

**Principles for Cross Cultural Missions  
from the Book of Acts**

Mark Gunderson

You and I have received a very special gift. This is the gift of the forgiveness of sins that came through the life and death of Jesus Christ. But this gift is too wonderful to hoard all to myself. Other people need to hear about this gift and share in the tremendous blessings that I enjoy. This includes people who are similar to me but it also includes people who are very different from me. These are people who speak a different language than I do, eat different foods, act differently, and just all around think differently than I do. How am I going to be able to share my gift of Jesus with them? The Bible gives me direction and guidance. From the book of Acts we see seven principles for mission work among other cultures. We will take a look at each of these principles as they applied for the mission work done in the book of Acts, and we will see how these principles can help us in our sharing of the gift of salvation to people of other cultures.

1. *Go!* We need to go to all people who do not yet know of their Savior, Jesus. This would include all of the different cultures and peoples on this earth. This first principle may seem obvious but Jesus in his final instructions to his disciples gives this command: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The apostles had a job to do. They were to be witnesses for Jesus not only in their homeland of Judea, but also to the far corners of the globe. The whole world needed to hear what Jesus just accomplished by his life, death, and resurrection. And the apostles did just that. In chapter 8 of Acts we hear of Peter and John preaching among the Samaritans, and later in that chapter we hear the evangelist Philip teaching the Ethiopian eunuch “the good news about Jesus”(Acts 8:35). These apostles went with the gospel to the surrounding areas of their homeland. They went with the gospel to reach people of other cultures. Later in the book of Acts we hear

of that gospel message being spread even farther. The apostle Paul takes that gift of salvation and goes to the ends of the earth. He shares the good news in some of the cities of Asia Minor and in some European cities, such as Philippi, Athens, and Corinth. His missionary journeys take him to Rome and possibly as far as Spain.<sup>1</sup> And what of the other apostles? Did they sit at home in Jerusalem and content themselves to proclaim the good news only to those in Jerusalem? Hardly! We can be confident that they took their Savior's command to heart as well, and went with the gospel to the ends of the earth.

This command of Jesus is no different today. We need to go. There are still people all over the world who need to hear the message that those first apostles taught. But now we get the privilege to share in that mission. We need to go to places like Indonesia where 90% of the population is blinded by the religion of Islam, or to India where Hinduism dominates, or countless other nations who need to hear about Jesus. We who have the great message of Jesus need to go and share that message with the people all over the globe who do not have it.

2. *Put yourself into the culture you are serving.* In order to share the message you need to understand the culture of the people with whom you want to communicate. This principle can be divided into two sub-points. First, learn the language of the people you are serving, and secondly, spend time in that culture to get to know that culture better. There are several places in Acts where we see the importance of knowing the language of the host culture, but we will only focus on just one.<sup>2</sup> That example comes from the great day of Pentecost. At the Feast of Pentecost there were peoples from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit took advantage of this opportunity to use the

---

<sup>1</sup> This is based on Paul's words in Romans 15:24,28.

<sup>2</sup> Another example can be found in Acts 22:1,2

disciples to communicate the message of Jesus to all of these different peoples. The Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to speak different languages so that each group of people was able to hear the good news in their native tongue. In Acts 2:11 we read this exclamation concerning the phenomenon, “We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” But why have the disciples speak other languages? Certainly most of the people gathered there would have been able to understand Greek. Why not just have one sermon in Greek rather than multiple sermons in all these other languages? The answer: to bring that awesome message home to all of those people present. Think of how personal that message would have been for those people! And also how hearing their own language so far from home would grab their attention! For a message this important only their native tongue would do for the Holy Spirit.

This still holds true today. In order to communicate with someone you need to speak the same language. It is so important that as we go to other cultures we learn their language as well. Only by studying the language will you be able to understand the depths of their culture. And by learning the language of the host culture you will be able to communicate the message of salvation to them in their native tongue. Communication in this way will bring that message home to them. One WELS pastor observed that for matters of faith and the heart people want to use their native tongue.<sup>3</sup> We have a personal message to deliver and we will want to use the native language to deliver that message. This might mean speaking Hmong to people living in Minnesota, or Vietnamese to people in Idaho, or Chewa on the continent of Africa. There are people all over the world and even in our own nation who need to hear the message of Jesus in their own language.

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a paraphrase of a comment made by Pastor Tim Flunker at the Mission and Ministry Seminar held at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, February 4-6, 2003.

The second half of putting yourself into the culture of the people you are serving is to spend time with the people of that culture. In order to share the gospel with the people of Athens, Paul first spent some time getting to know the city and talking to people who lived there. He spent time in the marketplace reasoning with any people who happened to be there (Acts 17:16,17). By doing this he was able to understand the mindset of the culture and was able to tailor his message to them. Paul also did this in the city of Philippi. Acts 16:13 says, "On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there." By doing this Paul was able to share the good news of Jesus to a woman named Lydia.

