

External Differences vs. Core Similarities of Divergent People Groups; Preaching the Gospel amidst Witch Doctors, Water Buffaloes, and Strange Worldviews (Or... Confessions of a Committed Cross-Cultural Communication Connoisseur)

Greetings Once Again In the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ,

I'm back in the States now, after spending most of the summer in Northeast Thailand. Many thanks for making this trip successful through your sustaining prayers and financial partnership. While there, I was able to finish translating and checking the books of Revelation and Mark with the faithful assistance of Pastor Pitak, along with a team of precious Isan believers who served as a committee of proofreaders and consultants. Praise God, we are now only one book away from finishing the Isan New Testament: the Gospel of Matthew!

I was also able to print and distribute another 10,000 copies of my foundational evangelism booklet called "Considering Creation." It is unique in that it introduces our Creator in a conversational style by presenting thought-stimulating facts about intelligent design, as opposed to happenstance. It then transitions into a strong and clear Gospel presentation. This little booklet is in increasing demand among Thai churches, because it meets a real need in culturally-relevant evangelism literature. I was also able to get this booklet recorded in high-quality digital format, in preparation to have audio CDs made. These can be played for people who are blind, can't read well, or for large gatherings, like weddings or merit-making festivals.

The subject I feel compelled to address in this newsletter is taken from decades of personal experience. Its focus comes under the heading of successfully communicating the Gospel to divergent [†]**people groups**—those with zero knowledge of God or origins—done within the confines of their respective cultures, beliefs, and ^{††}**worldviews**. Difficult languages and strange cultures being what they are, it takes years of study and practice to master them sufficiently. Not just becoming conversant in the national language, but also in local trade languages, and especially the target people group's language.

[†]When I say "**people groups**," I'm not referring to one's family or circle of acquaintances from within one's own Judeo-Christian, Western-based culture. I am referring, however, to the vast array of ethnic groups and subgroups throughout the world, as well as the unique communication challenges faced by missionaries in each respective situation, as they seek to reach those of whom the Lord Jesus Christ is not yet known, yet which He left a mandate for us (His Body) to reach with the Gospel before He returns.

^{††}Everyone has a "**Worldview**." (Ours is Judeo-Christian, whereas others are not biblically based.) These can be defined as the way people perceive and share life's experiences, including celebrate its joys, or grieve over its tragedies; also explanations about origins; social organization, right and wrong; punishment and reward; including dealing with death and the hereafter.

Cross-cultural communication of the Gospel is an extremely important subject. It is something that has been at the forefront of my focus for the many years that I have spent in study and research, along with trial and error, while seeking to minister effectively to diverse people groups—those who, at best, are very difficult to reach, since almost everything they have been taught to believe is at opposite extremes with the truths of the Gospel that we seek to present.

I am fully convinced that the most important thing any serious-minded missionary can do to insure a successful ministry, is to invest time and energy to master the nuances and intricacies of the language and culture of the people he/she has dedicated his/her life to reach. Visiting their homes and eating their foods is *mandatory* as you seek to befriend them. If you're the shy and quiet type, you *must* abandon your inhibitions and become an extrovert. If people don't know you, they won't trust or accept you. If they don't trust or accept you, they will *never* fully believe you, or readily accept the Gospel message you bring – simple as that! Mastering their language, while being involved in their daily lives on a friendly and helpful basis, bridges that gap.

"*Becoming all things to all*" often means unpacking your bags, shelving your Bible temporarily, then rolling up your sleeves and pitching in to help them, possibly using skills you have acquired. I knew how to build solid, symmetrical stairs. The house stairs of the villagers were dangerously rickety things that resembled a badly broken ladder. So, I met a felt need by showing them how to build good stairs, discipling them as I went. In doing so, I established the respected roles of both artisan and teacher, while providing something practical to improve their lives. This also provided a great way to practice their language and further my understanding of their *strange* underlying culture, while establishing trust and camaraderie. Likewise, after moving into the provincial capital, I started an *English Speakers Club*, where we got together and spoke in English one hour a week. They loved it and I made many trusted friends in the process.

