Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally

1) Why is cross-cultural communication a challenge?
Cross-cultural communication is a challenge. Many diplomats and political leaders of our world believe that only through successful cross-cultural communication mankind and society will survive. During the last decades, technique has developed much, and especially transportation was being improved. Through this new flexibility, the world has become a global village. But unfortunately, man’s ability to communicate with his once distant neighbours has not improved. Even, the increasing contact between people of very different cultural backgrounds has turned to be a central problem. Human communication between members of the same race, community, and even family is already often difficult. Communication of racial different people demands much attention and effort. An example: Two friends, one a Ghanaian, one a German, went to the Bavarian October Feast. They both ordered a beer. When they got it, the Ghanaian poured a bit of it on the ground. The German friend asked him: “Why are you doing this?” The Ghanaian answered: “I do it in remembrance of my dead ancestors”. The German friend laughed. “Do you think your dead ancestors do still have a mouth to drink this beer?” Now the Ghanaian laughed. “Do you think, your dead ancestors do still have a nose to smell the flowers which you bring to their graves?!” Now, both of them laughed. They came to the point that we do the same things just in different ways... Good understanding between people does not just happen naturally. Meaning cannot be found just in words, but different people give different meanings to the same words. Cross-cultural communication is a rapidly growing and popular subject not only for us Christians, but for social sciences and many others who are recognizing the importance of the subject.

2) From all nations to all nations
The hope for Germany to be evangelized rests in these words. The hope of fulfilling God’s mission in this generation lies in the mobilization of the church in every culture for the missionary task. It is important to understand that the church expresses itself in diverse ways as it is planted in a variety of cultures. Culture is the vehicle through which God communicates to people. Christ partook of human nature, becoming a human being so that He could communicate or reveal God to mankind. In that identification with people in their surrounding, communication took place and redemption of people was made possible. Jesus illustrated how the human and the divine could be uniquely brought together. His incarnation is an illustration of unity in diversity. He was truly a man of His time and culture, yet He was Immanuel “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). It is like when a zoologist was afraid of the deadly winter which was coming. He thought of trying his best to get the birds to a safe place, but the more he tried, the more they flew away. He said to himself: ‘If I could become a bird for just an hour, I would be able to communicate with the birds and bring them to safety.’ That same way, God became a human. When we study the Bible, it helps us to know God more. When we study our culture, it helps us to know ourselves. When we study our envi-
ronment, it helps us to know our neighbours. For Apostle Paul, his goal was to communicate Christ to all cultures. He wanted to “become all things to all men so that by all means salvation in Christ might be provided” (1st Corinthians 9, 22b.23). You, too, can do this if you for example talk to a foreigner in your church or in your neighbourhood. You can tactfully ask the person to talk about German customs that are strange to or misunderstanding for the person. Or maybe if you have child, you can invite a schoolmate or neighbourhood child whose parents come from a different culture. When you start visiting each other, you can experience the other culture and understand it better. One man worked for a newspaper and wrote about different cultures. So people thought he would be travelling much. But the truth was, he just had got in contact with people from different cultures who were all living in Berlin. So if you are open, you can learn a lot without going far.

