

Concept Fulfillment

Don Richardson

When a missionary enters another culture, he is conspicuously foreign, and that is to be expected. But often the gospel he preaches is labeled foreign. How can he explain the gospel so it seems culturally right?

The New Testament way seems to be through concept fulfillment. Consider:

—The Jewish people practiced lamb sacrifice. John the Baptist proclaimed Jesus as the perfect, personal fulfillment of that sacrifice by saying, "Behold the *Lamb of God*, who takes away the sin of the world!"

This is concept fulfillment.

—Nicodemus, a Jewish teacher, knew that Moses had lifted up a serpent of brass upon a pole, so that Jews when dying of snakebite could look at it and be healed.

Jesus promised: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

This, too, is concept fulfillment.

—A Jewish multitude, recalling that Moses had provided miraculous manna on a six-day-a-week basis, hinted that Jesus ought to repeat His miracle of the loaves and fishes on a similar schedule.

Jesus replied, "Moses gave you not the *true* bread from heaven. The true bread from heaven is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...I am that Bread of Life!"

Once again, concept fulfillment.

When some charged that Christianity was destroying the Jewish culture, the writer to the Hebrews showed how Christ actually fulfilled all the central elements of Jewish culture—the priesthood, tabernacle, sacrifices, and even the Sabbath Rest. Let's call these *redemptive analogies*—looking for their fulfillment in Christ. Their God-ordained purpose was to pre-condition the Jewish mind to recognize Jesus as Messiah.



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Application Today

The strategy of concept fulfillment can be applied by missionaries today—if only we learn to discern the particular redemptive analogies of each culture.

Consider the advantage: when conversion is accompanied by concept fulfillment, the individuals redeemed become aware of the spiritual meaning dormant within their own culture. Conversion does not deny their cultural background, leaving them disoriented. Rather they experience heightened insight into both the Scriptures and their own human setting, and are thus better prepared to share Christ meaningfully with other members of their own societies. See how concept fulfillment has worked in other cultures:

Examples in Other Cultures

The Damal and "Hai"

Less than one generation ago, the *Damal* people of Irian Jaya were living in the Stone Age. A subservient tribe, they lived under the shadow of a politically more powerful people called the Dani.

What hope could there be, you may ask, of finding a redemptive analogy in such a Stone Age setting?

And yet the *Damal* talked of a concept called *hai*. *Hai* was a *Damal* term for a long anticipated golden age, a Stone Age utopia in which wars would cease, men would no longer oppress one another, and sickness would be rare.

Mugumenday, a *Damal* leader, had yearned to see the advent of *hai*. At the end of his life, Mugumenday called his son Dem to his side and said: "My son, *hai* has not come during my lifetime: now you must watch for *hai*. Perhaps it will come before you die."

Years later, Gordon Larson, John Ellenburger, and Don Gibbons and their wives entered the *Damal* valley where Dem lived. After tackling the *Damal* language they began to teach the gospel.

The people, including Dem, listened politely. Then one day...

"O my people!" Dem, now a mature adult, had risen to his feet. "How long our forefathers searched for *hai*. How sadly my father died without seeing it. But now, don't you understand, these strangers have brought *hai* to us! We must believe their words, or we will miss the fulfillment of our ancient expectation."

A breakthrough began. Virtually the entire population welcomed the gospel. Within a few years congregations sprang up in nearly every *Damal* village.

But that was not the end.

The Dani and "Nabelan-Kabelan"

The Dani, haughty overlords of the *Damal*, were intrigued by all the excitement. Curious, they sent *Damal*-speaking representatives to inquire. Learning that the *Damal* were rejoicing in the fulfillment of their ancient hope, the Dani were stunned. They too had been waiting for the fulfillment of something they called *nabelan-kabelan*—the belief that one day immortality would return to mankind.

Was it possible that the message which was *hai* to the Damal could also be *nabelan-kabelan* to the Dani?

By then Gordon and Peggy Larson had been assigned to work among the Dani. Dani warriors now recalled that they often mentioned "words of life," and a man named Jesus who not only could raise the dead but also rose again Himself.

Suddenly everything fell into place for the Dani as it had for the Damal. The word spread. In valley after valley the once barbarous Dani listened to the words of life. A church was born.

Concept fulfillment.

The Karen and a black book

The Karen tribe in Burma had a legend that one day a teacher of truth would appear, and he would carry a black object tucked under his arm. This first missionary to come among them always carried a black, leather-covered Bible tucked under his arm. The Karen listened with rapt attention every time he took the Bible out from under his arm and preached.

Triggered by this catalyzing cultural element, a great moving of the Spirit of God soon swept thousands of Karen into the Church of Jesus Christ. Yet some studies of the phenomenal growth of the church among the Karen fail to mention this detail.

The Asmat and a new birth

When Jesus told Nicodemus he must be born again, Nicodemus was astounded. Even though he was well educated he met Jesus' assertion with a naively literal, almost childish objection:

"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter into his mother's womb a second time and be born?"

