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UNDERSTANDING
Seeing Through the Other's Eyes

"The key for successful personal relationships and ministry is to understand and accept others as having a viewpoint as worthy of consideration as our own."

SHERWOOD G. LINGENFELTER AND MARVIN K. MAYERS

"No matter how adept an exegete a theologian is, . . . it is all for naught if he does not understand his contemporary audience."

MARK E. VAN HOUTEN

In this chapter we start to see how all the material covered previously begins to come together—like the picture of a puzzle when sufficient pieces are in place. This chapter also introduces the idea of perspectivism, seeing as others see. Perspectivism, lacking in much mission literature, is wonderfully embedded in Scripture and is so important for doing God's work.

DEFINITION OF UNDERSTANDING

Understanding is *the ability to see patterns of behavior and values that reveal the integrity of a people*. Let me say it another way: understanding another culture is the ability to see how the pieces of the cultural puzzle fit together and make sense to them and you. Life in another culture is frus-

trating at first because we do not see the bigger picture, but the wonder of eventually seeing the pieces fit and the picture of understanding appear is exhilarating.

My basic assumption in this chapter is that people usually don't act randomly or stupidly. Those from other cultures may think it random or stupid, but from the local people's perspective, they're thinking or acting out of a larger framework that makes sense to them. People's behavior generally fits within a cultural pattern that works for them and gives them meaning and control in their lives. Too often we assume others are foolish or illogical simply because their reasoning is not self-evident to us.

When we explore the deeply embedded reasons why someone did something, a rational explanation that makes sense to those who share that culture usually emerges. But to those outside of that culture, it doesn't make sense. It's hard to understand why people do what they do. Until we understand, it will be difficult to effectively communicate or to develop any meaningful relationships.

Our visit in Kenya is illustrative. As the Maasai elder approached us, our youngest son, Marc, did as he had been told: "Step forward and bow your head. The elder will put his hand on your head and offer a greeting." It was the way for Maasai children, and we would honor their ways. The Maasai elder proceeded to spit on his head three times. Confusion flooded our minds trying to understand what had just happened. Then Marc stepped back to the side of his mother and said, "Mom, that man spit on me. He spit on me." His mother answered, "Yes, we must wait and see what it means," and the elder stepped forward to greet us in a more traditional Western way.

Later we asked a friend who knew the Maasai how we should interpret the spitting on our son. He laughed and said, "It was a blessing. They do it all the time." Marc didn't feel blessed, and we were skeptical. But with further information we began to understand. The Maasai believe that when it rains on their arid land, God is spitting—God is bless-

ing them. This has a parallel in Scripture, which talks about two kinds of spitting. One was to shame a person by spitting in his or her face (Num 12:14; Deut 25:9; Is 50:6; Mt 26:67). The other kind of spitting was used to bless another person. Different Greek words were used for "spit" meant to shame or bless. Blessing is clearly in mind when Jesus used his spittle in healing people (Mk 7:33; 8:23; cf. Jn 9:6). Our new understanding put everything in perspective.

Maasai also spit in their hands before the handshake to seal a business deal; they spit on infants when they are first brought out into public; and the women rub spit into the forearms of the person they are pleased to see.

A puzzle. A jigsaw puzzle might help us visualize this idea of understanding. As we dump the pieces out on a table, it's a jumbled mass of disconnected pieces. Assume you don't have the front of the box to give you the final picture. Makes things harder, huh? It often feels that way when entering a new culture. All the pieces are there, but they make no sense, and we have no picture to guide us. It's rather daunting.

Assembling the pieces of a culture so we can see the bigger picture and to understand how it all fits together takes patience and perseverance. The transition from seeing a heap of unrelated pieces to seeing the integrated beauty of the culture is a very rewarding journey. Yes, there are parts of any culture that aren't beautiful, just as there are flaws in our own culture, but the "picture" that emerges, piece by piece, should make more and more sense. Just as my family gained insight into the spitting of the Maasai elder, our understanding of any culture comes piece by piece. Each new insight provides ability to function more comfortably and more effectively.

