

Third Culture Kids and the Gospel

By Susan Bixby

Introduction:

What is a Third Culture Kid? It is essential at the outset that we understand our terminology and the platform on which we are building. Ruth Hill Useem coined the term back in the 1950's to refer to "the children who accompany their parents into another society." David Pollock, co-author of "Third Culture Kids," later developed this widely-accepted description: "a third-culture kid (TCK) is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any.

Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background." These are basically kids (or adults) who grew up not fitting in—never completely being like those around them, no matter where they happened to be at the moment. This group of people includes military kids, children of diplomats, and families of those who worked overseas as well.

But why the big deal? How are these people really different from a person (like many of you all) who grew up in a relatively un-changing, stable cultural environment. (By this I'm referring to not too many moves, interacting with extended family on a fairly regular basis, etc.) One thing that can help us with this is to understand what culture is and try to grasp the impact culture has on the development of a person in almost every area of his life. According to Wikipedia, there are well over 100 definitions of "culture" that can be categorized into three different general meanings. Most of the definitions that are in the category of the meaning which we are using today include the following ideas:

"The sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another; also referring to the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group."

The book "Third Culture Kids" says it is "the framework from which we interpret and make sense of life and the world around us." What, then, would be the major pieces of this cultural framework in a person's life? These would include home/parents, peers, host community, school, church, and media. Most people live in a home, and attend a school, church, and community activities that all share many of the same cultural beliefs, values, and practices. The TCK does not. He has a "home country" (normally his parents' home culture), a "host culture" (which he normally knows and understands better than his parents' home culture), and a "third culture" at home, which often is a peculiar mixture of home and host cultures along with the particular values and practices adopted by the particular family. THIS is the reality of the TCK.

Now that we understand what a TCK is, and how a little of how culture influences our basic development as human beings, let's think about man's natural make-up. What do secular psychologists say are the basic human needs? In my brief research I found 3

commonly listed basic human needs that I also found addressed in the book “Third Culture Kids” as categories in which TCK’s normally struggle:

- identity (who I am, core values and beliefs, a sense of significance)
- belonging (where I’m from, source of nurture)
- meaningful relationships (connection to people, affection, social interaction and abilities)

1. **Identity** (Oxford English Dictionary: the fact of being whom or what a person is and the characteristics determining this; also, a close similarity or affinity.) According to dictionary.com, an *identity crisis* can be confusion as to goals and priorities, or a period or episode of psychological distress when a person seeks a clearer sense of self and an acceptable role in society. It is quite common for TCK’s to go through an identity crisis of some kind. The struggle with a sense of identity plays out in several ways in the TCK’s life:

- a. Confusion about core values. Many times one culture or society will have different values that greatly affect the way of living, social interaction, decision-making, etc. Right and wrong can be (or at least seem to be) relative. A TCK may receive a strong message that something is wrong or unacceptable in his parents’ home culture while observing it as completely acceptable in his host culture (or vice versa). For example, in Mexico, most people believe it is better to lie than to make someone look or feel bad. Parents will commonly tell their children to lie for them or will lie to their children. These discrepancies can cause confusion in the development of the TCK’s own values, which are a major element in his identity.
- b. Always the oddball, no matter where he is. While in the host country, he may feel more comfortable, but probably “sticks out” physically, or in his speech, or because he has American parents. When returning to the “home country” he may not stick out because of his appearance, but he may because of his dress, habits, speech, funny ideas, inability to understand jokes, or any number of other things. He may struggle with the question, “is it ok to be different?”
- c. Victim mentality. (Normally later in life for Adult TCK’s) “Nobody will ever understand me.” “I’m a victim of my parents’ extremist religion.” Every human being is naturally self-centered, but TCK’s can easily end up in a more extreme victim mentality.

2. **Sense of belonging**—every child is born with a need to be nurtured and cared for, and this develops into a sense of belonging to the person or group responsible for that nurture. Normally, this includes several groups: immediate & extended family, community, church, friends, citizenship & patriotism. . .

- a. Home. . .where is it? Almost every TCK dreads the question: “Where are you from?” “Home” is an emotional place for all of us, but we don’t realize how the lack of a physical place to call “home” can affect our emotional sense of belonging. TCK’s often have no home to go back to during college breaks because of the expense of traveling, or they may feel they have no home at all if Mom & Dad move back to the U.S.

