

The Theology of Assimilation

Joseph F. Nielson, Ph.D.

Introduction

Theology and assimilation bring together religion and a facet of sociology; the process of becoming an integrated member of a group. Theology is the dependent variable and assimilation is the independent variable for the discussion in this paper.

Theology in its literal sense is a study of God (theos and logos). Karl Barth and H. Orton Wiley both state that Jesus Christ Himself is the only true and adequate revelation of God. Barth says it succinctly by saying that God's Word is God's Son in the Christian system.

Assimilation in the context of this paper is the process envisioned of an individual becoming similar to a group. The Latin word "assimilare" means to make similar. We are not concerned with hierarchy and stratification, at least at the initial stage. Our concern is the internalization of a religious group's beliefs and behaviors and the operationalization of those beliefs and behaviors in the individual's life.

A theology of assimilation should show the beliefs and behaviors of a religious group and the steps and stages an individual experience in the internalization process. The Biblical illustration that follows demonstrates theology as Christ, and the steps and stages that articulate becoming and maintaining belongingness in a religious group. The structural-functional beliefs and behaviors of the group are articulated by the sequentiality of the process.

The Theology of Assimilation

A student of Scripture could find a number of Biblical passages that would illustrate a Theology of Assimilation. The Books of Acts is rich in illustrations of assimilation as church planting is prominent. The Corinthian books are rich in adaptive behaviors. Even the Old Testament has assimilative dimensions relating to the history of Israel as the nation changes cultures and environments. This writer has chosen the writings of St. John to define and illustrate a Theology of Assimilation.

The reasons for the choice of John's writings are as follows:

1. John writes after fifty years of pastoral experience at Ephesus.
2. John includes the concept agape which does not appear in the Book of Acts.
3. John includes the preaching and pastoral ministries in his writings.
4. John was with the Master from the beginning of Christ's ministry.
5. John has time in exile to reflect on the impact of the life of Christ, church planting, and the generational transference of the gospel over the years.
6. Our church today is not in the Book of Acts. It is in a stage of institutional crystallization which John experienced.

My analysis of John's writings revolves around the High Priestly prayer of Jesus in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel. I have prepared a model of the prayer with headings designed to show the processual meanings of each idea. The rationale for this approach is as follows. Think of Jesus as a young executive who has been given a three year assignment to develop a new movement among men. God is the heavenly supervisor who outlined the steps and patterns that Jesus should take to accomplish His purpose.

Jesus begins the prayer with "Father the time has come I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave Me to do." It is only natural that a young executive reporting of his superior would outline point by point what he accomplished in relation to his assignment. John listened intently to the prayer and remembered how Jesus operationalized the dimensions of His work on earth. The gospel was written to show Jesus fulfilled the sevenfold mission that was assigned to Him.

The accompanying model is designed to show John's understanding of Christ' s ministry, as this writer sees it. Notice the similarity of the language in the prayer and the language of the gospel narratives. Key words are identifiable as John remembers the ministry and life of Christ. Christ profiles His Mission and then prays for the assimilative process as believers are of Revelation to develop a theology of assimilation based on the ministry of Christ. The word "transferent" is used to indicate the on-going process of evangelism and assimilation.

As I see it, there are three main areas that make up the assimilative process. These areas all relate to living a holy life.

The first epistle is introduced by a brief resume' of the gospel. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it...this is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you. God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." John then proceeds to show how this gospel - Christ - is assimilated in the church.

The three categories of assimilation are these:

A. I John 1:7

If we walk in the light as He is in the light we have fellowship on with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son purifies us from every sin." Walking in the light is the first basis for being assimilated into the church. Walking in the light illuminates the following assimilative variables:

1. Cleansing - 1:7
2. Fellowship - 1:7
3. Advocacy - 2:1
4. Worldliness - 2:15
5. Anti-Christ's - 2:18

The specific dimension of the beliefs of the Church of the Nazarene in this category revolves around the concept of the holy.

The Scripture states, "Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy." (Lev 19:2). The emphasis is on being holy. Let me illustrate an approach on the matter of being a holy person.

At the time of the reformation four views of God were considered. They were:

- a sovereign God - Calvin
- a justifying God - Luther
- a sacerdotal God - Catholicism
- a holy God - Arminius

These four views of God all surfaced at approximately the same time. Let us analyze each one.

Calvin proposed a sovereign God leading to perseverance. The question I ask is, "Can God be a sovereign God if there are no people over whom to be sovereign?" Sovereignty is a dependent term. Luther advocated a justifying God. Can God be a justifying God if there are no people to justify? Catholicism practiced a sacerdotal God. Can God be a holy God without people to become holy? Calvin, Luther, and Catholicism developed their theology around the lower level of abstraction which is from man's viewpoint of God's attributes related to man's needs rather than God's nature. Holy is the higher level of abstraction which is both transcendent and immanent.