A tapestry. A tapestry also illustrates the process of understanding another culture. A tapestry is pieces of cord or yarn that are woven together to form a picture or design, which when finished is hung on a wall. When we look at the front side of the tapestry, we see the picture. But

when we look at the back side of the tapestry, we see a confusion of dangling threads, no pattern or theme. Entering a new culture is like seeing the back side of a tapestry—there's no obvious pattern or picture to help us understand the culture.

We must discipline ourselves to see the patterns of the new culture. Cultural understanding emerges slowly, over time. Occasionally we get a peek at the front side of the tapestry, where bits of pattern emerge. Eventually we are no longer overwhelmed by of the back of the tapestry because we see more and more the pattern on the front. Most of us want this to happen quickly. Actually, it takes months and years to see clearly, because cultures are complex and varied. Nevertheless, we must continually work at it even if our stay is short.

Listen to some experts. Anthropologists Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers comment, "Missionaries, by the nature of their task, must become personally immersed with peoples who are very different. To follow the example of Christ, that of incarnation, means undergoing drastic personal reorientation."[1] The responsibility to change is ours. William Gudykunst, a cross-cultural researcher, says, "One of the major factors influencing our effectiveness in communicating with people from other cultures is our ability to understand their culture."[2] Cornelius Osgood, an expert on China, writes, "The greater the understanding of the people of one society by another, the greater the possibility for meaningful communication, beneficial exchange, increased appreciation and the reduction of fear."[3] Veteran missiologist David Hesselgrave says, "Missionaries must come to an even greater realization of the importance of culture in communicating Christ. In the final analysis, they can effectively communicate to the peo-

"Understanding is the basis of care. What you would take care of you must first understand, whether it be a petunia or a nation."

DALLAS WILLARD

ple of any given culture to the extent that they understand that culture."[4]

Just about any book you read in cross-cultural ministry or cross-cultural communication will emphasize the need for understanding the other person, the other generation, the other ethnic group before attempting any serious communication. Learning a language is an important first step. But learning how to form the message so that it is received by the hearer requires much more commitment to culture learning. Otherwise, we may be nothing more than grammatically correct fools or, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 13:1, "clanging cymbals."

Biblical Perspectives on Understanding

The Bible exhorts us to understand God and his ways. For example, Job declares that God is so great he is beyond understanding (Job 36:26). Yet he graciously gives understanding of many things (Job 32:8; 1 Jn 5:20). The book of Proverbs tells us to apply our hearts to understanding (Prov 2:2) while being careful not to rely on our own understanding (Prov 3:5). Rather, get your understanding through a "knowledge of the Holy One" (Prov 9:10). Understanding God is priceless (Prov 4:7; 16:16); it's a fountain of life (Prov 16:22). With God as the source of understanding, the wise person will meditate on his Word and contemplate creation, which whispers and shouts the glory of God.

The Bible says we can gain understanding from the general revelation of creation and the special revelation of God's Word. Psalm 19 represents the clearest portrayal of understanding from creation. King David, the writer, exuberantly states that the heavens declare, the skies proclaim, the days speak, the nights reveal, every nook and cranny of creation instructs us. Listen:

> The heavens declare the glory of God;
> the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
> Day after day they pour forth speech;

night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world. (Ps 19:1-4)

Then David slides seamlessly from the understanding we glean from creation to the understanding we glean from the "law of the Lord" (Ps 19:7). He declares that creation and God's Word are both valuable sources of truth. Creation and Scripture proclaim the same message, because the God, who is the source of all truth, has given us both.

Another passage of Scripture with compelling insight on creation and understanding comes from Paul's letter to the Romans. This passage, harsh in its message, also motivates us to share the good news of forgiveness through Christ's death and resurrection. God's anger is poured out against all humanity because of sin. All humans are guilty and condemned for one reason: we have rejected the understanding of God that comes through creation.

> Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.
>
> For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God, nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom 1:19-21)

God speaks through creation and through his Word. People have a choice when God's voice comes to them. Most choose to ignore it. But as long as they draw breath, they may yet respond to his voice—perhaps God's voice through you.

Understanding is important for the following reasons:

- God says that truth is available through the Scripture (special revelation) and through creation (general revelation). By inference, that means we may learn about God as we learn about other cultures. He has not revealed all of his knowledge and wisdom to the Western cultures alone or to any one culture. But each culture can make a significant contribution to our understanding about who God is and how he works in this world.
- When we seek to understand and learn from other cultures, we honor God. God gives us additional insight and wisdom as we gain knowledge from others. Learning and understanding are sacred activities because they draw us closer to God and creation.
- As we understand a new culture, we can more completely fit into it. In earlier days this was called "identification" but is now called "incarnation." *Incarnation* is the theological word for the truth that the Son of God took human flesh, entered human culture and lived as we live (but without sin). Similarly, missionaries are called to incarnate Christ in a new culture by understanding and adjusting to local realities and living out God's kingdom values.
- Understanding brings new perspectives. Assuming we are *open* and have built *trust,* people will share their lives with us. We can learn *from* them and gradually understand the new culture; we acquire new perspectives. The ability to add new perspectives to those we already bring from our own culture is one of the neglected pieces in cross-cultural effectiveness.[5] But there are barriers.

Egocentrism

Egocentrism is *the tendency for each of us to believe that the way we think, believe and act is the best way*—the superior way. We then measure all others by how close they come to "our way." If they are close to our way of

thinking and doing things, we accept them, draw closer to them and think positively about them. If they don't "measure up," we become suspicious and try to change them. If they don't respond favorably, we may reject them by avoiding them. There are many ways of showing disfavor. Another word for "measuring" others is to *judge* them. The highly egocentric person regularly evaluates people to see if they live up to his or her standards. If not, they are deemed defective and untrustworthy. But if they measure up, they are received into a circle of trusted friends.

Continuous evaluation of others, usually unconscious, has disastrous effects in cross-cultural friendships. In a new culture nearly everything is different. The tendency then is to judge everything as inferior, needing change, substandard. Our behavior will reveal these underlying attitudes and be seen by local people as judgmental, arrogant, paternalistic—neocolonialistic.

When a group shares common values and wholeheartedly adheres to these, it is called ethnocentrism—a group centeredness—which can be a second barrier to cross-cultural understanding.[6]

Ethnocentrism (Revisited)

Ethnocentrism—literally ethnic-centeredness or culture-centeredness—is not necessarily bad; after all, we all have group loyalty, even national loyalty. However, it becomes a negative when we are imprisoned by it and resist changing. Carley Dodd explains that ethnocentrism is "the cultural attitude that one's culture or group is superior to another person's culture or group."[7] W. G. Sumner adds another dimension: "Ethnocentrism is the technical name for the view in which one's own group is the center of everything and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it."[8] In egocentrism *my* ways are superior to yours; in ethnocentrism, *our* ways are superior to *yours*. The group believes it is superior. Again, all of us are ethnocentric to some degree. Ethnocentrism is valuable when it creates solidarity among group members and fosters group

pride. I have yet to meet anyone not essentially proud of their culture, even if they are among the most poor and marginalized. So if they detect that we look down on their culture, they are naturally hurt. Because most of our egocentrism and ethnocentrism is unconscious, others see it but we are mostly unaware.

Gladis DePree, a missionary to Hong Kong, exposed her ethnocentric attitude when she confessed, "I can't see why people get so perturbed about identifying with the culture. To me, the whole thing is ridiculous. Why shouldn't I be myself? We have our ways and they have theirs."[9] I suspect many of us have mumbled something similar as we struggled to adjust to a new culture. This ugly side of ethnocentrism appears as cultural arrogance. Monitor your thoughts and even your words; see if this is not true. It was true for me more times than I want to believe. Ethnocentrism forever lurks within me, within us! Fortunately, most of us realize it is an unhealthy attitude. So what do we do about it?

