

Witnessing for Christ in Other Cultures

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There was a time when Evangelicals took to the mission field a fairly standardized formula for communicating the gospel, using mainly verses from the book of Romans. “All have sinned... The wages of sin is death... But God shows His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us...,” etc., which is all true and logical, but was not the apostles’ approach to witnessing. Now, Paul wrote those verses to believers already born again, baptized and under pastoral care. Understanding the principle of Christ’s dying in our place as a sacrifice for sins, is often just that — understanding, not necessarily faith. The apostles simply told the Good News that 1) Jesus died, 2) He rose and 3) He promised forgiveness and eternal life to all who repented and believed. In His final command before ascending to glory, Jesus emphasized these three historical facts as the message that His witnesses were to proclaim to the nations (Luke 24:46-48).

The apostles consistently emphasized Jesus’ resurrection as the main point of their witness, and also as the only means of our receiving eternal life. Believers would participate in His resurrection in the same way that they participated in his death. The apostles viewed His resurrection as an essential part of His saving work; believers receive pardon through His death, and life through His resurrection. Our Lord Jesus Christ claimed that He would raise the dead either to life or to damnation (John 5:21-29). He asserted that He himself is the resurrection and source of eternal life in His assurance to dead Lazarus’ grieving sister (John 11:20-27). Paul revealed that our dying with Christ to sin and rising with Him to a new, holy life is one integral work of grace affirmed by baptism (Romans 6). Paul also made clear that our only hope for immortality lies in our being raised in union with Christ, being clothed with His immortality in our resurrection (1 Cor. 15).

Missionaries have found that a doctrinal approach to witnessing does not work well in non-Western cultures. The less they structure a standard form of witnessing, the better folks understand the message. The best way to spread the Good News is simply to let believers tell spontaneously — with the Holy Spirit’s power promised by Christ in Acts 1:8 — what Jesus did to save sinners and what He has done in their own lives. Simply to tell the joyful news about Jesus does not require a theologian. In wide-spread church planting movements today, one observes four starkly evident facts about witnessing:

1) Nearly everyone who comes to Christ does so because of *prayer for healing* of a physical ailment in Jesus’ name. Someone in the family, or a close friend, has been cured or liberated from an evil spirit.

2) Nearly everyone who comes to Christ in a pioneer field does so through the *influence of a new believer*. New believers still have many unsaved friends and can talk with them about spiritual matters without hesitation.

3) Nearly everyone who comes to Christ in a church planting movement has done so together *with family members and close friends*. Their faith is not a private matter. God sees the family as a unit, and brings it to faith as a unit, as Acts 16:31 promises.

Westerners' background in individualistic cultures, leads them to emphasize 'personal' faith and Jesus as "personal savior", etc. This is not found in Scripture. (The word 'personal' once simply clarified that we are saved by our own faith and not by that of our parents, but in time came to mean 'private,' which devastates witnessing.)

4) Powerful conviction of sin is more frequent, and sinners find it easier to come to permanent, saving faith, *in a group that is small* enough to have spontaneous interaction, where believers practice the many 'one another' commands such as exhorting one another, teaching one another, correcting one another, confessing faults to one another, etc.

Paul emphasized this dynamic in 1 Corinthians 14:3 and 24-26, "One who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation... if all prophesy and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you. What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification."

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