



Discernment in Cross Cultural Ministry

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Introduction

Proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ to the nations of the world is the church's faithful response to the Great Commission (Matthew 28: 16-20). From the beginning that mission has been challenged by cross-cultural issues. On Pentecost Sunday, it was the divine intervention of the Holy Spirit that empowered the apostles to speak and be understood in different languages. With due respect to the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit, we need to note that all of the peoples present on Pentecost Sunday, despite their linguistic differences were from the mid-eastern world with shared cultural values and world and life views. As evangelists traveled out from the Mediterranean world they encountered greater and greater differences in languages, cultural values, practices, and world and life views. To the Pentecost Sunday challenge of faithfully proclaiming the gospel in multiple languages was added the difficulty of bringing the gospel message alive to people with vastly different cultural heritages. Where that has been done well, the gospel message has been contextualized; where that has been done poorly, the gospel message has been syncretized. Simply put, the process of discernment provides the difference between faithful contextualization and syncretism.

Assumptions

Our assumptions about the body of Christ determine our responses to the diversity of responses to the Good News. The confession of 'one Lord, one faith, and one baptism' needs to be grounded in Christ's own description of his church in John 15: 1-17. In that passage Christ describes himself as the real vine and his followers as those who have been grafted into him. In horticultural practice, where scions of different types are grafted onto the same plant each scion will continue to bear fruit similar to those not grafted. That is, Macintosh, Empire, Spartan, Red Delicious scions which are grafted onto one rootstock will bear fruit that is of their respective types. (In Romans 11, the apostle Paul also uses the imagery of grafting.) Christians from around the world have been given new life in Christ by the grafting power of his Spirit, which produces fruit with a Creator-endorsed diversity.

The early Church addressed the issue of Christian cultural diversity. Rejecting the position that all believers must adopt Jewish cultural practices, the apostles wrote to the non-Jewish believers a letter of freedom with four explicit restrictions. They wrote, "The Holy Spirit and we have agreed not to place any other burden on you besides these necessary rules: eat no food that has been offered to idols; eat no blood; eat no animal that has been strangled; and keep yourselves from sexual immorality. Acts 15: 28-29. All of these restrictions are related to idol worship. (Interestingly, in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, Paul gives believers freedom to eat whatever, so long as it is consumed with gratitude to the Lord without offending others.)

Biblical revelation describes a church and heavenly kingdom which is not merely an extension of Hebrew culture but rather a radical revitalization process through which people from all nations are redeemed in Christ to bear unique fruit through his life-giving Spirit. (see Revelation 21: 24) The Creator's glory is too great to be borne by the image carrying capacity of any single culture.

Promotion of a mono-cultural response to the Good News and hostility to Christian cultural diversity, contradicts Christ's expectations and impedes the Holy Spirit. Proper discernment is a Spirit led process redeeming cultural gifts so that people may have new life in Christ and by his Spirit reflect the greater glory of the Creator.

Process of Discernment

The process of discernment leading to the redemption of cultural gifts so that people may have new life in Christ reflecting the glory of the Creator includes at least the following elements.

Community: Discernment can not be done in isolation or by an outsider; it must be done by a Christian community reviewing traditional cultural practices in the light of scripture. Additionally, the discernment process should be informed by the theological reflections of the broader historical Christian tradition.

Prayer and Bible Study: Discernment must be led by prayer which leads the study of scripture to examine the merits or concerns of individual issues.

Cultural critique: Cultural practices can not be taken at face value; nor can explanation of those practices be derived from a single source in oral cultures. Shallow understanding and analysis will limit contextualization to superficial adjustments rather than a deeper transformation.

Time: Discernment regarding the transformation of a cultural practice requires sufficient time for the members of the community to consider the implications of transforming any individual practice.

Experimentation: Discussion, prayer, and study will provide much of the basis required for discernment. However, experimentation with individual practices (within Biblical guidelines) followed by further reflection enables discernment to be a process rather than a single act of judgement.

Crucial Questions: The litmus test for discerning the value of individual practices is the consideration of questions like the following:

1. How can this traditional teaching, ceremony, or artifact help us to love the Triune Creator with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength?
2. How can this traditional teaching, ceremony, or artifact help us to love our neighbours as ourselves?
3. How can this traditional teaching, ceremony, or artifact proclaim and promote faith in the Creator's gift of forgiveness and healing in Jesus Christ?
4. How can this traditional teaching, ceremony, or artifact encourage the claiming, development, use, and celebration of the gifts of the Holy Spirit?

The use of questions facilitates discussion that goes to the heart of cultural practices and their potential fruitfulness or shortcomings for proclaiming the gospel of Christ.

Confession: The process of discernment must affirm in both process and subsequent developments the declaration of 1 John 4: 2-3. *"This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every Spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God."*

An example: Christian Aboriginal Smudging

At Indian Metis Christian Fellowship (IMCF) discussions over three years led to the following discernment regarding the practice of smudging. The following material is displayed at the ministry to explain the practice of Christian aboriginal smudging at IMCF.



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A Smudging Prayer

Creator Father,

We come to you as your children.

We confess that we are weak and broken images of you.

We pray for the forgiveness and healing that you give us through Jesus Christ so that his Spirit will clean our spirits, minds, hearts, and bodies.

We pray that your Holy Spirit will help us to worship you in spirit and truth.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ so that his Spirit will carry our prayers to the Creator our Father in heaven.

Amen.



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Smudging as a Christian Aboriginal Ritual: A Brief Summary

In Christian aboriginal faith, smudging is an offering to the Triune Creator.

Like church bells, smudging informs people that an act of worship is about to begin. The smudging ritual invites people to join the sacred space and activity of praying to the Creator in the name of Jesus Christ. The ritual of smudging communicates the initiation of a spiritual activity through the visual and olfactory senses. People see the smudge elements; they smell the fragrant aroma of the smoldering elements. Additionally, people participate in the smudging ritual by wafting the rising smoke over their hands, face and other parts of their body. Participation in a smudging ritual is always optional; people's desire to participate or not participate is always respected.

At Indian Metis Christian Fellowship (IMCF) the elements used for smudging may include one or more of the following: sweet grass, sage, cedar, and tobacco.

The sweet grass reminds us of our impurity before the Creator. Covering oneself in the fragrant aroma of the sweet grass is a confession of our need to be purified by the blood of Jesus Christ. We are reminded that *"Christ loved us and gave his life for us as a sweet smelling sacrifice that pleased the Creator."* Ephesians 5: 2

The sage reminds us of our need for healing by Christ the Creator. Covering oneself in the fragrant aroma of the sage is a prayer for healing by Christ. We are reminded that *"It is by Christ's wounds that we have been healed."* 1 Peter 2: 24

The cedar reminds us that we must worship the Creator in truth. Covering oneself in the fragrant aroma of the cedar is a commitment to be honest and to worship the Creator in truth. We are reminded that *"The Creator is spirit and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth."* John 4: 24

The tobacco reminds us that the Creator made us in his image from the elements of creation. Covering oneself in the fragrant aroma of the tobacco is a commitment to honour the creation from which we were made and in which the Creator placed us. Genesis 2: 4-25

Participating in the smudging ritual may remind people of the incense ritual and elements that the Creator gave to the people of Israel, see Exodus 30: 34-38.

Participating in the smudging ritual may remind people of the word of the Lord through the prophet Malachi that, *"My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the Lord Almighty.*" Malachi 1: 11

Participating in the smudging ritual may remind people that the book of Revelation reveals that in heaven, incense offerings will be offered to the Lord. Revelation 5: 1-14 and 8: 1-5

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