

A Multi-Dimensional Interpretation of the Sailboat-Powerboat Metaphor

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AFTER A RECENT DISCUSSION here at our Partners International office about the *Sailboat-Powerboat* metaphor, I came away with a troubled feeling about how this illustration is being understood. My sense was that different people are interpreting the metaphor from different contexts leading to misunderstanding of each other's points of view.

It is sometimes argued that the *sailboat* paradigm is clearly the “right” perspective and the *powerboat* the “wrong” one—a “right/wrong” view. I propose that in taking a “right/wrong” view one is thinking of the metaphor exclusively in terms of the *spiritual* dimension—relating to the degree of one's dependence versus independence toward God—and emphasizing that dependence on God is healthy, biblical—*right*.

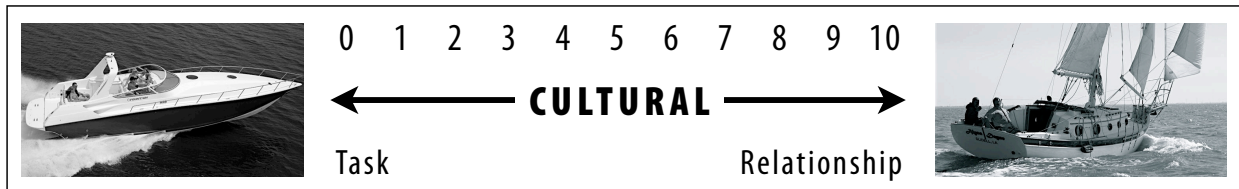
Could it be there is also a “both-and” view—with which to recognize the *spiritual*, and additionally, the *cultural* dimension, of the powerboat/sailboat metaphor? Could it be that a multi-dimensional perspective enhances the metaphor's clarity and usability?

While I appreciate and respect the vital spiritual context of the powerboat/sailboat metaphor, I *also* understand the metaphor from a cultural context. For example, I view the powerboat and sailboat paradigms as primary features, respectively, of the cultures of the Global North (the West) and the Global South (non-West.) Generally speaking, the Global North has a culture that is more task-oriented, more “powerboat” in its cultural expression—while the Global South is more relationship-oriented, more “sailboat” in its cultural expression. Moreover, I believe Christians possessing either cultural style can be healthy and biblical.

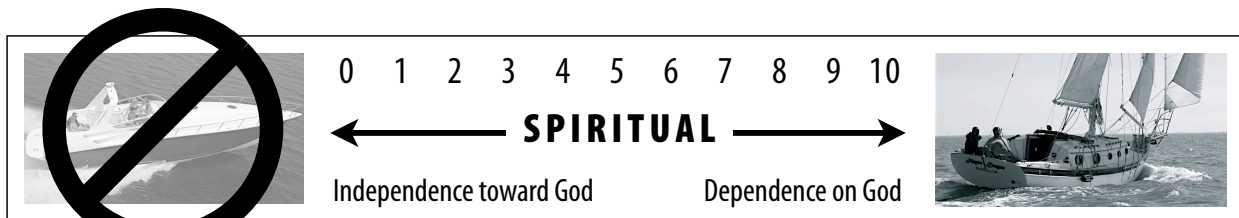
In looking back over the various blogs and conversations on this metaphor, it appears to me that many others have been mixing these two different contexts—*spiritual* and *cultural*. The result is that there has been an overall “muddiness” to the discussion about the metaphor, leading some to question if the metaphor is useful at all.

