

Cross-cultural Evangelism: How Do We Do It Well?

PCPC

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Let me begin by assuring you that I believe in evangelism. In fact, it is my strong belief that evangelism lies at the heart of all missionary activity that causes me to be so concerned that we “do evangelism right.”

So I pose the question: *Can we do evangelism right?* Yes and no, depending upon how one defines evangelism and how well one prepared before he or she goes. **The first rule of medicine is “Do no harm.”** I believe we must apply the same rule to doing evangelism. Evangelism done wrongly—by the wrong people in the wrong way at the wrong time—can be detrimental, no matter how well intentioned.

Six Key Questions

There are key questions which must be asked when considering cross-cultural evangelism:

- 1) Can we do evangelism without knowing the language?
- 2) Can we do evangelism without understanding the culture?
- 3) Can we do evangelism without relationship?
- 4) Can we do evangelism from a position of power?
- 5) Can we do evangelism for the wrong reasons?
- 6) Can we do evangelism without words?

I would argue that the answer to the first five questions is a qualified “no” and the answer to the last is a qualified “yes.”

Can we do evangelism without knowing the language?

Words are symbols. Symbols have meanings. Meaning is assigned to symbols by the culture in which one lives. Therefore, real communication takes place only as the two trying to communicate assign the same meaning to the symbol being used.

In his chapter, “When Yes Means No and No Means Yes,” David Livermore observes that “language is more than just learning words. It includes learning general strategies for how to communicate in ways that are respectful or get information” (Livermore 2009, 115). He goes on to emphasize that language is central to effective cross-cultural communication.

Can we do evangelism without understanding the culture?

Marcus Aurelius wrote “The Soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts. (Proverbs23:7). *For as he thinks within himself, so he is. He says to you, “Eat and drink!” But his heart is not with you.*

Note: Aristotle believed that the mark of an educated mind was to entertain a thought without accepting it. Effective evangelism is contextual evangelism, while the message does not change (Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord), the methodology of doing evangelism *must* change from culture to culture.

Can we do evangelism without relationship?

Without relationship (i.e., trust), it is difficult to do effective evangelism.

Building cross-cultural relationships take time. Duane Elmer (2006) says it this way: “You can’t build trust with another person until they feel like they have been accepted by you—until they feel you value them as human beings. After trust is established, there is a greater likelihood that people will share important information” (2006, 151). Communication is made up of two things: information and relationship (Watzlawick 1967). The relationship between the persons defines communication and is, therefore, the most important part of the process.

Can we do evangelism from a position of power?

What is the position of power (1) our education, (2) our wealth, (3) our position in the city and (4) our ability to pick up and go home at any moment.

1. **Education** has the power to eradicate ignorance and poverty and make individuals become independent by giving them choices.
2. **Wealth** Money is power. It takes money to buy things—even good things like land, church buildings, medicines, and Bibles. How does one who is poor answer the question, “Would you like to accept Jesus?” when the person posing the question is perceived to have the power to supply what the person in poverty needs? For those of us who work cross-culturally, access to money is both our greatest asset and greatest liability.
1. Unfortunately, our **position of power** has frequently contributed to cultural arrogance. At times, this attitude is subtle; at other times, it is blatant. But it is always present.
2. The short-termer always has a “back door” readily available and **can always go home**. He or she knows that at the end of the two weeks, one year, or four years, he or she is going home. The nationals with whom we work are also aware of this reality.

Can we do evangelism for the wrong reasons?

Yes, when it is done for the purpose of self-validation. This is the idea that “I need to win another to Christ” to validate my commitment to Christ or salve my conscience with regard to the Great Commission command

However, we need to remember that in our Christian witness, God calls us to faithful service, not necessarily success as the culture defines it.

While leading a person to Christ may make us feel good, evangelism done right is ultimately not about our feelings or self-fulfillment. If we are not careful to continually check our motives, we can fool ourselves. We can be engaged in all kinds of activity while actually serving our own needs.

So I come to the last question: Can we do evangelism without words?

Is it simply impossible for short-termers to “do evangelism?” Not if we qualify what we mean by evangelism and what methods are appropriate to use in cross-cultural situations.

We are all familiar with the three methods of evangelism: **proclamation, presence, and persuasion**. I do not deny the need for proclamation/persuasion with words in evangelism. Ultimately, the essence of the gospel message will need to be explained. However, I do believe that this is often best done by national workers, or at the very least, those who have a good understanding of the culture and language (i.e., seasoned missionaries). This does not, however, diminish the impact short-termers can have.

Their presence, when carried out in a spirit of servanthood, can be a genuine means of persuasion through deeds, good works, and a sincere expression of Christian love—servant evangelism. Jesus modeled it for his disciples (John 13:13-15), then he said to them, “For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done.”

Preaching the gospel with words can be confrontational. Sometimes, confrontation is necessary, but that is seldom the case with short-termers. Servanthood is intentionally evangelistic while not being coercive. When we serve others with no expectation of anything in return, we say to them, “I am doing this to show the love of Jesus.” Then, the Holy Spirit opens the door (usually through the person asking, “Why are you doing this?”; 1 Pet. 3:15-16) and we can respond as Peter encourages: “... if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way” (1 Pet. 3:15).

The saying is true that people are not likely to care how much you know until they know how much you care. While short-termers’ good deeds done in love may not lead a person to an immediate decision for Christ, they will most certainly move that individual toward that decision point.

Am I overlooking the work of the Holy Spirit in the evangelism process? Not at all. He empowers the messenger (Acts 1:8) and confirms the message (Mark 16:20). He works in us

and through us to convict of sin (John 16:8) and transform the sinner (John 3:5-8; Tit. 3:5). But this does not give those who go on short-term missions, nor those of us who send them, the right to presume that the Holy Spirit will make up for a lack of preparation.

Over the past few decades, the discipline of missiology has developed a vast amount of knowledge about how to do cross-cultural ministry correctly. The sub-discipline of short-term missions alone has a wealth of information which has been made available to the church. Yet all too often the tendency is to ignore that information and “spiritualize” the task by saying that the Holy Spirit will guide. Granting the absolute necessity of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, we are wrong to presume that he will make up for our lack of preparation. Being prepared can be costly in terms of time and resources. But doing evangelism right demands the effort.

Do I believe in evangelism through short-term mission teams? Absolutely...when properly understood and done well. For the short-term missionary and the agencies which send them, this will take careful thought, cultural sensitivity, and a considerable amount of cross-cultural preparation. To do less is to do harm