

Are We ACCELERATING or INHIBITING

Movements to Christ?

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Those with a heart for unreached peoples have the choice to pursue certain behaviors that have the potential to accelerate the spread of the gospel. These “accelerators” may help a new fellowship in an unreached people group become a large-scale movement to Christ. By contrast, we may consciously or inadvertently deploy “inhibitors” that may make it difficult for that fellowship to ever become a movement.

A Word about Movements

The term “movement” implies rapid growth in the number of believers, beyond the influence or control of the ones who introduced the gospel. “Church-planting movements”, such as the ones discussed in David Garrison’s Church Planting Movements, generally refer to Christians, whereas “insider movements” generally refer to Jesus followers who remain within their ethno-religious identity (e.g. Muslim or Hindu insider movements).

In this article my focus is on “movements” in general, whether church-planting movements or insider movements. My interest is in behaviors that tend to accelerate the spread of the gospel, regardless of the ethno-religious identity that is chosen by the new disciples of Jesus.

Expectations of Kingdom Growth

Jesus told three parables that predicted the rapid spread of the kingdom of heaven: the Parables of the Yeast, the Mustard Seed, and the Sower. The first conclusion that we can draw from these three parables is that Jesus expected dramatic growth in his Kingdom.

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In the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt. 13:31-32), Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard

seed... Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree.”

In the Parable of the Yeast (Matt. 13:33), Jesus says, “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

And in the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:20), Jesus says, “Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times what was sown.”

A Strategy for Kingdom Growth

The second conclusion that we can draw from these three parables is that Jesus had a specific strategy in mind for spreading the gospel in order to achieve dramatic growth. He recommended implanting the gospel like yeast so that it leavens, and planting it like a seed so that it grows in the new soil.

The common theme of these parables is that the gospel is something very small that is introduced into another culture and transforms it. Yet we often introduce the gospel into another culture with significant amounts of cultural and religious traditions associated with it. This “baggage” makes it harder for a new people to embrace the gospel because they see it as a foreign cultural and religious system, rather than a relationship with the person of Jesus that they can pursue within their own cultural and religious traditions.

Contextualizing the Gospel

Contextualization has become well-established as essential to successfully implanting the gospel in another culture. But while contextualization is indeed an excellent strategy, is it a sufficient strategy to lead to movements to Christ? Missionaries have been applying the principles of contextualization, even radical contextualization, for generations. Yet in most instances, these principles have not led to movements to Christ. What could be missing?

I believe that contextualization is insufficient on its own to lead to movements, because two other factors need to be taken into account—identity and community. While the gospel may be introduced in a highly contextualized manner, the identity that new believers choose and the way they interact with their community will have a great

effect on whether others from their culture will make a similar choice to follow Jesus.

Theory vs. Practice of Contextualization

Before I elaborate further, let me say that I believe many of the authors on contextualization intended contextualization to include both identity and community when they wrote of a contextualized approach to spreading the gospel. Therefore, it is not the theory of contextualization which is lacking, but the way it is practiced by many.

For many, the practice of contextualizing the gospel has been primarily cultural: the attempt to present the gospel consistently with local cultural forms, using local language, wearing local dress, using contextualized translations of the Bible, etc. However, these attempts to culturally contextualize the gospel are often practiced along with behaviors that are at odds with full contextualization.

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Foreign Identities and Extracted Communities

A culturally-contextualized gospel can be presented in a way that leads new believers 1) to adopt a new identity that other locals perceive as foreign, and 2) to associate with other new believers that other locals perceive as extracted communities. Thus, a new fellowship of believers may express a culturally contextualized gospel, yet have a foreign identity and be considered an extracted community.

To the extent that new believers are perceived by others as having chosen foreign identities and joined a foreign religious community, the opportunity for the gospel to rapidly spread in that people group is dramatically diminished. This will be true even if they are highly contextualized culturally; their foreign religious identity and membership in a foreign community counteracts the benefits of their cultural contextualization.

Inhibitors vs. Accelerators of Movements

If we are to establish fellowships that have the potential to lead to movements to Christ, we need to recognize the “inhibitors” and “accelerators” of movements. “Inhibitors”

are actions that may bring short-term results, but are likely to inhibit fellowships from becoming movements to Christ. “Accelerators” are actions that may take a little longer, but are likely to encourage fellowships to become movements to Christ.

Accelerators for Individualistic vs. Communal Cultures

“Individualistic cultures” are highly individualized with fractured families that don’t live in extended community (i.e., the majority of Western cultures). “Communal cultures” are community-oriented with tight-knit families that live in extended community (i.e., the majority of Muslim and Hindu peoples). Gospel-spreading strategies that are most effective for individualistic cultures will tend to be less effective for communal cultures, and vice versa.

For example, a communal culture places a high value on keeping its members part of the community, and will tend to resist any religious invitation that will lead its members to become “separate” or “foreign.” Individualistic cultures are more fragmented, and its members have greater freedom to separate from those around them into a separate sub-culture.