- b. Confused loyalties in citizenship or nationality. Even IF they are proud to be American, most TCK's resent or resist the American tendency to look down on all other nationalities. Different countries have different views of Americans. My kids are growing up in a country where being American is something to be admired and coveted. My husband grew up in a country where Americans are thought of as fat, ugly, and stuck-up.
 - c. Rootlessness and restlessness. Many TCK's develop a sometimes permanent sense of restlessness that never allows them to truly settle down and feel a part of a community or group of people. Obviously, this often becomes apparent later in life after years of inner turmoil and can greatly affect their families after marriage.
 - d. Unresolved grief from past separations and changes. TCK's often develop a hard shell to protect themselves from the emotional pain of separation and change, but under that shell can be found bitterness toward parents or other people in the home or host cultures. The implications of this are many and are beyond the scope of this session.
3. **Meaningful Relationships.** Man was created for meaningful relationships. TCK's will normally have many relationships, but not necessarily with the type of people that non-TCK's would. The constant moving back and forth or instability can cause a TCK to hesitate to develop those meaningful relationships in order to avoid further change or pain later on, or a TCK may simply struggle with knowing how to develop meaningful relationships because of his lifestyle.
- a. Immediate family very close. Children are often home-schooled. In some situations, there are few, if any, other families of like faith or interests to interact with. Kids do everything with mom and dad. There is often a large disparity between the closeness of the immediate family and the family's relationships with anyone else. So a TCK may know how to have a meaningful relationship with his parents and siblings, but may not get much practice in developing one with many others.
 - b. Extended family not so much. Many TCK's never feel the same connection to their grandparents and other extended family that their own cousins do. Furloughs can be very difficult for this reason—grandparents, aunts and uncles can unknowingly make life miserable for the TCK. They often feel like the people in their host culture understand them more.
 - c. Communication or expressing oneself accurately can be difficult. Depending on the way the family handles language in the home, the TCK may grow up more confident in the host language than the home one. He may feel hampered in his ability to communicate. He may not understand humor or pick up on what someone is really talking about. Sarcasm, nuances, double-meanings are all different. If a person feels he can't express himself well or communicate well, he obviously will feel inhibited in developing meaningful relationships.

God created man in His own image with, what someone said, a “God-shaped hole” inside of him. Do you know the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism? “What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” (Ps. 86:9; Isa. 60:21; Rom. 11:36; I Cor. 6:20; 10:31; Rev. 4:11 Ps. 16:5-11; 144:15; Isa. 12:2;

Luke 2:10; Phil. 4:4; Rev. 21:3-4) Every person on the face of the earth has a basic need that can only be fulfilled in Christ Himself. What is it that most people use to fill that void? For many, that void is anesthetized by the stability and predictability they normally experience in home and community life.

As I began to formally study this topic, after years of being exposed to it on an informal basis through personal experience, marriage to a TCK, many friendships with TCK's, and a particular interest because I have 3 children who are TCK's, I was struck over and over by one particular idea as I read about the needs and challenges that many TCK's have. That one idea was that *for every challenge and struggle a TCK faces, the Gospel's essential elements have a specific and complete answer*. The conclusion I have come to is that what every TCK needs most is a clear, personal, biblical understanding and internalization of the Gospel.

What is the essence of the Gospel?

- Rom. 3:23: Sinful man—totally incapable of doing anything to gain favor before a holy God.
- John 3:16: Jesus, the only begotten son of God, the second member of the Godhead, became man, and humbled himself, in order to pay the price that each of us owed.
- Acts 16:31 (Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.) If I place my faith exclusively in Jesus Christ because of what he did on the cross, I receive eternal life and the Holy Spirit dwelling within me.
- I Cor. 1:30 “And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” The righteousness of Jesus Christ literally becomes my own, as does his sanctification and redemption.

So how do the wonderful truths of the Gospel message meet the special needs that a TCK might have?

1. **Identity** in Christ. John 1:12 “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to be called children of God.” For every believer, his status as a redeemed child of God should be what primarily defines his identity. For a TCK who struggles to define his own identity, the solution is found in Christ alone. In fact, I think TCK's even have an advantage in this area. They have fewer crutches to get in the way!
 - a. Core values are determined by Scripture. A TCK's exposure to multiple cultures and confusingly conflicting sets of core values can make him particularly susceptible to Satan's temptations to doubt the existence of absolute truth. He can also struggle to clearly define right and wrong. When a TCK is exposed regularly to the truth of God's Word and clings to it as his anchor in a confusing world, his core values will be based on the truth he finds there, and the clear commands of God in Scriptures.

