

Further Reflections



Religion-Bashing or Faith-Sowing

Greg H. Parsons, Global Director, U.S. Center for World Mission

Here in the U.S., we are in our once-every-four-year presidential election cycle. Just hearing some of the back-and-forth makes me wonder if our “system” really does work as well as it used to. I’ve previously noted in this column that much of the campaigning is negative—candidates bash the other person’s position. I’ve talked about how we tend to do that with our theological arguments. But today I was considering how this kind of approach impacts how we share our faith.

Do we believe that we must put down another person’s religion or beliefs in order to convince them of the gospel? Do we need to say, directly or indirectly: “my Christianity is better than your xyz?” It may make us feel better to be “right,” but just as often this other person also thinks he is “right,” so it shuts down the opportunity to talk further.

Many are not direct in their approach, but even without a strong, “I am right and you are wrong” mentality, we can still come across as arrogant and condescending. While our culture here seems to admire those kinds of attitudes more and more, it doesn’t work when it comes to spreading the gospel. Ultimately, it is the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit that brings regeneration, yet God works in and through our words and actions.

Naturally, we believe we are right and that we know Jesus. If that is true, we are right. But that doesn’t mean all our theology is accurate. With Paul’s teaching, the Bereans checked out the Scriptures to be sure that what he was saying was in line (Acts 17:11). Just this last week, my pastor said that while he will never teach something he knows is not true, he

can be wrong! I appreciate that. Many in theological debates put up “theology” as crucial—and it is. But, that does not mean that my theology is always correct. Asking questions and reexamining theological issues doesn’t equal heresy. Neither is considering more effective ways of describing the gospel.

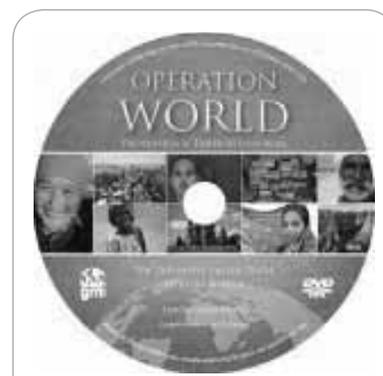
But more to the point: As we have discussions with those who do not (yet) believe, we need to be careful. I am not saying that we need to dumb down our message or hold culture above the Bible. Imagine someone was trying to convince you that your faith in Christ was misplaced. They might say that “this” or “that” fact about Christ or the Bible isn’t true and that you needed to believe a different “faith” to get right with God. How would you feel? Defensive? Angry? Entrenched in your position? Suppose for a minute that they are right: would you give up your faith because someone convinces you with an argument that put down the Bible? I’m sure it happens. But if you are reading *Mission Frontiers* regularly, you may be a bit stronger in your faith. You know you would not likely be swayed. Your faith may be tempted, but you are not likely to fall for any “debate” without a fight. If you don’t know an answer, you know people with whom you can consult. Perhaps, like me, you have grown up in Christian circles in a “Christian” country.

Now, imagine again, that you had grown up in a Buddhist family in a Buddhist country like Thailand. How well might our standard arguments work there? You can’t start with “God loves you” because they don’t believe in a supreme being. You can’t tell them our God is better than their god, for it wouldn’t make sense to them.

You can love them. You can serve them and learn the way they think. You can seek to understand their language and culture. Through that process—which several friends of mine have done in Thailand—you can find ways to share that make more sense and reap fruit for the Kingdom.

But remember—especially when the fruit seems slow in coming—it is the Holy Spirit who draws them, not our arguments. We need to contend for the faith, but that should start by our “contending for understanding” them. There must be proclamation of a message to go with our life being an example, but how we “preach” must fit the context, just like it did in the book of Acts.

We would love to hear what you think on this and other topics in this issue. Please take a moment and post your thoughts at: www.missionfrontiers.org.f



Operation World

DVD-ROM

\$29.99

missionbooks.org