Therefore, a gospel-spreading strategy that leads to foreign identities and extracted communities will face higher resistance in a communal culture. Family members and community members will tend to exert great pressure on new believers to “return to the fold,” and if they don’t do so, they will tend to expel them from the community and have nothing further to do with them. Thus, the new fellowship of believers may seem successful from an outside perspective, yet they may have limited ability to reach back into their community with the gospel of Jesus.

Spreading the gospel in a communal culture should be done in a way that is more likely to lead to movements to Christ. It should lead to communities of believers that are not seen as “foreign,” but as “still part of our community,” so that the gospel can spread more easily.

Workers from Individualistic Cultures

One challenge is that many cross-cultural workers spreading the gospel in communal cultures (e.g., Muslims or Hindus) are themselves from individualistic cultures (e.g., North America or Europe). Therefore, they may unwittingly pursue gospel-spreading strategies that are better suited for individualistic cultures than communal

cultures. They may even be expected to do so if they are sent by Western mega-churches that have experienced great success by pursuing strategies well suited for their individualistic cultures.

Sending-churches from individualistic cultures should consider whether their church-planting strategies may actually inhibit movements to Christ in communal cultures. A concern frequently expressed by cross-cultural workers is that their sending-churches may reject them if they pursue “insider” strategies for communal cultures.

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Seven Accelerators or Inhibitors for Communal Cultures

I suggest seven dimensions where certain actions may accelerate or inhibit movements to Christ in communal cultures: Identities, Communities, Leadership, Fellowship, Practices, Doctrine, and Independence. Tables 1 through 7 suggest examples of actions in each dimension that will tend to accelerate or inhibit movements. Missionary teams and their support networks may find these tables useful in prayerful planning and evaluation. Any one action in isolation is unlikely to significantly influence a movement. But—taken in whole—consistent use of accelerators in communal cultures is more likely to result in movements to Christ than consistent use of inhibitors.

For instance, consistent use of inhibitor actions will tend to result in extracted communities of believers with foreign identities and foreign religious practices. These extracted communities will have difficulty reaching the communities from which they’ve been extracted. Conversely, consistent use of accelerator actions will lead to transformed communities of believers with insider identities and contextualized religious practices that are far more likely to spread the gospel like yeast through the dough of existing communities. (Matt. 13:33)

« The unifying theme to all these movement accelerators is “comprehensive self-contextualization.” »

Dimension #1: Identity**Preserve an Insider Identity as Believers**

- Gospel is perceived as “inside,” “natural” to their culture.
- New believers are encouraged to preserve an identity that will allow them to reach their families and communities with the gospel (rather than being expelled because they converted to a foreign religion).
- New believers remain in their culture. If that culture is strongly intertwined with religion, then believers are free to follow Jesus while remaining “inside” their ethno-religious identity. (E.g. “I’m a Muslim who follows Jesus,” rather than “I’ve converted to Christianity in order to follow Jesus.”)

Establish a Foreign Identity as Believers

- Gospel is perceived as “foreign,” “outside” their culture.
- New believers identify themselves as Christians, and are understood to have left their ethnoreligious identity.
- New believers are expelled by their family or community, or are coerced into abandoning their new faith, because they’ve chosen to convert to a foreign religion.

Dimension #2: Communities**Penetrate Existing Communities with the Gospel**

- New believers remain in and cultivate their families, even if fellowship with believers is temporarily curtailed.
- Believers start new fellowships in their existing families and communities.
- Women play a vital role in reaching existing families and communities, and in discipling the next generation.
- The gospel spreads into new communities as believers witness through existing relationships or new relationships, then those new believers reach their own families and communities.
- Arranged marriages may result in the spread of the gospel into new families and communities.

Extract Believers into New Communities

- New believers are often shunned by their families, breaking them apart.
- Believers create new communities with other believers, and have limited ability to witness to their former communities.
- Women play a vital role in connecting new communities of faith together.
- The gospel has difficulty spreading into new communities, because believers are perceived as converts to a foreign religion.
- Arranged marriages are used as a means of coercing new believers to abandon their faith and return to their traditional ethno-religious identity.

Dimension #3: Leadership**Cultivate Local Leadership**

- New believers can lead other new believers, with appropriate mentoring and discipling.
- Local believers provide leadership right away for the emerging fellowship in their family or community (rather than having foreigners provide “temporary” leadership).
- Leaders pursue biblical training appropriate for lay leaders (rather than formal seminary training appropriate for professional pastors).
- Local fellowships have natural leaders who may or may not meet the biblical criteria for elders (e.g., patriarch who has multiple wives, matriarch of the family, single man or woman).
- Elders are selected to connect local fellowships together in larger kingdom community (not to supplant natural leadership in each local fellowship).
- If persecution is high, each community fellowship meets separately and leaders travel between fellowships teaching and encouraging.
- If persecution is low, community fellowships may occasionally meet with others in larger meetings.

Start with Foreign Leadership

- Foreigners provide leadership in new fellowships because believers don’t know each other.
- Foreigners provide leadership for the new network “until they are ready.”
- Church leadership is for mature believers, often professional pastors who have had seminary training.
- Elders must be appointed in each new fellowship, since there are no natural leaders when believers don’t know each other.
- Professional pastors sometimes work together to connect their churches into a larger kingdom community.
- If persecution is high, believers meet in house churches and await the freedom to meet in church buildings.
- If persecution is low, believers meet in church buildings and typically seek to grow the size of their churches.