My proposition is that both the *spiritual* and the *cultural* aspects of the powerboat/sailboat metaphor have validity, but they must be separated in order to understand the metaphor's pragmatic value to cross-cultural partnership ministry. When these continuums—*spiritual* and

cultural—are separated, I propose that the cultural continuum is morally neutral while the spiritual continuum is *not* morally neutral. This is represented by the diagram below:

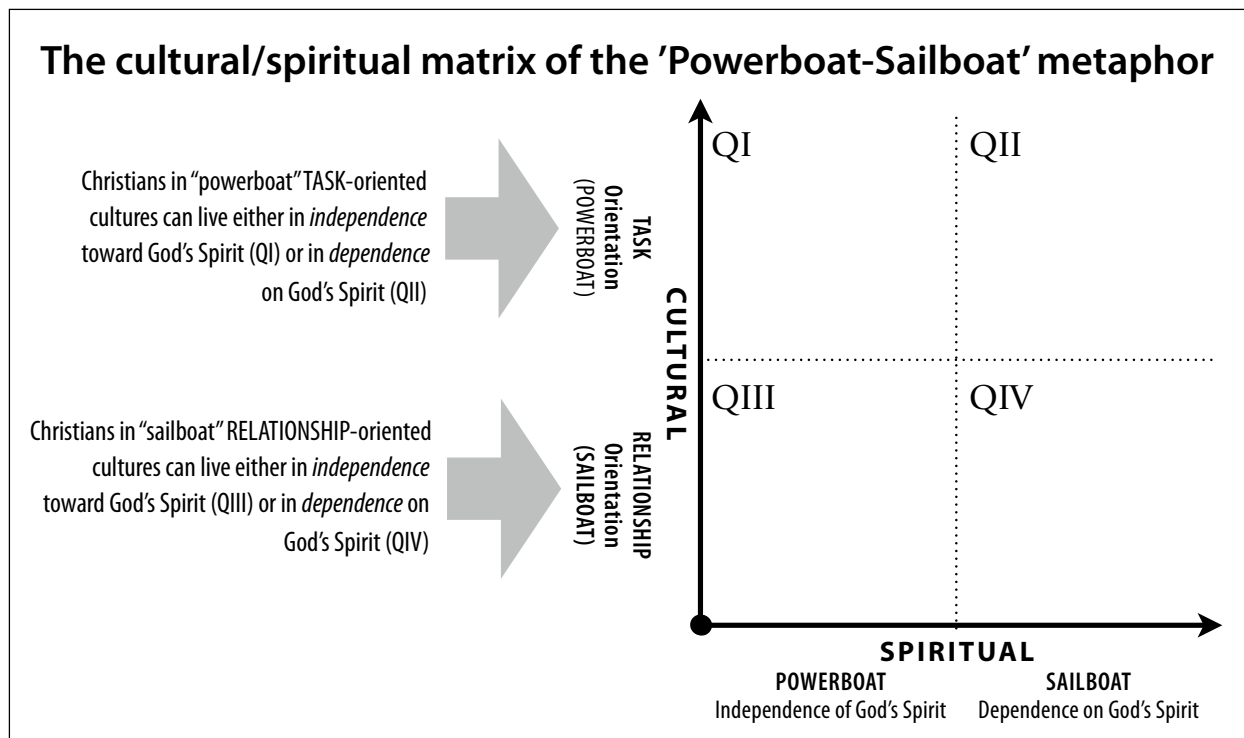


The powerboat/sailboat metaphor—viewed **culturally**—is **morally neutral**



The powerboat/sailboat metaphor—viewed **spiritually**—is **not morally neutral**

