

Cross-Cultural Communication - An Essential Part of Back to Jerusalem

One of the biggest challenges facing Chinese missionaries as they prepare to leave China - or to serve Christ among the ethnic minority groups within China's borders - is the challenge of cross-cultural communication. Any experienced missionary knows that learning the language of the country or people group they are living among is only part of the challenge. They must also be equipped with tools to allow them to be effective witnesses for Christ within the context of the culture and society they seek to serve.

Recently, in a Middle Eastern nation, Back to Jerusalem sat down with Brother John. John was born and raised in East Africa and has spent most of his life helping missionaries adapt and succeed in their call for God. He is now focused on training and equipping Back to Jerusalem missionaries for cross-cultural ministry.

Back to Jerusalem: Brother John, thank you for sharing with us. You have spent your whole life involved with missionary work. What do you think is more important for a missionary, learning the language or learning the culture of the people they are called to reach?

John: Both are equally vital. They are so intertwined that it is impossible to make a distinction. If a person learns a culture they will probably end up also learning the language, and if they

learn a language they will certainly also learn the culture as they do so.

Any church that is established anywhere in the world has to be a viable entity within that culture in order to prosper, otherwise it will be seen as a strange and foreign thing that should be feared and avoided. There is no point trying to plant Chinese house churches in Uzbekistan. They need Uzbek churches there, just as it is weird for a Western church to be planted inside China. For this reason it is crucial for Chinese missionaries involved with Back to Jerusalem to understand the importance of cross-cultural communication, and to understand that 'culture' is the place where the church will have to exist. The way a particular church appears and operates will be as varied as the number of cultures God has created. Each one should carry a distinctiveness and beauty that reflects the Creator.

Many Chinese house church leaders have told me they expect up to one-third of the missionaries they send outside China will die as martyrs for the gospel. This may well be one strategy from the Lord that the Chinese can uniquely contribute to winning Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus for Christ, but we want to ensure that nobody dies or suffers unnecessarily just because they weren't sensitive to the culture they were in.



BTJ: What is the main struggle that BTJ missionaries are facing today?

John: Discouragement. Some forms of discouragement are certainly unique to the Chinese Church. For example, I met with an evangelist who is working among an ethnic minority group in China. He was ready to give up. Why? Because in the previous three months he had only been able to lead about fifty people to the Lord, whereas normally when he worked in a Han Chinese area he would have led 1,000 people to Christ in that same time period!

Some of the struggles BTJ missionaries face are very down-to-earth. The female

members of a Chinese team that has been working in a difficult Middle Eastern country, report that the hardest thing for them is being touched and bumped against in a sexual manner by Muslim men while traveling on public buses. Some of the Chinese sisters are so worn down by this constant harassment that they hardly have enough strength to leave their home every day. Discouragement comes in many subtle forms, but is a key weapon of Satan to attack the servants of God.

Some of the discouragement BTJ missionaries experience may be due to a lack of cross-cultural training. It is always more stressful and confusing for someone living in a foreign culture if they are unaware of what is going on around them. By God's grace we hope to help equip both the existing and future BTJ missionaries so that they are better prepared for long and fruitful ministry as ambassadors of Christ.

BTJ: Many of the Back to Jerusalem missionaries come from rural areas of China. Some do not have a high level of education. What would you say to those who believe only highly-educated Chinese should be considered for mission work?

John: There are some who believe that only the highly educated are fit to participate in cross-cultural missions. This has been the argument of some since the dawn of the missionary enterprise. However, both history and empirical research has clearly shown that there is no correlation between education and effectiveness or competence in ministry.

For example, this was demonstrated by one scientifically designed empirical study on 120 missionaries in one country in Latin America. The study, based on 13 instruments and 40 pages of questions, was given to missionaries on themselves, and to fellow missionaries and nationals on the missionaries in question. Factors taken into consideration included the way missionaries were raised, their educational background and levels, their ability to learn local language, the extent to which they had entered into understanding the culture, the ability to contextualize their ministries, personal growth, family issues, spiritual dynamics, character issues, and a wide range of other factors.

