

## Witnessing Cross-culturally

We've worked in Chattanooga, Tennessee housing projects since 1990. Only within the past month have we encountered African refugees. Refugees from hurricane Katrina, yes, and Hispanics who were roofing buildings, but not Africans. A friend led us to Mafata, a fourteen-year-old from Liberia. By God's grace she came to understand that salvation isn't based upon her goodness, but upon the death of Christ to redeem her life.

With so many trying to migrate to America, increasing foreign tourists, and opportunities for international travel, how can you share your faith with those of other cultures? If we're in a stranger's company for more than a few minutes, it might be a "divine appointment," and we might look for an avenue to share Christ. The context could be sitting next to a Hindu on a ninety-minute flight in India, at the door of Hispanics in Dalton, Georgia, in the taxi park at Torit, Sudan, or in the "projects" talking with gang-bangers, wondering how in the world to share the Good News with these neighbors (those close in proximity).

We must first be willing to interrupt our plans to give time to a stranger. Since each situation is unique, it's wise to ask God for wisdom and discernment as to the person's condition and needs. It's also appropriate to ask God to fill us with the Holy Spirit, to cleanse us of our sin and to give us joy (Ps. 51:10-13), and boldness (Acts 4:29). We can ask God to open the eyes of the person's understanding (Acts 26:18) and, as needed, to give the gifts of repentance (Acts 11:18), faith (Eph. 2:8-9) and eternal life (Ro. 6:23). We can ask God to convict of sin, righteousness and the coming judgment (John 16:8). Without such conviction, people will not enter the Kingdom of God. We need to remember as well to show kindness and respect, so that if our message is rejected, it will leave an open door for the next witness. Some sow, some water and some reap (1 Cor. 3:7-8), but each one receives a reward, according to one's efforts.

### **Spiritual doctor**

The model analogy that I think best comprehends witnessing is that of a doctor treating a patient. A doctor who greets a new patient, immediately writes a prescription and hastily leaves is a quack. Doctors ask questions, probe, detect patterns, keep listening, and then offer remedies. Since some are closer to the Kingdom of God than others (Mk. 12:34, 2 Cor. 2:15), we need not convince of what is already believed. Where is the spiritual frontier in this person's life? What are the thoughts that have not been captivated by Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). What are the strongholds or lies of Satan that are believed? How can I best respond and convince of the truth? How can the Gospel be shown to be Good News to this person, right now? How can I nudge this person closer to God, or lead into new life?

### **Listen**

We may have to listen for quite a while. Recently a stranger talked for about 30 minutes outside a courtroom. She attends a good church and is assimilating scriptural teaching from her pastor. Yet she took her daughter to a doctor to get birth control pills and other "protection" so that she wouldn't get pregnant while experimenting sexually. She stated repeatedly that she hated her mother. It didn't

appear that she needed the message of salvation, but did need another perspective concerning her advice to her daughter and concerning her hatred. She took the latter counsel well, but felt that her enabling her daughter was better than pregnancy (the daughter became pregnant anyway). Listening earns the right to speak.

### **Three Elements to witnessing: Friendship**

What specifically are the cross-cultural elements to witnessing? First is friendship. Second is the notion of God, and third is sin in human nature. Before talking about sin, which almost no one wants to discuss, we need to develop rapport. On an airplane I try to be considerate in helping with overhead bags and in getting in and out of a center seat. I find that saying something early on breaks the ice, even if we don't converse much until later. If we find that the Australian sitting next to us works in Austria, and mans a computer help desk for IBM, we may talk about his job, and issues we have navigating in Vista. We may talk about what he enjoyed seeing in America. It's good to reveal who we are, and perhaps who we are not. In the projects I usually offer a person a free New Testament, and if the person shows sufficient interest, will ask if I could ask a question along spiritual lines. Then I ask the question taught by the late D. James Kennedy, "Have you come to the place in your spiritual life where you are certain that you will go to heaven?" Most people aren't. Of those who are, probably two-thirds are based on erroneous ideas, such as personal merit. At some point in the dialogue, the first name of the other is begged (I don't ask for the last name unless follow-up is needed), so I ask it, and give mine.

### **Transition to spiritual matters**

Making the transition to spiritual matters can be easy. I may say, "I talk to many people about their spiritual lives, and...", or "I'm really interested in where people are at, spiritually." If the person is from a near culture, ask if they attend church very often. Next I try to determine what the person is trusting in to make peace with God. "If this plane makes an unscheduled landing in the middle of the Atlantic, are you ready to go?" All Christians are priests, so our work is to assist others in making peace with God (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6). As priests, our sacrifice on the other's behalf is time, effort, and the willingness to risk rejection.

