God’s Metaphor for Ministry: The Incarnation by Sherwood Lingenfelter

In 1967, my wife and I and our two-year-old daughter flew from western New York State to the Pacific islands. We landed on Guam, spent a couple days there, and then flew to Yap, a small island in the western Caroline Islands of Micronesia. For Americans, Yap is geographically in the middle of nowhere. It is almost a thousand miles from the nearest major nation, the Philippines, and in most other directions, thousands of miles of ocean separate it from the rest of the world. It was here that we were to make our home for the next two years. This began what has become a lifelong adventure for us in cross-cultural living, research, and relationships. I was a graduate student at the time, and our goal was to live in and learn about Yapese culture in preparation for my doctoral dissertation on the impact of twenty years of American administration on the Yapese and their culture. We were young and filled with ideals, and our hope was to apply this learning experience in a life of service to cross-cultural missions and ministry.

Many years have passed now, and as we reflect on that experience, we have a much deeper understanding of our failures and our achievements. The Yapese taught us as much about ourselves as they did about their own culture. The experience of learning was often painful and never easy, but out of those years we developed a new comprehension of who we are and how we can live and work more effectively with others in a culturally diverse world. The objective of this book is to share some of the conflicts and struggles we experienced and to explore their meaning for the larger issues of cross-cultural living, work, and ministry. To do this we must go beyond specific personal experiences to the underlying principles of culture and communication through which we establish and maintain interpersonal relationships. The particular focus of this book is on priorities or values people use to order their lives and relationships with others. We will explore by means of both a questionnaire concerning basic values and case studies how people within the same culture and in different cultures define standards and establish personal priorities that are often in conflict with those of others. Conflict arises not only from personal and cultural differences but also from the fact that people often attribute moral force to their priorities for personal behavior and judge those who differ from them as flawed, rebellious or immoral. Personal judgments shared by many become social judgments, and society coerces individuals to follow its value system.

Our goal is to help readers arrive at solutions to these conflicts and to suggest ways in which people moving within and across social and cultural boundaries can adapt to and draw on values different from their own.

A central thesis of the book is that the Bible speaks to all people and all cultures and that Jesus Christ is the only faithful example of divine love in interpersonal relationships and communication. Jesus is God with us—the reality of the love of God in human experience.

As we explore situations of interpersonal conflict, we will continually return to Scripture to seek principles on which we can build more effective relationships and ministry within and beyond the boundaries of our homogeneous churches and communities. At the same time, we will use insights from the social and behavioral sciences to pose new questions and to develop new perspectives from which to understand more fully the implications of biblical truth. By focusing initially on cross-cultural experiences, we will be forced to examine our basic assumptions about life and to question every aspect of our relationships.

Jesus: The 200-Percent Person

When we arrived on Yap in 1967, the first question we faced was where to live. A Yapese man took me to his village and showed me two locations where I could build a house. One piece of land was situated on an isolated section of beach with a beautiful view of a lagoon and a coral reef. The other was in the midst of several houses where children littered their yards with empty cans and the voices and activities of mothers and children created a cacophony of sound from morning until night. Where should we live? The isolated beach was the dream spot that all middle-class Americans see in their fantasies of South Sea life. The lot in the village had all the characteristics that middle-class America tries to avoid—noise, litter, lack of privacy, and strange people all around. When I naturally chose the beach, my guide said gently to me, "If you want to learn to speak our language, the other place is better for you." His words broke my romantic reverie and challenged my personal interpretation of the right way to live. With a twinge of sadness, I admitted he was right and agreed to the village location. As I expected, the place was noisy, littered, and public, but he was absolutely correct; within a year we had all learned to speak the language.

My experience in this village on Yap gave me a deeper grasp of what John meant when he wrote in his Gospel, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). We hold the incarnation as a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith: God himself became flesh and dwelt among humans. We seldom ask, however, what the implications of this incarnation are. What did it mean for God to become flesh? How did God plan and choose to live among us? In what manner did he come? Does his example have any significance for us as we are sent to others?

The first significant fact about the incarnation is that Jesus came as a helpless infant. In Luke 2:7, we read that he was born as Mary's child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and placed in a manger. It is noteworthy that God did not come as a fully developed adult, he did not come as an expert, he did not come as a ruler, or even as part of a ruling family or a dominant culture. He was an infant, born into a humble family in a conquered and subjugated land.

The second significant fact about the incarnation is that Jesus was a learner. He was not born with knowledge of language or culture. In this respect, he was an ordinary child. He learned language from his parents. He learned how to play from his peers. He learned the trade of a carpenter from Joseph and studied the Scriptures and worshiped in the same manner as did all young men of his time. In Luke 2:46, we read that Mary and Joseph found Jesus in the temple, listening to the teachers of the law and asking them questions.