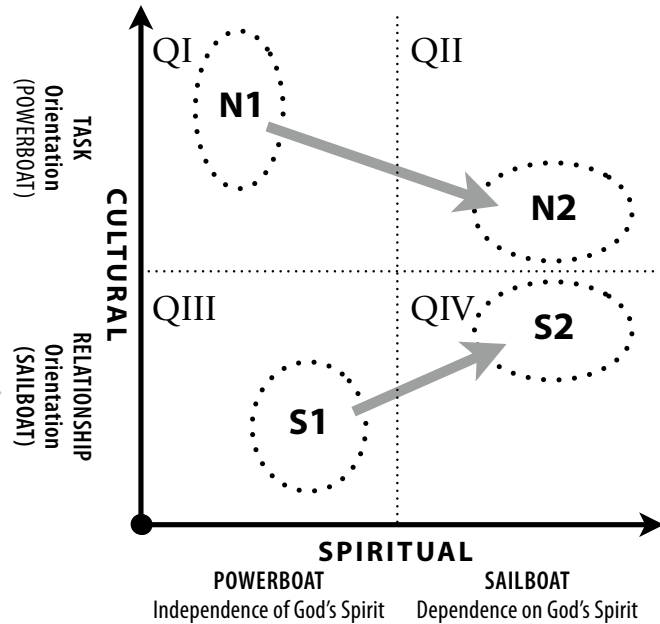
Having defined two different continuums, I suggest we think about them as two interrelated dimensions. To illustrate this, let's put them both into a two-dimensional diagram with the *cultural* continuum on the vertical axis and the *spiritual* continuum on the horizontal axis (as shown at right). This allows us to discuss some practical implications. Here is my attempt at that—with the caveat that these are extremely broad generalizations.



A shift is necessary—by partners both from the Global North and Global South—for healthy cross-cultural partnerships

Partners from the Global North move from (N1) to (N2)—keeping their “powerboat” cultural style while increasing their dependence on God’s Spirit, resulting in more of a balance between TASK and RELATIONSHIP

Partners of the Global South move from (S1) to (S2)—keeping their “sailboat” cultural style while increasing their dependence on God’s Spirit, resulting in more of a balance between TASK and RELATIONSHIP



ASSUMPTIONS

1. The Global North has a cultural style and worldview that is somewhere in Quadrant I. Our “rugged individualism” hinders us from living in dependence on God’s Spirit day-by-day—while our industrial/technology heritage enhances our ability to control outcomes and accomplish more through a “task-oriented” approach to life and problem solving. I’ll label the typical starting position on the chart for the Global North as “N1.”
2. The Global South has much more of a relational cultural style and worldview. They experience more vulnerability and embrace flexibility due to circumstances and situations over which they have little or no control. Therefore, their relational approach to life and problem solving puts them in the lower half of the chart. However, Global South people can also tend toward independence from God, though probably differently and not to the same extent as those of us in the Global North. I’ll label this starting point in Quadrant III for the Global South as “S1.”
3. The Global North has a need to learn greater dependence on God’s Spirit as opposed to using self or secular management approaches to determining Truth. Therefore, in general, it has a need of moving rightwards on the chart. It also has a need to be much more sensitive to relationships and not always so intensely goal- and task-oriented. So it also could use moving downward on the chart as well. However, the Global North has a huge and rich heritage of learning how to get things done, so I think it would be wrong for it to totally give up its understanding of strategic planning, etc., and demand that it live only in a Quadrant IV

worldview. I suggest a good ending point for the Global North would be the lower part of Quadrant II—“N2.”

4. The Global South also has need of learning greater dependence on God’s Spirit as a primary guiding force. It, too, can use movement to the right on the chart. It could also benefit greatly from learning something about the Global North’s experience in management practices and goal orientation. Therefore some upward movement is also appropriate. Its ending point could then be in the upper part of Quadrant IV—“S2.”

CONCLUSION

My conclusion is that the new positions of N2 and S2 now describe a position for truly healthy cross-cultural partnerships. By both being sensitive to God’s Spirit (the same Spirit for each!) and both bringing to the table the value of their heritage cultural styles, (task- and relationship-orientation, respectively), there is the potential for new synergy that can produce greater effectiveness. It is from this position of N2 that I would hope Partners International is interacting and working together with its ministry partners from the Global South who, in turn, have learned from our partnership, how to end up at S2.

My hope is that by combining both the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the sailboat/ powerboat metaphor in this manner, we can clarify our dialog and extract a richer understanding from it—to configure our global partnerships for even greater impact for God’s Kingdom.

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