

G o d ' s M e a n i n g s v i a C u l t u r a l F o r m s  
B y R o b e r t S t r a u s s , D M i s s

Kraft argues that the form / meaning distinction, if not the most important skill in cross-cultural communication, is one of the most important skills (1997:145). The purpose of this paper is to “think through” this model of culture analysis. What are the meanings of the terms – form, function, meaning, and usage? What are the distinctions between these terms? In what ways can these distinctions help the cross-cultural Christian worker in communication?

Because Kraft<sup>1</sup> introduces this subject in the anthropological/missiological literature, I will refer to his definitions for the terms.<sup>2</sup> Kraft argues that *form* refers to any cultural element – a material object, a word, an idea, or a ritual. The term *function* refers to the intended purpose of that form in a society. For example, a cell phone is intended to be used as a communication device. The term *meaning* refers to what the forms are intended to convey denotatively and connotatively.<sup>3</sup> The term *usage* refers to what people do with the form. For example, although a cell phone is intended to be used as a communication device, someone may use it as a status symbol.

Using the common cultural form of a *handshake*, the following table provides an illustration for the definitions for form, function, meaning, and usage. At first, the

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Charles H. Kraft, 1979 *Christianity in Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, pp. 64 – 80. (Also see Downs 1975; Luzbetak 1963; Nida 1960; Nida and Reyburn 1981; Hiebert 1985)

<sup>2</sup> Kraft notes that the first use of these terms and their distinct designations was by Ralph Linton in “The Study of Man,” written in 1936 and published by Appleton Century Croft Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> Denotative refers to the literal explicit meaning assigned by culture to a form. For example, the word “red” refers to a specific color (different from purple and orange). This specific color designation is the denotative meaning. Connotative refers to the ideas, feelings, and values associated with the word “red.” For example, “red” may also be used in the expressions, “red neck,” “to be in the red,” and “take a red-eye.”

category of “form” seems simple and straightforward. The table shows the complexity of the “form” category.

Form	Function	Meaning	Usage(s)
Handshake (how long; how firm a grip; how many shakes; how rigorous a shake; eyes looking where; other hand; body position – seated or standing; verbal accompaniment; optional for other party; when – meeting, departing, middle of conversation; dry vs. sweaty palm; grip four fingers or palm; speed of body movement; motion from elbow or shoulder; substitutes if hands full; what if you are wearing gloves; etc.)	Social Exchange - Informal Greeting - Congratulations  Economic Exchange - Business Transaction	<input type="checkbox"/> Courtesy – good will <input type="checkbox"/> Commonality <input type="checkbox"/> Type of personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Indicate friendship</li> <li>▪ Introduction</li> <li>▪ Pastor – to express care</li> <li>▪ Politician – to win vote</li> <li>▪ Identify a Boy Scout</li> <li>▪ Higher status initiates handshake</li> <li>▪ Transmission of common cold virus</li> <li>▪ Agree to a business contract (in the past)</li> </ul>

Table 1

There is difficulty in always making clear distinctions between function, meaning, and usage. Sometimes the definitions of these three categories cross over or intersect. For example, when a handshake is used to congratulate someone for an accomplishment, is the congratulation a function of the handshake or is it the meaning of the handshake, or is it the usage? On some occasions, it is difficult to differentiate. Kraft states that he uses the term *meaning* to sometimes include all three – function, meaning, and usage (1997:137). In fact, Kraft argues that the form / meaning distinction

is only possible conceptually (1997:145), but at the same time they are always separable conceptually (1997:147).<sup>4</sup>

Kraft makes the following summary statements about the form / meaning correlation (1997:140 – 144):

1. Communication is made possible because people have shared meaning in cultural forms.
2. The same form in another culture will have at least some different meanings.<sup>5</sup>
3. The same meaning in another culture is often represented by different forms.
4. In cross-cultural communication if one uses an inappropriate form, the meaning will be wrong.<sup>6</sup>

