

ROLE THEORY IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Chapter 17 in *Culture and Socialization*

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The theory of social roles and its related concepts is an important tool used by sociologists in their efforts to understand what happens when people interact with one another. In the first part of this paper I will present the basic elements of this theory. In the second part of the article I will demonstrate the usefulness of this theory by using it to analyze typical "routines" and "rituals" employed by Protestant Middle America in response to death. In the final part I will suggest some issues raised for the Christian by role theory, and indicate how the reader might use role of theory for self-analysis.

Role Theory

Definition

One of the most outstanding students of role theory has been Erving Goffman. In this paper I will rely heavily upon his analysis. His fullest discussion of role appears in *Encounters*. There he writes:

Role consists of the activity the incumbent would engage in were he to act solely in terms of the normative demands upon someone in his position. Role in this normative sense is to be distinguished from role performance or role enactment, which is the actual conduct of a particular individual while on duty in his position.¹

Interestingly, this definition of role includes elements of two types of definitions and ways of looking at roles current in contemporary sociology.² Some sociologists, particularly those who adopt a structural-functional model, focus upon the normative structure of particular roles. Usually these are work and familial roles such as minister, soldier, salesperson, or wife, husband, child—roles are often seen as *positions* within a given social organization or system.

The term *role expectations* is used to indicate that roles come with built-in rights and duties. That is, when a person assumes the role of minister, he either has been or will be socialized in this role. He learns what is expected of him; what norms are used to judge the quality of his performance; what he might rightfully demand from those with whom he interacts; and what sanctions are available to encourage the compliance with the role expectations attached to his role. Goffman says:

In entering the position, the incumbent finds that he must take on the whole array of actions encompassed by the corresponding role, so role implies a social determinism and a doctrine about socialization . . . The function of a role is the part it plays in the maintenance or destruction of the system or pattern as a whole, the terms eufunction and dysfunction sometimes being employed to distinguish the supportive from the destructive effects.³

Returning to Goffman's definition of the role, one focuses on performance, and effects the concern of the second definition and analysis of social role. This approach focuses on the actor's performance of a role, including the internalization of feedback. Here the concern shifts from a position with norms, to a performance in relation to norms.

From the perspective of performance the student may focus on such matters as the style of the actor (expediter, combatant, trickster, rogue, or conciliator), or he may focus on his goals, his commitment to the role, or simply the mechanics of face-to-face encounters. For example, a study from this perspective might focus on the techniques and strategies of incumbents within the ministerial role, variations of performance as one moves between audiences, and the degree to which the self-identity of ministers and their colleagues is tied to the role.

In our reading of sociological material we will find the term role used in both ways, i.e., referring either to position or to performance. The important thing for us to see at this point is that each of us occupies many social roles and that these roles have normative and moral dimensions. Consequently, how we see ourselves and how we conduct our lives is profoundly influenced by our roles. It would be hard to overestimate the impact of social roles the way each of us lives.

How do we acquire these roles? Like status, some roles are ascribed, such as sex, race, and class. Others, such as occupation, marriage and/or family, and a vocation, are achieved.

How do we learn to do our roles? We learn to play our roles through socialization—formal and informal. Family, school, church, work, and friends all teach us how to do our roles.

Situational Properties

Although roles may be looked at analytically as abstracted from interaction, in reality, roles are "done" or performed through interaction. Interaction does not occur within a vacuum; situational properties always shape the form interaction takes.

Living in a small college town, as I do, there are two places where large numbers of people—often pretty much the same crowd—gather. One is the college field house and the other is the First Baptist Church. By comparing and contrasting the activities in these places, I can demonstrate the function of "situational properties" in the role theory.