Spending time in another culture is important. It enables you to gain an understanding of the people in that culture and may provide opportunities for sharing Jesus. Only by spending time in the culture will you be able to make yourself accessible to the people of that culture. And only by spending time in their culture will you earn the right to speak to them about spiritual matters.

3. *Be ready to leave your comfort zone.* Leaving your culture and experiencing a new culture can be a very scary thing. It might make you uncomfortable. But it needs to be done if the gospel message is to be shared. An example of someone leaving his comfort zone to do mission work among a culture different from his own is once again the evangelist Philip. He took the message of Jesus to the Samaritans. This was a big step for cross cultural mission work because the Samaritans and the Jews did not get along. The hostility between them went back hundreds of years, but Philip would not let this be a hindrance to the preaching of the gospel. Philip went to the Samaritans even

though there was this tension. He left his Jewish comfort zone to evangelize among a people who might despise him. But he went. In Acts chapter 8 we see that God blessed his efforts, “Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city”(Acts 8:5-8).

Another example of leaving your comfort zone to share the good news to a people different from you came as a result of the early persecution of the church. We read in Acts 11:19-21, “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.” In this account we see both sides of the coin. On the one side we see Jews who remain in their comfort zone and speak only to Jews. On the other hand we see some brave Jews from Cyrene and Cyprus stepping out into the unknown and they began to speak to Greeks as well. While it may not have been easy for them, they realized that the Greeks needed to hear the message about Jesus. In this account also we see that God blessed their efforts. In verse 21 of chapter 8 we read, “The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” This was something that God wanted and he blessed them to show his approval.

God also wants us to leave our comfort zones and spread his good news to people of other cultures. It is much easier to speak to people who are like us, but it takes courage to step out of these safe surroundings to communicate Christ outside of our own

culture. We hate to feel uncomfortable. We hate to stand out. But it needs to be done if we are to reach all people with the good news of Jesus. And once the connection is made and once Jesus is shared you will find that being in another culture is not as scary as you first imagined. For further assurance we have God's promise that he will bless our efforts when we step out of our comfort zone to speak to peoples of other cultures.

5. *See people as God sees people.* When we look at people of other cultures we tend to accentuate the differences between their culture and ours. Instead of looking at the differences look at what we all have in common. All people everywhere, no matter what the culture or people, are sinners in need of a Savior. All people have the same sin problem but all people also have the same sin Savior. See people as they are on the inside, spiritually dead, and not as people who are different on the outside. When we begin to see all people as souls for whom Jesus died our mission work will fall right in line.

This was a lesson that God taught the apostle Peter. According to God's Old Testament revelation there was a difference between God's chosen covenant people, the Jews, and all other nations. Peter grew up with this idea firmly engrained in his head. The Gentiles were unclean and would make a Jew ceremonially unclean if there were contact between the two. However these clean/unclean laws became obsolete when Jesus gave his life as the perfect sacrifice for sin. Because Jesus fulfilled the Law there was now no difference between Jew and Gentile. All were equal in God's sight. God used a vision to teach this to Peter. This story is recorded in Acts chapter 10. In the vision there was a sheet let down from heaven that contained all kinds of unclean animals. God urged Peter to kill these animals and eat them. Peter strongly objected since he had never eaten

anything unclean in his life. But God's answer to this objection was simply this: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean"(Acts 10:15). This vision happened three times with the same objection and the same answer from God. God was using this vision to teach Peter that God had made the Gentiles clean – they no longer were different than the Jews. To demonstrate this fact God sent Peter to the house of Cornelius, who was a centurion in the Roman army and a Gentile. At God's urging Peter went into this Gentile's house and preached the word to him and his entire family. Seeing Cornelius' enthusiasm for the gospel, Peter made this confession: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right"(Acts 10:34,35). God made it clear to Peter that all people are equal in his sight.

God does not show favoritism – all people are equal in his sight. It is regarding this fact that our sinful natures get in the way of sharing the gospel. Because of pride we think that some peoples are better than others. We may feel that a particular culture is inferior to our own. We may feel that people with different colored skin are somehow less deserving of God's grace. These attitudes are sinful and need to be repented of. On the outside there are differences in language and skin tone but on the inside there are the same souls in need of a Savior. When it comes to doing mission work among other cultures we need to crush the sin of pride and see people as God sees them. What color your skin is doesn't matter. What kinds of food you eat doesn't matter. What style of clothing you wear doesn't matter. How much money you make doesn't matter. These people are souls and they need what we have to offer. See people as God sees them.