Stop Comparing

I am a firm believer in being aware of my thoughts, fleeting as they may be, and how they influence me. I work at this because I want to jettison some unproductive patterns. For example, even though my South Africa experience was wonderful, in the early days I constantly compared things there with things back home—roads, sanitation, dress, punctuality, living conditions, workmanship, food, driving patterns, smells, church services, leadership styles, decision making, conflict management, relationships, recreation, phone service, organization and so on—until I was exhausted from dealing with all the inferiorities around me, wondering why I ever left home. South Africa, beautiful in so many ways, always came up short. But what good did this comparing do? It didn't change anything and only left me feeling depressed and lonely.

Here is what I did—self-talk. *Stop it!* I told myself maybe twenty or more times a day, *and get on with living here and fitting in.* I had to inten-

tionally interrupt the pattern of judging the new culture. *Stay open. Accept things as they are,* I kept saying to myself. *Remember openness and acceptance! Focus on building trust. Learn. Understand. You can do this.*

In time I broke the negative pattern; I stopped evaluating and criticizing the pieces of the puzzle, and I began to see how they fit together and made sense. Sometimes I slipped, but mostly I began to see people as God's image-bearers with all the dignity he bestowed on them. I saw culture as a puzzle that, seen as a whole, would have striking beauty and integrity. There were obvious scars revealing that sin had its corrupting effect on the culture, but the beauty persisted. I watched others who were adept at navigating the culture to see what attitudes and skills contributed to their understanding. These simple but strategic activities reoriented me in the right direction. And now, thirty-five years later, those skills continue to guide me.

Some comparison is perfectly normal. We often connect a new experience to something in our past. That's OK—for a while. But work on minimizing so you can appreciate the new culture for its own sake, not in reference to your home culture.

Look for Good, Beauty and Common Grace

The Pianist, a movie, recounts the human and physical devastation of World War II. An accomplished Jewish pianist emerges from the rubble of the Warsaw buildings and hides from the occupying Nazis. In the rubble he discovers a piano, and when he is sure no one will hear, he begins to play. In the sound of his own music he finds comfort and temporary escape from fear and gnawing hunger. Soon a German officer who has established an office among the destroyed buildings hears the beautiful music, which also brings momentary peace to his own soul. The officer discovers that the pianist is a Jew. One day the pianist, always on the brink of starvation, sees a package that had not been there the day before. Inside the package is bread. He would live another day. He would

play the piano one more time. The bread begins to appear regularly. Both the German officer and the Jewish pianist live by the kindness of the other and, ultimately, by the kindness of God.

The film, dark in nature because of the devastation of war, had rays of good, of beauty, of God's grace: a piano in working condition, music that soothed the hunter and hunted, bread to eat, peace periodically invading the guilty and fearful, and life, raw life. By God's grace people can be kind to each other, create beauty, love each other, build families and cultures. Sin and its effects are always with us, but if we obsess over them we overlook the wonder of God's presence in people and their various cultures. Look for the good and the beautiful, and when you see it you will see God's grace.

Children Ministering God's Grace

In Rwanda, shortly after the human carnage and while mass graves were still being dug up, my wife and I visited an orphanage in the southern part of the country. Many of the five-to-twelve-year-old children had fled into the jungle during the war. They never found their parents and ended up at this orphanage, which is surrounded by heavy jungle. The buildings were basic. The dorm was one rectangular room with rows of bunk beds only inches apart. Two to four children, depending on size, slept in each bed. They either slept sideways or bigger children would sleep with heads at opposite ends, each dodging the other's feet. There were no toys or balls or playground equipment. Knotted rags served as a soccer ball. Everything was dirt or mud when it rained. Food was minimal.

