



*Christ Teaching in the Temple*, painting by James Tissot

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# Transcultural Considerations in Teaching the Gospel

*Roydon Olsen*

*Roydon Olsen is an international business consultant and instructor of Portuguese at BYU.*

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Jesus of Nazareth was the Master Teacher. His teachings were always fitted to His hearers, even if it meant masking the meaning in parables for those who were not ready to receive the deeper meaning of His teachings. He used examples that were readily understood by His audience because they were taken from the local culture, and yet they were remarkably universal so they could be effectively taught in all ages with simple explanations of their historical setting. Some of His sayings, given the perspective of history, are even more appropriate today. Consider His words about “whosoever looketh . . . to lust” (3 Nephi 12:28; Matthew 5:28) in light of today’s tsunami of Internet pornography.

At times the doctrine He taught was hard and the meanings only discernible through the Spirit by the honest and committed truth seeker. But these teachings were designed to weed out those who could not stay the course, as was the case shortly after Jesus fed the five thousand, when He spoke of Himself as the “living bread from heaven” and likened the Atonement to eating His flesh and drinking His blood. Many said, “Who can hear it?” and “walked no more with Him” (John 6:51, 60, 66). The message was always fitted to the listeners.

In today’s classroom, differences of language, culture, ethnicity, and gender offer us new and challenging opportunities as religious educators to follow the great Exemplar and, guided by inspiration, to fit the message to the needs, understanding, and spiritual readiness of our audience.

## Attitude

Fortunately, ethnic diversity is appreciated and well understood in Latter-day Saint culture, a fact due largely to the worldwide missionary program, the universality of the message, and an understanding of the gospel, which has been greatly enhanced by modern revelation. This new knowledge from heaven is, in its own way, cultural adaptation for our times. However, as the Church grows internationally and as classrooms fill with students of increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds, an even greater responsibility falls upon teachers to understand how and when to make allowances for differences in culture and when to adapt materials so that gospel principles might be better understood. We ought to consider the question, “Am I willing to pay the price to learn something new and vital to effective teaching?”

Cultural adaptation is not a new idea. Latter-day instruction relating to the Old and New Testaments has always been enriched by expositions of biblical times and customs, as well as by exegeses of the Master’s parables, the writings of Isaiah, and so on, all of which are methods of addressing cultural diversity by filling in gaps in our own knowledge and experience base. As mentioned, the Master was sensitive to His audience regarding ethnicity, geography, religious partisanship, politics, gender, profession, social standing, diet, and customs. And He tells us how we should proceed. The answer is deceptively simple: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, this is my gospel; and ye know the things that ye must do in my church; for the works which ye have seen me do that shall ye also do; for that which ye have seen me do even that shall ye do. . . . Therefore, what manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:21, 27).

As the scope of cultural adaptation broadens in today’s classroom, gospel instructors ought to consider basic questions such as “What materials, examples, and concepts can I adapt so that they will be better understood by my audience?” “How and when do I do it?” and “What stories, principles, and ideas do I need to leave *as is*?” In these cases, we may have to provide elucidation to make doctrinal or historical teachings understood or to teach about our culture. After all, not everything needs to be adapted, and learners do need to know about the culture they now find themselves in. The Church itself provided a wonderful example of cultural adaptation in the inspired changes made in the temple endowment. Without changing the doctrine, the presentation was adapted to be understood by an increasingly international and multicultural membership.

Straightforward guidelines govern how we may address this diversity, which will be outlined in the following sections. As a prelude to the discussion of these issues, I will explain how the definition of cultural diversity has expanded in recent times.

## Diversity

*Diversity* has become one of the important buzzwords of modern culture, generating buzz phrases such as, “We must all learn to embrace diversity” or “All diversity is good” or “Diversity teaches us tolerance.” On the surface, these phrases may seem innocent enough, although the utterance about *all* diversity being good may have sent up some red flags in many of our minds. But, good intentions aside, the discussion of diversity has for some eroded to the point that it fails to separate persons of diverse ethnic, racial, social, and religious backgrounds from the diversity of their behaviors. Moreover, what started out as a movement to encourage individuals of any majority to shed their biases about minorities and be more accepting of them as people has been adopted and embellished by minority groups who are radical in action and thought. The call, in subtle ways, is now more than ever before becoming “accept the sinner *and* the sin.” The old maxim that just because something is different does not necessarily mean it is bad is being morphed into “if something is different, it is good.” Not surprisingly, its converse, “Just because something is different, it does not mean it is right,” has been swept under the carpet. With such logic, a broad range of sinful behavior is rationalized because it is the product of diversity. As has been the case since time immemorial, “I can’t help it; God made me this way” is being applied liberally as an excuse for all kinds of maladaptive behavior that must be tolerated in the name of diversity. Or so say those who, ironically, have been the most stridently outspoken against religion and those who practice it. In the final analysis, we cannot lose sight of the fact that God does not “look upon sin with the least degree of allowance” (D&C 1:31).