3) Our worldview and the church
Our worldview maybe described as the principal way in which a people define what is real in their everyday existence. The forming of a worldview is largely done unconsciously, but it is the centre system of reality from which come a society’s basic values. Each society teaches its particular worldview to its youth early in life by imposing traditions upon them. The whole structure of what a child ought to do and think is passed on to them. So a child raised in a given society is conditioned to interpret reality like the other members of its society. The people of the Mossi tribe in Ghana/ West Africa say: “Walega kon zwe ti a biga kyeose ye” (this means, you would not expect the antelope that is swift to raise a child that limps). We pass on to our children in many different ways what is our manner of making sense out of what is happening around us in everything from the power of nature to interpersonal relationships. Man, then, interacts with others and with his environment. This interaction is called his personality. As an individual, man has certain needs and wants that serve as a motivational force in directing his behaviour. His heredity and environment have endowed him with certain abilities and resources with which to satisfy these needs and wants. But if he travels away from his environment, he needs to learn new things to be able to cope with the new environment. Our attitudes, prejudices and opinions come from our mental press. If we can learn how man thinks, we will begin to understand why and how he acts. The Bible say in Proverbs 23:7: “As a man thinks, so is he.” An example: Two young people were getting ready to marry. The young man resealed that any time his future wife would cook chicken, she would always cut the wings and the ties and throw them away. Therefore, he asked her: “Why?” She answered: “I really don’t know why, my mother always did it. Wait, please, my love, I will call my mother and ask her why.” So she did. She said: “Your future son-in-law wants to know why we always cook chicken with the wings and ties cut and thrown away?” Her mother answered: “I don’t know either. I learned it form your grandmother so, please, wait, I will just ask her.” Therefore, the mother asked her mother: “Why do we always cut the wings and ties of chicken away before cooking?” Her mother answered: “I don’t known why you are do-
ing it. But I did it because my pan was too small.” Here are three generations doing the same thing without knowing from one another the reason for it.

4) Jesus gives an example
A classic example of cross culture communication occurs in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. The story is familiar to most Bible readers as “Jesus and the woman at the well of Samaria”. Because of the heat, most Samaritan women came to the city well to draw water in the early morning or late afternoon. So Jesus observed that the behaviour of the one woman who came to the well at noon was unusual. Here, we see a wonderful blending of the revelation of the Spirit of God and the key observation of Jesus as a human being working together to help meet the need of an individual whose life was confused and ruined. Read the story carefully and note how Jesus handled every part of the conversation to keep the woman's mind on the subject of salvation and eternal life. Note well that Christ crossed cultural boundaries in this incident. The fact that He as a Jew would talk to a Samaritan was already condemnable. Normally, a Jew would have had nothing to do with a Samaritan because they were haters of one and another. But also, He as a man was not allowed to talk to a woman in public without knowing her. In addition, this specific woman had a bad reputation. Nevertheless, Jesus recognized His goal in the world to reach the lost (Luke 19:10). Be cautious in your ethics or nationality while keeping in sight your high and noble calling as a Christian ministering to the needs of others. Unfortunately, faith in Christ does not automatically change one's view of the world and its people. One may reproduce and even defend sinful attitudes such as racial prejudice because it is accepted in the culture.

5) Jesus’ encounter with a Syro-Phoenician woman
This passage could raise some troubling questions about racial and ethnic characteristics. For the way Jesus treated the woman seemed to be a contradiction to His image as the international Messiah and Saviour of the whole world. First, the woman sought for Jesus. When she found Him, she begged for mercy for her demon-possessed daughter. She called Jesus “Lord” and the “Son of David”. But Jesus even tried to hide from her. He ignored her cries, and He seemed to agree with His disciples that she should be sent away, for He said that He only came for the Jews. He even compared her with a dog. Just as history says, Jews frequently referred to gentiles as dogs. He went on by saying that because she was not a Jew, she was not a child of God and could not be helped. But the woman did not object to be compared with a dog. She only asked for the “crumbs” leftover from Jesus’ works with the Jews. In Ecclesiasts 9:4, there is an old oriental saying: “A living dog is better than a dead lion.” And because the woman persisted in faith, Jesus praised her and healed her daughter. But what are we to make out of His treatment to her? The woman came with a sincere heart and great respect for the Lord, yet, Jesus used hard words on her. Why did He do that? Does He want us to relate to people from other races and cultures like that? Absolutely not! Perhaps, the key is to consider that Jesus' words were intended less for the woman’s ears than for His disciples. Possibly, it was to the disciples, not to the woman that he said: “I was sent
to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.” They wanted Him to send her away. But Jesus refused by appealing to their own traditional pride and nationalism. Jesus maybe turned this incident into a living parable to show His disciples how hard-hearted they were in their attitudes against gentiles. Studies show that Tyre, the setting for this story, was only fifty miles from the region of Galilee where most of the disciples had grown up. But it had an entirely different culture which was dominated by Greek influences and populated almost inclusively by gentiles. Many of its people had already come south to learn more about Jesus (Mark 3:8). Now Jesus was taking His followers on a course of cross culture awareness. When He was encountering the woman, Jesus probably treated her the way His disciples would have treated her to illustrate their attitude in a way that they would never forget. The disciples rejected the Gentile woman who deeply hungered for God’s grace and power just as many gentiles hungered for a relationship with God their Maker. But Jesus was ready to meet the desires of the woman. How would Jesus treat someone today to illustrate prejudice among His followers? We should bear in mind that Peter was right in the middle of this conversation. Could it be possible that Peter needed the experience of his vision before he actually understood the implication of Jesus’ way of treatment of this woman (Acts 10:9-15)? The vision appeared to him three times for emphasis. Peter’s spiritual perceptiveness moved from being puzzled to a full understanding of the vision’s implication as he said: “God has shown me that I should not call any human being impure or unclean.” (Verse 28) Let us also allow God to have His way in our lives as we build the cross culture kingdom!

