

HABIT FOURTEEN

Become Sensitive to Contexts

“I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”

1 Corinthians 9:22

This chapter is designed to prepare us to be better communicators. The previous chapter established that geographic closeness does not guarantee good communication. Though becoming geographically close can be a first step, there are issues that are equally critical. Our message is important. To make sure we convey it, we also need to connect in social and personal ways. If I want you to understand me, I must also speak your language and understand your culture. I must speak to you on subjects you are interested in — or subjects about which you recognize your need to know more — if I want you to listen with attention. The more we are able to get into others’ worlds and address issues they are interested in, the more likely we are to effectively communicate.

In this chapter, we consider how to be sensitive to the situations — the contexts — of people with whom we would like to share our good news. This information will help increase your effectiveness as a communicator, whether dealing with linguistic and cultural issues in cross-cultural communication or simply considering how to enter the “world” of a neighbor more effectively. Your business may put you in contact with international people in other countries. Or your neighbors may

be internationals in your own increasingly cosmopolitan or multicultural city. As our world shrinks, we need to learn to accurately communicate cross-culturally. On the other hand, you may simply want to know how to better understand people in your “world.” They may be from a different generation or, for any other reason, think differently. In any case, the communicator is responsible for being sensitive to the other party’s perspective. People aren’t likely to study intercultural communication strategies just so they can understand our message. We must adjust to their world if we want them to “hear” what we mean. After reading about this habit, you may want to learn more about cross-cultural communication as a Christian. Check out Charles Kraft’s excellent book, *Christianity and Culture*.

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The following story illustrates the flexibility an effective communicator must exercise. The incident describes a specific situation. It teaches cultural sensitivity lessons that apply to effective cross-cultural communication. Not everyone will, nor should they all, subscribe to “our kind” of Christianity. In other cultural situations, other modes of expressing the gospel may be more appropriate.

Core Values or Peripheral Issues?

During a recent summer, my five days in a Muslim country were almost over. I had one more appointment. My host had arranged for me to meet someone at 9:00 a.m. before I flew on to India in the afternoon. My host — a former Muslim, now a Christian — had carefully told me that the guest requested this appointment and further explained that he was “probably not the most important person for you to meet.” I was willing to meet him and was in for a delightful surprise.

Rafique wore a beard and the traditional attire of Muslims in his country. He brought his friend, Mohammed, a behavioral science professor. Though dressed like a Westerner, he had mannerisms similar to Rafique’s. Rafique works in health care, and Mohammed teaches in a local college. These two men represent what missiologists would call a highly indigenous,

Muslim-sensitive group of “believers” — believers in Isa (Jesus) as the way to receive favor from Allah. They do not use the name “Christian.” Doing so would distance them from the circle of family and friends they most want to reach with their faith.

As I listened to Rafique, I noted that these men were sensitive to their cultural context, just as I advocate in my *Contextualized Theology and Evangelism in Context* classes in seminary. They pray with their hands open and slightly lifted — the way they were taught to pray to Allah as Muslims. They call Jesus the “Holy One” instead of using the offensive term “Son of God.” They do not refer to the Trinity, though they themselves believe in each member of the Trinity. The term “Son of God” and references to the Trinity in the Muslim worldview are taken to refer to an immoral God who had sexual intercourse with a woman and produced a bastard. They don’t use the word “church,” and they don’t use a cross for decoration. They meet and pray in homes and in every way appear to be Muslim.

They use strategies that are consistent with the Muslim worldview. Their children’s book about Isa has no pictures of humans. I was told pictures of humans are offensive to Muslims. Mohammed and other Muslim prophets did not — would not — allow their pictures to be used. They do not use the Jesus film for the same reason. Rafique told me Muslims will watch the Jesus film, but there is a problem. People in this country could not respect or believe in anyone treated with such disrespect as to be portrayed in pictures or films.

Rafique explained that the life of Jesus in Arabic has been written in the Quranic style. It has 30 chapters, just as in the Quran. They don’t use “Matthew” or “Mark” as names of books because Muslims don’t use men’s names that way. Instead, they use “Manger” and “New Life” as the names for those books, which make the Gospels more palatable. Each chapter begins with “in the name of God” as in the Quran.

By profession, Rafique works in health care and Mohamed is a professor. However, their primary task is to spread the news about Isa. They study one afternoon a week at Rafique’s office and have communion with water and bread. They do not observe Christmas and Easter. Furthermore, they continue to attend the regular Friday’s prayer session in the local mosque. Muslim women are difficult to convert because they fear their husbands, but men are more likely converts. The wives follow their husbands in conversion. Rafique’s group, therefore, targets husbands.

Christians in their country tell these believers that they are not Christian because, of all things, they do not observe Christmas and Easter! Rafique and his friends just go on believing and serving, even without the strength and support of brother and sister Christians in their own nation. Rafique asked me for Christian materials that he could adapt and use in his Moslem context. I gladly gave him more than he asked for.

Was it right to encourage Rafique? Should I have given him the materials? Was I right to release him to adapt them? How much of the Western “Christian message” is essential, and how much is cultural? What traditions can be omitted without compromising our belief? What can we do to make it easier for people to become believers without changing cultures? What requirements have we added over the years to the invitation to receive salvation from God? How can Christians be more flexible and sensitive to the situation of others to make it easier for them to become believers? Is Rafique simply doing in his cultural context what Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each did in writing a gospel for particular target audiences — Jewish, Roman, Greek, and general? Finally, if not in public ways, how does a believer in Isa “confess” his faith before men? How does he avoid having a watered-down Muslim-like semi-Christian “faith?” In short, what are our core values, what are only peripheral issues, and what is syncretism? We will return to Rafique and Mohammed after examining some of these questions in more detail.

God the Communicator

In the book God gave us, He could have totally overwhelmed us with equations, formulas, astronomical, cosmological, chemical, molecular, geological, and atomic information. Its complexity would have caused Albert Einstein to scratch his head and ask God for the simple version. Instead, God used a shepherd named Amos and a fisherman named Peter, as well as scholars Moses and Paul, to write a series of human stories in the common language of the day. The result was an easy-reading book that addresses human history and spiritual needs. It was done so perfectly that some say it's *just* a human book. In missiological terms, sensitivity to contextual issues for communication purposes is called “contextualization” — adapting to the cultural context. God contextualized his message so well that many do not realize that hidden, divine, and supernatural truths lie in those histories and discourses. When