Differences in belief and value-systems typically require different approaches: Anti-biblical worldviews and value systems (*like Buddhism or Hinduism*) present a maze of seemingly impenetrable barriers that every cross-cultural missionary must overcome in the pursuit of preaching the Gospel to the people to whom they have come to minister. In the process, the astute missionary develops an appreciation for the differences in languages, cultures, beliefs and worldviews. This, along with a realization of the underlying similarities that abide deep within the hearts and minds of every human being, i.e., their hopes and desires, and the bittersweet joys and sorrows of life—things which transcend all cultures. And, above all, their overriding need for Christ!

There isn't enough room here to go into great detail on this extremely important subject, so I'll provide a few illustrations. Case in point: how did the Apostle Paul witness to the *educated heathen* on Mars Hill in Acts 17:22-32—who called him a babbler and purveyor of strange gods when they heard him preaching Jesus? Having no prior knowledge whatsoever, Jesus was in fact a *strange god* to them. Realizing that these otherwise-sophisticated people had no knowledge of Creation or the Creator, Paul adapted his presentation style. Thus, he began at the beginning—the Genesis account and the character of the Creator—not at the Cross as we habitually do in Westernized, short-cut methodology. (*Thought: if we blithely assume that our audience shares Biblical knowledge that they do not yet possess, it does them a grave injustice, while short-circuiting successful communication.*)

After covering God's attributes, mercy, sin and judgment, Paul introduced Christ through the miracle of the Resurrection. In this way, he piqued genuine interest among some, while others mocked. The same need applies to all people groups with zero knowledge of Biblical truth. For example, the noncommittal, hyper-religious Thai and Isan people seem impervious to the Gospel. Yet other people groups, for whatever reason, are hungry for the truth.

Why are the Thai and Isan so impervious to the Gospel? Because, first and foremost, they too must understand about origins (*the Creator and His Creation*), the temptation, fall, death and sin's curse—which resulted in their hopelessly lost condition. This, they *must know*, before introducing Christ as Savior. Without this foundational truth, they sense no heart-felt need, no understanding of their lost condition before a righteous and holy God. Well-meant short-cut presentations only foster confusion, since the message comes across to them as just another lesser, do-gooder religion.

And yet, some people still say: why waste time starting with Creation, instead of getting straight to the point? I believe that statements like this are a result of naïveté by those who make such assertions. Dr. Henry M. Morris, scientist, scholar, and father of the modern creationism movement, addresses that with this statement, "*Before one can really know Jesus Christ as Savior or Lord, one must acknowledge Him as Creator, because He was our Creator first of all. This is such an important doctrine of the New Testament that it is remarkable how rarely it is emphasized in modern evangelicalism.*"

So, given these facts, the perplexing question is: why don't people follow Paul's example in Acts, or hearken to Dr. Morris' plea to begin with creation when proclaiming the Gospel to the lost, essentially those who do not have the advantage of having grown up under a Judeo-Christian worldview?

As missionaries, we must remain careful to keep the truths of the Gospel in focus as we explore valid ways to explain God's salvation message cross-culturally. Since these truths *never* change, they must be transported, unaltered, not only across geographical borders, but also across the

illusive borders of language, culture, belief-systems and worldviews. In other words, it's our job to present the Gospel accurately to uninitiated hearers in ways both clear and comprehensive, within the confines of their own heart language and cultural setting—supplying lacking information when needed. Yet, our trust is in the Spirit of God, who convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment (*John 16:8-11*). He alone can transform our spoken message into faith, i.e., the life-changing repentance and faith that comes through hearing the Word of God. (*Romans 10:17*)

Why do you suppose missionary work in foreign countries is so *different* and potentially *difficult* in nature? Different, that is, from reaching people from within our own Western or Judeo-Christian-based value system and point of identification. Simply stated, an adapted approach is generally necessary within other cultures, since the understanding of life held by the audience is often very different from ours (*described above under Worldviews*). Nowhere here am I suggesting that we modify the actual Gospel message in any way—*God Forbid!* I am saying that our delivery *may* need modification, yet the message *must* remain complete and comprehensible, not spotty or full of holes to the minds of the hearer. Otherwise, if the message becomes muddled due to our inadequate or unclear delivery, we have failed in our attempts to preach the Gospel!

