

What Is Culture Specific Evangelism?

Non-Western peoples in general, have not accepted Jesus as readily as Western peoples. For example, India is 2.4% Christian¹ even though the gospel has been preached for two thousand years there, 0.4% of Thai are Christian after 250 years,² and 0.5% of Japanese attend Christian church after 450 years.

If we look at it from a sales point of view, we have the best “product” to “sell.” No other God shows love, grace and mercy like Jesus and no other God loves us so much that he suffered and gave his own life for us. So, why isn’t Jesus “selling” in these countries?

For this problem, we can draw three general conclusions:

1. Non-Western people are spiritually unintelligent and, therefore, are not capable of grasping the spiritual truths being presented to them.
2. The Non-Western peoples are cursed of God and, therefore, are not meant to know the love of Jesus.
3. We are not presenting Christ and the “Good News” in a way that they can relate to, appreciate and understand.

Because the first two conclusions are not scriptural, we believe that the third conclusion is the only viable answer.

So what is wrong with the way the Gospel is being presented? It worked fine for the West. This complicated problem is best explained by an analogy:

*If a PC computer user said, “I use a PC because the MAC computer is just garbage, it can’t process anything!” A MAC user would reply, “No way, the MAC is the best!” Well, says the PC user, “I can prove the MAC is a hunk of junk right now!” “How can you prove that to me?” says the MAC user. “Okay, I went to the computer store and bought a program for my PC. I took it home, put it in my computer and it worked fine. I took the **exact same program** and put it into my friend’s MAC and it wouldn’t work! Nothing but garbage came out. It is a junk computer!”*

Anyone who knows about computers knows that this conclusion does not make sense. It is based on what the PC user **sees** happening but he doesn’t understand **why** it is happening. Anyone who knows a little about computers knows that the Mac runs on a different operating system and therefore, it cannot read the programs written for the PC. The PC and Mac seem to do the same things. They both can do word processing, spreadsheets, play media, etc. but the way they process information is very different. Therefore, programs that work in a PC produce only garbage in the Mac. Does this mean that the Mac is faulty,

stupid, no good, cursed, evil or junk? No, it just means we must put the program into a language that the Mac can understand and compute.

We make this same faulty conclusion with the gospel. We know what worked to show us that Jesus loves us and is our God, so we automatically think that these same things will work for people of other languages and cultures. However, each language and culture has its own unique worldview (The way in which it processes data that it receives). Therefore, **specific programs need to be written for each one**. This is what we call “***Culture Specific Evangelism***.”

One of the best examples of this comes from Thailand. Thailand is a Buddhist country by law and has a Buddhist education system by law. The Thai people grow up with a Buddhist worldview. How is this worldview different from our worldview? One of the most precious scriptures in the West is John 3:16, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*” (NIV) In the Thai Buddhist computer (worldview), this scripture is interpreted in this way:

“***For God***” – God to the Thai Buddhist is one of two things, he is either cruel or stupid. He created a world full of temptations that cause sin, suffering and death. He either did this on purpose to hurt us or he did it because he was stupid.³

“***so loved the world***” – The word used for love in the Thai interpretation is a worldly type of love. Thai Buddhists rightly believe that “lusting (worldly love)” after the things of this world cause sin, suffering and death. A Thai proverb says, “Danger (or filth) arises from what we love.”⁴ Thai Buddhists think, “Oh, how pitiful; this God is full of unwholesome passion.”⁵

“***that he gave his one and only son,***” – Killing is evil and a sin to Buddhists, they do not believe in human sacrifice. This Christian God lusts after the world so much that he sacrifices his own son for it!

“***that whoever believes in him shall not perish***” – The Buddhist word for heaven, Nirvana, holds within it the connotation of perishing from this world. So this God does not want you to go to heaven! If you believe in him, you will never get there!

“***but have eternal life***” – Eternal life to a Buddhist is the “Wheel of Life.” They believe we are born, fall into temptation, commit sin, suffer and die only to be “born again” (another loaded word) to repeat this cycle of pain and suffering again and again until we can finally escape into Nirvana.

Therefore, to a person with a Thai Buddhist worldview, this scripture says that this cruel or stupid Western God lusts after the world so much that he commits a sin by sacrificing his only son so that we will be caught in the Wheel of suffering, death and rebirth forever and never go to heaven. Now, if you put yourself in a

Thai Buddhist worldview, would you accept this God? No wonder only 0.4% of Thai have accepted Jesus!

