

SERMON TOPICS CONTEXTUALIZED FOR JAPAN

Mitsuo Fukuda*

1. Introduction

Contextualization is the methodology of facilitating the disclosure of God to a particular social group within the context of their own unique cultural forms. Contextualization is an inevitable and necessary process in order for the targeted group (hereafter referred to as “the receptors”) to understand the message. The message embraces the concept that the Bible is the source of fundamental solutions to questions the receptors ask when they encounter problems in life. The goal of contextualization is for the receptors to accept the fundamental principles of the gospel as support in their everyday lives, to establish biblical churches that are rooted in the receptor’s culture, and finally, that worship, which is the most natural and most heart-felt expression of the receptor, can be offered to the one and only God.

The goal of this essay is to offer the reader an understanding of what it means to promote contextualization in the cultural context of Japan. This is achieved by focusing on the sermon, as it holds a central place of communication in services of many modern Japanese churches.

2. Using Japanese Culture as a Medium for Communicating Christ

It happens quite often that when Japanese Christians talk about Japanese politics, economics, religion, customs, etc., they often use the western church and its theology as a filter, looking critically at Japanese

* *Mitsuo FUKUDA (D.Miss., rac@mbg.nifty.com) is the founding chairman of the Research Association of Contextualization (RAC) and the editor of The Journal of Contextualization. He is also serving as the pastor of Christ Family Church in Japan.*

culture. This tendency is closely related to identity problems of Japanese Christians.¹

Japanese Christians should not be cut off from the prescribed culture with which they associated themselves before their conversion by transferring them to a completely different culture. This isolates them the instant they accept Christ. Unfortunately, this is a reality in many Japanese churches today. It would be preferable for new Japanese Christians to establish their new relationship with God in every sphere of their lives as they receive the call to shine the light of Christ. At the same time, they should continue to live and act in accordance with the culture in which they were born and raised (Matthew 5:13-14).² Those who become Christians should continue to remain Japanese culturally. This can be done even though they are changed by the gospel and become a free member of the people of God. Becoming a Christian should not mean that they cease to be Japanese and become a “half-baked westerner.”

How many opportunities for missionary evangelism must have been lost because the missionary rejected the Japanese culture, considering it a pagan, thinking that the Japanese culture had to be radically rectified (or that another culture had to replace it)! If God purifies a Japanese, he can do so by using their culture, just like other cultures, as a medium for God’s message to them. To be certain, all cultures are comprised of numerous elements that need to be reconstructed by the gospel. If, however, those communicating the gospel are careful to avoid the pagan, animistic, and corrupt aspects of the culture, this culture can be used as an arena for communication between God and humans, and as a medium to communicate the message of God to the Japanese people.

God, through Jesus’ incarnation, became like the receptors of the message to which he wanted to communicate. That is, he presented the model for communicating a message while respecting the culture of Jesus’ day and time. Truly, God placed himself in this limited framework known as the culture of the receptor. On his own initiative, Jesus took part in the everyday life of the Jewish people and gave himself to them. In addition, the Jewish Christians rejected exporting the Jewish culture and instead, at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29), infused the gospel into the mission fields of the day within the context of the receptors’ cultures. Jewish Christians paved the way for churches to be established using different forms, forms which were appropriate for each individual culture.

¹ Mitsuo Fukuda, *Fukuin wa Tsutawatteimasuka* [Paradigm Shift in Contextualization] (Tokyo: Kirisuto Shinbun-sha, 1995), pp. 71-75.

² Direct biblical quotes are from the New American Standard Version.

They took notice of the fact that the gentile cultures could be used as arenas for communicating the gospel.

If one tries to take part in God's mission in the cultural environment of Japan, it is necessary to communicate the gospel using Japanese cultural forms, using Japanese language and phraseology and by involving themselves in the Japanese way of life. In order to do this, Christian communicators in Japan must be cautious of being controlled by western standards in relation to theological values. It is reasonable that frequent quotation of foreign theologians and usage of terms such as, "God," "love," "sin," "redemption," "soul," "trinity" and other specialized words often causes a sermon to sound foreign to the Japanese non-believer or one seeking after Christ. It is also possible that those who are seeking refreshment for their souls go away bored because of a continued stream of knowledge-oriented sermons which are meant to appeal to a person's mind. In addition, perhaps a mistaken, elite identity has fermented among Japanese Christians as Christianity has cut deeply into certain aspects of their culture, blaming culture for all wrongs.

We must clearly reject the aspects of Japanese culture that oppose the truth of God's Word. However, if we throw out even those elements which could be put to use as points of contact in mission, we will not be able to touch the heartstrings of the receptors.