5. *Don't force the receiving culture to become like yours.* This principle really flows out of the previous principle. It is the height of arrogance to feel that your own culture is better than someone else's culture. Don't force them to be like you and do what you do. In the New Testament church a dispute arose concerning this very thing. The dispute was between the Jews and the Gentiles. The dispute came about because the Jews felt that the Gentiles who converted to Christianity should become like Jews in the way that they lived. The matter at hand was regarding circumcision. Ever since God's promise to Abraham the Jews were circumcised as the sign of God's covenant promise to them. The Gentiles were not. The Jews felt that the Gentiles should be circumcised to show that they lived like the Jews. The Jews pushed this matter so strongly that salvation was conditioned on whether you were circumcised or not. This matter was brought before the Council at Jerusalem for the leaders to decide. At stake was the true gospel message of Jesus. Jesus came and fulfilled all of the Law, including the law of circumcision. Since this was the case circumcision was not required for anybody, Jew or Gentile. James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, came to this conclusion: "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God"(Acts 15:19). The Gentiles did not have to submit to circumcision and they were not forced to become like Jews.

We need to keep this principle in mind as we work with other cultures. We should not force our western culture on the receiving culture. They do not have to follow the same kind of liturgy that we use. They do not have to sing the same kinds of hymns that we sing. They are free to worship God in ways that are consistent with their own culture. Their ways of doing things are just as good as our own. However, this principle

needs to be applied in the light of Scripture. If there are things in any culture, our own included, that go against Scripture, these can not be allowed. But where God has neither commanded nor forbidden, each culture is able to serve God in its own way. We need to recognize this and not force other cultures to become like our own.

6. *Understand your audience.* This principle is similar to principle number two but it is specific to the message being proclaimed. In order to communicate the message of Christ effectively you need to understand where people are and tailor the way you present the Savior to them. The apostle Paul was a master at understanding his audience and going from the known to the unknown. He wanted to share the message of Jesus with all people but he first took time to see where to start.

There are two contrasting examples of Paul understanding his audience and tailoring his message to them. The first example came early in his first missionary journey in the city of Pisidian Antioch. Paul went to the synagogue to share the message of Jesus with the Jews who had gathered there for worship. Paul understood that his audience was Jewish and his message reflects this understanding. Paul drew upon their background knowledge of the Old Testament to remind them of God's promise of a Savior. Every Jew knew of this promise and was waiting for its fulfillment. Paul had the awesome privilege to tell them that this Savior had indeed come, and his name was Jesus. This account can be found in Acts chapter 13:13-41. Paul knew his audience and brought them from what they knew to what they needed to know – Jesus.

The other example comes from Paul preaching in the city of Athens. Paul realized that the people of Athens were very much different from the people he preached to in Pisidian Antioch. The people of Athens were Gentiles and had no knowledge of the

true God. These people were also philosophers and loved to talk about the latest ideas. In order to get to know the people of Athens Paul spent some time speaking to the people in the marketplace and walking around looking at what things were held to be important to the Athenians. Paul found the people of Athens to be very religious (Acts 17:22). They were in fact so religious that they had gods for everything. And for fear of leaving a god out they even had an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.<sup>4</sup> Paul was then able to share with them just who this “unknown” God really was. Paul used what they knew and told them about the true God they didn’t know.

We also need to follow Paul’s example. Good communication comes from knowing your audience, going from the known to the unknown. There is no easy formula to figure out how to do this. Each situation will be different but it is up to the evangelist to take the time to get to know the people with whom he will be speaking. Find out what they know about God. Find out what they know about Jesus. Find someplace to start and bring them to the knowledge of the Savior. Understand your audience and bring Jesus to them. Note that we are not changing the message. The gospel of Jesus needs to remain pure forever. But we might need to change how we present that changeless gospel of Jesus.

7. *Remember what is important: proclaim the Word.* This principle is the most important one. When it comes to doing mission work in other cultures it is easy to be concerned with the how and lose focus on the what. The Word is the most important thing. People need to hear that Word. Over and over again in the book of Acts we hear the refrain of the apostles: proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Peter and John

---

<sup>4</sup> This account comes from Acts 17:16-33

“proclaimed the word of the Lord,”<sup>5</sup> Philip told the Ethiopian “the good news about Jesus,”<sup>6</sup> and Paul stayed in Corinth “teaching them the word of God.”<sup>7</sup> The apostles’ number one concern was that people hear the good news about Jesus. That Word of God needed to be communicated. The book of Acts is filled with different missionary stories, but all of these stories have one thing in common: the Word was proclaimed.

We need to focus on proclaiming the Word of God. We can get caught up in the worries of mission work. What about the language barrier? What about cultural sensitivities? What about worship styles? However, the worries can never get in the way of the mission: people need to hear about their Savior. Proclaim the good news about Jesus and reflect the love of Christ. Everything else will fall into place.

We have a message to proclaim and people all over the world need to hear it. Acts 4:12 says, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” There is no other answer to the problem of sin – Jesus is the only answer. May we keep these principles from the book of Acts in mind as we bring this answer to the ends of the earth.

---

<sup>5</sup> Acts 8:25

<sup>6</sup> Acts 8:35

<sup>7</sup> Acts 18:11