

WHEN CULTURE AND CHRISTIANITY MEET

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Two fish were passing each other, and one asked, “How’s the water?” The other responded, a “I don’t know. I just swim in it.”

Our view of culture many times is the same. We really do not understand culture, even our own culture . . . we just swim in it. For this reason, often we are unknowingly dominated by our culture. The greater culture infiltrates our churches in ways contrary to scripture. We do not know how to speak the gospel into current culture, and we are imprisoned in antiquated methods that reflect a culture from times gone by.

There is never a time the gospel enters a cultural vacuum; there is always an existing culture in every place the gospel arrives. The relationship between the gospel and culture is less about the first time gospel and culture meet and more about the developing relationship in each locale.

Culture can be defined as an integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas, and products that offer coping mechanisms (Hiebert). The interpretation of that definition is that culture is learned behaviors, not genetic predispositions. Culture fits nicely into a system that is a whole and not merely random parts; one of culture’s primary functions is to provide coping mechanisms whereby we live in our culture like swimming in water. We do not really think about it, we just live in it as naturally as breathing.

Culture has been likened to an iceberg. Much of an iceberg is under the surface of the water; however, we tend to judge the iceberg solely on the part that is visible. Similarly, we visit a new culture and declare that all people are basically the same all over the world. That is true from the observation of the part of culture that is “above the water line.”

However, the deeper realities of culture are not seen in a brief visit and/or superficial analysis. That is why cross-cultural mission practitioners have to **learn** languages, **discover** worldviews, **uncover** values, and **pay close attention** to behaviors in order to **understand** and **function** in a different culture. All of the bold verbs in the previous sentence indicate that the process of adapting to a new culture is an arduous endeavor which demands great energy and time, hence the demands of the process of adjusting to a new culture.

Three primary areas must be considered in the gospel/culture relationship. First, worldview is the lens through which we view the world. It is our default setting to reality. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus started with the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Jesus is not simply providing propositional truth here for rote memorization. He is challenging the dominant worldview of his disciples’ day . . . a religious/works-based righteousness that was man-centered through Judaism. All of this was packaged into the reality of a foreign invader that brought about a cultural identity issue and a longing for hope

among first century Jews. You must know worldview in order to communicate the gospel more effectively.

Another area of culture that must be addressed is communication. Jesus demonstrated his ability to communicate in his culture by using parables. He always used key examples from his culture such as fishing, farming, shepherding, etc. He communicated through the cultural system of the rabbinical method where the rabbi would choose a small group of men to teach and train at one time.

The last area we will mention is that of building relationships in a cultural context. Jesus was perhaps most counter-cultural in his relationships. He both chastised the Pharisees and accepted their dinner invitations. He left many scratching their heads in the way he treated and conversed with women in public. Perhaps most challenging was his culturally frowned-upon friendships with “sinners” of all types. He constantly challenged the existing culture in relationships, personal identity, and inherent value of individuals with parables, such as the publican and the Pharisee and the parable of the good Samaritan.

Next time, we will take our conversation on culture beyond the meeting with the gospel as discussed when the gospel and culture collide.



mission:world

NEWS

REACHING THE UNREACHED IN THE 10/40 WINDOW

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When you think of church planters serving in the hardest-to-reach places, are you imagining Americans moving to those places, learning the local language, building relationships and planting a church? Unfortunately, in most cases that's not a real possibility. Let's first consider the realities of those hardest-to-reach places and how those realities affect our strategy as Americans to reach the people living there.

The Hard Places

When we think "hardest to reach," we shouldn't think in terms of remoteness. I say this having served as a missionary in a location that was *extremely* remote. No; "hardest to reach" isn't about remoteness. It's about access. Generally speaking, the majority of the world's unreached people groups reside in a geographic region located in or around a window between ten and forty degrees north latitude spanning from North Africa through Asia. Not all countries or areas in this region are included, while some just outside of the boundaries are. In all, missiologists surmise there are 68 countries that make up the revised 10/40 window region.

The people in this region predominantly consist of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Unreligious, and Animists (tribal spirit belief systems). Another consideration is that many of the countries included do not look favorably on the USA and often have the most hostile governments toward Christianity. Of the 50 worst countries for Christian persecution, 45 reside in the 10/40 window.

These locations are often challenging for Americans to even exist without inherent suspicion from the community and government. Because of the scrutiny that would arise from simply living there, the idea of an American planting a church in such a context is unrealistic at best.

One might assume that the people in this region represent a relatively small proportion of the world's population compared to people who already have access to the good news. However, the truth couldn't be more contrary; the combined populations of these 68 countries represent two-thirds of the entire global population.

As Christ followers seeking to fulfill the Great Commission, we cannot ignore the hard places just because we can't do it ourselves. No, we must take action but do so strategically. We have been blessed to be a blessing! The resources Christ followers have in America are too great to keep on the sidelines. We need to leverage the tools and resources we have been blessed with to do our part in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Working Behind the Scenes

As Americans we must prioritize faithfulness over receiving the credit in order to reach those in the 10/40 window region. We must adapt our strategies and focus our time and resources into equipping and sending missionaries from the places traditionally considered our mission field. There are countless potential missionaries that fill churches all throughout the global south and countries near the 10/40 window region.

We need to strategically partner with those churches and believers to equip and send them to serve in the places we cannot.



