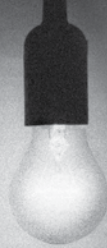


DECIDING WHEN TO CONFRONT



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I was just reading an email from a husband and wife who have been working for 8 years among an unreached group in Asia and, before that, among an animistic people in Africa for a couple of years. The opportunity to serve in two very different contexts gives them

an advantage over those who have only understood one culture deeply.

As a result, their observations and insights are stunning. This young couple in their thirties is seriously grappling with the realities of what happens when the gospel enters a people and the ramifications on the lives of those coming to faith.

When the gospel comes in, it affirms what light God has already given and it confronts the darkness. Reading about their struggles in that process reminds me of what Jesus said to Paul in Acts 26:17-18: “I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (NET Bible)

As I read their message, I sensed a “holy awe”—they really love the gospel and these people. This couple and other front line servants like them have the

amazing privilege of watching the gospel take root before their very eyes. But with that also comes the struggle. And, sometimes, they experience the pain of those who leave the faith or continue to wrestle with sinful patterns.

Since workers are outside of the culture, the local people do not expect them to act in certain ways or do certain things. On the other hand, they fully expect their own people to do the things they have always done. Failure to do so normally leads to problems or loss of blessing.

In response to their email, I asked them about the balance between encouraging new believers to remain faithful to their family and community while being faithful to God in it all. At times, that can be a tough call.

There comes a time—ideally after much reflection and prayer—to confront an anti-Biblical practice. Nevertheless, I would encourage a couple in this situation to work carefully with the new believers, directing them to study the Word together and letting the new believers decide when a practice should be confronted as well as when and how to address it. In other words, they (the new believers) need to pray and reflect also.

All too often, we feel we need to encourage action on the part of new believers. While we may not be animistic, we can add the baggage of our Christian culture all too easily. One Asian example is what is often referred to as “ancestor worship.” Of course,

IF it is really worship, it should be confronted. But if it is merely honoring parents, it could very well be a way to actually obey the Old Testament commandment with a promise:

“Honor your father and your mother, that you may live a long time in the land the Lord your God is giving to you.” (Exodus 20:12, NET Bible)

In one culture, the people were afraid that if they touched a hammer or nail (or any number of other things), they would be cursed in some way. That seems silly to us, and is likely the work of our Enemy to prevent that society from developing, keeping them poor and in inadequate housing. Of course, it is not a sin to touch (or refrain from touching) a hammer. In the case of such a practice in this culture, the impact of the gospel will likely break through a spiritual stronghold.

Often we call “sin” things that the Bible never defines that way. Knowing the difference can be hard when you are an outsider to a situation and some practices seem so wrong to us. Usually, we don’t know what they really think about what they are, or are not, doing. One person may be worshiping their dead parents. Another may merely be following a historic or family ritual.

As outsiders looking into any situation in another culture, we need to be faithful to the Word. The difficulty is figuring out how the scriptures apply to a specific local context and how they should be lived out. 