No missionaries in the study had fewer than 4 years of ministry, with an average of 17 years of ministry. The 20% of the most effective missionaries were compared with the 20% least effective along classical competencies such as communicating the Gospel clearly, leading people to Christ, doing follow-up and discipleship, church-planting, and church-development, *based on a variety of predictor variables*. The results were amazing! The most important factors differentiating most competent with least competent missionaries were spiritual dynamics. The second most important factors related to character areas. The third most important factors that consistently came up related to social involvement.

Level of education had almost nothing to do with effectiveness, since most effective missionaries and least effective missionaries both had equal numbers of every level of education from only secondary school up to post-graduate education.

In layman's terms, what this thorough study showed could be summarized in the following way: It was the missionaries who loved God, and loved people, who were the most effective on the field. Those whose lives radiated a spiritual quality of godliness and genuineness were, in return, loved by the people they had gone to serve. Even being a 'missionary kid' (the child of a missionary family) offered no obvious advantage. What mattered most was how that person walked with God and with his fellow man.

Many of these successful missionaries had no more than high school education, yet they possessed a quality of spiritual life that enabled them to bear fruit for Christ. In summary, the survey showed that a person's level of education was not an important factor in determining the effectiveness of their missionary service.

That makes sense to me. You may have received the highest education available, but if you don't walk with God, and you don't like people much, you won't have much of a ministry. Since the modern Protestant missionary era started about 200 years ago there have been countless missionaries go out who were not highly educated, yet they were profoundly used by God to impact whole peoples and nations with the gospel.

Now of course someone can go to the mission field uneducated and continue to be stupid, and that doesn't work either! We should be learning throughout our lifetime, but education is *not* the most important thing in determining who should go forth into the harvest fields of the world.

BTJ: According to your own experience with the Chinese Church, in what ways do you see they could be effective as cross-cultural missionaries?

John: Probably the most crucial aspect that the Chinese Church has demonstrated in the past is an absolute commitment to Christ. There are many men and women willing to suffer, face prison, and even die if need be for the gospel. When a Christian is willing to die for something, then they are able to live for that same thing. Many Chinese missionaries have already gained a lot of experience in hearing God and obeying Him, no matter the cost. Remember that Jesus said, *"The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does"* (John 5:19). This is a foundational requirement for anyone who wants to have an effective ministry.

There are many ministries that look like they are doing much for God's kingdom, but in the end when we stand before the judgement seat of Christ our works may be revealed to be something less than what they appear. What will remain is that work done in obedience to God's calling, done in the strength of His Spirit and not by mere human effort. In these

ways the Chinese Church has much to offer the kingdom of God in those nations that comprise the Back to Jerusalem vision.

BTJ: *Do you therefore think there is a potential problem in that Chinese missionaries who go overseas and link up with churches that do not have the same spiritual dynamics as in China may lose some of their effectiveness and distinctiveness?*

John: Yes, this is a concern of many, and a concern of mine. I fear that even when training Back to Jerusalem missionaries if we do so according to 'strategies' that are too similar to the strategies being carried out in the Western world and by many Western missionaries, the training may actually hinder the Chinese from being effective for God's kingdom like He wants them to be.

The Holy Spirit has been preparing the Chinese Church with its unique history of persecution, hardship, and isolation in such a way that they may have a strategy that God has in mind for effectively taking the gospel into those areas of great darkness between China and Jerusalem. If we are honest we will have to admit that the present missionary endeavors into the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa, Buddhist nations, etc., are not achieving the kind of impact and fruitfulness that will see the Name of Jesus Christ glorified as the Father desires it to be.