The Thai are a very practical-minded people, able to adapt and make do, pick and choose as they wish. They love modern conveniences from the West. They want missionaries to teach English to their children, so they can come to the States to study. Ironically, the first dictionaries, sewing machines, typewriters, printing presses, modern schools, hospitals, hygiene and medicines were all brought to Thailand by missionaries, along with the Gospel. The first evangelical missionaries to enter Thailand were Adoniram and Ann Judson—Baptist missionaries to Burma. The first Thai dictionary was compiled by Ann Judson, who also translated the Gospel of Matthew into Thai in 1819. All the modern conveniences listed here, and many more, can be found in abundance throughout Thailand today. Only *one* thing remains in relatively scarce supply—born-again Thai Christians.

The Thai are also very spiritually-minded, always searching for peace and wellbeing. Yet, sadly, they have been duped and blinded by the enemy of their souls into following a superstitious lifestyle and a works-based religion, while rejecting the *only One* who can fill the God-shaped vacuum in their lives. Meanwhile, popular “cold-call” evangelism methods employed by most remain woefully inadequate, i.e., Roman's Road, Four Spiritual Laws, God Loves You, and Jesus died, etc. The truths contained in these approaches are correct, but confusing to the average Thai listener, since they lack the necessary foundational knowledge to be convicted of their need. These may work in some places, but not in Buddhist Thailand, since they fail to provide the essential truths of Creation, etc. The exception is that some Thai are truly seeking, and do become born-again in spite of the misunderstandings and assumptions that arise due to the confusing “popcorn” evangelism presentations that abound. The brighter side is that some Thai, as well as missionaries, are now catching on.

This brings me to a concern that many career-missionaries share concerning visitors who try to evangelize using shortcut methods. These types are usually filled with zeal and idealism, which is fine, but it needs to be tempered with patience, wisdom, and knowledge. What often occurs is that, in their zeal, they try to rush people into responding to their attempts to share the Gospel, without first spending the time necessary to provide an adequate foundation. (*A “Catch-22” situation, to be sure, since it usually merely reinforces their misconceptions.*)

Not knowing the language or ways of the people, these well-meaning types attempt to work through the medium of English or interpreters, and are usually unaware that their most sincere attempts fall way short. This is because they lack adequate cross-cultural communication experience, as well as knowledge of the culture and beliefs of the people they seek to press into a quick decision. (*I call it “popcorn” evangelism.*) Then, if the person smiles or *seems* the least bit interested, this is often interpreted as their being interested in the Gospel, or having received Christ—which it *may* be. Yet, in all probability, the person is usually friendly in hopes of gaining a Western friend, so that their children might have a chance to come study in America, Canada, or other Western nation. (*This information was related to me by a native Christian onlooker and friend.*)

Furthermore, many experienced career missionaries (*including the writer*) have discovered that the focal point or theme of these divergent languages, cultures, and worldviews contain a deep-seated maze of concepts in direct opposition to the truths of the Gospel message. I see these non-Judeo-Christian value systems—as good as they may seem to some—as being subtly influenced by the Enemy over the centuries, to keep adherents in spiritual darkness.

Cultural Illustration #1—Medicine and Healing Arts: One time in the late 1970s, while we were living and doing church-planting among the Nyaw people in their remote primitive village, the *talk of the town* was about a recent bad omen. A wedding processional truck (*yes, truck*) had run off the road at a curve and flipped over, spilling the wedding party out on their way to the groom's village. The animistic villagers saw the cause as being spiritual in nature, yet in actuality, it was caused by a celebratory drunk driver and a soft front tire (*according to my view*). The only serious injury was one elderly man, who remained hospitalized under oxygen. Although making steady improvement, he was concerned that he might die in the hospital, away from his village surroundings. So, he asked to be taken home. (*Incidentally, if he had died while in the hospital, all sorts of costly cleansing rituals and ceremonies would have been required, just to get his corpse home without calamity or misfortune befalling all those involved.*)

He came home and died soon thereafter due to being taken off of oxygen and away from proper medical care (*again, my view*). Relatives and friends gave him a proper send-off, replete with every important ritual. These all followed accepted tradition, designed to maintain wellbeing, according to their worldview. His remains were cremated on a Buddhist-styled funeral pyre, erected in the rice fields he had worked from youth. Buddhist priests walked in front of the casket processional, each grasping onto a thin cotton string which was attached to the casket. Upon arrival, they recited a chant in Bali-Sanskrit. Having performed their duties—*pulling the deceased man up to heaven*—they returned to the village temple in silence.

