

Theological vs cultural: When does the theological override the cultural?

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Issue in context

The context of this article is the multicultural ministry of LCANZ, but the question ‘When does the theological override the cultural’ is a hermeneutical one. This is because in the bible, particularly in the New Testament, there are strong elements of multicultural ministry and cross-cultural dynamics. That is why biblical interpretation requires much skill in understanding and discerning what is theological and what is cultural.

Likewise, when doing ministry in a multicultural context or cross-culturally, the challenge of what is theological and what is cultural often comes to the fore. A failure in making that distinction may result in a heavy-law approach which in turn may result in suffering, oppression and destruction of cultures.

When I first studied theology, my professor often reminded the class that we don’t study but do theology—that means theology is *doable* and *consistent*.

Due to the brevity of the article, I would share just two simple but important hermeneutical principles for consideration or food for thought for those who are involved in multicultural and cross-cultural ministry. This is by no means going to solve the problem but act as a hermeneutical caution and encourages empathy for cultural realities. It is also *by no means* a compromising approach.

Theological versus cultural: message and form; law and gospel

The bible has its own cultural context from which biblical truth and teaching are expressed. Unfortunately, there is no divinely ordained culture. It’s important to tell the message, which is usually theological, from its form, which is usually cultural and through which it is expressed. The message is almost always universal and the form cultural. One needs to find the equivalent in the corresponding culture for the message to be heard and heeded.¹

The inability to tell the difference or to make the form part of the message would certainly turn the blessings of the gospel into oppression of the law. However, sometimes the message and form are rolled into one, and the error on the other side of the pendulum is to regard it as culturally relative and ignore it altogether.

We shall apply the two principles to three different kinds of examples below to get a feel of the challenges and pitfalls, and to glean some lessons to enable us to be more competent in the task.

¹ Suggested reading: Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 71–87.

Some practices in the bible are easier to tell apart than others:

1. Holy kiss: Rom 16:6 and 1 Thess 5:26 exhort Christians to 'greet each other with a holy kiss'. We have no problem replacing 'holy kisses' with handshakes. We can easily tell that the message in this instance is to greet each other and it is done through 'holy kisses' on the cheeks or forehead, which is culturally relative. Hence, the message is now expressed in forms which are culturally acceptable. Western societies use handshakes, hugs and kisses while in Asian societies, there are various forms of greetings. Christians in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Thailand would clasp their hands to greet one another and those in Japan and Korea would greet one another with mutual bows. It's not too difficult to see that the practice of 'holy kisses' is a cultural expression in the Middle East. This is considered inappropriate and unacceptable in some conservative Asian societies. The message is that the church of God everywhere ought to treat one another cordially in Christian love. This has not caused tension among theologians and churches mainly because it is not too difficult to tell the message from the form.
2. Catalogues of sins: Paul's sin-lists in 1 Cor 6:9–11 and Col 3:5–11 do not give the impression that the sins are culturally relative but, instead, they are inherently immoral. Some sins, though, may be more prevalent in one culture than another. The reasons for forbidding them are spiritual and moral. In this instance, the theological overrides the cultural or 'Christ above culture'. This is why proclaiming the gospel in different cultures is also accompanied by the responsibility to transform certain cultural areas to reflect the holiness and justice of God.
3. Holy Communion: Unlike the earlier two examples, this is highly challenging and sensitive for Lutherans because Holy Communion is one of the two sacraments which we regard as a means of grace because of the real presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine.

For churches and Christians in Western societies where bread and wine are part of the food culture, observing the Holy Communion the way it is done in the New Testament is not difficult. Everything, especially the eucharistic elements, are taken for granted in the Western culture.

The challenges and difficulties of administering the Holy Communion come to the fore when it is done in a non-wine culture, or where alcohol is a social taboo, or where wine, as white goods, is relatively exorbitant beyond the affordability of the church communities.

It is human that we don't think outside of ourselves or our cultures. We have our own cultural biases.

Those who insist that both elements in the Holy Communion have to be 'bread' and 'wine' respectively have the following questions to consider:

- i. Must the bread and wine used be of the same kind that were originally used in the New Testament?
 - a) If the answer is 'yes', then how do you justify using what you are using now in your churches?²
 - b) If the answer is 'no', then to what extent can one differ? How does one decide?³
- ii. What causes the efficacy in the Holy Communion? The spiritual, which is the promise of God and the faith of the recipient, or the material, which are bread and wine or both?

In some poor villages in China, *mantou* (Chinese bun) and Chinese rice wine (white wine) are used in Holy Communion. *Mantou* and Chinese rice wine are the closest to 'bread' and 'wine' that could be found. In most poor villages, *mantou* is the only 'bread' found in the village and rice wine is the only affordable wine around.

In some very poor Dalit villages in India, naan and grape juice are used instead of 'bread' and 'wine'. It is said that the cost of a bottle of red wine is about the village's total income for a day.

There was a time, from the 60s to the 80s, when alcohol was a social taboo in Singapore because many of the early migrants who came from China and India, especially those who came alone, took to alcohol because of loneliness and the hard life. Their addiction resulted in broken marriages and dysfunctional families. The government went on an intense campaigning and national education to counter and eradicate the problem. The church responded by keeping alcohol out of the church and lives of believers. During celebrations such as weddings and birthdays, only Chinese tea and aerated drinks were served. Even until today, most churches would still use grape juice in communion. Only the Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran churches use red wine or port wine and even then, grape juice is always an alternative.

With people of different cultures coming into the church through its multicultural and cross-cultural ministry, some long-established practices are likely to be challenged as it tries to accommodate them. Such a process can be contentious because our perception and understanding are often defined by our cultural preferences. Like it or not, people are culturally biased but differ only in degrees.

The principle of law and gospel is a good guide to helping undo the theological-versus-cultural knot and perceiving and understanding the means of grace in Holy Communion. In view of the realities relating to the two eucharistic elements in churches of different

² Churches which still insist on 'bread' and 'wine' are themselves using different kinds of bread and wine from NT times. Wafer and port wine are commonly used but they are certainly not the original eucharistic elements used in the NT. There seems always to be some inconsistencies in the practice.

³ Typically, the closest equivalence in the culture is used. Yet they vary from culture to culture: some use *wafer* and *port wine* while others *mantou* (Chinese bun) and *rice wine* (white wine), still others use *naan* and *grape juice*. It is always easier to accept the equivalence in our culture than those of another.

cultural and economic setting, is the insistence on using the kind of 'bread' and 'wine' the way you have understood it, law or gospel?

LCANZ is a church with a fairly homogenous European culture and is used to doing what it has been doing for a long time. Perhaps some practices are culturally influenced and have been regarded as the 'only' way of doing them. LCANZ should begin to adopt a more multicultural mindset that encourages a wider hermeneutical horizon to rethink areas of conflict and long established practices so that LCANZ is able to provide a conducive bible-based multicultural environment for all to thrive in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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