Dimension #4: Fellowship

Emphasize Community-Oriented Fellowship	Emphasize Meeting-Oriented Church
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fellowships emphasize relationships and community (rather than meetings and structure). • Existing patterns of community are redeemed for Jesus-oriented fellowship, though believers also meet on other occasions (rather than treating Sunday morning worship as the only time “church” takes place). • Fellowships meet in homes, or if necessary in buildings that local fellowships can build themselves (without referring to the building as “church” or describing the meeting as “going to church”). Fellowships avoid buildings built or funded by outsiders, because they aren’t reproducible across many local fellowships as the gospel spreads. • Fellowships remain informal gatherings led by lay leaders so that the gospel can spread through their community and into others, rather than trending toward formal organization, buildings, and professional pastors. Emphasis is on spreading the gospel to the unreached, rather than organizing the reached. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fellowships are built around meetings and structure. • Church meetings are on Sundays and feel similar to foreign ways of “doing church.” • Churches meet in buildings, often that foreigners pay for when they can’t afford to build themselves. • Churches often begin by focusing on outreach, but organizational matters often consume much of their time (e.g., planning worship services, preparing sermons, administering programs, paying for buildings).

Dimension #5: Practices

Develop Contextualized Church Practices for Gatherings, Worship, and the Sacraments	Adopt Foreign Church Practices for Gatherings, Worship, and the Sacraments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Bible is the only authority for the fellowship’s forms/customs (not foreign church traditions), and any other practices that are developed are consistent with local culture. • Fellowships develop their own practices for gatherings and worship that are normal for their culture. • Fellowships develop Biblically-based practices for baptism and the Lord’s Supper that fit their local context and culture (rather than adopting foreign practices). • Fellowships use contextualized terms and concepts in their own language, including a contextualized translation of the Bible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Churches gravitate toward foreign forms/customs because they are shown how to fellowship and worship by foreigners. • Foreign church traditions often carry as much weight as Scripture in determining “how to do church.” • Churches may use foreign terms and concepts, including a non-contextualized Bible translation.



Dimension #6: Doctrine

Develop Contextualized Doctrine	Accept Traditional Doctrine
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Bible is the only authority for doctrine, and believers are free to develop their own contextualized perspectives on controversial doctrines. • The Holy Spirit is the primary guide “into all truth” (John 16:13), not church traditions or people. • Believers develop the habit of seeking answers in Scripture for themselves, rather than relying on seminary-trained professionals. • If believers are pursuing “insider” ethno-religious identities (e.g., as Muslim Jesus-followers), they are given the freedom by Christians to do so. • Other Christians give the “insider” believers freedom to develop their own contextualized biblical doctrines, without passing judgment. This follows the Acts 15 pattern where the Jews did not “make it difficult” or “burden” the Gentiles unnecessarily (Acts 15:19, 28), and the Romans admonition to “accept... without passing judgment on disputable matters” (Rom 14:1). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church traditions are combined with the Bible in determining appropriate doctrine. • Believers develop the habit of relying on seminary-trained professionals in addressing doctrinal questions. • Other Christians often pass judgment on what an emerging church should believe. Theology that conflicts with Judeo-Christian traditions may be considered heresy, even if it has biblical merit and even when Western denominations disagree about the same matters.

Dimension #7: Independence

Preserve Local Independence	Accept Foreign Dependence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fellowships pursue approaches that are locally reproducible and sustainable, preserving long-term independence. • Fellowships avoid or minimize foreign funding (e.g., for buildings, seminary training) because it is not locally sustainable and frequently leads to foreign control. • When fellowships send cross-cultural workers to unreached peoples, they do so using minimal or no external funding (e.g., as tentmakers). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fellowships accept short-term approaches that are likely to lead to long-term dependence on outside resources. • Fellowships frequently accept foreign funding instead of pursuing locally sustainable strategies. • Cross-cultural workers are typically sent using partial or full foreign funding.

Conclusion: Comprehensive Self-Contextualization

The unifying theme to all these movement accelerators is “comprehensive self-contextualization.” It’s “comprehensive” because it goes beyond cultural contextualization to encompass identity, community and various aspects of church. It’s “self-contextualization” because foreigners are unreliable guides for what is appropriate for believers in a particular ethno-religious situation.

We have to be willing to allow local believers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the discipline of Scripture, to discern what is most appropriate for their context. We have to be willing to echo the early church leaders in Acts 15:28—“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following...” The early Jewish leaders released the Gentile believers to comprehensively contextualize their identity, doctrines

and ways of “doing church.” The Gentile believers then penetrated existing communities throughout the Roman Empire and beyond with this contextualized gospel. The result was the most dramatic movement to faith in the history of Christianity!

May God bring about similar movements among all the peoples of the earth. May we be granted the wisdom to accelerate, rather than inhibit, these movements. 