Even within the Church, the same kind of thinking allows some to justify abusive or other sinful behavior, often hiding behind the mask of cultural diversity. Elder Richard G. Scott boldly addressed this very issue in his memorable conference talk of April 1998, “Removing Barriers to Happiness.” Citing from scripture the examples of Abraham and King Lamoni, who had rejected false traditions in a dramatic way, Elder Scott asks: “Is yours a culture where the husband exerts a domineering, authoritarian role, making all the important decisions for the family? That pattern needs to be tempered so that both husband and wife act as equal partners, making decisions in unity for themselves and their family.

No family can long endure under fear and force; that leads to contention and rebellion. Love is the foundation of a happy family.”<sup>1</sup>

### The Precedence of Doctrine

The first principle of cultural adaptation is that the Savior’s teachings—the doctrines—override cultural considerations, as Elder Scott asserted, although we may use culturally adapted examples to teach those doctrines. In prior counsel, President Howard W. Hunter also affirmed: “I suggest that you place the highest priority on your membership in the Church of Jesus Christ. Measure whatever anyone else asks you to do, whether it be from your family, loved ones, your cultural heritage, or traditions you have inherited—measure everything against the teachings of the Savior. Where you find variance from those teachings, set the matter aside and do not pursue it. It will not bring you happiness.”<sup>2</sup>

Not all differences are good, and not all need to be embraced. Nevertheless, it is good to know about cultural differences, even when they conflict with gospel principles, to understand why students think the way they do and what traditions may be binding them down. Working from this knowledge base, we will be better positioned to enlighten students, bring them from error to truth, and inspire them to abandon false traditions through offering a hand rather than tearing down ethnic, cultural, or national heritages that may contain many good and wholesome parts.

Many years ago I participated in a discussion of the problems of cultural adaptation in the translation of scripture. One of the participants cited an example in the translation of the New Testament into one of the languages of the Philippines. Regarding the parable of the Good Samaritan, he commented that in a particular Philippine culture, if a person were to assist an injured traveler, as the Samaritan had done, the person assisting would be bound for life with the obligation of continual servitude to the one who had been rescued. The presenter’s conclusion was that in this case, the parable would have to be changed so the Samaritan could avoid the cultural obligation. To invite discussion about the principle involved, I asked, “If there is a culture where smoking is the acceptable thing to do, should translators change section 89 of Doctrine and Covenants to read that tobacco is OK for inhaling?” He answered that that would be preposterous. And so it would also be to change the principles of one of the Savior’s parables. For people of the target culture to understand the principles of this parable, further commentary may be required, but tradition must always bow to correct principles.

Since doctrine trumps culture, when a conflict emerges, it is incumbent upon us as instructors not only to study the culture of scriptural times and

early Church history but also to study contemporary cultures—everything from national cultures to gang and drug cultures—to understand those conflicts so that effective presentations can be planned, that place gospel truths in a graspable context, meaningful to the audience.

Elder Scott further stated:

These are other traditions that should be set aside, any aspect of heritage:

- That would violate the Word of Wisdom.
- That is based on forcing others to comply by the power of station often determined by heredity.
- That encourages the establishment of caste systems.
- That breeds conflict with other cultures.

There is serious danger in placing cultural heritage in priority above membership in the Church of Jesus Christ. That zeal to defend one's own culture may lead to excesses that are known to be wrong but justified because it's "them" against "us." Gangs, with all of their potential for destruction, are fostered in a culture of group identity over principles of right and wrong. It is a violation of God's commandments for one culture to persecute another, whatever the reason.<sup>3</sup>

## Cultural Differences

It is just as important to appreciate cultural differences that are not at odds with doctrine as it is to reject those cultural practices that do conflict. More than one latter-day prophet has issued the invitation to those of diverse backgrounds to hold on to the good things they have and to drink of the living water available in the restored Church. Remember, we have to give up only *false* traditions. We need not be in conflict with cultural differences that do not conflict with gospel principles. So, to follow the Savior, a Scotsman may have to be more selective about what he drinks but should be able to continue to wear his kilt and play the bagpipe without reproach from well-intended Church members. There are great lessons to be learned from most cultures.

