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"Perspectives on Syncretism, Critical Contextualization and Cultural Practices in First Nations Ministry"

This is an excellent booklet to help the reader gain a better grasp of some of the controversial issues of Biblical faith and First Nations culture. Many First Nations national Christian leaders generously endorse it. It is a forty-five-page booklet published by Wiconi International.

PERSPECTIVE 1

WHOSE CULTURE HAS MOST SHAPED YOUR THEOLOGY?

Cultural worldviews affect the way that people groups interpret and apply God's Word in their lives. They are the lens that colors the way we see and interpret the world around us. Any Christian who honestly believes their theology and doctrine is completely free of its own cultural bias is likely misinformed and naïve! One author has said there is no such thing as "plain" Christianity, regarding cultural beliefs, expressions and practices. All missiologists today agree that no theology is free from the cultural worldview of the missionary who serves as Bible theologian or scholar for a particular tribe or group. Paul J. Hiebert addresses this notion.

Naïve idealists reject the notion that their interpretations of Scripture are colored by their history and culture, their personal experiences, or even the language they speak. They assume that they understand clearly and without bias what Scripture has to say.

A critical realist approach to theology affirms the priesthood of all believers, and...assumes that all theologies are partial and culturally biased, so that truth in Scriptures is greater than our understanding of it. They must see and test one another's theologies and be open to critique.

Paul J. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994) pp. 26, 30, 31. (Hiebert is Chair of Mission and Evangelism, Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois).

Whose culture has most affected and defined the expression of your Christian faith - Native or Anglo? I have often heard from Native unbelievers that they do not have a problem with Jesus of the Bible or His teachings, but their problem with Christianity is the church - the church is "white" and definitely against them. We can accept the Gospel message of God coming to earth in the form of a human being, but find it difficult to understand why we can't find ourselves in His church, unless we become like white people.

Every Sunday the church looks, acts, sounds, behaves, and operates like any other Anglo organization. Why has our Native culture not been the primary influence in shaping our church practices, worship traditions and theologies? Why do we believe that the influence of Euro-American culture is any less potentially detrimental or harmful to developing our Christian walk than we are led to believe First Nations cultures may be?

We know God loves us, but cannot understand why He doesn't like us. We can see that He loves us because He gave His only Son to die on a tree for us so we could live and never have to die. Yet, when we accept Him into our hearts and begin going to church, we are told we cannot use our Native drums for praise and worship, our Native music is not acceptable, our dances are not to be done in church, we cannot sit in a circle, we must not talk or add our words to the discussion. Furthermore, we must learn to sing new Christian music, play new Christian instruments, dress in new church clothes, sit in rows, all things done in a culturally "white way." In effect, we are confused by God's seeming to dislike for everything about our culture, while being so loved by Him.

This present day reality is the result of hundreds of years of ethnocentrism by the early missionaries. Dr Hiebert refers to this ethnocentrism as "White Man's Burden;" His perceived need to educate and civilize the world. The early missionaries among First Nations people were not free of the prevailing societal attitudes of their day. Dr. Hiebert notes:

The seventeenth-century New England Puritan missionaries largely set the course for modern missions. They defined their task as preaching the gospel so that Native Americans would be converted and receive personal salvation. But early in their missionary experience these New Englanders concluded that Indian converts could only be Christians if they were "civilized." The model by which they measured their converts was English Puritan civilization. The missionaries felt compassion and responsibility for their converts. They gathered these new Christians into churches for nurture and discipline and set up programs to transform Christian Indians into English Puritans.

Paul J. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994) pp. 54,55.

Speaking of these early missionary attitudes, James C. Juhnke writes,

"They were to confident of the wholesomeness and goodness of their own cultures to see the pagan flaws in their own social and political structures. They assumed that their own theology was wholly biblical and that it was not biased by their cultural and historical context.

/James C. Juhnke, A People of Mission: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions (Newton, Kans.: Faith and Life, 1979) 10-11

It is this lingering missions philosophy/attitude that still impacts the Native work today that I hope to identify and challenge.

PERSPECTIVE 2

NATIVE CULTURE HAS VALUE IN THE KINGDOM

Though this disparity exists, it is obvious from Scripture that Native culture, as all human cultures, reflect to some degree the attributes of our Heavenly Father Himself. It is in Christ that we find the ultimate fulfillment of His Holy and sovereign purpose for us as a people.

