other person’s emotional condition, the better your interpersonal relation will become. What the Japanese people desire most is the service for emotion. Compassion for the needs of *Honne* (real intent and feelings), with the understanding and acceptance of *Tatemae* (public image), often heals a person and assists him/her to grow. If a person says, “I am really an indecisive person,” you can appeal to his/her emotion by saying, “You must be a prudent person,” rather than saying, “That’s no good.” Then the person will feel your compassion and love and he/she will be changed by the energy generated by such love.

After intellectual and emotional needs are met, the will of the person needs to be motivated to start living. A person usually starts living dynamically when he/she is given a dream that there is actually a better and more wonderful world. So if you can communicate to the recipient in such a way that the latter can visualize such a world, the person will be motivated enough to begin to live dynamically.

Lastly the seed of an apple is the human spirit. As is clear from the Bible, human beings were created “in the image of God” by the Creator. This fact is decisively important in order to understand human beings. Though every person is a sinner before God on account of sin, the fact that human beings were originally created “in the image of God” means that in dealing with your clients, you understand and believe that the client has the seed of “life” and certainly harbors the possibility for “growth,” even in such cases as the client has been judged as hopelessly incurable by non-Christian psychiatrists, because the person’s real life lies in the spirit itself.<sup>7</sup>

As I think over this second philosophy of understanding human beings as a total person, it recognizes the cultural orientation to perceive emotion as the most important function. Thus communicating the gospel begins and ends with giving careful attention to the person’s emotional state. Then the person feels the warmth from the sender of the message and receives courage to start a new life, for the person’s greatest need is an understanding of how he/she feels, rather than to be taught some reasonings.

### **3. Understanding Human Life as a Relational Being**

Personality will achieve healthy growth when there is a mutual sense of recognition and peace of mind through communication with another personality either verbally or non-verbally. A person perceives problematic behaviors through the lens of “relationships.” For example, suicide occurs when relationship is lacking for a period of time, having no one to love or to be loved by. Delinquency often occurs when the need for relationship is lacking and the desire for relationship is changed into an aggressive form. Violence occurs when a person is angry because he/she cannot establish a desired relationship with someone else. Thus the person attempts to obtain relationship by unjust means rather than just means. Rev. Tanaka asserts that when dealing with people with psychiatric problems or trying to lead someone to Christ, the restoration of healthy relationship is the key. In order to do so, the pastor or

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 24-45.

counselor must discern clearly in what area of relationship the client needs to be restored. And if you can restore the inadequate relationship of the person through Christ, you can build a new relationship between the person and God. To restore relationship means to make a new pipe into the person's heart and pour energy of love into that pipe. It means to re-raise the person. He stands on the premise that the restoration of relationship cannot be done through verbal explanation alone. It presupposes that "love heals." Love is to accept a person as he/she is through interpersonal relation.<sup>8</sup>

I clearly see that Rev. Tanaka's emphasis on personal relationship presupposes the fact that among other things human relationship is most valued in Japanese culture. Such cultural characteristics often generate mutual dependency, lose individuality in a group, or create excess humility orientation. However, Rev. Tanaka utilizes the emotional human relationship which is the primary characteristic of the culture with great effectiveness, and it proves to be a heartwarming approach for the Japanese people.

#### **4. Understanding the Characteristics of the Japanese People**

This last point of Rev. Tanaka is exactly what I intended to emphasize in this address and it is the theme of my presentation. Real communication of Christ begins with knowing and discerning the strength and weakness of one's culture, feeling the needs of the people, caring and loving them in the culture they are familiar with, and then people will be led to Christ by the warmth of the loving relationship.

### **Conclusion**

Culture is something learned and transmitted and is alive and mobile. In order to contextualize the gospel, we must first acknowledge our own culture and people. And in comparison with other cultures we need to examine our culture objectively and change what needs to be changed. It is my prayer that constructive communication of the gospel will be done, making the best use of our own culture, uplifting and

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 46-57.

loving people, just as we have seen in the case of Rev. Tanaka and his church. In doing so, I believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ will take root and bloom flowers beautifully within our own culture , and as a result will bring forth creation of a new culture.

### **Prayer**

*Our Father,*

*We praise your name. We are grateful for your never changing love for humanity. The gospel of Jesus Christ is our only salvation and hope.*

*Once Japanese culture was manipulated by the military and the Japanese people gave terrible sufferings to many people in Asia.*

*Father, please forgive us our wrong, cruel acts. We pray that your gospel will be communicated unfailingly and the love of God may quietly spread throughout the world. And may the gospel bloom flowers in each place in different cultures. And may the culture of love be created, we pray in Jesus name.*

*Amen*