

Further Reflections



Western Christianized Identity

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When we talk about identity, it is usually in reference to those from other cultures we are trying to reach with the gospel. *How will new believers understand and live out their faith in a situation where there is little or no biblical background?* And, how will friends, family and neighbors view that newfound faith?

We know that anyone who repents and comes to God through Christ is a new creation. They are different. But how that transformation plays out in different cultures is not what we might expect. What they need to do or avoid within their cultural or religious setting is something we must consider carefully.

Donald McGavran used to say that when the gospel is first penetrating a culture, how others within that culture view the new believers is key to future growth. If they feel like “those people” (meaning new believers) are now different or “other,” the gospel will not spread. If, however, they are seen as a valid expression within the culture, the gospel will spread.

Think for a moment about your own identity. What is your cultural background? (I’m speaking mainly to Westerners, but others from around the world where the gospel has been implanted for years can also relate, since many Koreans or Africans south of the Sahara or Latin Americans come from a “Christian” background with Western roots.) Most of us would likely say that we didn’t have to change that much when we came to Christ. Sure, there are those who used to think and act immorally—living out the flesh in all of its fullness. And, yes, it is a major shift for them. But even

then, while they need to leave certain friends to stay away from sinful behavior and temptation, they can normally find believers who are from similar cultural understanding. At least they can find believers like them who speak their language.

Yet for us who didn’t indulge in that level of pre-faith sin, the shift is far subtler, especially if we trusted Christ

when we were young. Researchers tell us most people come to Christ before they are 18, yet most of the time, the shift to being a new creation is difficult to see.

So is the change real? Of course! That six-year-old boy who truly believes is a new creature. Naturally, he will grow and exhibit more fruit of the Spirit as he matures in life and spiritual things.

But now, imagine growing up in a culture where there are no people of faith. Any believers living near you are from a different background and speak a totally different language (or at least use different religious terminology).

Looking at it from our perspective as believers, when someone from a situation like this comes to Christ, what would we expect (or require) them to do differently? Are we sure that any and all of these requirements are derived from clear biblical teaching and not merely our cultural traditions?

Unfortunately, we often add to the Bible from our religious traditions. Those traditions may not be bad or wrong, but that doesn’t mean they are best in

another culture. For example, we might expect that once there are enough new believers, they will have a church building and a full-time paid pastor. If there are already Christians nearby using the same language, we expect they will adopt the Christians’ way of saying things (as

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is the case with languages such as Arabic or Urdu, where religious terminology is very different between Muslims and Christians). We might expect them to go to prayer meetings at 5 am, or if they were Hindus, to start eating meat.

Most of us would say that these things are not “required.” Historically, all this and more has been expected of new believers. So I wonder, are we merely putting new forms of legalism on new believers? Are we putting a yoke on them that neither they (nor we) should have to bear, as James said in Acts 15:10?

Why not make a list of the things you do as a part of your faith or church pattern, which are not clear biblical teaching. Remember that doesn’t make it wrong, but it should make us think more carefully as to how our “Christian activities” might be seen when lived out in another situation. f

(I encourage you to briefly post your story or comments in the response section after my article on the *MF* website, and see what others have said.)