There is, of course, nothing wrong with John 3:16. However, there are many scriptures that are easier for someone from a Thai Buddhist worldview to understand and we must learn how to translate scriptures like John 3:16 for the Thai “computer.” For instance in the phrase, “*loves the world*,” the word for worldly love, “*rák*,” is used. This could be replaced by, “*pàe-mé²-dtaa*,” which is translated into English as “compassion,” but is much more akin to “*agape*” love. Thai Buddhists look down upon those who love (lust after) the world but esteem people who show compassion and mercy.

It is also Culture Specific Evangelism to not use the hula to evangelize Muslims. Seeing the hula in worship has helped many Hawaiians know that God accepts and loves them. It has also been used to attract people to the Gospel in places like Japan. However, a Muslim saying is, “*When a woman walks, the devil moves her hips.*” Therefore, the hula would not be good to use when sharing the Gospel to Muslims.

Each language and culture has its own unique worldview. Therefore, specific programs need to be written for each one in order for them to clearly and accurately understand the Gospel. This is called, “**Culture Specific Evangelism.**”

What is Culture Based Evangelism?

Culture Based Evangelism is an important component of Culture Specific Evangelism. Culture Based Evangelism is looking for the “signposts” that God has placed within every “ethnos,” cultural group, which point to God and his coming revelation of Jesus Christ.

Why is it important to use Culture Based Evangelism?

“When teaching at missionary schools, I always ask non-Western students what their main objection was to accepting Christ. The main objection, and I am using a mild word because many times it was actually resentment and anger, was that the Christian God was a foreign God who did not love their people. I have found this objection in nearly all non-Western peoples I meet around the world. Their thoughts are, ‘The Christian God is not our God and he doesn’t love us. If he did love us, we would see his hand of care and involvement in the long history of our people. Instead, he dwelt in the West, only cared for them, and only accepts their culture.’

Daniel Kikawa

The main reason non-Western peoples have for not coming to Jesus is that they think he is a foreign God who does not love their culture, and therefore, does not love the people who created it. We can show them this is wrong by pointing to the “signposts” within their culture that show that God has always loved and had an intimate, caring relationship with them throughout their long history and culture.

Has the God of the Bible Communicated With People of Every Culture? Is the Bible the Only Truth?

A major theological misconception that Christians have is that the Bible is the only true word of God. This is how most Christians are trained. It is not a scriptural theology. The Bible shows us that scripture is not the only true word of God but is the measuring stick of truth.

Romans 1:20 *“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”* NIV

Acts 17:26-28 *“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’* NIV

If these two scriptures are true, then God has made himself clearly seen to all people from the beginning of time. Wherever he placed them around the world, in the deepest jungles or on an island in the middle of the sea, he was never far from any one of them. He was so close to them that they lived, moved and had their being in him; and all men everywhere are rendered without excuse to know him. If this is so, then as God reaches out for man and man searches for his maker, there should be many things in every people group’s history and culture that points to this relationship with God. This is known as the “**General Revelation**” of God to all men as opposed to the “**Special Revelation**” of God recorded in the Bible. **Culture Based Evangelism** is using the **General Revelation** of God to point to the **Special Revelation of God** so that people can understand the Gospel.

An example of using the “General Revelation” of God to point to the “Special Revelation of God,” is when John chose to call Jesus “**The** (using the Greek article) **Logos**,” which is translated in English as “the **Word**,” in John 1:1. The Encyclopedia Britannica says that, “*In Greek philosophy and theology, the logos was the divine reason implicit in the cosmos, ordering it and giving it form and meaning.*”⁶ In Acts 17:29, Paul preached the Gospel to the Athenians by using a Greek poem by Aratus⁷ that said, “*For in him we live and move and have our*

*being. We are also his offspring.” In Acts 14:15, Paul called God, “the living **Theos** (in the Greek).” The Encyclopedia Britannica says, “No matter how polytheistic a cult may have been, it left a place for the god shared by all peoples. **Theos**, ‘God’ (not merely ‘a god’) is in Homer (Homer’s writings – Homer was the most famous poet in Greece).”⁸*

