

Teaching Cross-Cultural Evangelism

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Abstract: Evangelism is conducted within human cultures and is supported by knowledge and understanding of cultural contexts. To that end, this article presents frameworks for lifelong learning about cultures and religions, provides basic premises for learning to announce the salvation message in the context of a given culture, and illustrates the importance of familiarity with the culture for the nurture and support of new Christians.

I have been teaching about how to share the Gospel with people of other cultures and religions ever since 1997, following my return from serving on Taiwan. A complete study of a new culture is a lifelong project, and so I felt my role as a teacher was to provide frameworks for lifelong learning. I believe that one learns as one takes a concept and then does something with it—in this case, deciding where it fits into one of the frameworks. These frameworks at the same time enable a person new to the field to know what to learn in order to get started, that is, by learning enough about a new culture to make friends, learning enough about the new religion to explain the Gospel, and learning enough about the culture’s attitude toward religious change to be supportive in the challenges faced by a new Christian. I hope these approaches will help you in your teaching.

Understanding a New Culture

Following are some frameworks into which students can place the welter of facts they are learning about a new culture. First, they can create a grid to record how a given group of people treats major life events by listing life events on the left side and the ways that they are treated along the top. For example, some cultures treat a funeral as a family affair, and others as a communal affair. This tool helps students to analyze a culture in a systematic way and provides ideas for questions they can ask the people in that culture. Students would analyze their own culture as well as the culture they are learning about.¹

The “onion diagram” created by Dr. Gene Bunkowske² is a valuable tool for analysis. It places someone’s first impression of a new culture, “what is seen,” as the

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outermost of a series of concentric circles. Each layer represents a deeper insight into that culture, finally reaching the center, called “ultimate allegiance.” That allegiance might be to a local god, to the tribe, and often to family. The circle adjacent to the center is labeled “worldview”; the rest of the circles serve as paths to apprehending that worldview.

Another useful activity is constructing “contrasting pairs” of attitudes, such as “time-oriented versus event-oriented,” in which the students determine where the culture fits along the spectrum between the two extremes. Students themselves can create more such pairs.³ It is important to note that an individual one meets in another culture may deviate from his own culture’s norms to some degree. The desire to find out what that individual really thinks helps to determine what to talk about with him.

Pointers for those planning to enter a new culture include the following: (1) See yourself as a learner, not as one who knows all the answers and needs to enlighten those to whom you are sent. (2) See yourself as a servant, not as a criticizer. (3) Be determined to adapt to the customs of the culture, even those you do not agree with. (One American I knew who came to Taiwan seemed to be on a personal crusade to break down the taboos of the locals and free them up to be more like Americans. His actions actually impeded building trust with the host culture). (4) Be content to take the role of guest. You will never be an insider, but being a guest gives people of the other culture a chance to show hospitality and frees you from the unspoken obligations expected of a native. On Taiwan, for example, there are unwritten rules of gift-giving, which the foreign visitor is not expected to know. (5) Regard your feelings of dependency as an asset for bonding. (You’re giving the host people a chance to play the role of helper.) (6) Visualize cultural barriers such as language, age, and differences in education level or social stratum as “stepping stones” to be crossed.

Language study is an essential part of understanding a culture. Many characteristics of a culture are embedded in its expressions and proverbs. Using the heart language engages you more deeply in conversation. Asking for help in the language is a method for getting to know people. On Taiwan, I used to carry a photo album of my family as a conversation starter to use while riding on the bus. Since language learning is also a lifelong process, I advise people to take charge of their learning process by deciding on a life activity they prefer. It could range from ordering food or mailing a package to leading a small group Bible study. As students reach each goal, they have a sense of accomplishment, which encourages them to keep going toward the next goal.

Understanding a Religion

As a framework for the study of a culture's religion, I encouraged students to place the facts they were learning into categories. At a minimum, these should include the religion's view of God, of the human problem, of the hoped for solution (salvation), and of the means toward that solution. I also used Ninian Smart's seven categories for the study of religion (rituals, stories, ethics and laws, doctrines, spiritual experiences, organization, and objects) as ways for them to organize their findings.⁴

As the student researches the culture and religion, he is looking for the words and illustrations that will help to communicate the salvation message. After all, this is how God has communicated with us. When God talked to Abraham, He did not expect Abraham to learn a new vocabulary. God used the familiar Canaanite word for God; and God used the culturally familiar way to make a covenant. As time passed, God, through His actions, filled these terms and concepts with richer meaning. It has been the same every time God's message has crossed to a different culture. Each time, the presenter had to use the words and customs of the receiving culture and gradually fill them with the biblical meaning.⁵ I regard the attempt to express God's message using the words and concepts of the receiving culture as my working definition of the word "contextualization."