- b. Different for a reason. Being different provides opportunities to exalt and glorify God. Being different (if it's in the right way) identifies me with Christ. Being different is being like Jesus.
 - c. "Victim" of His grace. Understanding his own desperate, undeserving condition, and the measure of grace that he has been given can change that victim mentality into gratitude for the sacrifice Jesus made for him.
2. **Belonging** to a heavenly kingdom—"And the Lord will. . .preserve me unto His heavenly kingdom." (2 Tim. 4:18)
- a. Home—a spiritual place, not just an emotional one. The emotional needs that are normally met by belonging to a place to call home are met in Christ. He is where I belong. I have a home no one can take from me. "This world is not my home. . ." The longing for home can be an eternal perspective that we acquire as we understand that this world truly is not our home.
 - b. Citizenship and Loyalty. I'm a citizen of heaven. My most fervent loyalty should be to God and His glory on this earth. I can love all men because of Jesus' example and His love in me. (My dad is one of the most patriotic Americans I've ever met, but I've yet to meet a missionary that loves his host country and people more.)
 - c. I don't need to settle yet. . .I'm a pilgrim. The rootlessness and restlessness that many TCK's face can be caused by different factors. A TCK must come to understand that it's ok not to feel settled on this earth, because life really is short, and eternity is coming quickly. The internalization of this part of the Gospel will also help a TCK deal with the grief and (maybe even bitterness) of past separations or abrupt changes. Even if things were mishandled, and he was not treated as he should have been, he can trust that in eternity all things will be made right. And his loving heavenly Father who has saved him, will also with this give him all things. Rev. 21:4, God shall wipe away all tears, no more crying, no more pain, for the former things are passed away. What a wonderful truth for a TCK who has suffered over and over the pain of separation, rejection, and confusion.
3. **Relationship** with Him—the most meaningful of all.
- If God created man to thrive in relationships, it is because first and foremost, he desired to have a relationship with man. Earlier we mentioned the "God-shaped hole" we each carry inside of us. When a TCK has experienced all of the unusual, varying, disappointing, suddenly-ending relationships, he can often develop a cynicism about people, and resist deepening his relationships. This can affect his relationship with God, too. He needs to understand the great love and desire his Father has for him. He is a valuable person for whom Jesus died because He wants to have an intimate relationship with him. This can be life-changing for a TCK who has withdrawn into his shell to protect himself.
- Rev. 3:20, "If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." One of the points I most remember and meditate on from Paul Miller's book, "The Praying Life" is that when Jesus wanted to give us a picture of how we want to have a relationship with us, he uses the supper table to describe it.
- a. My Father is all I need. When a TCK is so close to his immediate family, then has to be separated from them because of college or some other reason, this can

- be almost devastating. He must become convinced that all he truly needs is his heavenly Father. This also applies to the lack of closeness with extended family.
- b. He cares for me when the only people that have ever really cared are far away.
 - c. He understands and knows me, even if I can't express myself very well. The communication struggles that TCK's often face can provoke a feeling that nobody understands me. But when they come to understand who God is, they know that he searches and knows the intents of the heart, and that He will always understand and accept them.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with some real advantages that missionary kids believe they have for the sake of the Gospel as a result of their experiences.

- Many MK's have a much clearer picture than the typical American of the reality of the need for the Gospel all around the world. They can watch a news program about some far away country and, even though they have maybe never visited that country, they see those people as real people with a real need. This is one of the main reasons why many MK's return to the mission field later in life.
- Secondly, MK's are normally more open-minded and less set-in-their-ways. They can readily acknowledge that there may be multiple legitimate ways to accomplish the same thing (because in the US we do it this way, but in Africa they do it this way and in Venezuela they do it that way). This allows for more flexibility when working with others in ministry.
- Thirdly, because MK's have often observed people making life work with far fewer material possessions than the typical American, they are often much less materialistic—not just on a personal level, but also on a ministry level. They know from personal experience that one can “do church” with backless wooden benches and a tarp overhead, singing a capella from memory and the Holy Spirit can work just as mightily (or maybe even more so!) as in an air-conditioned, luxurious environment!

Being a TCK is a wonderful privilege, and opens many doors to service to our King! But we must be rooted and grounded in our eternal Savior!