New Testament Scriptures That Point to The “General Revelation” of God

Romans 2:14-15 says, “*The non-Jewish people do not have the law. But when they freely do things that the law commands, **then they are the law for themselves**. This is true even though they do not have the law. They show that in their hearts they know what is right and wrong, just as the law commands. And they also show this by the way they feel about right and wrong, Sometimes their thoughts tell them they did wrong. And sometimes their thoughts tell them they did right.*” (EB emphasis, ours) Romans 13:8 also says, “*Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.*” Romans 13:10 says, “*Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*” Galatians 5:14 says, “*For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*” 1 John 4:7-8 says, “*Beloved, let us love on another: for love is of God; and **everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not “God; for God is love.***” (KJ emphasis, ours)

We need to take the “General Revelation” of God and use it to point to the “Special Revelation” of God. We need to look for the “signposts” God has placed within every “ethnos,” cultural group, that point to God and his “Special Revelation.”

Some Culture Based “Signposts”

The Indigenous Names of God

Romans 1:20 says that all people knew God by the things that he made. He is so clearly seen that we are all without excuse for not following him.

If the Bible is true and all people know of God, then all people must have a name for him even if they are not following him at the time. In every people group we have researched long enough, we have found God's name. The anthropologist, Dr. Wilhelm Schmidt, collected twelve volumes of evidence of the belief in One Benevolent Supreme Creator in cultures throughout the world.⁹ This evidence is scriptural.

Example from Modern Missions

When the first Catholic missionaries came to Korea in the late 1700s, the Korean people listened to the missionaries speak about the character of Jehovah and

told the missionaries about their God, *Hananim*. Although this vague God, Hananim, sounded much like Jehovah, these Catholic missionaries made it clear that Jehovah was not Hananim and used other names for God when translating scripture into Korean. There was no excitement among the Korean people about this new foreign god.

However, when Protestant missionaries came into Korea nearly one hundred years later, they agreed, after studying the nature of Hananim, that there was no name they could use in Korea for Jehovah other than Hananim. The Protestant missionaries began preaching that Hananim sent his son to bring the Korean people back to himself. This caused great excitement among the Korean people. Crowds collected to hear about Hananim's son as the news spread from village to village. The Protestant churches began to explode in growth, quickly overtaking the Catholic churches that had been there nearly one hundred years earlier.¹⁰ The Catholics later held a conference to discuss what they were doing wrong. **They concluded that their mistake was not using the name of Hananim!** They began to use a form of the name Hananim and began to grow rapidly.¹¹

Have the fruits of using the indigenous name of Jehovah in Korea been good and lasting? South Korea has become one of the most Christian nations on earth. South Korea is now 32% Christian and growing. 10 of the largest mega-churches in the world are in Korea and the Korean people have become the second greatest senders of missionaries in the world.¹²

Cultural Traditions That Point to Jesus or Can Be Used to Explain Biblical Principles

Thailand, a nation of 61 million people, is only 1.6 % Christian.¹³ Within Thailand and Burma are the *Karen* people. The native name of God and native traditions were used in preaching the Gospel to the Karen. The Karen had a tradition that they used to know and follow the Creator God but they lost the book of his precepts. Their ancestors lost their way to God and could no longer find his trail. Because they could no longer find their way to God, they were forced to worship the "Nats," demonic spirits who would grant healing or safety for costly sacrifices. There was however, a precious prophecy among their people that someday, a white skinned stranger would bring back the book that they had lost and they would be able to find God's trail again.¹⁴ When a missionary finally shared the Gospel with a Karen man, he realized that this was the book they were waiting for; he immediately began spreading the word with great joy. Excitement about the book that said their God's son made a way for them to return to him spread like wildfire. It spread so fast among the Karen that missionaries could not keep up with the Karen converts. When missionaries arrived at one Karen village, they found 5,000 Karen converts ready to be baptized. The Karen consider themselves to be a Christian nation today.¹⁵ This prophecy of the book is so important to the Karen that it is a part of the Karen national anthem. Most of the

1.6% of Christians in Thailand are among the Karen and other mountain tribes who were waiting for the lost book. Compare the Karen who are 80-90% Christian to the Thai people who are 0.4% Christian. Very little Culture Specific Evangelism has been used for the Thai.¹⁶ In the words of a rare Thai Buddhist convert, "Thailand has not become a Christian country because, in the eyes of the Thai, to become a Christian means you can no longer be Thai. That's because in Thailand 'Christian' equals 'foreigner.'"¹⁷

What Cultural Things Can Be Used by Christians?