Surely if a theologian like Nicodemus had that hard a time comprehending the meaning of "new birth," then a naked, illiterate, stone-age cannibal would have a thousand times more difficulty.

On the contrary, one part of Irian Jaya's Asmat tribe have a way of making peace which requires representatives from two warring villages to pass through a symbolic birth canal formed by the bodies of a number of men and women from both villages. Those who pass through the canal are considered *reborn* into the kinship systems of their respective enemy villages. Rocked, lullabied, cradled, and coddled like new-born infants, they become the focus of a joyful celebration. From then on they may travel freely back and forth between the two formerly warring villages, serving as living peace bonds.

For no one knows how many centuries, this custom has impressed deeply upon the Asmat mind a vital concept: *True peace can come only through a new birth experience!*

Suppose God called you to communicate the gospel to these Asmat people. What would be your logical starting point? Let us assume you have learned their language and are competent to discuss the things dear to their hearts.

One day you visit a typical Asmat man—let's call him Erypeet—in his longhouse. First you discuss with him a former period of war and the new birth transaction which brought it to an end. Then...

"Erypeet, I too am very interested in new birth. You see, I was at war with an enemy named God. While I was at war with God, life was grim, as it was for you and your enemies.

"But one day my enemy God approached me and said, 'I have prepared a new birth whereby I can be born in you and you can be born again in Me, so that we can be at peace...'"

By this time Erypeet is leaning forward on his mat, asking,

"You and your people have a new birth too?" He is amazed to find that you, an alien, are sophisticated enough to even *think* in terms of a new birth, let alone *experience* one!

"Yes," you reply.

"Is it like ours?"

"Well, Erypeet, there are some similarities, and there are some differences. Let me tell you about them..."

Erypeet understands.

What makes the difference between Erypeet's and Nicodemus's responses? Erypeet's mind has been pre-conditioned by an Asmat redemptive analogy to acknowledge man's need for a new birth. Our task is simply to convince him that he needs *spiritual* rebirth.

Do redemptive analogies like these occur by mere coincidence? Because their strategic use is foreshadowed in the New Testament, and because they are so widespread, we discern the grace of God working. Our God, after all, is far too sovereign to be merely lucky.

But has anyone found a culture lacking concepts suitable for redemptive analogies?

The Yali and "Osuwa"

A formidable candidate for this grim distinction was the cannibal Yali culture of Irian Jaya. If ever a tribe needed some Christ-foreshadowing belief a missionary could appeal to, it was the Yali.

By 1966 missionaries of the Regions Beyond Missionary Union had succeeded in winning about twenty Yali to Christ. Priests of the Yali god Kembu promptly martyred two of the twenty. Two years later they killed missionaries Stan Dale and Phillip Masters, driving about one hundred arrows into each of their bodies. Then the Indonesian government, also threatened by the Yali, stepped in to quell further uprisings. Awed by the power of the government, the Yali decided they would rather have missionaries than soldiers. But the missionaries could find no analogy in Yali culture to make the gospel clear.

Last year another missionary and I conducted a much belated "culture probe" to learn more about Yali customs and beliefs. One day a young Yali named Erariek shared with us the following story from his past:

"Long ago my brother Sunahan and a friend named Kahalek were ambushed by enemies from across the river. Kahalek was killed, but Sunahan fled to a circular stone wall nearby. Leaping inside it, he turned, bared his chest at his enemies, and laughed at them. The enemies immediately lowered their weapons and hurried away."

I nearly dropped my pen. "Why didn't they kill him?" I asked.

Erariek smiled. "If they had shed one drop of my brother's blood while he stood within that sacred stone wall—we call it an *osuwa*—their own people would have killed them."

Yali pastors and the missionaries working with them now have a new evangelistic tool. Christ is the spiritual *Osuwa*, the perfect place of refuge. For Yali culture instinctively echoes the Christian teaching that man needs a place of refuge. Ages earlier they had established a network of *osuwa* in areas where most of their battles took place. Missionaries had noticed the stone walls, but had never ferreted out their full significance.

Redemption and Resistance

Concepts like the Damal's *hai*, the Dani's *nabelan-kabelan*, the Asmat new birth, and the Yali *osuwa*, form the very heart of their cultural life. When outsiders obliterate distinctives like these, something dies within the hearts of the people. But the gospel preserves these concepts. Converts among such tribes then find, along with their personal redemption, that they become resistant to *apathy*, the great destroyer of indigenous peoples overcome by culture shock.

Hundreds of areas remain where response to the gospel has been unsatisfactory or even non-existent. In many of these areas, sensitive culture probes may discover undreamed-of possibilities for spiritual penetration through concept fulfillment. Discouraged missionaries or national pastors may gain fresh confidence in their ability to make the gospel understood.

Study Questions

1. What explanation does Richardson suggest for the prevalence of redemptive analogies in human societies?
2. What connection does Richardson make between the discovery of redemptive analogies and the preservation of tribal societies?