First, place and occasion tend to define what roles are appropriate and how they are to be played. In a sense it is a stage. Although the Saturday night and the Sunday morning crowds are composed of many of the same individuals, they conduct themselves quite differently. *Second*, each place will have a number of roles available—roles which are interrelated. In fact it is hard to conceive of a role without an alter or other role. (Perhaps this is why the Apostle John spoke of the Eternal Son of God who had fellowship with God the Father.) *Third*, within a large gathering there will be sub-gatherings of couples, friends, and groups with their distinct roles to be played within the larger event. *Fourth*, each place will have places where one can escape from the major function of the gathering—dressing rooms, lobbies, and restrooms. Here he may experience some "distance" from the role(s) he was playing in the larger occasion.⁴ Goffman refers to these as front and back regions. And *fifth*, the actors within these places will have goals for the occasion and perhaps for themselves, and will use their skills to achieve these goals. The formation of one's goals and the means employed to achieve them are subject to being monitored by those with whom one interacts, so in most cases the actor is very sensitive to normative expectations. They observe one's manner of speaking or facial expressions and physical appearance. So much so, that even when he violates a behavioral norm he must be ready to give an accounting.⁵

Not all encounters are so structured. For example, initial and unintended dyadic ones are unstructured. Here it may be to the advantage of an actor to control the interactional sequence by determining the "definition of the situation" in play. In the subsequent discussion of "responses to death" that follows, we will see how sympathetic "others" will accept the definition offered by the bereaved and act accordingly.

In summary, role theory suggests that most human conduct is customary or moral behavior. We conduct our lives in terms of the roles we hold. We are aware of what our fellow actors and audiences

expect of us. As we move from situation to situation, we assume the role that seems appropriate for us, and normally we play it to gain the recognition and approval of others—the applause of the crowd. To say this is not to pass moral judgment or to question the sincerity of the participants. It varies. Rather, role theory provides a perspective from which the social organization of human conduct may be perceived and examined.⁶

Death: Routines and Rituals

While a divinity student, the author worked occasionally as a "professional pallbearer" and "house minister" for a Kansas City mortuary. And I have officiated at almost 50 funerals in the role of pastor. What follows is an attempt to interpret my close observations of bereavement from the role theory perspective. I will, of course, limit my analysis to the non-liturgical, middle-class Protestant bereavement which I have observed. The reader may note some distinctive features associated with death in relation to his own communion.

Defining the Situation

Death is seldom received with joy, at least openly, by the family, kin, friends, and acquaintances of the deceased. American culture defines death as tragedy—something bad—that should be avoided as long as possible. As a tragic event bearing sorrow it calls for some adjustment. This adjustment is necessitated because our society believes that happiness is both the ideal, as well as the normal state of mankind.

As in many primitive cultures, Americans have a sense of awe and dread of death which is clearly seen in the well-defined set of norms and roles associated with it. When a member of the family or an acquaintance dies, he knows the role he must play. He also knows how he is expected to respond, although there is some variation as to the age and the nature of the death of the deceased. Death, therefore, sets in motion a series of rituals and routines.

Elements of the performance normally include: (1) demonstration of grief, (2) efforts to comfort the bereft, (3) expressions of thoughtfulness, (4) kind words about the deceased and (5) frequently "potlatch"-like demonstrations of affluence and "love" by the family for the deceased through the medium of an expensive funeral. (Interestingly, if the minister is paid at all, it is usually less than 1 percent of this total cost.)

Roles

When one throws a rock into a placid pool, ringlike ripples emerge from the point where the stone hits the surface and moves in ever-widening circles toward the shore. In a somewhat analogous way there are circles of intensity of bereavement.

1. *The bereft.* Normally the inner circle is composed of the immediate family, e.g., husband, wife, mother, father, and children. In the next circle might include more distant relatives and in-laws and other friends and associates. There is a continuum of intensity of expression of the elements of performance listed above. For example, the grief of a widow will likely be more intense than that of a third-cousin-twice-removed. (Note: it is "bad show" for someone, e.g., secretary to the deceased boss, to demonstrate a greater intensity of involvement than the situation calls for.)

2. *Neighbors and acquaintances.* These are persons who were not close enough to the deceased to be included in the rings of bereavement but who, because of custom and/or feelings of sympathy, become at least a part of the audience. (Others may function alternately as part of the audience and minor performers.)

3. *The professionals.* Any number of professionals, who earn all or part of their livelihood from serving the bereft, will be involved with a family. One of the most important of these is the funeral director. Most families have only infrequent experiences with death, so a professional is called in to aid in

preparing for "the performance." Like a stage director he provides and places the artifacts, gives stage directions to the performers, and often even provides much of the script.

