

Toward a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin

T. Wayne Dye

Pete is a missionary to a tribal culture. He has become extremely concerned with the problems of polygamy, betel nut chewing, and smoking. The local people aren't too concerned about Pete's standards of sin. They focus instead on avoiding discord in the village. Disobeying husbands and leaders, refusing hospitality and inter-clan payments, and expressing anger are to them the far more serious sins.

Pete is eager to do the right thing, but he has a hard time communicating this to the local people. They think he is stingy with things they would normally share, and he doesn't seem to understand about their kinship obligations. Frequently, he appears to them to be angry in public (to Pete it's only "frustration") and it disturbs them that he sins so often. Because of this, the local leaders don't really listen to Pete.

Pete is frustrated because, among other things, many of his converts don't seem to have grasped the meaning of living in obedience to God. Several have even fallen into overt sexual sin. As a result, Pete has become convinced that he must be the judge of these converts. He reasons that they don't show enough evidence of real repentance to be trusted. Not knowing the local people well enough to determine their interior motives, he has decided to focus on external matters, single marriages, smoking, and betel nut chewing. Right now, these are the only fruits of repentance he believes he can easily identify.

Pete has a problem, but he doesn't understand that it started long before he arrived on the mission field. Like many missionaries, Pete had something of a prophet's role at home. His leadership was valued among his peers, and in most situations, he found himself able to judge between right and wrong. As a Christian professional, he learned to sense what was wrong for others by noting what was wrong for himself. Intuition tells him that this same approach will work on the field. As the most highly trained, fully dedicated and "spiritual" person in the village, Pete doesn't question his assumptions. He now lives in a place which presumably needs even more of a word from the Lord than his homeland. He is obviously the one to speak on the Lord's behalf.

There's really just one problem. It doesn't seem to be working. The local people just don't "get it." The truth is that no matter how hard he tries to adapt externally, Pete



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has come into this new culture with a heavy load of internalized cultural baggage. Many of the things which he assumes to be right, sensible and natural are not, in fact, biblical ideals. They are simply part of Pete's own culture. American values like efficiency, punctuality and cleanliness are very important to many American Christians, but hard to document from Scripture. Yet these differences between his own culture and the tribal culture strike Pete most heavily. Of course, the tribal culture, like all cultures under God's judgment, has plenty of true evils to correct. This compounds Pete's shock at being in such a different culture and affects his perceptions so that he finds local values even harder to accept. It soon becomes hard for Pete to remember (if he ever differentiated) which of his own values are simply home country values and which are based on the Bible.

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Pete spends time preaching against the things that seem worst to him in the local culture. These may not be points which have bothered the consciences of his listeners. The people soon learn what actions he disapproves of, but they don't really understand what he's driving at. They know some things are morally wrong (different things from the ones Pete harps on) and they feel a sense of guilt (again at different things from the ones that bother Pete). So they turn a deaf ear to him or perhaps to be polite they dutifully "confess" things over which they feel no guilt and become Christians without ever repenting of that which truly troubles their consciences.

A Universal Definition of Sin

What in good conscience can a missionary do about the problem of sin in the lives of those to whom he or she is called to minister? In order to answer this, one must first

determine how sin is defined for any particular culture. A review of Scripture gives a universal standard from which to start. Romans 3:23 talks about a definite standard and says that falling short of this mark is sin. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus makes it clear that the standard is wholehearted love for God, and love for one's neighbor as one's self. In Romans 13:8-10, Paul states explicitly that this kind of love is the supra-cultural, essence of the Levitical law. He ends by saying, "To love, then, is to obey the whole law."