6) Developing Christian attitudes
In cross culture communication, it is not just what we say that is important. How we say it is equally important. Also, not only what we say but also what we do is important. All are bound up together in the same communication event. Therefore, Jesus understood the importance of developing Christian attitudes in the personalities of those to whom He ministered. In chapter 13 of the Gospel of John, we are told that Jesus Himself, after the Last Supper with His disciples, washed the disciples’ feet. As He did so, He taught them an impressive lesson and developed in them an attitude toward service to others that should characterize Christianity for centuries to come. A proper attitude regarding the ministry is extremely important. Remember, Mark 10:45 tells us that “Jesus the Son of Man did not come to be ministered unto, but to minister.” After washing the disciples’ feet, Jesus said in John 13: 17: “If you know these things, happy are you if you do them.” Our attitudes give direction and purpose to our behaviour in our Christian walk and everyday interaction with others. We should become increasingly aware that the way we personally feel about people and events may be passed on to others. Let us try our best that our lives may be an example of Christian behaviour which others may want to pattern after and imitate.
7) How the personality affects the behaviour
We are all interested in ourselves and how we came to be what we are. Yet, it is interesting to know that each individual is different and must be studied as an individual in order to understand the self-concept. As Christians in our world, we deal with all types of personalities when we work with people. We must learn to communicate in a way that our listeners can comprehend what we are saying. Think of examples in the Bible when Christ Jesus communicated to various groups and individuals who were each vastly different personalities because of their backgrounds. Still, recognizing these differences, He communicated to their needs. To Peter and John, Jesus talked about becoming “fishers of men”. To the Samaritan woman at the well, He spoke of “living water”. To Nicodemus, He talked on a much higher intellectual and philosophical level. To the hungry, He spoke about “bread of life”. You can by no doubt find many more examples. Therefore, the Christian life is there for us to develop a healthier personality as we minister to Christ and people.

8) The Christian personality
What does really happen to a person’s personality when he or she is born again? After conversion, what remains of the previous personality? These are important questions that are not often asked because in Christian circles, great emphasis is given to the changed life. The Bible says: “The old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new” (2nd Corinthians 5:17). Peter’s life changed from a cowering person who denied his Lord before a girl to a bold personality who stood before a large crowd on the Day of Pentecost and declared the Good News. His example is often used to illustrate a completely changed person. Do you think that after the Day of Pentecost, Peter’s fear of opposition became ever evident, again? Actually, much later at Antioch, Peter stopped eating with gentile Christians when advocates of circumcision were near because he was afraid (Galatians 2:12). Here we see a weak personality trait expressing itself, again, long after conversion. The change of personality does not come overnight, but it is a process, and it needs honesty and the openness to let God come into every area of our lives and sometimes to admit before God and man that we still need sanctification in some ways.