Since many deaths occur at the hospital with a portion of the potentially bereaved present, the doctors and nurses play an important role at the time of the initial encounter with death. Frequently they provide bits of information such as when death occurred, nature of the illness or injury, degree of suffering, and last words. These are repeated many times during the course of bereavement. (One may notice that a widow repeats these bits of information to each new person who comes to comfort her, quoting the medical personnel as supporting references.) Also medical professionals may be the first ones to enunciate the clichés which cue everyone to assume roles: "It is better this way." "Go ahead and cry; it may help you." "What would he want you to do?" "It must have been God's will."

Frequently the minister plays a key role in the bereavement cycle. He is expected to provide the inner circle of the bereft with consolation based upon the Christian hope of eternal life. Many want the minister to pray with and for them, and some request prayers for the deceased as well. At the funeral the minister is on "center stage."

Other professionals include musicians, funeral home attendants, florists, caterers, and the news media.

4. *The curious.* Whenever someone with a degree of notoriety dies, many who did not personally know the deceased will attend the funeral. Morticians in some communities say that there is a small coterie or group of persons who attend almost all the funerals they direct.

Social Norms

When death comes, very powerful psychological forces are at work on the bereft—guilt, a feeling of lostness, and despair about the future. All of these are culturally conditioned. At least the form and expression they take are acquired in the socialization process. The way in which the various roles outlined above are played will depend in part on the personality of the actor, and in part on the situation. Primarily, however, how the actor behaves is determined by the audience before whom one is acting. If he perceives them as significant, he will "perform."

1. *Emotional involvement.* The inner circle of the bereaved are supposed to demonstrate their grief by or through emotional releases. Frequently the bereaved seize center stage and apparently lost self-control. However, it is amazing to see a short time later, the one who could not be comforted, switch roles and become the comforters of someone else who "refuses to be comforted."

Two typical styles of play emerge: (a) the one in need of comfort; (b) the one offering the comfort. The bereaved have a choice of these styles and, as indicated above, they may alternate between them. The one mourning may become the comforter of another mourner.

2. A number of *situational factors* affect one's performance. (a) *Age of the deceased.* As a general rule, the younger the deceased the more intense is the grief. Our norms dictate that we grieve more over the death of a 19-year-old girl than for a 91-year-old woman. (b) *The role of the deceased.* Mothers with small children, fathers, and community leaders held in high esteem are mourned more intensely than bums, criminals, and others perceived as nonproductive members of society. (c) *Cause of death.* (1) Accidents may be divided into two categories: Acts of God and carelessness. Grief is more intense for the former. Death by an accident is more grieved than by an illness because one is less prepared. (2) Illnesses may be divided into two short and long term. Since we shun pain in our society, death from a brief illness is much preferred. (d) *Relationship.* We have already suggested that there is a continuum of grief from the close relative and friend to the more distant ones. (e) *The religious factor.* For committed Christians grief may be less intense if the deceased was a practicing Christian, because of this hope of eternal life.

3. *Pressures for involvement.* It is the height of inconsiderateness for someone who is connected

with the deceased or his family not to become involved in the mourning process, either as one of the bereaved or as a comforter. Failure to participate makes one subject to sanctions, unless one can justify his absence. The usual excuse offered to the bereaved is, "I did not hear of it until after the funeral."

4. *Quality of the performance.* (a) Stage settings. Some people, the newly rich or those with guilt problems for instance, feel obliged or pressured to provide elaborate funerals. Others say, "We want to make it simple." This may reflect poverty, lack of feeling, and effort not to succumb to pressure, or common sense and good Christian stewardship.

(b) Manner. We have already mentioned the continuum between the comforter and the one to be comforted. And we have mentioned the concept of the degree of grief being commensurate with the relationship between the mourner and the deceased. In mourning and comforting "given off" expressions are particularly important. Tears, a kiss for the widow, an anguished countenance—these are but a few commonly used idioms of the body. Verbally, certain phrases appear to be standard.

"I lost my . . ." is used by the consoler to establish a relationship between himself and the mourner.

"My, doesn't he look natural . . ." is meant to help console the bereft.

"Did he suffer much . . . ?" is a good opener, for it allows the bereft an opportunity for repeating her story and reaffirming his death. Also the response is a certain "winner" for the questioner. If he suffered, then she may remark that his death was in a way a blessing that he did not suffer as so many do. Perhaps an anecdote or two is added.