This is a profound statement: The Son of God was sitting in the temple, listening and questioning! The implications of Jesus' status as a learner are seldom discussed, let alone understood or applied. God's Son studied the language, the culture, and the lifestyles of his people for thirty years before he began his ministry. He knew all about their family lives and problems. He stood at their side as learner and as coworker. He learned to read and study the Scriptures in his local synagogue and earned respect to the point that the people called him Rabbi.

He worshiped with them in their synagogues and observed the annual Passover and other feasts in the temple in Jerusalem. He identified totally with those to whom he was sent, calling himself the Son of man.

Luke 2:52 tells us that he grew in favor not only with God but with man as well. The point is that Jesus was a 200-percent person. Philippians 2:6–7 tells us that Jesus was "in very nature God." He was and is

100 percent God. Yet Paul tells us that Jesus took "the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." He was 100 percent human. When he spoke of himself, he called himself the Son of man, identifying completely with those to whom he was sent. Let us move our thinking one step further. Jesus was more than simply human; he was also 100 percent Jew. The Samaritan woman in John 4 identified him as such, and he accepted this identification at face value. (Note by contrast that when people tried to make him a king, he resisted.) His disciples and even the Jewish leaders often reminded him of his Jewishness and its attendant cultural obligations (ritual washings, Sabbath observance, avoidance of unclean people and places, etc.). At the crucifixion, Pilate had inscribed over Jesus' head the words "King of the Jews." In sum, he was 100 percent God and 100 percent Jew—a 200-percent person.

Cultural Context

Culture is the anthropologist's label for the sum of the distinctive characteristics of a people's way of life. All human behavior occurs within particular cultures, within socially defined contexts. For example, in America, worship occurs in a specific context with distinctive characteristics. A church building, chairs or pews, readings from the Bible, a sermon, an offering and prayers are all part of that context. The social organization of worship includes pastors, musicians, ushers, a seating arrangement by families, and a schedule of activities. If one were to go to Saudi Arabia, the context of worship would differ dramatically. The mosque would have no chairs, musicians, Bible or sermon. Removing one's shoes, kneeling, prostration, and prayer would be the primary elements of worship. The sexes are carefully separated and leaders and learning have only minimal significance. A Muslim entering an American church would not understand what happens there as worship. He may deny that worship is possible in such a context.

Culture, then, is the conceptual design, the definitions by which people order their lives, interpret their experiences, and evaluate the behavior of others. (Italics added)

A Muslim sees men and women sitting together and interprets this as sexual behavior. He evaluates such a situation by comparing it with his past experiences in his own culture. By definition, the commingling of the sexes cannot be part of the context he calls worship. Therefore, to a Muslim, what happens is American churches is not worship. Similarly distinctive definitions, rules, and values are specific to each socially defined context, and these specifics make up the conceptual designs or culture is accordance with which all of us live.

It is fairly obvious, then, that communication requires effective use of contextual cues. When a Muslim removes his shoes as he enters a mosque, it is a cue that he intends to worship there. A cultural cue is a specific signal or sign that people use to communicate the meaning of their behavior. Each culture has literally thousands of cues that signal a change of context and a corresponding need to follow the rules appropriate to the new context.
On Yap, an invitation to chew betel nut is a cue to initiate conversation. This cue is equivalent to offering a cup of coffee in the United States. In the States, guests terminate a conversation by suggesting they must leave, whereas on Yap the host terminates the conversation by saying that it is all right for the guests to leave. A failure to grasp the meaning of such cues results in misunderstandings, conclusion, and oftentimes interpersonal conflict.

Personal Culture

One reason it is necessary, even within our own families, to keep the goal of incarnation is views are the differences in our personal standards and ways of life. These personal differences arise out of our unique genetic heritage and individual histories. Each one of us is born into a particular social context and family. It is within that context that we are socialized, or acquire what might be seen as our personal cultural heritage. For our purposes here, cultural heritage is the early learning a child unquestioningly accepts. This learning generally takes place before one is able to enter into dialog with one's parents and make choices by conscious reasoning.

A human being is completely helpless at birth and lives through a period of near-total dependency on others that lasts about six years.

During this time, a child is subjected to the intensive influence of parents and a few other adults. During this intensive interaction, parents seek to teach the child certain forms of behavior, values, and modes of living. They do so through the process of reward or punishment, giving or withholding love. The child's personal temperament is also a factor. While the parents attempt to teach specific patterns of behavior, the child's temperament will to some extent counter the parents' teaching so that what they desire to pass on is rarely if ever accepted in full. Most parents will attest to the fact that children in the same family rarely share the same basic outlook on life, the same patterns of temperament, or the same values and goals. The personalities of children vary. In addition, parents revamp their goals and methods of child rearing as time passes. As a consequence, each child emerges from childhood with a unique personal heritage.