The universal nature of this law of love is evident in the behavioral ideals of all cultures. Prohibitions against lying, stealing, murder and adultery are virtually universal, although what exactly constitutes each sin varies from culture to culture. This information, however, often does not appear in ethnographies because it is considered irrelevant to many anthropological inquiries. Furthermore, some anthropologists are so focused on actual behavior that they fail to explore cultural ideals and values. One study on polygamy in Mexico seemed peculiar to me at first because the wives usually lived in different villages and were not known to each other. I finally realized that this particular culture did not have polygamy at all. Instead, a high proportion of men were keeping mistresses. The researcher mistakenly equated the way people were observed to behave with the underlying value system of the culture. Apparently, he had never asked if the people approved of their "polygamy" or whether they were, in fact, troubled by guilt over their behavior.

Universal moral principles may seem clear enough on the surface, but the actual realization of them is determined partly by each culture's distinctions. What exactly does the law of love mean when it manifests the attributes of Galatians 5: kindness, humility, peace, self-control and so on? An executive in an industrial country is patient if he waits for ten minutes for his next appointment. A Bahinemo native of Papua New Guinea thinks nothing of waiting two hours for someone. The people of a village in southern Mindanao demonstrated their hospitality by



giving visitors gifts equal to one month's wages. In the United States, even the most lavish hospitality to a stranger rarely adds up to a day's wages.

Even standards like the Ten Commandments have fuzzy borders when they are translated between cultures. Is it stealing to pick up a child's toy from a suburban sidewalk? In the United States, yes. In Mexico, no. In ancient Israel, one could pick and eat fruit while passing through another man's orchard. That would be considered theft while trespassing in present day Southern California. Papua New Guineans see a clear violation of the fifth commandment in our culture's practice of leaving the care of the elderly to the state. It seems that while the essence of each commandment is clear, the edges are defined differently by different cultures.

If God's universal standard of love must be realized in different ways by different cultures, what determines a particular action to be sinful? The crucial principle is presented in Romans 2:

"Their conduct shows that what the Law commands is written in their hearts. Their consciences also show that this is true, since their thoughts sometimes accuse them and sometimes defend them. This, according to the Good News I preach, is how it will be on that day when God, through Jesus Christ, will judge all the secret thoughts in men's hearts" (Rom 2:15-16).

The role of culture in conditioning the conscience is seen in Romans 14. The Roman church was divided over two issues: what could be eaten and what special days should be observed. In the first issue, the vegetarians were probably the formerly idolatrous converts; in the second, those who kept special days were probably the Jewish Christians (perhaps the "missionaries" in the situation). Their different cultural backgrounds resulted in these disagreements about behavior.

In his answer, Paul says that it's not the act itself which is important, but the underlying character of one's relationship to God (vs 17). A person must do what he or she believes will please God (vs 12, 18, 22-23). Different people, however, will do different, even

Allowing the Holy Spirit to Convict and Transform

1. Learn the ethical system of the culture to which you are sent.
2. Compare your findings with your own culture. Then compare both cultures with the Bible. Be sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses in both cultures. This helps overcome blind spots and ethnocentrism.
3. Without going against your own conscience, learn to live a loving life by the cultural standards in which you are serving. For each decision you make, remember in which cultural framework you are thinking: your own culture, your host culture, or the New Testament culture. Make decisions within the appropriate cultural framework.
4. Preach repentance for areas in which the Holy Spirit is already convicting new converts. Teach patiently about God's standards for things which, though cultural, are in conflict with the Bible. Pray that you will be able to accept the aspects of the culture which, although they bother you, are compatible with the Christian faith.
5. Expect the Holy Spirit to steadily enlighten their consciences and eventually to transform their society. Keep getting feedback from others on how He is working in their lives. Learn to trust the insights of new converts.
6. Teach new converts to obey and rely on the Holy Spirit. Teach them how to keep their consciences clear so that the Holy Spirit can use their consciences to teach them new truths. Expose them to the Bible, not just the "pre-digested" form of your lesson plans. Teach them to find principles in the Bible for wise and truly Christian answers.