After the director, an American missionary, showed us around, he called a group of children together and asked them to sing and dance for the unexpected guests. They did, with joyful enthusiasm and infectious smiles. These children, who had nothing but their lives and some rags that passed as clothes, ministered joy to my own heart—and with conviction. So often I complain at small things, momentarily forgetting my

incredible wealth in Christ, in my family, in my culture and in my possessions. The orphans, so young with so little, showed me how to see, how to value, how to live and how to recognize God's grace.

PERSPECTIVISM

Another fruitful way to deal with ethnocentricism is getting to know well two or three local people. Doing so should (1) break down any stereotypes and prejudices you may be carrying, (2) give you opportunities to get specific answers to questions, (3) create some positive emotional bonds with host people, (4) provide you with daily companions who can share life's situations with you, and (5) help you get an insider's perspective, that is, help you see things, understand things and interpret the world more as they do.

Getting the insiders' perspective, sometimes called perspectivism or perspective taking, means you begin to see as the local people see.[10] It's like having double vision: seeing the world through your own cultural lenses and also being able to see more and more clearly through the lenses of another culture. Taking another's perspective is never easy; it means we must set aside our ethnocentrism to try to see how they see, to think like they think, to value as they value. This doesn't mean that we set aside any of our biblical principles, just that we get a deeper understanding of the people and culture.

"It may be difficult to teach a person to respect another unless we can help people to see things from the other's point of view."

KOHEI GOSHI

Why? Why? Why? Forming the habit of asking why helps us to increase our understanding and overcome our ethnocentricism. We are unlikely to ask this critical question if we have already made a negative judgment about someone or their culture. Thus after checking and suspending our initial negative judgments, we must intentionally seek new

insights into the situation to enhance our understanding.

Asking why keeps our mind open to receiving new information. It prompts us to search for answers, for understanding. We need to know more because knowing leads to understanding and empathy, which opens the door to more effective ministry with people.[11]

Below are a series of illustrations that reveal how people discovered cultural understanding by getting another's perspective. Some illustrations show the horrible results when we try to do important things without first getting the perspective of the local people.

Crushing crowds rather than lines. Having lived in South Africa for a number of years (and in Zimbabwe briefly), and having lots of experience in North American airports, I was accustomed to nice, neat lines where people patiently waited their turn. Arriving for the first time at the Manila airport, I assumed I'd find the same kinds of lines. Instead, there was this huge mass of bodies all pressing against each other trying to reach the ticket counter. Should I go to the furthest end of this mass? It would take forever. Should I try to angle in from the side? That seemed rude. Should I go to a restaurant and come back just in time to board? Only at the risk of having my seat given away. So I plunged into the crowd. At any given time there were two or three suitcases pressing against me. I tried to keep a respectful inch away from the suitcase of the person in front of me. That didn't work. People kept edging the corner of their luggage into the inch of space, and I was now obligated to let them in. Until I learned the rules and played by them, I lost ground. (Did I mention the suffocating heat?)

Carley Dodd had a similar experience in India buying a transportation ticket.

> We got there early (like good Americans) and secured our place in front of the ticket window. Nobody else was around so we felt confident that our waiting would be minimal once the window

> opened. However, when the ticket window opened, about one hundred people came out of nowhere and crowded around us, squeezing us out of what we thought was our place in line. After a half hour of standing in the same place while everyone else crowded in front, we finally realized that is this culture there was no such thing as a "line"—it was everyone for himself. Once we understood that, we soon had our tickets.[12]

Dodd explains that many cultures of the world do not think in linear ways—in terms of straight lines. Nor do they have the same sense of personal space. These differences represent ways cultures have evolved. We might prefer one or the other way, but to survive and prosper in another culture, we must see, think and do as the nationals.

I'm yours for life. In many parts of the world the patron-client system, along with many accompanying assumptions, is deeply embedded. In North America, the patron-client relationship is encountered in anthropology books. Patrons (owners, landlords, the wealthy) hire people, called clients, to work for them. In North America we would call this an employer-employee relationship, but very different assumptions underlie the two systems, which cause serious problems.

