

Further Reflections: No Shortcuts to Jesus

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Since my wife and I arrived in Pasadena in 1983 to join the staff of the U.S. Center for World Mission, I've heard lots of strategies from global workers trying to reach the Unreached. Some hear and learn cultural, historical or religious stories—which they hope might impact whole people groups for the gospel. For example, I've heard how certain Chinese characters have underlying meanings that point to spiritual truth. Or how various Sanskrit scriptures have epic stories that make for great analogies to share with Hindus.

The thinking behind this is that if we can understand and use these stories, we might understand their thinking and be able to soften people's hearts so they might turn to God. It seems like some may be either, 1) looking for a shortcut to the hard work of deeply learning language and culture, and/or, 2) using some sort of "contextualized" strategy where they think they know the answers before they even start. Paul Pennington said that contextualization is "Christian code too often for cosmetically enhanced imitation of our assumed essentials."

So, after hearing another example like this today, I wondered: *what is it that seems to draw people to Jesus?* I realize it is different in different situations, but I wondered if there is a pattern. We know that Jesus will draw people to Himself (John 12:32), and yet He has instructed

us to pray, among other things, that the Lord of the harvest would thrust out laborers (Luke 10:2). Since we are to pray for God's will, one of our greatest ministries is to *pray that God will draw people* from specific people groups to Christ.

I've also heard from some who have tried a simpler approach. They too learned language and tried to understand the context/culture where they live—often living in-country for a long time. And they might use a story that connects with the spiritual climate or background of the culture, but they are mainly *pointing people to Jesus through God's Word*.

It is easy for those who grew up in the church and/or became Christ followers long ago, to forget the power of the Word of God to transform lives. We have this as head knowledge. But we may need to be reminded of how this truth plays out every day around the world by people who grow up in very different contexts.

For example, one worker I know was serving in South Asia. He sought to live a holy life, even though it made him stand out. Eventually, he saw whole families meeting together in the evening to study about Jesus in the gospels. Another brother studied Jesus' life with leaders in his Middle Eastern country. The group decided to compare Jesus with others—like Buddha or Ghandi. Eventually, they gave up on everyone *other* than Jesus! And they were increasingly drawn to Him.

In both contexts, the expatriate worker sought to keep his own views out of the way and let the Word speak—making sure to answer all spiritual questions with the Word.

While I am reluctant to second guess someone who has lived or is living in the local situation, at times I've wondered if some workers wait too long before sharing more directly about how Jesus and the Scriptures have impacted their lives. Of course, sometimes, people share too boldly for their context and get themselves into trouble or are completely misunderstood. A while back, workers from a large Asian country were killed in a Muslim country because they were too aggressive. We should only call it "boldness and courage" when it is tied to wisdom from above.

I want to be clear that I believe it is very important that we understand our context. I don't think I can say that too strongly. History matters. We have all seen situations where people—perhaps out of youthful zeal, perhaps out of immaturity—did things that seemed to us to be counter to the gospel in other contexts. We have all seen people close the door to God—perhaps in our own families.

But there are so many people in the world around all of us, who have not heard and would be willing to listen—even among the unreached. So yes—gain understanding of the context where you are (or will be). Learn from the language they speak. Walk with them through life's difficulties. Understand an individual's life, family, or local history. Listen. Pray. How you live your life speaks volumes.

All of that can help show *you* how *they* think. That leads both you and them to the Word of Life. 