opposite, things to please God (vs 2-3, 5-6). God not only judges each differently, but actually makes each one succeed in pleasing Him (vs 4). Therefore, it is wrong to be contemptuous of those who follow rules that seem irrelevant; nor should we feel more spiritual than those who don't follow our own ideals of Christian behavior (vs 10). Put another way, each of us is answerable to God. Only the Master knows exactly what He wants each servant to do.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

This does not imply that God is satisfied with any one person's understanding of righteousness. Instead, He is constantly leading each one into greater love and obedience. He is continually teaching new truth, correcting their understanding of sin, of goodness, and of how God deals with people (John 16:8). He brings each one to Christian maturity by, among other things, a long process of enlightening and changing their consciences. A missionary's job is to sense where in a convert's life the Spirit is working, and to assist that work.

As the Holy Spirit teaches individuals, societies also are changed toward greater justice, mercy and moral uprightness. Throughout history, reforms in society have been instigated by responsive Christians.

No existing cultural system is entirely pleasing to God. This fact may seem particularly graphic when a new missionary encounters the standards of morality in a pagan culture. That society may be quite concerned about rituals, yet say nothing about humility or cruelty. It may treat moral issues as civil or even personal matters which do not concern the gods. In such a society, the present state of the people's consciences can be a poor reflection of God's ultimate goal for them. As they respond to God, He will undoubtedly lead them to make changes in their social order.

The fact that some things we now consider wrong were not spoken against in the New Testament shows that God can allow time for converts to realize the cultural implications of being Christians. As practiced by the Roman world, slavery was far more cruel and inhuman than anything missionaries and na-

tional Christians disagree over today. Yet, it was never directly condemned in the Bible. People were taught how to live for Christ within their culture.

The implications for today are clear. One cannot automatically know how God has been teaching another person. Behavior one considers natural may violate another's conscience. Things that violate one's own conscience may not be an issue for someone else. There will be large areas of agreement among individuals within a culturally homogeneous unit. In this context, there is an obligation to share one's own convictions with others. In the context of another culture, however, it is wiser to speak about the biblical principles behind one's actions.

In the opening description of Pete's troubles with the tribal culture, Pete did not understand that God was not speaking to the local converts about behavior which would be, for him, clearly sinful. Instead he preached against "sins" for which the nationals did not feel convicted, and which, in fact, may not have been sins for them at all. At the same time, he ignored other sins that were real problems for them. In effect, Pete unintentionally tried to take on the role of the Holy Spirit instead of asking the Holy Spirit what He was doing and cooperating with His work in the lives of individuals, and in the ongoing story of the entire people group.

In spite of Pete's confusion, converts were won from his preaching. But they faced difficult problems. Because the things they heard from the missionary did not match the things they heard from their consciences, they faced a long struggle in learning what God wanted for them. In cases like this, one result may be a slavish obedience to *everything* the missionary suggests or does including brushing one's teeth and putting flowers on the dinner table. This inability to function independently delays the development of an indigenous church. Converts need to be introduced to the whole range of Scripture. As they are taught how to use the Bible for themselves, they may come to see how different the teaching they have been given is from their own sense of what's right.



An understanding of the complexities of the doctrine of sin presented here requires the missionary to begin as a learner. He or she must take time to learn the values and rules of the culture, then categorize the difficult aspects: a) areas in which the Holy Spirit is already convicting; b) things that are not yet points of conviction although still in conflict with the Bible; c) aspects of the culture that are compatible with the

Christian faith although troublesome to the missionary. This kind of categorization requires care to make certain one is after value systems and meanings, to go beneath the surface and uncover the true ideals of a culture. Even then, the answers are only approximations. The real answers will eventually be hammered out by the converts themselves, as they work out their own salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12).

Study Questions

1. What does your family or culture value more highly: stewardship of time efficiency or quality of interpersonal relationships?
2. Does God have different standards for different cultures? Or are there diverse pathways by which the Holy Spirit guides a people group toward full obedience?