3. The Place of the Sermon in Japanese Evangelism

The sermon as a vehicle for communication, just as other approaches to communication, has limitations and advantages. To begin, allow me to discuss briefly the limitations. First, no matter how excellent preachers speak, it is difficult for them to live and model a life of obedience to the Lord simply by speaking from the podium. The receptors can only begin to learn concretely how to tie what is preached from the pulpit into their everyday lives when they are in close contact with those wearing the ministerial robes. The impassioned sermons, once delivered from the podiums, must then be lived before the receptors so they can observe the speakers' daily life and how to cope in times of crises. One cannot communicate the values of the gospel without modeling a concrete example of how these values work themselves out in daily life. Nor is it effective to simply give the receptors a motivation for changing their way of life without also giving them a model of how to do so.

Second, in the lecture-like style found in preaching, one person speaks and many listen. This does not make possible nor allow for a detailed

response on the part of the receptor, which would show they understand how to apply the scriptures to their various circumstances of life. Limiting communication to sermons makes it impossible to broaden the communication realm through interactive activities. Active participation enables the receptor to discover new truths through such activities as creating ongoing dialogs between the messengers and the receptors. Creating environments, which promote discovery, can do this. One example is breaking a large group into several smaller groups. A leader can be appointed to care for the group members, pairing newly converted believers (receptors) with mentors. Other such creative and interactive activities can be used as well.

In addition, it is necessary to be aware of the delivery limitations of the verbal-centered approach to communicating the gospel and, at the same time, not to underestimate the impact that a non-verbal message has with the receptor. Non-verbal communication occurs when receptors participate in rituals such as communion, baptism, singing hymns together, contemplation in a closed room, having close fellowship while eating lunch together after the service, the architectural space and the decoration of the sanctuary, clothing, music, smells, lighting, and the progression of the program. These non-verbal approaches are in not inferior to verbal messages.

Even though there are several limitations as noted, nevertheless, the sermon is an approach in Japanese evangelism that cannot be dismissed. This is because it is difficult to convey a large amount of information in a short amount of time by any means other than a sermon. In order to respond, in a person's short life span, to the large variety of God's wisdom that is available in the Bible, it is necessary to ensure the use of a means of communication which can facilitate the transference of a large amount of information. Jesus did not simply use the approaches that utilize the characteristics of the one-on-one or small group interactions, he also taught large crowds of people.

In addition, many Japanese would not reveal their true selves in front of others until they become considerably close. However, the time used in the delivery of sermon allows the receptors to be passive for a time. For the Japanese, this can be a period in which they observe the church. Even those who are already active in the church desire some time to gather information in order for them to process a new dimension of Christian truth. They give themselves some distance (time) before they arise voluntarily to a new position. The sermon is for those who have conservative tendencies, a means that God uses to prepare their hearts for a shift to a new phase that he has ready for them.

4. Three Necessary Conditions for Sermons To Penetrate the Japanese Heart

4.1 The "Good Fortune" Image

The Japanese have a sensitivity that enables them to find beauty and brilliance in everything that exists. Munosuke Mita, a famous Japanese sociologist, calls this the "consciousness of original favor" (*gen-on ishiki*), and contrasts it to the Hebraic consciousness of original sin.³ The Japanese have a sense of gratitude for even the smallest things in their everyday lives. I will call this sensitivity for recognizing beauty and happiness in life and existence, the "good fortune" consciousness" (*okage ishiki*).⁴

Let us think about testifying to the "blessings of God," using the concept of "good fortune" consciousness as a point of contact. It should be easy for a Japanese to form an image of a God that causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on both the good and the bad, who provides for the birds of the air and clothes the flowers of the field. This is an image that we could call the "good fortune" image," in which one feels that the world is full of "good fortunes." It is possible to use this image as the first step to communicating "grace" as the free gift a personal God, who is the source of life and who has absolute authority, gives.

This "good fortune" image is often bound up with water-related expressions in Japan, where rain is so plentiful. For this reason we can, in our sermons, depict images such as grace by using expressions like, "grace poured out," "brimming with grace," "overflowing grace," and "the flow of life that purifies and gives life." These could serve as effective conductors of communication as the receptors are lead to various aspects of the Truth.

4.2 The Message of Acceptance That Heals Wounds of Isolation

The traditional bonds of the local village, the community, and of family union have collapsed in modern Japan. The nuclear family, which was originated out of this collapse, is falling apart, too. The concepts of individuality and independence in the world are "progressing" more and

³ Munosuke Mita, *Gendai Nihon no Seishin Kouzou* [The Value System of Modern Japanese] (Tokyo: Oubundou, 1965), pp. 155-57.