Often, clients don't see themselves simply as employees but as faithful workers who will, until death, receive wages, health benefits and general protection from the patron. That is, clients see employment as a lifelong arrangement. Many countries have laws whereby the patrons must give these lifetime benefits to the clients. As such, the client's retirement, social security and health coverage is tied to the patron.

Missionaries and relief and development workers have discovered this accidentally. When they hire a local person for a job, the missionaries assume that this is a contract that is good for a limited time—as long as they wish to employ the person. If the missionaries are unhappy with the person's job performance, they may sever the relationship and hire

someone else, believing they have no further obligation to the client (employee). However, the client took the job believing that he or she would be employed and protected for life.[13] But the fact is with many missionaries or mission agencies, the patron and client often come to the arrangement with very different sets of assumptions.

Why do other cultures operate this way? One reason is found in the financial arrangement. Most of the clients hire themselves to patrons at a very cheap wage. The reason they take a job for such cheap wages is that they assume that this is a lifetime arrangement and even though they will never get rich, they will be protected for the rest of their life. The missionary who does not understand this will be in for a surprise and maybe a lawsuit.

A Christian organization headquartered in the United States had several Westerners in the Philippines, but it also employed a sizable number of Filipinos who would have the responsibility for managing affairs in their own country. Things went relatively smoothly until the organization decided to leave the Philippines and turn all the work over to the Filipinos they had employed, assuming that they could neatly sever the patron-client relationships. The Filipinos, on the other hand, had been working rather cheaply, and they were assuming that their income, health care and security were secured for life by the American organization. Things got quite messy, including lawsuits by the Philippine government. This lack of understanding proved costly in many ways.

Do you understand? Westerners who have just given some kind of instruction or direction to a local person will usually end with, "Do you understand?" Rarely will a local person respond, "No, I don't understand"—even when they don't. This, of course, causes frustration because the lack of understanding usually reveals itself sooner or later. So why this confusion?

In shame-based cultures, a person tries to *never* respond in the negative. To say no to someone is considered harsh or rude. Furthermore, to

say "I don't understand" is to imply that the person explaining was not clear. Thus we would cause this person shame or loss of face to say "I don't understand" after we have just given directions. Or the person hearing "Do you understand?" may feel shame or lose face if they really don't understand. They avoid this disgrace by answering in the affirmative. If the person saying "Do you understand" is the boss, patron or a high status person (and this is often the case), to say no would cause the client (employee) to lose face. So, the client always says, "Yes, I understand." Obviously, the consequences are usually negative, but for the moment everyone saves face.

Eunice and the roses. Eunice was a Zulu lady who worked for us when we lived in South Africa. In our front yard were dozens of rose bushes. One of Eunice's responsibilities each day during blooming season was to pick a few roses for the center of our table.

Which roses would you pick for your dining table? Where I came from, it would have been the younger roses about to burst open or the ones that had opened just that day. This made sense because these would be the most beautiful, and they would also last for a few days when placed in water. Eunice apparently didn't see it that way. The roses she brought in were the oldest, petals browning at the edges, drooping and even falling off. We had dozens of beautiful ones. Why did she pick the least attractive for our table? It irritated me, and I wondered if she was making some kind of negative statement about us. My wife didn't think so. Perhaps the Zulu view of beauty was different from ours.

Actually, we never talked to Eunice about her reasoning, fearing she may think we were unhappy with her work. But there are two plausible interpretations. Eunice may have had a different view of people than we did. She came from a collectivistic culture where people don't think as individualistically as we do in the West.[14] Beauty was to be first shared with one's community and then with one's family. Eunice, sensitive to the neighbors and those walking by, wanted them to enjoy the beautiful

flowers. When the last moments of beauty came, she would pick them for the house. If a person had resources such as beautiful roses, he or she had an obligation to share that beauty with others for their enjoyment.