Communicating the Message

No matter what country the students go to, their life of genuine love and willing servanthood does make an impression and may lead to relationships with people, but the Gospel itself is a message that is to be expressed in words. The framework I use to teach the Gospel message is based on the four topic areas that are found in the Gospel conversations in the Book of Acts⁶: (1) the reason a savior is needed, (2) the person and work of Christ, (3) inviting a response, and (4) proclaiming the benefits promised through faith in Christ. This framework can be stated briefly as "Problem-Answer-Response-Benefits." It provides a way to organize the new insights and illustrations accumulated through the years, but it is also simple enough to guide a believer in presenting the Gospel.

The first topic, "problem," has to do with separation from God due to sin, which leads to symptoms such as guilt and to a consequence: eternal punishment. This is the topic on which students offer ongoing insights into ways to teach about God's Law in the new culture.⁷ On Taiwan, one soon learns that there is a difficulty in using the word that the Chinese Bible uses for "sin." This word in everyday usage means "crime," that is, something you could be sent to prison for. Thus, the normal reaction to being told you are a sinner is "but I have not done anything worthy of being sent to prison." On Taiwan, I did not use that word for sin when introducing the Gospel, but rather said "did wrong" or "disobeyed God." A Chinese Christian

gradually picks up the content of the Christian usage of the word “sin” through exposure to its usage in the Bible.

“Answer,” the second topic, is the heart of the Gospel. The “answer” is Jesus—who He is and how He has brought about atonement. For this category, the student searches for culturally meaningful ways to explain such biblical concepts as ransom, substitution, sacrifice, and victory over Satan.⁸

In cross-cultural sharing, you are involved in a process involving three cultures: the original Hebrew culture into which God embedded His message, your own culture, and the receiving culture. Sometimes the receiving culture is more similar to the original culture than your own is! Don’t overlook going back to the original culture to get ideas for explaining concepts. Since the people of Taiwan are accustomed to temples and ceremonies, in follow-up conversations I like to explain atonement by talking about the lid on the covenant box in Solomon’s temple, where wrongdoing was forgiven by the application of blood.

I believe that the third topic, “response,” should be presented as a gracious invitation to believe rather than as a law to be obeyed. That does not mean your friend will actually repent and believe at that moment, because that response is brought about by the Holy Spirit. But Peter and Paul did not neglect to tell people what the response would look like. On Taiwan, faith needs to be explained carefully as a trusting in the heart, not just an outward conformity, because the people are accustomed to showing allegiance to gods in outward forms, such as feasts and bowing with incense sticks. In many cases, families are not troubled when a member announces a belief in Jesus, but resistance appears when it “becomes real” to them through a public act, such as Baptism.

The fourth topic, “benefits,” is clearly Gospel in nature, because it consists of God’s promises. Many of these promises correspond to the problems that surfaced in topic one. For example, “forgiveness” is the answer to “guilt,” and “acceptance” is the answer to “shame”; thus, this framework is usable whether the culture is guilt-oriented or shame-oriented.⁹ Chinese culture through the years has valued “becoming truly human” through the cultivation of virtue. Many who have this ideal also recognize they are not living up to it. It is meaningful to them that the new life brought by faith in Jesus produces the very result, such as the fruit of the Spirit, that the culture values.

These four topics are useful aids for understanding any world religion. When a person discovers what each world religion believes about these four topics, it becomes apparent that most religions place the “self” as the “answer” called for in topic two, and so they are without a savior. This makes it obvious that the salvation message is truly “good news.”

The four-topic framework organizes the content for an evangelism conversation in a way that avoids a mechanical approach; yet it gives definite direction. Just as

Peter touched on all four topics, but used different words each time, we hope our students will continuously expand their insights into each of the four topics so that they will be able to share them by using words and illustrations suitable for the listener. Using the framework keeps our focus on our role, which is to pass along the message, as opposed to passing along an experience that the listener should try to copy. God will give the new believer his own experiences. The framework must never become a limitation on the course of the conversation; one trusts that the Holy Spirit will guide, and afterwards one believes that the Spirit can use whatever was shared. Even if all four topics are not brought up in a single conversation, one can remember what has not yet been shared and bring it up at another time. Each of the four does not have to be shared at great length, because it is from the listener's feedback that one knows which concepts require more clarification. It is important to help the student learn the skills that will allow the conversation to go forward.

Conversation Skills

To teach conversation skills, I use a framework briefly stated as “avoid cut-offs and misunderstandings, and watch for handles and bridges.” I urge the students to avoid saying things that would unnecessarily terminate the conversation, to search for ways to cope with misunderstandings, and to bring up the Gospel in a natural and relevant way. By “handles” I mean making use of some element of the person's religion, and by “bridges” I mean connecting with a person's human problems or aspirations.