### **Second element: God**

Second, particularly with those from very different cultures, such as Hindus, I focus upon their notion of God. Do you believe that there is a God? Would you mind describing your belief system? Who is God, to you? Do you believe that Jesus is God or one god among others, or simply a person? Most people believe in some kind of God, so listen. If the person is an atheist, I share how God dramatically changed me at the age of fifteen. I may talk about notions of "irreducible complexity" in microbiology, and the argument for God from design in nature, trying to move the person toward agnosticism, at least<sup>1</sup>.

### **Third element: Sin**

Third, is the unhappy topic of a person's sin, and what they will are going to do with it. Almost everyone admits to having done *something* wrong, but almost all flatter themselves that they aren't murderers or

adulterers--so they are good people. If after repeated denials, they admit to no sin, I gently quote 1 John 1:8—if we say we have no sin we lie. In Psalm 36, David made this profound statement:

An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes. <sup>2</sup> For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin.  
Psalm 36:1-2 NIV

Unforgiven sinners (and some Christians) have four problems: they don't fear God enough, they flatter themselves as to how good they are, which leads to failing to detect their sin. If they succeed in detecting sin, they fail to hate it—to repent of exquisite sins. Our work is to show the need for the work of Christ on the cross by convincing the person that s/he is indeed a sinner, and in abysmal jeopardy. We usually must lovingly tear down the rickety but cherished structure of self-righteousness that exists across cultures. A deeper work of the Spirit is to actually despise one's sin. John the Baptist, Jesus and the Apostles began their work with "Repent!" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Mk. 6:8; Acts 2:38). When the apostle Paul addressed the philosophically fashionable Athenians, he said: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" ( Acts 17:30). This may seem "old school," but it speaks to hedonists, Hindus, agnostics and assorted non-Christians in their terminal illness.

Then I ask, "How are you going to deal with your sin problem?" The usual reply is that God will forgive them<sup>2</sup>. "But why should a holy God, who hates sin, be obligated to forgive you?"<sup>3</sup>. At this juncture, the sinlessness of Christ and his voluntary sacrifice on the cross for our sins--the just for us unjust people (1 Pet. 3:18)—is introduced. I show how this salvation is received by faith in Christ, perhaps quoting Rom. 10:9-11. I show how Christianity differs from other religions in that other systems show how to earn salvation, while we deny even the possibility of earning our own salvation--salvation was accomplished for us by Christ's payment on the cross for our sins, for all who accept and believe it (Rom. 3:20-22; John 3:14-15). When talking with a Hindu, realize that Christ may be accepted into the panoply of gods quite easily. We need to press home the uniqueness of Christ as being the only way to salvation (John 14:6). In sum, everyone has to decide what they will do with personal sin. They may ignore it, presume upon God's mercy apart from Christ, minimize it, flaunt it, joke about it--or dispose of it at the cross. Personal sin must be confronted by everyone, in every culture.

You may need a translator. When finding a Hispanic family as a door opened, a friendly girl of about eight years was willing to translate the Gospel into Spanish for her aunt. It's a good idea to leave a tract which uses diagrams to tell the story<sup>4</sup>. Better is to have along an inexpensive NIV English or Spanish New Testament to give. You can bend back the corner of pages with scriptures that you've referenced. At about \$1.00 each in case lots, they are light and inexpensive, and contain a Gospel presentation<sup>5</sup>.

Our responsibility isn't conversions, but it is sharing the Good News as a kind and skillful physician would serve someone with terminal cancer (Prov. 24:11). We are called to witness beyond our own people (Acts 1:8). Being a spiritual doctor or priest constitutes a challenging obedience to God, who does not want any to perish (2 Pet. 3:9).

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<sup>1</sup>See Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box*, ISBN: 0684834936; Here is are resources for the "intelligent design" argument: [http://www.amazon.com/Crucial-Books-Intelligent-Design-Movement/lm/2E9IME3UUVNYL/ref=cm\\_lmt\\_srch\\_f\\_1\\_rsrsrcs0/102-5863507-8420951](http://www.amazon.com/Crucial-Books-Intelligent-Design-Movement/lm/2E9IME3UUVNYL/ref=cm_lmt_srch_f_1_rsrsrcs0/102-5863507-8420951)

<sup>2</sup> "Dieu me pardonnera. C'est son metier." God will forgive me. It's his job-- attributed to Heinrich Heine—an incredibly presumptuous statement.

<sup>3</sup> The element of God's holiness in evangelism derives from training received from Evangelism Explosion

<sup>4</sup> The "Bridge to Life" (International Bible Society) or "The Passage" (for African Americans, from The Impact Movement) are useful [http://www.impactmovement.com/articles\\_view.asp?articleid=9183&columnid=1459](http://www.impactmovement.com/articles_view.asp?articleid=9183&columnid=1459)

<sup>5</sup> Order at [www.IBSDirect.com](http://www.IBSDirect.com)