"How is she taking it . . . ?" and if the answer is "Well," then this can be complimented as being courageous. And if the reply is "Not so well," then the comforter feels a particular challenge.

There is always an interest in last word. Widows particularly make a great deal of them. Of course, it would be "bad show" for the bereft to "take it" too well.

(c) Appearance. Mourners and comforters are expected to demonstrate this reverence for the dead by attending the events of the ritual of death in their best attire. They are to project an image of reverence, solemnity, and respect. Perhaps at no other time do the social norms call so strongly for one to be other-directed. For example, one notes how responsive widows are in the weeks following the funeral to those who share a common grief.

In summary, we are to grieve and to be comforted and to comfort. In doing this, we should perform in certain prescribed ways and use certain acceptable lines.

Procedural Response

A number of stages are involved in what we might call the mourning cycle. Normally six stages can be noted.

1. *Closest kin informed of the death.* Death occurs for a variety of reasons, and it is necessary that the cause and certainty be established. Normally, the coroner or a medical official verifies that a person is dead. The "next of kin" is then notified and the mourning cycle is initiated.

2. *Notification and arrangements.* Often there is a kind of "pecking order" in the notification of kin. Those in the inner circle are notified first, preferably face-to-face, but at least by phone. Next the second circle is notified by phone or by wire. Frequently there is a division of the labor with the second circle, who assist by notifying those in the third circle, lesser friends, and acquaintances.

Normally one member of the inner circle, perhaps the eldest son, is invested with the responsibility of making the arrangements for the funeral. Perhaps in consultation with other family members, he makes contacts with the professionals and arranges for the formal events of the ritual. Arranging for the funeral carries with it awesome responsibility. In addition it requires diplomacy for often there is a "falling out" among family members over the arrangements. He also provides a model of stability and rationality for those within the circle.

3. *Response of home visits.* Soon the kin begin to arrive. Arranging accommodations for those

coming from some distance must be made. The neighbors begin to bring in food, the rationale for doing so is that the bereaved are too distraught to prepare food and, in addition, there are usually added guess to provide for. Frequently the one bringing the food also comes in to console the bereft. As such he is particularly concerned with what Goffman calls impression management.⁷ Usually almost everyone involved is uncomfortable in his role because he is unfamiliar with it. Perhaps there is no other occasion when so many are so unsure of their roles. At this time it is difficult to distinguish between actors and audience. The comforters particularly seem to vacillate between these positions.

One factor which makes things so uncomfortable for the mourner is that there is no "back stage" really available. He may get off stage, but he can't seem to escape his role. Any thought of role distance would be quickly dismissed as being immoral and unthinkable.

The conversations at these times are of particular interest. Some of the standard lines were mentioned above. Most of the participants, both the mourners and the comforters, are so "other-directed" at the time that they are quite guarded in what they talk about and choose words carefully. Some of the elements seem to be: (a) It is important to keep some kind of chatter going; (b) This should be rather light, non-consequential, and not very much related to what is really uppermost in the minds of most; (c) Some effort may be made to draw the mourners out, getting them to talk about things which will enhance their own self-image, and deal with any feelings of guilt that they might have. (Both overt and covert expressions of guilt, particularly by the next of kin, are quite frequent. Perhaps one of the primary tasks of the comforters is to allay these guilt feelings.) (d) Reminiscences about good deeds and good times with the deceased are frequent topics in these conversations. References to evil acts or bad character are inappropriate, at least for a time.

Later, the funeral services as a ritual event becomes a topic of discussion. Elements include: size of the crowd, the many people who came that were not expected, the words of the minister, and the beauty of the floral tributes. The professionals also make appearances. These are regarded as being particularly comforting. (Some morticians have been known to seize upon the opportunity to advertise by distributing favors like calendars and emory boards.)

4. *The reception of friends at the mortuary.* This is still a common practice. It is called "viewing the body," and perhaps the most tasteless of all elements of the ritual complex. On the evening prior to the funeral service, the family receives friends before the open casket. At this time people "get a last look" (form a memory picture) of the deceased. Often several hundred people are involved. The bereft are particularly vulnerable at this time. Much of the action is similar to that noted in the previous stage.