As an example of an unnecessary cut-off, consider a conversation with a Muslim friend. The friend has probably been told that calling Jesus the “Son of God” means God conceived Jesus with Mary in a human way. Because the evangelist's research would have alerted him to this probability, he would avoid using that phrase early in the conversation or without a full explanation, knowing that the Muslim would regard that title as blasphemy

An example of a misunderstanding would be using the Chinese word for god. Chinese have many deities, so it is not clear if I simply use the word “god.” I preferred to say “the God who made everything.” That does not mean I thought the listener believed that there is a God who made everything, but it was as a way to denote the God I was talking about. Another noted example of misunderstanding involves the listener in India who had to explain to an evangelist why people were not responding to his call to be “born again.” He said, “That is the very thing we are trying to avoid.” In cross-cultural sharing, it is not unusual for a person to misunderstand what you said. You must rely on asking and listening and re-expressing and finding illustrations to help the receiver of your message come closer to grasping the intended meaning.

Handles and Bridges

Using a “handle” to make a transition to conversation about Jesus is done by listening until you hear something that reminds you of one of the four topics. For example, imagine a conversation with a Muslim friend. He states that one admirable quality of his beliefs is “submission to God.” You recognize your friend has brought up a word relating to topic three (response) and that he (not you) has moved the conversation into the salvation message. You might then say, “Submitting to God is really important to me too.” By saying this, you are affirming the importance of the topic he has brought up, and so now you are together in topic three of the salvation message. You then want to make a transition to topic one (problem), and you might do so by continuing with “but I’m aware of how often I’m not very submissive. Can I tell you more about that?” If your friend agrees, you then talk about topic one: about your sinful nature, how it fills you with guilt, and how you deserve to be punished by God. You may ask your friend if he can relate to any of those feelings. Your purpose then is to move from topic one to topic two. You might say, “But even though I deserve to be punished, I know that God will give me eternal life. May I tell you why?” If your friend agrees, he has given you permission to share the Gospel with him—the meaning of Christ’s death and the significance of His resurrection.

This same approach can be used when your friend reveals a problem in his life. If the problem is “lack of meaning,” you notice that he has initiated the Gospel conversation for you by bringing up something that belongs to topic one (problem). If it is “hope for eternal life,” you realize that he has brought up topic four (benefits). In all cases, you then attempt to use his statement as a “bridge” to approach the salvation message and then try to touch on each of the four topics.

Your goal is that your friend will eventually understand these four topics, no matter whether it is during a single conversation or a series of conversations. You become better at witnessing as you understand the four topics more thoroughly, and as you consider how to present each topic in a way that your friend will understand. When you know your friend has heard the message, you ask what he thinks about it, and his reply shows you what to do next.

Answering Objections

The person to whom you are witnessing may finally understand the message, but not accept it. You then ask what part of the message he does not agree with, and that reveals the area that needs further conversation. For example, if he says he is not a sinner, you can proceed by telling him why you know you are a sinner. On the other hand, he may agree that he is a sinner, but not agree that Jesus can be of any help to him. Or, as someone on Taiwan said to me, “I would rather pay for my own sins.” Remember that your friend’s revelation of his feelings to you is precious. His answers have enabled you to discover that the Holy Spirit has not yet brought him to

saving faith. You cannot bring this change about by arguing, but you can converse together as friends about his viewpoints, while continuing to share the Gospel, for it is the Gospel that is “the power of God unto salvation.” Lack of acceptance does not necessarily mean you did something wrong. You rest in the confidence that, since the message is now in the person’s memory, the Holy Spirit can use it at the right time to draw the person to faith. A survey taken on Taiwan in the 1970s revealed that those who became Christians said that they had rejected the Gospel seven times (on average) before they came to faith.

I think some Christians are reluctant to begin a Gospel conversation because they are afraid objections will come up that they can’t answer. Therefore, I tell students that evangelism and meeting objections are two different things. If you share the Gospel message, but your friend does not agree with your answer to one of his objections, you still have evangelized. The value of talking about objections is that it prolongs the conversation and makes it possible to deepen your friendship. Do not regard your conversation partner as an opponent; rather, look at him as a friend seeking the truth together with you.¹⁰

In my first extended Gospel conversation on Taiwan, the “answering objections” phase went on for three months. Fortunately for me, since I was only at the beginning stages of learning the language and culture, the person’s English was good enough to enable us to communicate, and his objections were not specific to his culture. What he brought up were the universal objections you might hear from anyone, such as wondering why the innocent suffer. As I look back now, I doubt that I answered each objection so thoroughly that my response couldn’t be disputed. But my friend did hear that there was an alternative to his viewpoint, and that was enough for him to move on to his next question.