⁴ Mitsuo Fukuda, *Bunmyaku-ka Kyoukai no Keisei* [Developing a Contextualized Church as a Bridge to Christianity in Japan] (Gotemba, Japan: Harvest Time Ministries, 1993), pp. 81-97.

more into the culture of Japan. The young are especially affected by a baptism into the rivalry of a standardized, blockaded society. They are surrounded by an abundance of highly technical information equipment such as video games, personal computers, videos, and television. Their tendency is to avoid the effort that is necessary to communicate with others by fleeing into their own private “capsule” of space. This tendency is getting ever stronger and stronger.⁵

In this atmosphere, the youth of Japan have forfeited their “reality for living.”⁶ That is, their world of actual human emotions has a tendency to lead them on a search for salvation through new religions. It is difficult to say that the church of Japan is meeting their needs sufficiently. The family of God, bound together by God’s love, should be able to win over the cell-like structure of the new religions and heal these youths’ wounds of isolation, right? The reality of becoming one with the Creator, who throughout the cosmos, puts together every activity of life into one body, solving the powerlessness, fretfulness, and isolation of humans, should win over any cult that sells the satisfaction of superhuman desires, right? Japanese Christians need to ask for the sensitivity to hear the voice of God that speaks to them: “Comfort, O comfort my people” (Isaiah 40:1). They should be able to hear the cries of their fellow Japanese, the “modern day refugees.”

The message, “I am accepted just as I am,” has a big impact on modern Japanese, virtually all of whom are facing identity crises. The ordinary Japanese need the unconditional acceptance of Christ in the midst of a culture where a student continues to be evaluated by an over-emphasis on a percentile ranking and where a contributing member of society is surrounded by a company-centered community that places giving-it-all-you’ve-got as its supreme value. This message alone, however, can untie the knots of the Japanese people’s isolation, lead them into a new relationship with God, and bring them into a new position as the people of God.

4.3 Surrender to an Eternal Existence

Kiyoko Takeda states that at the deepest levels of Japanese culture there is a factor of eternal transcendence, of an orientation toward a

⁵ Asahi Newspaper, ed. *Asahi Keywords 1991* (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun-sha, 1990), p. 22.

⁶ Tadashi Murou, *Shinjinrui to Shuukyō* [Religions of the Japanese Shinjinrui] (Tokyo: San’itsu Shobou, 1986), p. 229.

universal value involved.⁷ This is added together with other factors such as irrational shamanism and exclusivist collectivism. She asserts that this concept characterizes, throughout Japan's entire history, the thoughts and actions of the Japanese people. This roots itself in the view of humanity presented by the biblical writer who states that God has set eternity in humans' hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). The Japanese, at the depths of the heart of their group consciousness, have a desire to surrender themselves to an eternal existence. We can use the words "nature" or "way" to point out the way to the Christ, who is the precious origin of life in the universe. These words will communicate contextually because they are referred to in well-known Japanese sayings, such as, "Disregard the discretion of an ascetic and faithfully follow nature,"⁸ or "Leave your own motives and become one with the way."⁹ If we can clearly communicate, through our words and actions, that the eternal God will take Japanese receptors just as they are, unconditionally (Deuteronomy 1:31), the possibility remains that many would disregard the discretion of an ascetic, leave their own motives, and surrender everything to Christ.

When the youth of Japan who have fled to and are now confined to their barricaded private capsules; when corporate warriors who are workaholics and have a fear of going home accept the message of unconditional acceptance by the Lord of heaven and earth, their isolation will be healed and they will overcome their identity crises. They will discover the refreshment of living as they surrender their lifestyles to Christ.

5. Conclusion

Sermons that are contextualized for Japan should make the "good fortune" image their point of contact, have the grace of "acceptance as you are" as their underlying theme, and, in addition, should testify to the joy of

⁷ Kiyoko Takeda, "Nihon Bunka no Kakureta Katachi [Archetypes of Japanese Culture]," in *Essays on Japan from Japan: Nihon no Kokoro: Bunka, Dentou to Gendai* [The Heart of Japan: Culture, Traditions, and the Modern Age], ed. Public Relations Department, Corporate Secretariat Division, Nippon Steel Corporation (Tokyo: Maruzen Kabushiki Gaisha, 1987), pp. 170-74.

⁸ Noboru Kajimura, *Nihonjin no Shinkou* [The Faith of the Japanese] (Tokyo: Chuouou Kouron-sha, 1988), pp. 159-96.

⁹ Kakichi Kadowaki, *Michi no Keijijougaku* [Metaphysics of Way] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1990), p. 40.

transferring oneself over to that grace. Sermons should be delivered not in the western theological order of God, sin, and salvation, but in the order of “good fortune,” grace, and surrendering oneself. Then, on that foundation, while avoiding any syncretism, sermons that appeal to a transcending, personal God who gives to us “good things,” that depict ingratitude toward this as sin, and that speak of the joy of salvation as a result of surrendering yourself over to this God, would be an effective means of reaching the Japanese people with the gospel of Christ.