Another possible interpretation is that Eunice's view of beauty was different from ours. Perhaps for her, beauty was in the largeness and fullness of the flower, not in the bud or the early phases of unfolding. Beauty looks different to different people. Whereas I wondered if Eunice was making a negative statement about us in some way, maybe she was opening our eyes to another way of seeing beauty and how we could share beauty with others. Trying to understand Eunice's way of seeing helped me understand her; it caused me to be less quick to judge her and helped me make a small step toward a new perspective. When wider perspectives and broader understanding replace narrowness, we become better people.

The tricky business of generosity. Jason Saunders tells a story about gift giving.

> I constantly offered to do things for [Boli Zhiang] that he graciously refused. One time, I offered to get his computer fixed for free. He thanked me profusely yet had his computer fixed at a store. I was confused and troubled by this. Then his [friend] explained that to be in my debt, without an obvious means of returning the favor, would be, for him, a loss of face because he was ten years older than me. This meant that if I wanted to do something nice for him, I had to arrange for him to help me in some way.[15]

Jason discovered that giving a gift can be complicated, and understanding the cultural rules important. It involves age, status, saving or losing face, perceptions of gaining or losing honor, and economics (i.e., being too indebted, too obligated to another). It's just one piece of the puzzle or a loose string on the back of the tapestry until we begin to see its place in the bigger picture, then it becomes part of an integrated, cohesive whole.

Understanding changes us in ways that help us build relationships for sensitive, culturally appropriate serving or, put another way, to be Jesus wherever God puts us.

Check Your Motives

Getting the other's perspective is not easy—and it's not easy because of our ethnocentrism. When we enter another culture and stay bound to our ethnocentrism, local people notice we aren't there to learn from them but to teach them; we won't ask questions but will give answers; we aren't there to be with them but to train them; we won't build trust but will attempt to transform them; we're not there to dialogue but to lecture. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, calls this a "subject-object relationship." Unchecked ethnocentrism turns human beings into objects to be manipulated. Freire also says that such relationships are not

> to exchange ideas, but to dictate them; not to debate or discuss themes, but to give lectures; not to work with the student but to work on him, imposing an order to which he has had to accommodate. By giving the student formulas to receive and store, we have not offered him the means for authentic thought.[16]

When people are treated as having no dignity, the image of God they bear is profaned even further. Thus in our zeal to do the work of God, we may in fact be working against God's purposes.

The ultimate perspective is God's perspective—we should try to see things as he sees them. For example, God calls himself our Father and he calls us his children. As Father he always looks out for our best interest. He may say no to our prayers because his perspective on that situation is far better than ours; what we are asking for may hurt us. While knowing these facts growing up, it was not until I became a father that I began to get a much better grip on God's perspective. As I held our firstborn, Scott, I realized there was nothing I would not do for him.

Then I realized much more deeply that was exactly how my heavenly Father felt about me. I love my son unconditionally, the same way my heavenly Father loves me. I would sacrifice anything, even my life, in order for Scott to live. And so my heavenly Father did that for me through his Son, Jesus. I understand God's perspective on being a father, and I look for his perspective on other matters: suffering, loving my enemies, reaching a lost world, extending mercy, living justly, stewarding my time and resources.

Going from the Natural to the Unnatural

Everyone is ethnocentric. It's natural to believe that we do things the best way. So it's unnatural for the cross-cultural servant to assume that other cultures have been blessed by God. But when we discover the validity of other cultures' ways (though maybe not all their ways), we not only discover the beauty and diversity of God's own character, but we discover something about ourselves and are freed to change in ways that better reveal our Creator to others.

Seeing things as others see them is the way of the servant. Seeing things the way God sees them is the way of the disciple: "Pay attention to my wisdom, listen well to my words of insight" (Prov 5:1). In the Christian pilgrimage to servanthood, God's wisdom, his understanding, leads us to serving others.