That experience has led me to tell students that even if we do not have an “indisputable” answer to a given objection, we can still say why the existence of the objection has not caused us to lose our faith in God. That is always an authentic answer. After three months, my friend finally did say something specific to his culture: “If I became a Christian, my mother would get angry.” When I heard that, I was encouraged. It meant that he had been pondering the possibility. I looked at it not as a hard-core objection, but as an “excuse.” The remedy was not argument but encouragement. I told him that he was probably right, but that many others had gone through this experience, and God had given them the grace to endure. Later that same night, he did profess faith in Christ. His mother did later come to terms with her son’s change of religions, and she began going to church too.

Supporting a New Believer

After your friend makes a profession of faith, your need for cultural understanding increases so that you can stand by him as undergoes the possible

rejection by family and the loss of his support system. You will arrange for his Baptism, and ideally the pre-Baptism instruction will be by a local pastor in your friend's heart language. You'll want to share the Bible verses that provide assurance and show him what he has become in Christ.¹¹ In terms of the onion diagram, his ultimate allegiance has changed to God, and this allegiance will work its way outward through the other layers to affect his values, behavior, and stewardship of material things. Guiding this process is one way to understand the term "discipling."

You can make use of the "four topics" as a framework for your friend's daily Christian life, which is a life of confessing sin, remembering Christ's work and turning to Him in faith, thus being reminded again of forgiveness and eternal life. You need to help him think through which of his previous life customs are compatible with his new faith and which need to be discarded. On Taiwan, for example, the new Christian will regularly face the decision about whether to eat food offered to idols. The local congregation probably has already come to a consensus about this and similar issues, such as ancestor worship. Some churches have a formal ceremony in which the family altar is taken down and burned. You need to find out why the surrounding culture may feel threatened by someone's becoming a Christian and help the new believer find ways to show friends and family that he has not rejected them. Traditional Chinese religion teaches that those who pass away are still dependent on their descendants to provide for them in the afterlife by burning money or objects; thus, parents would fear that a descendant who becomes a Christian will not make those offerings. A crisis for many believers on Taiwan occurs at a funeral, because the well-being of the deceased is thought to depend on family members' participation in the ceremonies. Several of my friends faced this dilemma, because they felt conscience-bound not to take part. After much prayer, they asked permission of the family to be allowed to stand there and pray, rather than do the ceremonies, and in many cases the families assented. The problems in cross-cultural work seem overwhelming, but God is able to overcome them.

Endnotes

¹ Examples of grids for analyzing a culture are at <http://foundbytes.com/knowning-culture/>.

² The onion diagram is copyright © 2011 Eugene W. Bunkowske, PhD. To see it and more about using it, please go to <http://foundbytes.com/onion/>.

³ Detailed examples are given in chapter 2, "Characteristics of Worldviews," in Paul G. Hiebert's *Transforming Worldviews* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2008), 31ff.

⁴ Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.)

⁵ Bringing God's Word to the Greeks required the use of the pagan word, "*theos*," to the Latins the pagan word "*Deus*," to the Germans the pagan word "*Gott*," and to the English the pagan word "God." It was God's self-revelation in Scripture that filled these pagan terms with their biblical meaning. Since the Chinese have many deities, I usually introduced our Lord as "the God who made everything." That does not mean that I thought they believed that there was a God who made everything, but rather it served as a way to denote the God I was talking

about. The origin of the term contextualization and its numerous definitions are provided in chapter 12 of Michael Pocock, et. al., *The Changing Face of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

⁶ These places are Acts 2:22–38; 3:13–21; 4:10–12; 5:29–32; 10:34–44 and Paul’s message in Acts 13:23–39. I do not find all four in Paul’s speech in Athens. The four topics are also found in Romans 3:22–25; Ephesians 2:1–13; and Titus 3:3–7. And there are also many verses that simply give more detail about one of the four topics. These four constitute most of what scholars call the “kerygma,” which means “that which is announced.”

⁷ Each chapter of J. A. O. Preus’s *Just Words* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000) presents a real-life example of someone’s experiencing the need for salvation, along with a matching word of Gospel for that need.

⁸ Page 130 of Richard R. Caemmerer’s *Preaching for the Church* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959) consists of a comprehensive list of the descriptions and benefits of Christ’s work.

⁹ The entire January 2015 issue of *Mission Frontiers* (Pasadena: U. S. Center for World Mission) is devoted to understanding honor/shame cultures.

¹⁰ Suggestions for discussing objections and excuses are at <http://foundbytes.com/meeting-objections/>.

¹¹ Suggestions for helping a new Christian are at <http://foundbytes.com/overall/>.