Furthermore, every individual goes through a lifelong process of learning, or what anthropologists call enculturation. This larger process is the means by which an individual acquires the cultural heritage of a larger community. For children, this involves peer pressure and peer socialization, learning in school and play activities. By this time, the learning involves conscious dialog both with adults and with one's peers, and this dialog results in conflict and questioning as well as acceptance. In becoming more independent of one's parents, a child is increasingly influenced by persons outside the immediate family. The child develops an ability to choose what to accept and what to reject. At this point, peer group influence becomes increasingly important in the child's life. As the child is exposed to new ideas and has an opportunity to select form among them, his or her choices are tempered by feedback from others who either accept or reject him or her. Through that acceptance or rejection the child begins to formulate a conception of his or her own world, a personal culture. The individual will then tends to congregate with those who share similar ideas and interests and avoid those who do not, thus reinforcing his or her own personal choices.

Our personal culture as individuals, then, is unique; it is not the same as that of our parents or of any other individual. It is the product of the combination of (1) the personal culture heritage acquired through socialization with our parents, (2) the broader cultural heritage acquired through enculturation and feedback from the community, and (3) our act of accepting or rejecting those forces. Each individual develops a personal lifestyle and a set of standards and values by which to order and organize his or her life.

Shared Culture

In spite of the fact that we are all unique persons, we share common beliefs, values, and a way of life with many others around us. We not only share those beliefs but also reinforce them in one another and teach them to our children. The shared aspects of our personal cultures produce the common values, priorities, and standards for behavior that we apply in each social context. We begin to learn these things as helpless infants, and by the time we are adults, they shape much of what we are and do.

This shared culture has great value for us. Because of it, we are able to plan a career with a reliable expectation that we can actually accomplish what we envision. We are able to establish a family and friendships and to fulfill our mutual obligations to one another. When we find ourselves in situations of conflict with others, the standards and procedures of our shared culture furnish mechanisms for settling those disputes, and while the solutions are not always satisfying, the process is familiar and somewhat predictable.

In their collective sum, our personal cultures have enough in common with one another that outsiders look at us and see us being alike, even though we find great differences among ourselves. These similarities may be reinforced by an institutional identity. We are Americans, not because we are identical but rather because international custom defines nationality by one's place of birth. Other parts of our identity we derive from our race, language, and the groups into which we are born or with which we affiliate during our lives. The groups and institutions of which we are a part coerce us to conform to standards shared by a majority of their members. We learn these rules so that they become natural to us, and we assume that exceptions to our behavior are unnatural and illegitimate. Acceptance in our groups comes at the cost of exclusion from the groups of others. An attempt to belong to groups whose standards are in conflict with ours produces emotional stress within us and antagonism is our relationships with others. *For this reason, most of us choose to belong only to those groups within which we find people who have standards and values similar to our own.*

As a consequence of our choices, the communities we form include some and exclude others. These social arrangements become an important part of our shared culture. We include those people who reaffirm our values and relationships, and we exclude those who in some way do not measure up to our standards or do not fit within our prescribed sphere of social relationships. *This pattern of inclusion and exclusion often prompts us to fear and even reject the very people we are sent to serve.*

Culture is always learned and shared with others, and in this process, people perceive and respond to one another in culturally conditioned ways. Edward Hall (1976, 85) suggest that this is useful to us, because it allows us to screen out information that is not essential and protects us from emotional and intellectual overload. Further, it allows us to predict, to some extent, the behavior of others in our own culture. At the same time, the screening process produces a blindness to cues form cultures not our own. A Muslim cannot accept a Christian church service as worship, nor can a Christian accept a Muslim's prayer in a mosque as worship. *This cultural blindness makes us ineffective communicators in alien contexts and leads us to assume that the problem lies with others rather than with ourselves.*

The cultural bias we share with others in our communities becomes a consensus we use to protect ourselves from others. Through this consensus, we regulate the behavior of our members and reject those who refuse to confess. We become certain that our way of doing things is the proper way, and we are blinded to the possibilities of doing things differently or of engaging in new behaviors that might be beneficial to our community. Our very agreement becomes a distortion of the reality of our experience, a defense against other peoples and other ways of life. The comfort of our community becomes a bias toward others and a blindness to viable relationships different from our own.

It is because of cultural blindness that we must become ***in*** the culture and thus in the lives of the people we wish to serve. We must begin as a child and grow in their midst. We must be learners and let them teach us before we can hope to teach them and introduce them to the master Teacher.