"There are features of every culture which are not incompatible with the Lordship of Christ, and which therefore need not be threatened or discarded, but rather preserved and transformed."

Perspectives on the World Christian Movement; 1999 Edition, (William Carey Library) Pasadena, CA: p. 280.

If He has a unique role for us to play or contribution to make in the fulfilling of His purposes for our nation in these days, then, as the Church, we must reconsider the place that we give to the Native expression in the evangelical mainstream in North America.

Consider these very powerful insights as it applies to Native culture:

Biblical Christianity is never found apart from a culture. It is always part of a culture. There is no such thing as plain Christianity. Christianity always expresses itself through a culture. It is unique in that it is adaptable to any culture.

Stephen A. Grunlan & Marvin K. Mayers, Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective Perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988) p. 244.

I would then say, Christianity is unique in that it can be expressed equally well in any culture.

Kraft, from Fuller Seminary writes, "...we see God working in terms of Jewish culture to reach Jews, yet, refusing to impose Jewish customs on Gentiles. Instead non-Jews are to come to God and relate to Him in terms of their own cultural vehicles. We see the Bible endorsing, then, a doctrine we call biblical sociocultural adequacy (his emphasis) in which each culture is taken seriously but none advocated exclusively as the only one acceptable to God." (Emphasis added)

Charles Kraft, Anthropology for Christian Witness (Orbis Books, 1996)

It seems as though the majority of First Nations Christians believe that we are the only people group in the world who are exempt from the reality that our cultural expressions are just as capable of expressing Biblical faith as any of European origin. Why are we so distrustful of our cultural identity? Why, as First Nations believers, do we believe our drums, music styles, dance and art forms have any less value in the Kingdom than do English hymns, German organs, Welsh choruses, Irish ballads, Italian frescoes, Roman architecture, Norwegian clogging, and French ballets?

It is clearly a biblically supported view that God will bless the use of our drums, songs, languages, traditions, dances, and customs as a way to worship and walk with Him in a way that is beautiful, unique, edifying and ultimately deeply pleasing to Him!

- He did not give them to us to frustrate, wound and embarrass us.
- As a loving Heavenly Father, He did not give us a cultural identity that is comprised of inherently bad or evil things.
- Regardless of the way that sinful people ended up using drums, ceremony, dances, etc., that fact does not make those things evil or bad, in and of themselves - only polluted and/or misdirected - ABLE TO BE CLEANSED AND REDIRECTED!
- And, if able to be cleansed, then also able to be transformed/redeemed for use by God's people in praise and worship to Almighty God.

What we are advocating in this process of "shifting paradigms" is a "critical" contextualization of the Gospel. An "uncritical" contextualization would be a move toward relativism that unquestioningly assumes all aspects of a culture can be kept because they are all relatively good, it's only a matter of perspective. While it affirms the good in cultures, the evil in them goes unchallenged. When carried to far, it compromises the gospel.

Dr. Paul Hiebert notes, "Critical contextualization is an ongoing response that see the gospel as outside culture. It comes as the message of salvation, not from West to East, but from God to people in all cultures."

He goes on to say, "The gospel call us all to follow Christ. It also stands in prophetic judgment on all societies and cultures. It affirms what is good in each but condemns what is evil - our corporate idolatries and rebellions against God and our sins of oppression and injustice.

Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Regal Books, 1994). P. 94

PERSPECTIVE 6

SYNCRETISM - SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I will now attempt to make some applications of theological or doctrinal syncretism, which is the critical and core issue of this dialogue.

First, I would like to clearly state that religious/doctrinal syncretism is much more than an application, misuse or practice of a particular cultural form, (i.e., music, musical instruments, language, dance, custom, social practice, ceremony, art, and so on). Nor is it simply the combination of or use of similar or even identical ceremonial forms, methods or liturgies.

Syncretism is a theological issue of belief and faith, not merely the wedding of religious or cultural forms and objects.

Because a Satanist burns special tall silver candles purchased at K Mart during his animal sacrifices in honor of Lucifer, it does not make us syncretists to burn the same tall silver candles purchased at K Mart during our New Years Eve service. It is not the fact that one object is identical to another object that makes it unclean, it is how the object is used that matters.