Our own local cultures are not always compatible with the doctrines of salvation. In exaggerated attempts to show that we are kind and forgiving and have "unconditional love," many Church members often coddle sinners and rob them of any motivation to repent. Some Latin cultures give greater emphasis to justice for the unrepentant and to the idea that the chances of repentance are greater when consequences are imposed. In contrast to the U.S. tendency to put elderly family members in care facilities at the least sign of inconvenience, Brazilians, as well as those of many other cultures, are legendary for bringing all kinds of family members under one roof. "We'll just add another spoonful of beans

to the pot” is a popular and most generally sincere expression used to downplay the inconvenience of having extra guests at home, and it is a manifestation not only of true charity but also of adherence to the principle that family assistance comes before that of church and state. In some cultures, Church members’ sensibilities are often offended by inappropriate public displays of affection. In India, Abrahamic hospitality extends beyond going the second mile. In other cultures, time spent listening to someone else’s heartaches is not a waste, another’s native dress is not ridiculed, children over twenty who live at home are not derided, and young singles are not insensitively hounded about why they are not married yet.

Some of us often forget that the Prophet Joseph Smith defined Zion as the Americas—North, South, and Central—and equate only the Wasatch Front with Zion. However, living in a predominantly Latter-day Saint area is no guarantee that all cultural traditions and actions are in harmony with the gospel. We often get lulled into a false sense of security, thinking all is well in Zion. Why, then, when President David O. McKay asked the brethren in general priesthood meeting not to leave before the final song and prayer to “beat the traffic” did hundreds walk out of each venue immediately after the final speaker and before the closing song and prayer? Drive around the state and see how many observed President Spencer W. Kimball’s plea to paint barns, repair fences, and beautify our properties. Straying from center in our Latter-day Saint culture is not uncommon and has required occasional course correction from the Brethren. Consider the overemphasis on *going* on a mission, *going* to the temple, and *going* to church, rather than on *becoming* and *worshiping*, as pointed out by Elder David A. Bednar in the October 2005 priesthood session of general conference.<sup>4</sup> Yes, “we” are not always right, and “they” are not always wrong.

### Cultural Adaptation

What does it mean to adapt for cultural differences? When I was a young, recently sustained bishop in Brazil before the block-plan era, the local mission president, who was from the United States, came to see me and share some advice. At the end of our meeting, he said, “Oh, and by the way, get them to hold Relief Society on Thursday night like back home.” What is wrong with this story? In the first place, the mission president had no stewardship for the stake and wards. Second, he was not aware that working husbands did not arrive home until 7:00 p.m. or thereabout; that in the local culture respectable women did not go out alone late at night; that it was dangerous to do so; that buses



stopped running at certain times; that few, if any, had their own cars; and that evening Relief Society had been attempted already with an average turnout of eight. Thus, we took seriously the counsel of the Brethren to adapt to local needs and held Relief Society on Sunday with the result that over fifty sisters were able to partake of the blessings of the program. Cultural adaptation is often common sense, but we have to be willing to at least try to understand the dynamics of the situation to allow inspiration to flow.

Doctrine and Covenants 90:15 encourages us to “study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues and people,” for “whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection” (D&C 130:18). As we learn about peoples and their customs, we can sharpen our intuition, supplemented by prayer, as to what actions, schedules, policies, stories, and examples are appropriate for a given audience.

Today, classrooms in the United States display a greater ethnic diversity than ever before. Many students are our Latino brothers and sisters, the remnant of Jacob, whom the Savior referred to throughout 3 Nephi 20, who would work side by side with others, also of the house of Israel, in building the New Jerusalem (see 3 Nephi 21:22–23). Part of their legacy is rooted in the promises made to Father Lehi. In helping them sort out which traditions to hold on to and which to set aside in deference to the teachings of the Nazarene, we must not lose sight of the depth of their heritage as described in the Book of Mormon, which we can help them more fully understand. Knowledge of their culture, and those of others whom we teach, will help us resist the temptation of trying to impose our own culture on them in areas that do not compromise the principles of the gospel.

Gender is another variable that must guide the writing of lesson plans. The examples, reasoning, and approach we take must be relevant to both male and female students.

If we have students whose native language is not English, we cannot assume they really understand everything we say. We may have to slow down, use less slang and fewer idiomatic expressions, and ask more questions to assess if the message is getting through. One-on-one talks with each class member may take additional time out of our schedules, but this will give us a good indication of how well are understood. In extreme cases, we may have to put the resources of our local community to the test and see if there are individuals who speak the language of a struggling student who might be available to provide translation or tutoring.



Finally, even a rudimentary understanding of the cultural composition of a class and some common sense will enable us to tailor our presentations to have the most impact. We don't have to be cultural experts. It is amazing how far a little insight can go if we have the right spirit and attitude. During my years in international business, people of the various countries I visited were grateful, complimentary, and eager to work with me because they perceived that I cared about them and their cultures. All I did was read in the encyclopedia about the countries and peoples. I asked a lot of questions of acquaintances who knew about the cultures and asked questions of the people themselves.