All the other accident victims returned to the village the day of the accident, sporting casts, braces, bumps and bruises of various sorts. A couple days later, I was visited by a woman who had suffered a broken forearm in the wedding truck rollover. She wanted me to remove the cast that supported her broken arm. “*Why,*” I asked. “*Because it hurts,*” she responded. I assured her that the pain was only temporary, and supplied her with some pain medication that I had on hand. When she saw that her little spoof wasn't working, she finally told me that the doctor wanted it removed. “*What doctor,*” I asked in amazement. “*The blowing doctor,*” she responded. He told her that his healing incantations could not penetrate the cast, so he wanted it removed. I politely refused, trying to explain how this blowing thing was not really real, or necessary. My words fell on deaf ears as she descended my house stairs and headed on home, where someone else later removed the cast.

Not knowing their Creator, these people have been tricked by the Enemy into believing that bones *will not* heal apart from a *blowing doctor*, gently blowing over the affected spot while mouthing a magical incantation. And, they usually negotiate a handsome price before providing this beneficial community service. “*This is our way,*” I was told by the same blowing doctor (*a village elder and personal friend*); “*You outsiders go to hospitals, take medicine, and use casts, but this is our way.*” Without the cast, the woman's arm obviously healed, albeit fused in a crooked fashion. The blowing doctor got his fee, along with all the credit. Later on, I saw this same old gentleman working his healing arts on a water buffalo's injured hind leg! Do they really believe this silly stuff you ask? As much as you or I believe in modern medicine, or the Bible; and, they aren't ready to abandon their old ways, since they're fully convinced they are better. Once saved, they realize it's wrong. Turning to God in prayer instead, they rejoice when they realize that He created our bodies to heal—another step removed from the dark paths they once trod.

Applying this same scenario: what if, as an outsider, I try to convince them to receive Christ without first introducing Creation, etc? All they will hear is that they must abandon their beloved religion and tightly-held traditions—passed down for centuries from their respected forefathers—in favor of embracing some

strange-sounding foreign thing, which they find baffling and confusing. They may even smile knowingly, and remind me how all religions are equally good. Or, they may feign interest in an attempt to gain the friendship of the "rich" foreigner, all in hopes of being able to send their children off to study in the West, or curry some other favor. Maybe even seek to gain my confidence to later rob me, as once happened. But, not knowing their need, they won't truly receive Christ.

Cultural Illustration #2—Interpreting Accidents and Calamities: Two opposing worldviews concerning Uncle Sou-pea's calamity. Uncle Sou-pea's son had just gotten married, so there was a need to add an extension onto the house to make more room. With the neighbors' help, another row of posts was added to the existing porch. Then, hand sawn rafters and floor boards were added. Next morning, Uncle Sou-pea snapped a chalk line and set about sawing off the uneven ends of the floor boards. While doing so, a heavy brace that was not nailed down securely, worked itself loose and fell down across Uncle Sou-pea's shoulders. Knocking him unconscious, he fell three meters (*ten feet*) to the ground below.

As a neighbor, I was one of the first on the scene. Thankfully, Uncle Sou-pea was only shaken up. Surveying the situation, I concluded that the nails holding the offending rafter in place were too short, and had pulled out due to the swaying motion caused by his sawing. "Yep, that was it," he responded. Later, all sorts of ceremonies began taking place, some of which were new to me: the protection ceremony to ward off further calamities; the soul-calling and wrist-tying ceremony, to regain a sense of wellbeing; the merit-making ceremony at the village temple; among others. I inquired of a village friend why all these were being done. His answer provided me with a deepened sense of respect for the superstitious darkness they live under.

So, what actually happened? It seems that Uncle Sou-pea's mother had died three years previous, and according to a village divination doctor, she lacked enough merit to be reincarnated. Thus, her disembodied spirit was still adrift in the village. As such, she desperately needed her son (Uncle Sou-pea) to perform merit-making ceremonies for her. This, he did, after she got his attention by causing the mishap. I later asked him if his mother had loved him while she was alive, to which he responded that she did. "Why would she try to harm you now?" I added. He had no answer.