What from a culture can we use? In Acts 15:1-29 is recorded a problem that occurred when the first Gentiles (non-Jewish people) became believers in Christ. At this time, there were only Jewish Christians who were still attending the synagogue and following the laws of Moses. They were cultural Jewish Christians and it was not only okay to be culturally Jewish, it was the norm. Some of these Jewish Christians insisted that the non-Jewish believers in Jesus needed to be culturally Jewish too. They wanted the non-Jewish believers to be circumcised and to follow the laws of Moses. The apostles and elders held a meeting about this important issue that threatened to divide the young church. They decided that the non-Jewish believers in Christ did not have to become culturally Jewish to be believers in Jesus but may remain culturally who they were. In other words, they believed that **Christianity transcends all cultures and yet encompasses all cultures.**

Using the cultural dances, musical styles, instruments and dress in worship; cultural architecture in church buildings; organizational style in church government, etc. is very important to people groups. It shows them that the God of the Bible is their God who loves them.

Although most non-Western Christians are too polite to tell their Western friends, they have been dishonored and hurt by Western Christians unknowingly rejecting who they are as a people. It is natural for all people to unconsciously gravitate to what they know, trust and feel comfortable with. It is also natural to feel unsure and want to change or avoid what is strange, unfamiliar and uncomfortable; especially when it comes to "sacred" things. Unconsciously, the church in general has rejected the culture that flows from non-Western people. Most have done this innocently, not realizing that they had gravitated toward doing church in Western style and not understanding the impact this has had on non-Western peoples.

From the book, Bruchco, comes a very interesting conversation. Missionary Bruce Olson invites a chief of a Venezuelan tribe to church. The following is the chief's reply: "*Listen, those Christians don't care about us Why, they've rejected everything about us. They sing those weird wailing songs that are all out of tune and don't make sense. And the construction which they call a church! Have you seen their church? It's square! How can God be in a square church? Round is perfect. (All of their dwellings are round) It has no ending, like God. But*

*the Christians, their God has points all over, bristling at us. And how those Christians dress! Such foolish clothes*¹⁸

Paul is the one who said, “*And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the laws to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.*” (1 Corinthians 9:20-22 EB) Paul also said, “*Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many that they may be saved. Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.*” (1 Corinthians 10:27-11:1 EB)

Conclusion

If the Bible is true, then God placed every people where they should be so they would seek him, search for him and perhaps find him. He was also close to all people in every place on earth, since the beginning of time, so close that all people lived, moved and had their being in him. Romans 1:20 confirms that a witness of God is clearly seen by all men. Therefore, there must be many things within a culture that developed out of this relationship of God reaching out to man and man reaching out to God. Finding these “signposts” that point to God and using them to help explain who God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus are in a way that Non-Western people can understand in their worldview is called Culture Based Evangelism.

The preceding is a very brief and general explanation of Culture Specific/Based Evangelism. If you would like more in depth information on this subject, or to have one of our ministers speak at your church, conference or school, please go to the “contact us” section on our website at: www.alohakeakua.org

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¹ Johnstone, P., et al., *Operation World*, Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001, p. 310

² Interview with Kauai Tai, missionary in Thailand

³ Petchsongkram, W., Hudgins, F. trans., *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, 1975, pp. 17-18

⁴ Petchsongkram, W., Hudgins, F. trans., *Talk in the Shade of the Bo Tree*, 1975, p. 15

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 16

⁶ *Encyclopedia Britannica CD*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Schmidt, W., *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1971).

¹⁰ Richardson, D., *Eternity In Their Hearts*, Regal Books, 1981, pp. 62-72

¹¹ *ibid.* pp. 70-72

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- ¹² Johnstone, P., et al., *Operation World*, Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001, pp. 387-388
- ¹³ Johnstone, P., et al., *Operation World*, Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001, p. 619
- ¹⁴ Bunker, A., *Soo Thah, A Tale of the Making of the Karen Nation*, Fleming H. Revell C., 1902, pp. 79-94
- ¹⁵ Richardson, D., *Eternity In Their Hearts*, Regal Books, 1981, pp. 73-109
- ¹⁶ Interviews with Various Thai Missionaries
- ¹⁷ Decker, F., When Christian Does Not Translate, *Mission Frontiers*, Vol.27 No. 5, p. 8
- ¹⁸ Olson, B., *Bruchco*, New Wine, 1973, p. 52