

Making friends across cultures

An introduction to issues of culture and communication

Perspective

1. God is the great communicator, always concerned about revealing Himself to mankind.
 - i) Nature
 - ii) Prophets
 - iii) Jesus Christ, the Word. John 1:1-4; Romans 5;8

2. God is concerned about the foreigner, alien, sojourner, international visitor. Deut.10:17-19; Lev. 19:33,34.

3. God promises that there will be people from every tribe, language, people and nation in heaven. Rev.5:9, 7:9.

4. God has given us the commission to help see this purpose come about. Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8.

5. God made man and cultures. He understands them. Genesis 1 & 11.

6. Though different languages came about as a result of sin (God limiting man from doing more evil by confusing his language), it is also part of God's strategy for reaching peoples. Gen 11:5-9.

7. No matter how difficult the task or how much we blunder, remember the Holy Spirit is at work to communicate, convict and convince. 1Corinthians 2:10. One of His primary means of communicating through us to others is through the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22,23.

8. Love is an international language.

What is culture?

1. Culture, definitions

- i) Acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experiences, determine social behaviour and get along. Includes food, dress, relationships, social behaviour, values
- ii) A group of people who have shared codes, something in common. They understand verbal and non-verbal communication of their group

2. Practical definition

What makes us different? The greatest difference is not *what* we see, but the *way* we see it.

3. Culture is acquired or learned in four ways:

- i) Formal teaching
- ii) Modeling
- iii) Doing
- iv) Reinforcement

4. Learning culture at four levels

- i) World view: the way people characteristically look out on the world around them
- ii) Value system: what is important to this people group
- iii) Institutions: marriage, family, community, government, leadership styles, initiation into adulthood
- iv) Traits, artefacts and techniques: externals which reflect world view and values. Customs of death and burial, festivals, clothing, dance, music...

5. Culture in action

World view affects values; values affect institutions; institutions affects traits. In understanding a culture, we usually look at these factors in reverse. We observe traits to understand institutions, institutions to understand values, values to understand world view.

6. Culture shock

Culture shock is caused by arriving in different surroundings and losing the stability of one's own culture. Two suggestions for helping people in this situation:

- i) Accept them and appreciate them for who they are, including the culture they come from. Enter into their world a bit - greetings, customs, food.
- ii) Help them get a perspective of the new culture they live in.

7. Understanding our own culture

As you deal with people of other cultures, you will probably begin to understand your own culture and yourself better. Ask yourself if your values are Biblical or cultural. In dealing with Christians from other cultures, be willing to be flexible about the values that are cultural.

What is communication?

1. Comes from the Latin word *communus*: to have things in common.

2. For effective communication to take place, we must have enough in common so that understanding takes place.

3. International students (university and college) probably know English already, some very well. This is helpful, but communication is more than language.

4. Non-verbal communication. Understand both our own culture's and our friend's non-verbal language:

- i) Eye movement
- ii) Body movement
- iii) Time concept
- iv) Touching behaviour
- v) Space
- vi) Smell (what smells good to someone)

Aims in cross-cultural communication

1. It is not trying to impose information.

2. It is trying to understand verbal and non-verbal codes, traits, institutions, value systems and world views well enough so that mutual understanding takes place as needed information is transmitted effectively. I work at having a mutual understanding with my friend from another culture, so that when we communicate, we accurately understand each other.

3. This understanding is especially important as we share the gospel:

- i) Never compromise the message
- ii) Try to put ourselves in our friends' shoes enough to perceive their problems and objections and perhaps their understanding
- iii) Stress these things:
 - The person and purpose of Jesus Christ
 - A trust relationship between man and God. (Not merely a profession of faith)
- iv) Beware that your traditional methods and approaches may not be appropriate for the international student. Stories are often effective.
Sticking to one passage rather than hopping all over Scripture
- v) Avoid using words that do not communicate to the non-Christian: e.g. atonement, expiation, washed in the blood of the Lamb
- vi) Be cautious of using words that will be immediately misunderstood, such as 'Son of God' with a Muslim. We need to share the concept that Jesus is God, that's what He claimed about Himself. Even Jesus didn't call Himself 'Son of God'

Attitude of the communicator

1. Key word is 'servant'.

2. Paul's method, 1Cor. 9:19 - "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible."
3. This may mean giving up some of our freedoms that may hinder the gospel (e.g. how we dress).
4. May mean entering into the other person's world in order to win his friendship and trust.
5. It isn't necessary that we live as they live or eat everything they eat, but it is absolutely necessary that we love. They can tell.
6. Look for felt needs. Ask yourself: "Where do they hurt?"
7. Look for internal needs and questions that could be answered in Christ. Question of death, purpose of life, is there a God who cares for me, etc. Be sensitive to crisis opportunities

Practical do's and don'ts

1. The person we are communicating with is a person, not an object. Treat them as such:
 - i) Courtesy, respect
 - ii) Try to understand them as well as possible
 - iii) Remember that as well as being a product of his culture, he/she is also an individual
2. Show genuine interest in your international student friend:
 - i) Write down their name. Spell it correctly. Try to pronounce it properly. Practise!
 - ii) Use your atlas. Locate your friend's country and city. Learn a bit about this place by reading or asking questions
 - iii) Try to get beyond the superficial
3. Remember communication is two-way. We must listen as well as speak, receive as well as give.
4. Be a learner:
 - i) Eat their food. The social context is often the best place to build a relationship with them. Eating together is significant
 - ii) Learn a word of greeting in their language
 - iii) Learn taboos of their culture - what is offensive - and try to avoid these
 - iv) Try not to be offended by their ways that are different from our ways (social distance, touching, noisy eating). We need to discuss the way we do things here.
5. Be patient! Good communication is hard work. Never give up. Remember you're not in this alone.

Melissa Jacobson (former staff worker)