Cultural Illustration #3—Diet and Local Delicacies: We are all familiar with the delicious and exotic Thai cuisine, served in Thai restaurants here at home. And yes, when in Thailand, we eat this delicious fare on a regular basis in restaurants around the land. That being said, there are also other local-area delicacies you may not find on the restaurant menus here, like a saucer of fresh pig blood, topped with a sprinkling of cilantro and a squeeze of lemon. Or, maybe roasted Cobra, or field rat, or dry-fried June Bugs, or frogs, toads and lizards, large grubs, or rotted fish paste, or a cow's innards or afterbirth... and the list goes on. These are typically rural Isan foods, eaten and enjoyed on a regular basis. I have eaten most of these, except for the grubs, afterbirth, blood, and parasite-infested raw meat and shellfish—some things even taste like chicken. ☺

At village wedding receptions, I am often offered raw marinated meat they call "tiger food." How do I handle it? I say, "Save the tiger food for the tigers, I wouldn't want them mad at me. If you stir-fry some, I'll eat that." They do, and I do—it tastes great cooked. We all have a good laugh.

"You guys throw the best parts away; do you mind if I take them home for us to eat?" This was a request our village house girl submitted one day after cleaning a chicken for our dinner. Was she requesting the drumsticks, thighs, breasts, or maybe the neck? No, she was referring to the head, intestines, skin, lower legs and feet. We told her that she was more than welcome to do so, swallowing hard at the thought.

A few years later, Pastor Jarat and I were evangelizing one Saturday, way out in Isan's remote hinterlands. Noontime came around, but there were no little eateries where we could scare up some prepared food to eat. The only "prepared" thing we found was on a pushcart, parked alongside the dusty old dirt road. It was chicken, but not Colonel Sanders' style. Have you ever eaten barbecued chicken innards, cleaned and wrapped around a bamboo stick and overly-roasted to a dried-up crisp, along with the heart, gizzard, and liver? That's what we had for lunch that day, along with sticky rice (*the staple food of both Isan and nearby Laos*). They were actually not too bad, once I got past the idea of eating chicken guts!

As we have seen here, various people groups all have their distinctive languages, cultures, belief systems, and even foods—all which may seem strange to us, as ours do to them. These also present challenges for missionaries in their attempts to present the Gospel to the adherents in an understandable way. Yet, we all breathe the same air, have the same blood coursing through our veins, and our biological makeup is exactly the same. We all share the same love for family, desire to see our children succeed, share similar hopes for good health, security and well-being. And, above all, the greatest and most important core similarity is our mutual fallen spiritual condition, and the need for the saving forgiveness of God, freely given through the Name, Person, and Work of God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dynamic Change: Blinded eyes are opened when these people hear the Biblical account of their Creator, including their ancestors' temptation and fall, the promised Messiah, etc. Then, if they respond to the Gospel call, something marvelous occurs. As they repent from serving dead idols and vain religious rituals, and trust in the living Christ, the Holy Spirit takes up residence within their hearts and lives as they become born-again into God's family of Saints.

Then, we who are from vastly different languages and cultural backgrounds, become one together in the Spirit and in Christ as we are transformed from dead works to a living hope, from temporal to eternal, from falsehoods to truth, from despair to joy, from blindness to sight, etc. It's truly exciting and wonderful to behold.

Conclusion: What I am describing for you here is a little peek at a life and death struggle, a battle for peoples' eternal souls, that all cross-cultural missionaries must face. We stand in the gap between Heaven and Hell on their behalf. Therefore, instead of being satisfied with the status-quo, I believe that every missionary (*including yours truly*) needs to continually monitor and improve their language skills, i.e., the ability to converse fluently on a variety of subjects in the national language, and the heart language of the people they minister to. Beyond that, we need to review our cross-cultural presentation skills, to insure that we clearly communicate Gospel truths to the hearts and minds of our audience.

In closing, I apologize for this longer-than-normal newsletter. However, I do hope it gives you a more complete picture of how challenging cross-cultural missionary work can be, and how important your prayers and financial gifts are in upholding this vital ministry, and others like it. We truly need and appreciate your help. Please pray for missionaries, that they would present a clear Gospel, and for the Isan people and their Thai cousins, that their hearts would be softened towards the Gospel of God's Amazing Grace—found only in the Name, Person, and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ!

By God's Enabling Grace and For His Eternal Glory,

Ron Myers

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We just celebrated our 43rd wedding anniversary