Human sexuality is a gift from God, but when wrongfully used, its misuse can become a great reproach to God Himself. It is the context in which the gift is used, or abused, that is of primary concern to God, not the gift itself. It is a known fact that throughout religious history, men and woman have been abused as "temple prostitutes" in the worship of false gods. They profaned the holy as well as defiled the sacred gift of human sexuality. However, regardless of the degree of perversion and depravity, human sexuality/biology does not become a "sacred object" because it was used in animistic ceremonial practices, but remains the gift of God. Should this prostitute become born-again, redemption delivers him/her from the power of sin, and in light of Biblical righteousness, their sexuality is restored to its original intent.

Theologically speaking, because a shaman uses an elk hide hand drum to conjure evil spirits, it does not make me a syncretist to use my elk hide hand drum to honor Christ and the Holy Spirit on Sunday morning in church. I want to submit for your consideration some Biblical perspectives on how to best understand syncretism.

- Syncretism, whether in an Anglo church on Sunday morning, or a Native ceremony, is the belief that unscriptural "parallel truths" can be interchangeably mixed with the doctrines of justification, righteousness, atonement, holiness, redemption, sanctification, salvation, etc. because they are the same thing.
- It is essentially faith in any ceremony that says Jesus Christ's work on the cross can be comingled with other religious practices as truths that are equally true.
- Syncretism says mutually incompatible religious beliefs can be combined together with Biblical Christian faith to create a new system of religious belief

To the disciples of Hinduism in India, the Ganges River is regarded as a "sacred place." An important source of life and healing; a place of burial and prayer. However, it would not be syncretism to baptize new believers in the Ganges even though Hindus' baptize their converts that way. It is not syncretism to hold a Bible study in an Elks Lodge, use a hand drum to sing Amazing Grace, play an electric guitar on Sunday morning, worship singing a traditional Choctaw hymn, wearing a ribbon shirt, wearing an eagle, turkey, or pigeon feather, or sleeping in a tipi.

Biblically speaking, it is not syncretistic to own a dream catcher, attend a give-a-way to honor a relative, attend or dance in a pow-wow, square dance or hang a buffalo skull in your living room, or even burn a stick of raspberry incense or braid of sage or sweet grass. There is no Biblical prohibition against doing any of these things. None of these things would constitute syncretism or a compromise of God's Word or my Christian testimony.

Don Richardson offered this perspective on syncretism, "Combining something from a Native religion with Biblical Christian faith is not syncretistic unless it conflicts with something in Biblical Christian faith."

Syncretism can be described as a way of thinking that says by performing or participating in a particular religious ceremony or practice, you can alter the essential human spiritual condition in the same way that Jesus does, through His death on a cross, burial, and resurrection from the dead, because they are parallel truths and both equally acceptable in the eyes of God; thus can be considered the same thing and combined together.

Theologically, syncretism states or implies a Native ceremony can cleanse the soul from sin in the same way the work of Jesus Christ does; or that performing Native ceremonies can heal sickness, perform miracles and bridge the sin barrier separating sinful human beings from a holy God because they are parallel truths from the same source.

"It is assigning the same weight of power and authority to unbiblical Native religious beliefs and ceremony that you do to the revelation of truth found in the Word of God."

Based on the previous hypothesis, the syncretist says,

"Un-scriptural tribal religious beliefs can therefore be mixed in a mutually compatible and complimentary way with Orthodox/Biblical Christian faith, resulting in a different gospel."

THIS IS SYNCRETISM AND BIBLICAL ERROR!

Here are a few "outcomes" of syncretism;

- A churchly rationale that would say, "We share the Gospel of Christ with people because Jesus is the "best" way to heaven.
- A belief in "Christian reincarnation."
- Using an Ouija Board as a means of praying to God and receiving spiritual guidance.
- Believing a drum has an innate spiritual power to attract and release the Spirit of God when played correctly in a given situation.
- Believing that it is an inherent power in the anointing oil itself, when placed on sick people, that heals them, not the prayer of faith.

PERSPECTIVE 7

SYNCRETISM AND REDEMPTION

How does God change people without tearing them out of their culture? God wants more than a message conveyed. He wants a movement of obedience to Christ to flourish. How can churches redeem instead of reject their home culture?

