

Further Reflections



Giving and Receiving Strategies

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It's commonplace in missions today to emphasize the need to let new believers decide what is best in their context, under the prayerful guidance of the Bible and the Holy Spirit. Jesus told his disciples that the Father, "will give you another Advocate to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth...he resides with you and will be in you." (John 14:16-17, NET Bible). Yes, there is a role for teaching and guiding new disciples, yet we realize that they understand their culture better than we ever can. So rather than promoting or "leading with" our perspectives, we point to truth and guide as necessary.

I am not saying we should give up our values or ideas. While our theology (-ies) may not be wrong, those from a very different culture may view specific areas in radically different ways than we do—adding a new dimension of our understanding of God. Perhaps this is one reason we have not seen more progress among the least reached. We see things differently. We prioritize differently. An important issue to us, may not be something that others think about at all.

For example, one mission I am close to has a particular view on eschatology. They have a sending base in a country in Asia, and those who join the mission from that country don't have the same priority for eschatology. For various reasons historically, it was simply not an important issue to them.

At the same time, some of the ideas and emphases from the West are actually good ones. Because we have had the Gospel for centuries and have been involved in missions for decades, we

have learned a few lessons along the way. Westerners have different, sometimes creative perspectives on how to do outreach more effectively. And we've sought to learn from history and our mistakes of the past. That doesn't mean we don't make new—or the same old—mistakes, but sometimes we can see things that the insiders to the culture cannot. Some of our ideas may be bad, but I believe our creativity is one of the major gifts we can contribute to other believers worldwide.

My point is this: just because an idea doesn't come from the new believers doesn't mean it is bad. One argument I've heard in the last year is "well, this approach is a Western idea from the missionaries...", as if that automatically makes it bad or less helpful.

I suggest that when it comes to approaches to contextualization, the outsider may indeed have some helpful insights. At times, the insider, who has been saved out of their majority non-Christian context, cannot easily see how the gospel might spread in their midst. Depending on how they were reached, they may have only been exposed to a narrow approach to outreach. For example, someone who was initially reached by radio or tracts may think that radio or tracts is the way to reach everyone. Naturally, there

is nothing wrong with either of these methods, they're simply not the only ways to reach people or penetrate new people groups.

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In the early 1970s, Ralph Winter introduced an idea which some saw as "Western" called the E-Scale. It described a simple yet profound way of categorizing non-Christians and highlighting overlooked cultures. Other factors aside, those who are E-1—or culturally near you—would be easier to reach, while those who were E-2 or E-3 would be much more difficult because of major cultural differences in understanding or acceptance. A major contribution of his 1974 Lausanne presentation was to point out that 87% of the non-Christians of the world were at an E-2 or E-3 distance from Christians, and that reaching them would take a special kind of cross-cultural effort. Thinking through these issues has greatly helped mission strategy, even though the ideas originated from the West.

As we watch what is happening around the world and seek to further His Kingdom, we need the wisdom and insight of God to direct our way and inform our strategies, as he guides us in communicating the Gospel to all peoples. *f*