In what ways can the distinction between form and meaning help the cross-cultural Christian worker in communication? Romans 16:16 is perhaps an obvious illustration. Romans 16:16 says, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” This injunction is found four other times in the New Testament. In studying the culture of Palestine, it is evident that one form of greeting was and is a kiss.<sup>7</sup>

Using the format from Table 1, consider the following analysis of Romans 16:16:

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<sup>4</sup> Hiebert says that *symbols* are the form and meaning linked (1985:142). He uses the terms “symbol” and “form” interchangeably. Hiebert argues that Western cultures tend to separate form and meaning, but that traditional cultures tend to equate them. He does agree with Kraft that a distinction is warranted. Hiebert identifies several symbols where form and meaning would be difficult to separate – the cross in Christianity, the city of Mecca in Islam, a child’s cry, an adult’s laughter, and an injured person’s groans.

<sup>5</sup> This second statement proves that a distinction between form and meaning is possible conceptually.

<sup>6</sup> Hiebert argues that the separation of form and meaning is attributable to the epistemological shift from positivism to critical realism (1989:105).

<sup>7</sup> Kraft argues for an anthropologically informed theology that consistently distinguishes between supracultural meanings and cultural forms (1979:116).

Form	Function	Meaning	Usage(s)
Kiss	Common Greeting	Courtesy to “one another”; “holy” (no immoral or impure overtures)	

Table 1b

The text itself does not explain all of the related complexities to the kiss (cp. the handshake in Table 1). The question for the Bible translator and for the cross-cultural missionary is as follows, “Is the New Testament telling all Christians in all cultures for all times to greet each other with the form of greeting used in Palestine?”<sup>8</sup> Kraft and others argue that the form / meaning distinction gives the answer to this question.

No, the New Testament is not asking that the cultural form be replicated, but that the intended meaning be transferred.<sup>9</sup> This principle seems simple and doable when the illustration is “a holy kiss.” What degree of openness does the cross-cultural Christian worker have to broader applications? For example, what about the cultural forms of foot washing, water baptism, communion, location of church meetings, content of church meetings, and other New Testament activities? What about the cultural forms that are already in a host society, like ancestor veneration, witchcraft, animal sacrifices, taboos, and other rituals? Can these forms be incorporated into the New Testament church?

When is an old form acceptable? When is an old function permissible? When should new meaning be given to old forms? Should all the religious forms in a host society be replaced by forms from the Bible (Hebrew, Greek, Roman culture)? The following chart illustrates the complexity of form, function, and meaning in the process of

<sup>8</sup> The Koran attempts to fix for all time the behavior of Muslims.

<sup>9</sup> Multiple Scripture passages speak to the subject of contextualization – Lev. 25:39 – 46; Nu. 5:11 – 28; Dt. 25:5 – 6; Mt. 5:21 – 22, 5:27 – 28, 5:38 – 39, 25:14 – 30; Lk. 12:47 – 48, 19:12 – 27; Ro. 2:14 – 16; 1 Co. 9:20 – 22; Gal. 2:11 – 14.

communicating cross-culturally and in the quest to contextualize the message of the Gospel and the reality of Christian living. I have provided a column that analyzes the combinations of old and new forms, functions, and meanings.

<b>Form</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Description of Culture Change</b>
New	New	New	Cultural Change
New	New	Old	Syncretism
New	Old	New	Indigenization
New	Old	Old	Syncretism
Old	Old	New	Transformational Change
Old	New	Old	Functional Adaptation
Old	Old	Old	Cultural Continuity
Old	New	New	Transformational Change

**Table 2**  
 (Adapted from presentation submitted to Dr. Tom Steffen by Bob Strauss for a paper on the Ancient Near East Cosmologies in View of Genesis 1 – 11)

The missionary (whether an expatriate or a national) is bringing a message to a host society that may both accommodate cultural forms and meanings or may confront them. Missiologists understand that a new form with an old meaning is syncretism. The ideal of contextualization is an old form with a new meaning.

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