5. *The funeral.* This is a rather short service, usually lasting less than half an hour. Frequently it has two parts. The first is a formal memorial service in a church or a mortuary chapel. The second is a graveside service. Normally a minister is in charge. Elements in the first service may include music with a solo or small ensemble, reading of Scripture, reading of the obituary, some brief remarks of an appropriate nature, and prayer. If there is a second service, at the grave-side, this is usually limited to Scripture and prayer.

In the funeral service the Goffman dramaturgical model is most evident. Three groups are involved. The professionals are Goffman's actors *par excellence*. An office or a lounge in the church or the chapel provides them with a back region. As professionals they are veterans at these things and frequently engage in byplay. Yet as professionals they can assume the role of mourner or comforter on command. The family functions both as audience and secondary actors. The others serve as the audience.

Frequently, the stage setting is a work of art. Beautiful flowers, organ music, songs, dim lighting, appropriate tints and hues, and reverent ritual—all provide the proper setting. Every knows his role well enough to play it rather successfully. Usually it is a good performance, and the audience is cooperative, overlooking miscues.

The grave-side service usually involves only the true mourners. Following the service the crowd

frequently does a little backstaging itself. Often there is a certain joviality in the byplay of those outside the inner circle. The crowd takes on the character of a reunion. Old friends see one another again. They are introduced to new people.

6. *At home.* After the service the inner circle returns to the family home. Often they are joined by the funeral director and the minister. Both are congratulated for "doing such a wonderful service." More than likely it was, because "they defined it as helpful." The conversation is taken up again in the same "uneasy" way. Everyone is still working hard at his role. After awhile they begin to make their way to their own homes. The family is then left alone with all the problems of making adjustment in role contents to take up the slack left by the death of a family member.

Just here it becomes difficult; and here we must end our analysis. The situation must now be redefined. One of the latent consequences of much of the earlier comforting is that it prepares the mourners to do this. The social gathering is at an end. Later reflection by the actors may help them to give a more creditable performance when called upon again.

Summary

This analysis has focused upon the events related to bereavement following the death of a family member. What seem to be the basic elements have been briefly outlined. Also, attention was directed specifically to those elements in the experience that fit role theory concepts. The main point we made was that the mourning ritual provides fruitful resources for applying the role theory concepts and perspective.

To summarize, mourning is a social gathering with rather well-defined bounds. Roles and role expectations are well defined and people have been socialized concerning them. Likewise, the various rules or situational properties are generally well understood. They cycle includes beautiful symbolism.

Some Insights and Challenges for the Christian

Let me share some insights and responses to the questions which I have posed for you at the end of this chapter.

First, analyzing the roles we play has helped me to realize the customary or "moral" nature of our actions. No one really "does his own thing." Whenever you or I assume a role, we take on and must deal with the moral expectations which come with the role. Provided they do not run counter to the basic teachings of Christ, there is no reason why we should not play the role. (See questions 1-4.)

Second, "social order" demands that there be social roles with attendant moral expectations. Otherwise, societies would be static and could not adjust to change. Here lies a basic dilemma both for sociology and for Christian theology. How can we have a society which is stable and orderly, yet is malleable and subject to change? In change, how can we keep from "throwing the baby out with the bath water?" Are there Christian "absolutes" or principles which can inform our analysis of social roles, practices and systems? If so, how do Christians go about seeking to apply these?

Third, I see changes happening with regard to funeral practices in the wake of the recent surge of interest in the sociology of death. I have noted a coming together of the insights of sociology and psychology with theology. The end result has been the planning of funerals, services of worship and praise, donation of human organs for the good of others, and simpler funeral arrangements. In the light of Christian principles, what kind of changes would you like to see with regard to the rituals and practices associated with illness, death, and funerals? (See question 10.)

Fourth, I have found role theory an insightful tool for reflecting on the life, work, and death of Jesus as discussed in the New Testament. This is particularly clear in Matthew's Gospel where he gives an account of how Jesus very carefully fulfilled many of the biblical "role expectations" of the Messiah and role was in conflict with the role expectations the Pharisees and others held. Hebrews can be read as a hymn of vindication of Jesus' understanding of what he role called for. None of us will be confronted by

role conflicts of such monumental proportions, yet all of us will experience such conflicts. Are there any biblical principles available to help choose between conflicting role expectations? Should we always seek to please the majority, our peer group, the person most important to us, or the crowd immediately present? Or are there some principles which are not subject to compromise? (See question 5.)