The proliferation of views of God is enormous because the needs of men are varied and many. Thus, in our society today we have a "Possibility God," a "Loving God," "a Positive-thinking God," a "Healing God," a "Sovereign God," a "Pentecostal God," a "Social Concerned God," a "Sacerdotal God." The list is endless and if the internalized view of God is one of these attributes dependent on the interpretation of man's needs; then everyone is "right" in his own right. Thus, it makes little difference at what level you understand and view God.

The Church of the Nazarene is committed to a Holy God and a Holy life which is the highest level of extraction making God's nature the requisite for fulfilling man's needs.

Walking in the light is the assimilative operationalization of the holy.

B. I John 3:3

Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he is pure." Self-discipline is the second category for assimilative behavior. Self-discipline involves the following:

1. Let no one lead you astray - 3:7
2. Love your brother - 3:11
 - a. Lay down your life - 3:16
 - b. Love with action and with truth - 3:19
3. Test the spirits - 4:1
4. Faith in Christ - 5:5

5. Obedience - 5:13

These variables are self-imposed by personal discipline.

The specific dimension of the category "purifying oneself" is man's part in a continual cleansing. The assimilative concept in this dimension is a belief that a person can be freed from sin and does not need to practice suppressionism (the Keswickian position). Our culture with its incessant appeal to the appetites, drives, and emotions which are essential for being human has accentuated suppressionism because life appears to be a constant struggle over the illegitimate gratification of legitimate desires. Let me illustrate what I think is our church's position at this point.

Every human being is born with basic, God-given appetites and drives. When a child is very young, society and the family work together to curb, train, and discipline these essential human characteristics. It is necessary for the family and society to direct these appetites until the child is old enough to direct them for him/herself. As the individual takes over the direction of the appetites and drives he/she is found to be self-centered and desirous of having his/her own way. Self-fulfillment with emphasis on the centrality of self dominates the gratification of the essential appetites. The centrality of self has been developed through being the center of his/her environment during the nine months in the womb and the long dependency period. Not until the child comes to self-direction or accountability does this self-centeredness take on moral implications. The remedy for this central self is cleansing of the self so that "just as the parts of the body were offered in slavery to impurity and to ever increasing wickedness, so now the parts of the body can be offered in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness," (Romans 6:19). Keswickian suppressionism confuses the arousal of legitimate desires with sin. The desires necessary for human existence are not sinful. It is the self that can be cleansed so that these parts of the body can be offered in slavery to righteousness. The Keswickians are infiltrating our society at an alarming rate. We need a renewal of emphasis. The appetites are always directed by self or others, never free to be self-directing.

Every man that has this hope within him purifies himself. The Greek verb means to purify morally. It is used of the Nazirites who disciplined their appetites and desires in order to please God. People need to assimilate this kind of operationalization of purifying oneself.

C. Revelation 1:5-6

The third basis of assimilation is ministering or service "...unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood and made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father." Servanthood is embodied in the admonitions to the seven churches in Asia Minor.

[Greek Words 1](#)

These churches represent the sevenfold ministry of service that each church should incorporate for its people. Each person needs a ministry and all ministries fall into one or more of these church characteristics.

The final assimilation for God' s holy people is the new heaven and new earth. A transcommunal experience of the city without sin and filled with the glory of God.

- Walking in the light
- Self - discipline
- Service for Christ

These comprise the theology of assimilation as John sees it after fifty years of pastoring Ephesus. John' s life spans five generations. No wonder he speaks to fathers, children, mothers and family members. Assimilation has strong transferency in family ties and influences.

John also uses a nice selection of Greek words to show shades of meaning relating to being holy and cleansed:

[Greek words 2](#)

In the gospel John 13:10, he uses three Greek words in one verse to show a distinction in meaning of three dimensions of cleansing.

[Greek Words 3](#)

John's writings present a theology of assimilation as he is the only apostle who lived long enough to observe the gospel in its assimilative dimensions, John realized that Christ did not come to argue any belief or sect. He came to live and preach the coming of the Heavenly Kingdom. Jesus refuted other only when His presentation was interrupted by those who challenged His message. John is presenting his theology of assimilation in the same tradition.

End Note

The idea of Christ functioning as a young executive came from Rev. Henry Heckert, who is a retired elder.

Trans-denotes - over, across, beyond, through as designating relatively position or place, so as to change, absolute change as in transform, completeness of change.

Transcendent to rise above in excellence or degree, outdo in quality or power, to be prior to.

Transfigured-to change the outward form or appearance, to give an exalted meaning or glorified appearance.

Transactant-to carry through.

Transmutual-to change in nature, substance or form, alter in essence or attributes.

Transparent-easy to see through, frank, sincere.

transferent-the removal of a thing from one person or place to another.

Transcommunal-belonging to the community, mutual communication of thoughts or feelings, to converse or confer intimately or confidentially.

* Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language. 1959.