Perspectives on the World Christian Movement; 1999 Edition,
(William Carey Library), Pasadena, CA, p. 268

Frequently people confuse the doctrine of redemption with the fruit of cultural transformation. Cultural transformation is the outworking of Christ's redemption of man and creation from the curse of sin and death. The following are some quotes from my Culture, Christ, & Kingdom Seminary Study Guide, published by Wiconi International.

- There are at least two different ways of thinking about the definition of the word redeem; theological or doctrinal, and non-theological or conceptual. Theologically, redemption applies to both human salvation and creational restoration.
- A non-theological conceptual definition is taken from The Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary: "1. a: To buy back, repurchase; b: to get or win back 2: to free from what distresses or harms; a: to free from captivity by payment of ransom b: to extricate or to help to overcome something detrimental."
- In the same way that I can say I want to redeem some mistakes I've made and not be speaking about salvation, I can also say I want to redeem some cultural forms and see them restored to what is pleasing to God in a non-salvific context.

Basically when speaking of redeeming cultural forms, I am speaking of redeemed believers in Christ, repossessing various forms, practices, objects, or expressions, that have been erroneously given away or surrendered to ungodly or idolatrous uses and practices, then seeing them transformed for Christ-honoring purposes.

- I also mean restoring those cultural expressions that were stripped from us by an ethnocentric missions mindset.
- All of this for the singular and sole purpose of restoring them to original intent - Praise and worship to Almighty God, through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.
- I see this as an integral dimension of the Great Commission to win the lost, make disciples, and see the Church multiplied.
- I don't mean trying to "christianize" biblically defined sinful behaviors, practices, or beliefs, such as starting a "christian bank robbers club" to help fund world missions.

CONCLUSION

My motivation in writing this booklet is to equip the saints with a Kingdom or biblical worldview that will result in more souls won to Jesus Christ, more believers disciplined/raised up to spiritual maturity, and leaders prepared to make a difference for Christ and the Kingdom. My heart is set on reaching Native people who reject Jesus Christ because they have seen that Christianity is the "white man's religion."

We want to see the indigenus church arise among First Nations people. One that is self-governing/supporting/propagating, and most importantly, self-theologizing.

"But little was said about the fourth self: self theologizing. For the most part, national leaders were not encouraged to study the Scriptures for themselves and to develop their own theologies. Deviation from the missionary's theology was often branded as heresy. To young, nationalistically minded leaders this was theological colonialism. ...Whether we like it

or not, young theologians around the world are reading scripture and interpreting it for their own cultures."
Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Regal Books, 1994) p. 46-47

This booklet is an example of an attempt at indigenous theologizing.

I am grateful to be linked together with mature First Nations men and woman across the land that God has raised up as leaders in the Church in our generation who are making a difference. This has indeed emerged as a movement, birthed by God in our generation, to fulfill the Great Commission and hurry the return of our Lord Jesus Christ for a Bride without spot or wrinkle.

Here, then are my "through a glass dimly" summary statements for you to critique, ponder, and allow to sharpen your own beliefs. These are neither definitive nor dogmatic "positions," but simply the considerations of a man on a journey.

- Though the risk of syncretism is always present as we attempt to inculturate Christianity, it is a risk that needs to be taken if we are to make an impact for Jesus Christ among First Nations people.
- We must guard against syncretism by not allowing the blending together of unbiblical native religious beliefs and Biblical Christian faith.
- We must make a crystal clear distinction between theological syncretism and the use of varying cultural expressions of the same truths.
- Theological syncretism is in direct contradiction of biblical truth, while the blending of cultural forms is a normal fact of everyday life.
- We must constantly rely on the Holy Spirit to help us better understand biblical principles and truths in our pursuit of a culturally contextualized approach for more effective Native ministry. It involves a deep trust in the Holy Spirit's ability to guide people in accordance with the scriptures.
- As Native leaders, it is we who must be careful that we do not allow an emphasis on subjective personal experience, versus solid biblical theology, to lead us to an unfounded fear of syncretism among ourselves.
- We must counsel, pray and dialogue with those of different persuasions from our own to prevent syncretism from becoming an emotionally defined standard that will only lead to more confusion and division among us.