The practice of incarnation (i.e. a willingness to learn as if we were helpless infants) is the first essential step toward breaking this pattern of excluding other. Missionaries, by the nature of their task, must become personally immersed with people who are different. *To follow the example of Christ, that of incarnation, means undergoing drastic personal reorientation.* They must be socialized all over again into a new cultural context. They must enter a culture as if they were children – ignorant of everything, form the customs of eating and talking to the patterns of work, play and worship. Moreover, they must do this in the spirit of Christ, that is, without sin. While most of us may not face situations requiring such total orientation, the incarnation principle can also be applied effectively in family and church life.

A Personal Inventory

Take an inventory of the various cultural labels that apply to you. You might be, for example, 100 percent German, English, Italian, or American. You might also be classified as 100-percent southerner, easterner or mid-westerner and more specifically as an Arizonian, Californian, or New Yorker. Theologically, you might be evangelical, fundamental, or liberal: denominationally, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Brethren, or Free Church.

When I arrived on Yap, I was a Pennsylvanian-born preacher's kid who had learned to say "Yes, sir" and "Yes, ma'am" in Virginia, who had enjoyed Charles Dickens and Mandeluahn's *Elijah* with black classmates in Ohio, who had been a "brave son" at Wheaton College and had married a "daughter true." I had received excellent Christian teaching, was licensed as a Grace Brethren elder, and had been trained at the University of Pittsburg by internationally renowned anthropologists. I was clearly a 100-percent middle-class, evangelical American. I was definitely not Yapese!

What kind of persons should we be when we enter alien cultures? We can find some direct instructions in Scripture. In Philippians 2:5, Paul says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." First Peter 2:21 states, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." If Jesus did indeed set the example, then it is my responsibility to work as hard to become Yapese as he did to become a Jew. Through the Great Commission, Jesus sends us out into all the world, and as his messengers, we are to follow his example, that is, we are to become incarnate in the cultures in which we are sent.

The World Christian: a 150-Percent Person

The challenge is to become what Malcom McFee (1968) calls a 150-percent person. McFee uses this concept to describe Black Foot Indians who are enculturated into white American society. He argues that they are still 75-percent traditional Black Foot, but they have also learned to adapt to and follow the larger American culture to the point at which some are 75 percent white as well. He calls these people 150-percent persons. Like these Indians, we will never become 100-percent insiders in another culture or subculture. The only way that is possible is the way Jesus did it, to be born into that other culture and to spend a lifetime in it. However, it is possible to follow his example, to be "imitators of God," as Paul commands in Ephesians 5:1, and to "live a life of love" (v. 2) in the culture in which we hope to minister.

Our goal should be to become more than we are; for me it was to become at least part Yapese, even if that meant being less than 100 percent American.

To become a 150-percent person is more than an ordinary challenge. Discarding or setting aside something of one's Americaness or one's social or church identity is almost sacrilege to many people. Our way of life is often equated with godliness, and we defend vigorously its apparent rightness. *As such, this way of life has become our prison.* We forget the example set by Christ, who, "being is very nature

God." did not cling to that identity but instead became not only a Jew but also a servant amount Jews (Phil. 2:6-7). We must love the people to whom we minister so much that we are willing to enter their culture as children, to learn how to speak as they speak, play as they play, eat what they eat, sleep where they sleep, study what they study and thus earn their respect and admiration. *In essence, we must leave our prison, enter their prison and become full participants within it.*

The excitement of becoming 50 percent Yapese was one of the highlights of my life. I will never forget the ecstasy of my first compete conversation in the Yapese language or the deep admiration I felt upon grasping their custom of sharing their personal possessions. I also remember the anxiety when I felt unwanted or burdensome to my host, the isolation when my speech was so poor that people did not want to be bothered by me, and the frustration and boredom I felt with the hours of what seemed to be trivial conversation. The lesson here is that becoming incarnate in another culture will be a trial by fire, a test of inner strength, of personal faith, and most of all a test of the veracity of one's love. *An individual who is not ready to give up being an American for a time and to begin learning as a child is not ready for the challenge of cross-cultural ministry.*

If we are to follow the example of Christ, we must aim at incarnation! Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself" (Matt. 16:24). These acts of self-denial are in fact the first steps of freedom in Christ. We must consciously release our attachments to home, income security, convenience, significance in work or ministry and even comfort of family. We must enter a new community of stranger, often without many if not most of the comforts and symbols of home, and begin as children, learning at the feet of those we have gone to serve. We must be willing to become world Christians. The challenges will shape us: the changes will trouble us. Our bodies will get sick, our minds will suffer fatigue, our emotions will sweep us from ecstasy to depression. Yet the love of Christ will maintain us so that we can identify with Paul, who said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possibly means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in the blessings" (1 Cor. 9:22-23).