

EXCERPT



Effective Intercultural Evangelism ***Good News in a Diverse World***

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We live in a multicultural society, but many Christians hesitate to engage those of other faiths about Christianity. Exploring evangelism from the perspective of four major worldviews, Jay Moon and Bud Simon unpack the intercultural dynamics at hand when sharing the gospel across cultures, offering contextual evangelism approaches that are relevant, biblical, and practical.

Reframing Evangelism for a Pluralistic Generation

Migration and urbanization produced by globalization have changed the face of the world. In fact, the twenty-first-century American culture is “producing the most pluralist generation in American history.” Today’s twentysomething generation in America faces major theological and philosophical distinctions among belief systems such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, atheism, agnosticism, Wicca, unaffiliated, and those religiously indifferent. How does intercultural evangelism help faithful Christians begin to fulfill the Great Commission in a pluralist society? Many well-meaning Christians are often overwhelmed by the religious options and the challenge of moving someone from one complex faith system to the other that they back out of evangelistic conversations entirely.

The twenty-first century has brought religious complexity to the forefront. Once we understand these complexities, we will recognize exciting opportunities for effective evangelism. The gospel is still good news for our friends and family, but when the cultural context changes, the presentation of this good news must change as well.

The goal of our intercultural evangelism approach is to reframe the question from, How do I move someone from a belief system I don’t understand into a Christian belief system? to the question, How do I cooperate with God’s existing conversation with this person of a different belief system to move them in the direction of Jesus Christ?

Contextual factors are important for evangelism. Have you ever considered Jesus also lived in a pluralist world and adapted his message to his cultural contexts? In fact, he never shared the gospel in the same manner twice. Talk about adjusting to the context! His approach to the shame felt by the Samaritan woman at the well was drastically different from Zacchaeus, who was indifferent to the religious system of his day. Again, Jesus’ approach to the fear of the man filled with demons was drastically different from the way he spoke with the Samaritan woman and Zacchaeus. Like someone trying to catch a rabbit that keeps changing his direction, Jesus took the time to consider the changes in the local cultural context and adapted his approach accordingly.

WE NEED TO ADAPT OUR APPROACH

When we do not adapt, we die—simply look at companies like Blockbuster, which had VHS movies available for rent in almost every town center. When they were not able (or willing) to adapt from analog to digital movie viewing, eventually Blockbuster went out of business. Likewise, when Bill Bright first created “The Four Spiritual Laws,” D. James Kennedy introduced Evangelism Ex-plosion, and Billy Graham started his crusades in the twentieth century, they lived in a different cultural context than we do today. While these approaches addressed their context, we need to adapt to the pluralist society we find ourselves in today. When we use evangelistic practices that are not suited to the worldviews of our listeners, the encounters are often awkward or unpleasant. My students have said they reject formulaic approaches for several reasons:

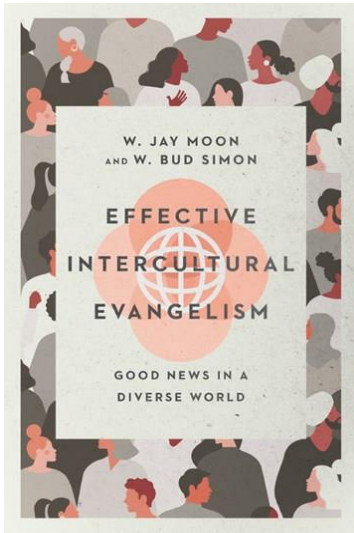


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- “Presenting verses of the Bible is like reading fortune cookies. It won’t make sense to the recipient.”
- “It’s an oversimplification of a dynamic story.”
- “To people in my age group—millennials—they wouldn’t particularly care.”
- “It takes the richness of the Scriptures and flattens it.”
- “I have seen it done so poorly so often that I have disregarded it as a practice.”

These unfortunate conclusions often lead churches to either abandon evangelism or adopt the common evangelism approach Tim Tennent calls “passive congeniality.” Tennent explains, “We tell our congregations to turn and greet those around them and if they see a visitor, they should be very warm and welcoming. Some churches even give special gift bags to first-time visitors, or staff a ‘welcome center.’” While these well-intentioned practices should not be abandoned, the “passive congeniality” approach misses many of the greatest opportunities for evangelism in our places of work and play, as well as our social media networks.

Adjusting to these cultural shifts has always been the way the gospel has moved within societies. Leonardo Boff explained how important recognizing these cultural shifts is:

Evangelization cannot occur apart from culture. Evangelization always arrives astride existing cultural worldviews. The gospel is not identified with cultures, but it identified in cultures, unable ever to exist apart from a cultural expression, be it the one articulated by Jesus in the Semitic universe, or by Paul within the parameters of Hellenism and the Judaism of the diaspora, or by the Christians of the first centuries in the matrices of the Greco-Roman, and later, barbarian culture.

In an increasingly pluralistic society, those who share their faith will greatly benefit from understanding contemporary cultural factors. This is an intercultural approach to evangelism since it takes seriously the local cultural context in order to wisely plant the gospel.

—Taken from chapter 1, “What Is Intercultural Evangelism?”



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