Years ago I was working as a simultaneous interpreter for a Church conference. One of my colleagues was translating from English to Portuguese for visiting Brazilian Saints when the speaker told a story about Babe Ruth. The Babe hit more home runs than anyone in his day but also struck out more than anyone. The point of the story was that we should not be deterred by failure. Unfortunately for the Brazilians, not only were there no Portuguese words for *home run*, *strikeout*, *fly ball*, and *runs batted in*, but also there was little or no concept of how the game was played and very little inclination at the time to want to learn it. (The translator became so frustrated with his inability to tell the story that he let a cussword escape his lips, which may have been the only entertaining and memorable part of the talk for the visitors.)

What do we do for those who have no understanding of baseball? Unlike elucidating a story from scripture, it would probably be asking too much for a group of Church members from diverse cultures to spend the time required to learn the nuances of the U.S. national pastime. The onus now falls to the teacher to learn enough about the hearers to find an example of more universal appeal. Perhaps soccer? Perhaps the story of some globally well-known person who suffered defeat before eventual triumph would be more effective? On the other hand, if the example comes from Church history, such as the story of the Martin handcart company, an explanation of the details of pioneer life and the events that led up to the migration across the plains would be well worth it for both those who have not had exposure to American history and those who have.

### **Cultural Application**

Some teachers may ask, "I'm overwhelmed; how can I know all these things?" Without having to "know it all," we can set about doing a few simple things that will have a great impact in the classroom. We can all be sensitive to the issues. We can all study a little more about the relevant cultures and languages, as is suggested in the Doctrine and Covenants

and some of the other foregoing examples. We need to understand who the students are. It's easy; ask them. They can tell us about their cultures, their languages, what they understand and don't understand, what interests them and what does not, what would help them understand, and what their current views are. With this information in hand, we can let go of unwarranted biases and rid our minds of cultural stereotypes rather than fall victim to cultural overgeneralization. Then, we can go to the Lord for inspiration on how to address the specific needs of the class with certainty that the answers will come.

Attitude is an important component in addressing diversity. If students sense that we have the Spirit, that we are not biased, and that we are accepting of the good in their cultures, genders, and ethnic backgrounds and are truly sincere and willing to learn through the Spirit, we can "speak the same language" and be of one mind.

Let's look at an example from real life and contrast the good that can be gained from being willing to learn about culture versus prejudice. A mission mother from the U.S. was told in a health-orientation class to be careful of eating strawberries in certain parts of Latin America because of concerns about microorganisms that may be found on the fruit. She was assigned far from the area of concern to a region of South America where eating strawberries was safe, but she would not let go of her overgeneralized fear of eating strawberries. If they are dangerous in one place, they must be bad anywhere in Latin America. The issue took on such proportions that eventually many local members and missionaries were offended that she had characterized their part of the world as unsafe, unsanitary, and backward. Contrast this event with another situation in which a nonlocal mission president in another part of Latin America, perplexed by similar conflicting views regarding public health, went to the head of the local state health department and asked what precautions he should take for his missionaries, both native and foreign, regarding water, diet, and so on. He received accurate and valuable information pertaining to his specific situation and at the same time scored a huge public relations coup. Imagine a North American asking a local for advice! Imagine a gospel teacher asking his students for input!

### **Final Word**

As teachers, we must all plan carefully and be guided by prayer and inspiration. More of that inspiration will flow if it is unhindered by cultural bias and is fortified by standing firm on principles of doctrine. We will know when to adapt for culture, change stories and examples,

and more effectively enlighten and motivate our students. We will be able to judge when the burden of explaining the meaning of existing material to someone of a different culture outweighs practicality or is totally foreign to his or her interests. At the same time, a level of cultural awareness will enable us to elucidate in clear language when it is important for the learner to understand a historical or doctrinal concept or to abandon a false tradition. Our obligation as teachers of religion is to learn about current cultures (often from the students themselves), as well as those of the past, and, above all, to follow the Savior's example of fitting the message to the audience. By doing so, we will come closer to our objective of changing lives and bringing souls to Christ. **RE**

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## Notes

1. Richard G. Scott, "Removing Barriers to Happiness," *Ensign*, May 1998, 85.
2. Howard W. Hunter, "Counsel to Students and Faculty," Church College of New Zealand, November 12, 1990; quoted in *Ensign*, May 1998, 85.
3. Scott, "Removing Barriers to Happiness," 86.
4. David A. Bednar, "Becoming a Missionary," *Ensign*, November 2005, 44–47.