This requires a focused effort to mobilize those brothers and sisters abroad to go to the 10/40 window region, train and equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to serve in those contexts, and help financially support them to serve in the places where we cannot go.

This does *NOT* mean we should stop sending Americans abroad. We definitely must continue to send our own people to the places we are able to go. Additionally, we should send our own to train and equip our brothers and sisters from other countries to make disciples where we are unable— specifically, the 10/40 window region. Once we are able to do that, we can use our resources to partner with these frontier workers as they fulfill the Great Commission by going to the hardest to reach places.

To the Finish

I am fully convinced this is how we will be able to effectively reach the unreached in the 10/40 window region. The road is long and challenging. In all likelihood, we will be unable to see the work completed with our own eyes. However, it is not always our role to finish the race. Sometimes it's our job to run our leg well so we can pass the baton to the person who will finish. Sometimes it's our job to be the coach who prepares the runners.

Many of us will need to be sponsors whose role is to invest in the team so they can train, go, and run the race abroad.

Regardless of our individual responsibilities to the team, we are all called to play our parts in a manner worthy of our Lord Jesus Christ.



REACHING THE UNRESPONSIVE IN EUROPE

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Have you ever considered the challenge of spreading the gospel across Europe? It's an incredibly diverse continent with 44 unique countries, each with its own language, cuisine, music, literature, and culture. It's easy to overlook the importance of understanding and respecting each country's culture when we're trying to reach out to them. But here's the thing: To be effective in sharing the gospel, we need dedicated missionaries willing to immerse themselves in the culture, learn the language and customs, and develop an understanding of the ones they have come to reach.

Building relationships and becoming friends with the locals is crucial, as opportunities for gospel conversations arise when the relationships are nurtured. And let's be honest: Sharing the gospel in someone's local language is essential in communicating the message effectively. By learning the language and customs, you will prove yourself to be a trustworthy and caring friend, and sharing the gospel will become a natural conversation from one heart to another.

We sometimes forget Europe has a rich history of Christianity, with 76 percent of people claiming to be Christians. Notable figures such as Martin Luther and Jan Hus significantly contributed to modern Christianity. To forget or ignore their history is offensive and can cause a real setback in relationship building. However, today less than one percent of Europeans are evangelical Christians who have placed their faith solely in Jesus Christ. The growing influence of secularism, atheism, and agnosticism has led to a general indifference towards the gospel. This highlights the urgency and importance of our mission to share the gospel and plant new churches throughout Europe.

But here's the catch: Unlike other countries where missionaries can freely establish churches, in Europe they must be registered with the government, and missionaries must be members of legal churches approved by the government. To

make an impact in European countries, we need to adjust our approach. People in Europe want to know that we're legitimate and qualified and that our actions align with our words. They don't want to be treated as mere numbers. Hence, our approach must be truthful and transparent to win their trust.

Are you up for the challenge of reaching millions of people living in forty-four different European countries who need to hear the gospel and see it lived out before them? Let's help them differentiate between a dead religion and a vibrant, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Let's offer them hope in Jesus and help them see the contrast between a hopeless, atheistic, secular life and the hope of life in Christ.

It's time for missionaries to go to these countries to share the hope of Jesus Christ and plant new churches for the glory of God.





TRANSFORMED LIVES IN BURKINA FASO

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Located in West Africa, Burkina Faso is a primarily Muslim country that is known for its political instability and the ongoing presence of Islamic militant groups. Though the country's constitution declares that individuals have the right to religious freedom in Burkina Faso, terrorist groups have been known to target places of worship and religious leaders in the country. Christian persecution is a very real and dangerous reality that believers in Burkina Faso face.

Living in the capital city of Ouagadougou, Lifeword partner Emmanuel Nacoulma has dedicated his life to sharing the hope and gospel of Jesus Christ with the lost in Burkina Faso. Along with producing internet broadcasts to share the gospel in his country, Bro. Emmanuel regularly travels outside of his city into rural areas to interact with and learn about the cultures of the 60+ different ethnic groups that are found in Burkina Faso. Living conditions in these rural areas are challenging. The Burkinabé people face little to no access to education of any level, and 88% of rural communities lack sanitation.

The Muslim populations in these rural areas are very strict, and individuals live with the threat of being disowned by their families and even physical harm if they convert to Christianity. This was

the case for one Muslim couple that Bro. Emmanuel met on one of his trips.

The couple came from a devout Muslim family. After meeting Bro. Emmanuel and hearing the gospel of Jesus from him, both husband and wife became believers. When their families heard of their conversion to Christianity, they disowned them and even came and burned down their home, destroying all of their possessions. The couple was devastated. Being from a poor, rural community, they had no idea how they would survive.

But through the devastation, uncertainty, and loss, they remained faithful to the Lord above all. They continued to give Him praise and glory and grow in Him daily.

Through Bro. Emmanuel, Jesus Christ radically changed their lives and gave them the hope, grace, truth, and faith they needed to persevere through the persecution and danger they would face. Now, they are sharing their story with other Muslims and showing them how Jesus can save and change them.

Would you pray with us for our Lifeword partners around the world? They all have similar stories of how the Lord is changing lives and saving the lost in their countries through their ministries. Praise the Lord for His saving grace and transformative power!