9) The law of cultures
In France, it is common for the most important meal of the day to be eaten at noon. Most shops in France close down at noon so that the shopkeeper can rush home to eat a leisurely meal that has been well prepared and is often very delightful to the senses. A German considers the noon meal to be only a small lunch, and he often carries it to work with him. ?? The lunch time for an average worker in Germany is between 30 and 45 minutes, and some take only 15 minutes to eat their sandwiches quickly. The Frenchman will take 2 hours to eat leisurely, and afterwards, he will rest a few moments to allow the food to digest before he goes back to work in the afternoon. You can imagine the potential communication problem surrounding this variation in habits of eating. The Frenchman has a way of mentally stopping time before the sight of good
food. The German visiting France sees this as a waste of time and the French fixation with food as sinful or sensuous or at least strange. The Frenchman believes that his German counterpart lacks a cultural value and has no appreciation for the finer things of life.

10) Love as a key for a better communication
An attitude is a position, bearing, or outlook that a person takes which shows his feeling or mood. Our opinion or feeling about a person is reflected in our attitude toward him. This may be lovingly, fearful, hostile, condescending, indifferent, concerned, and friendly, threatening; the list is endless. Our communication can either attract people toward God in unity in diversity or drive them away. We can choose which. Love attracts. It was Jesus’ love that drew people to Him. And the revelation of God’s love is what drawn us to Him. Sincere love is more important in cross culture communication than how well we can preach, teach, or testify. Love has eloquence all its own, and this way it reproduces itself (1st Timothy 1:5). Love is the greatest gifts to the world. The more we realize how much God loves us, the more we love Him. Our attitude changes from fear to trust. From rebellion to a glad willingness to do whatever He wants us to do. We commit our lives to Him in bringing trust and surrender to His will. The more we love God, the more we want to be with Him, talk with Him in prayer and share in His work. We appreciate the proofs of His love that He gives us every day, and look for ways to show our appreciation. God is love. Therefore whoever lives in love does live in God (1st John 4:16.19).

11) Love in our motives
Our motives often grow out of our attitudes and, like them, are related to God, to people, and to ourselves. Is anything in life more important than getting them straightened out and in the right order? What we want to do to please ourselves may not be what we want to do to please God or to help others. Then we have conflicting motives and have to decide which is most important. For example, our neighbour needs our spiritual help and we feel that God wants us to witness to him or her. But we are afraid the neighbour won’t like it if we do, or that we will make an embarrassing failure. Here are our conflicting motives. Towards our neighbour we desire to help, but towards ourselves we desire to protect. Which of these motives will guide our action? Which do we choose first? How can we make the right choice? The answer is: The more we love people, the easier it will be for us to give the right priority to our motives. Love is the most powerful motivating force in the world. Love helps us reject the wrong and conflicting motives that would weaken our motives of cross culture communication. For our love for God gives us these strong right motives which we need for this work. Ethnic group communication is nothing new. Jesus gave the order for it in the Great Commission: “Therefore go and makes disciples of all nations!” (Matthew 28:19) The word Jesus used for the nations is the Greek word ethna. From it we get our word “ethnic”. An ethnic group is made up of people with the same racial or cultural background. Everyone belongs to some ethnic group. Our neighbourhood groups are sepa-
rated by deep antagonism resentment rooted in history, distrust, prejudice, and hatred. This was true in Jesus time, too. But communicating Christ cross culturally, we desire His kingdom to come. If you love a person you want to help him in any way you can. If your brother were trapped in a burning building, you would risk your life to save him. What about the people around you who have become children of God like you? Realizing that anywhere God has a child you have a brother or a sister will be a powerful motivation for cross culture communication. For Christianity focuses on similarities in Christ, but not our cultural or domination differences.

12) Unity in Diversity
The church will always face diversity. God’s people differ in culture, language, economic situations, needs, desires, and even styles of worship. This theme shows how to blend all these differences into one joyful family of God. Our differences are our strength the church has a rich society because its people come from a wide range of backgrounds and cultures. To benefit from the full wealth of skills, talents and ideas in Christ, it is vital that everyone is included. Wherever God has a child, there I have a brother or a sister. Our diversity can bring huge benefits to the world. And it is unity in diversity that brings the maxim glory of God.

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