Fifth, this discussion points up the most subtle danger of role theory analysis from the Christian perspective. It builds upon a "weak view of the self." By this I mean that discussions of human activity from the role theory perspective tend to posit a self who is a responder, a conformer. The image of man portrayed in no way resembles a person free to seek to do God's will as he/she understands it.

It is important for the Christian student of sociology not to take role theory as a total "doctrine of man." Its image of man is generalized and partial. It must be used as a helpful tool, but never be allowed to become dogma. (See questions 6-9.) This point underscores a serious problem confronting the Christian student. Sociology and psychology each has its "doctrine of man." Each tends to push it as dogma, yet each is partial. While both have merit, each must be further informed by the Christian/biblical image of man. Here is one of the great challenges for Christian scholars in the social and behavioral sciences.

Discussion Questions

1. List all of the social roles you play, e.g., young person, male, Christian, college student, human services major, son, boyfriend, roommate, athletics team member.
2. What roles, held by others interface with each of these roles?
3. What do you see as the major role expectations attached to each of your roles?
4. What conflicts do you experience in trying to handle all of these roles, expectations, and audiences simultaneously?
5. How do you resolve these conflicts?
6. How does memory and the drive for consistency in actions make for the conception of a trans-situational self, rather than of a person who passively conforms to the expectations of whatever situation he is in?
7. Is there room for the freedom of the individual in role theory, or is the person's behavior socially determined?
8. Is there more to you than the roles you play, or is your self only an amalgamation of roles?
9. Is role playing necessary for social order, or is it authentic behavior as the existentialists contend?
10. How do you feel about the conduct roles called for in our society by the death of a loved one?

Notes

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1. Erving Goffman, *Encounters* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1961), p. 85.
 2. The distinction between the two types of role definitions was suggested by W. Richard Scott, ed., *Social Processes and Social Structures* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), pp. 58-59. "Thus some sociologists use the concept of role to refer to the behavior of an incumbent of a social position, while others, sharing the perspective of Gross and the editor of this volume, define a role as a set of normative expectations applied to the position incumbent. The former definition of the concept focuses attention on how the position holder *does* behave." One is from the perspective of the actor; the other from that of the audience. It is the contention of this chapter that Goffman unites these two perspectives in his definition.

The "normative expectations" kind of definition of role is that which is found most frequently

among those sociologists of the Structural-Functionalists persuasion. Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 69-112. A most definitive discussion from this perspective is found in Neal Gross, Ward S. Mason, and Alexander W. McEachern, *Explorations in Role Analysis* (New York: Wiley, Inc., 1958).

The discussion of symbolic interactionists tends to focus on the performance of the incumbent. Building on Mead they focus on how role-taking contributes to the emergence of the social self. See Tamotsu Shibutani, *Society and Personality* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1961) pp. 46-54, and Ralph H. Turner, *Family Interaction* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1970), pp. 185-214. In these writings the emphasis falls upon the impact of the role of the individual and interpersonal relations. In the other, the focus is upon the role as a part of a system.

Attention is given to both perspectives in the very important work: Bruce J. Biddle and Edwin J. Thomas, eds., *Role Theory: Concepts and Research* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966). In the present study the term "role" will be used in a fashion consistent with Goffman's definition. Role may be used to indicate normative expectations or the performance. The specific intent will normally be apparent in the context. Dennis Brissett and Charles Edgley have gathered a fine collection of writings on this subject in *Life as Theater* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1975).

3. *Encounters*, pp. 87-88.

4. Goffman discusses these concepts in great detail in his *Behavior in Public Places* (New York: The Free Press, 1962).

5. An interesting account of "accounting" appears in Goffman, *Relations in Public* (Harper: New York, 1971).

6. Goffman discusses these concepts in great detail in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959).

7. For a clear statement of impression management see *Ibid.*

Note: This was prepared some years ago for a college audience. But the concepts are universal. We will build upon this to consider some of the roles related to being an Associational Missionary.