The Back to Jerusalem missionaries themselves will need to depend on and be led by the Spirit of God. Some will seek to work with the local believers in the country they go to, while others may actually find to do so could hinder their effectiveness, as Christians in many areas of the world have become so used to the culture and society of their location that they have lost their distinctiveness and therefore their effectiveness as witnesses for Christ. Many times God runs absolutely counter to the methods and rules and regulations and processes that man has in place.

The testimony of the house church Christians in China is that they have learned over many years how to be led by the Spirit of God. Not only in where to go, but what to do every day, who to speak with and who not to speak with. They have learned to discern the strategy required at any given time or situation. Without these kind of factors the Chinese will lose the spiritual advantage they have over believers from other parts of the world who have been raised in a completely different environment.

It would be a tragedy if, in our desire to help the Chinese Church, we export our own failed strategies and burdensome conditions and in so doing stifle the vitality of the Chinese Church.

BTJ: *Are there certain principles involved with training Back to Jerusalem workers that could be implemented to hopefully avoid such a tragedy?*

John: Yes, there are. One way is for everyone privileged to be asked to participate in any kind of training of BTJ missionaries to ensure that the material they are teaching is accepted and relevant to the Chinese leaders themselves. Much of what we think is necessary in the West is not necessary in China, and may in fact hinder them. All of the material we are helping the Chinese with is being scrutinized, weighed, and adjusted by a group of Chinese Christian leaders before it ever makes it to a training school in China. After a training school has been completed the same leaders process what has taken place and implement changes so that the next school can be more effective. This is crucial to ensure the content and spiritual quality of what is being taught remains in the hands of the Chinese themselves, and is not being imposed on them from the outside.

BTJ: *Can you share a little about the extensive cross-cultural training resources you are helping to develop for Back to Jerusalem, in conjunction with the Chinese leaders?*

John: One of the things we are working on is a way for people to be effectively trained in a way that is best suited to their makeup. For

example, Chinese believers learn best when you start with concrete details of life, with stories, with problems and issues rather than starting with broad principles. You move from the concrete to the intuitive and from there to the broad principles. This is true of most tribal peoples of the world and with most cultures.

This does not mean that oral cultures cannot learn profound concepts. You can teach profound concepts but how you do it will be quite different from the processes by which Westerners learn such concepts. Oral learners may be and often are literate, but they process information differently from the way most western education does. We are developing our training for China based on the best ways by which people oriented to orality learn.



We also examine Chinese church history, world church history, and the strengths and weaknesses of the church in China to identify what factors and strengths God has built into Chinese Christianity that will assist them in the Back to Jerusalem vision. We are careful to safeguard these precious and unique strengths. When these things have been identified we say to the Chinese, "These are the things you need to retain when you go into your new context as missionaries."

Basically our training can be summarized as teaching the missionaries (a) how to hear the heart of the people they intend to reach, (b) how to understand the core values of the society and religion, (c) how to discern what are the vacuums that the people's worldview and religion have not answered, and (d) strategic ways the gospel could be presented that can penetrate and influence the heartfelt needs of lost people.

To accomplish these things means we must take the time and effort to really listen and learn about the people we are trying to witness to. The same principles apply for Christians anywhere in the world. God-given strategies that 'work' in one place or among one people will not necessarily work in another place. The approach to reaching an Arab Muslim for Christ will be different to the approach that works reaching Chinese in China. Each servant of the Lord must spend time waiting upon the Lord to reveal a strategy from heaven for each particular circumstance and need.



Language learning can be done in a variety of different ways. There are some methods that do not necessarily result in an effective communication with people on the street. In our training we are looking at this very carefully. We have found the Chinese brothers and sisters usually need to learn language by being 'out and about' with people, whether it be on the farm, at work, or in the marketplace. There they will learn the language much more quickly and effectively than if we put them into a classroom setting with a textbook for a year or two. That kind of learning often results in a very stylized or academic approach which does not fit with the makeup of most Chinese people. When it comes to a Chinese Christian learning a language like Arabic, for example, we have found they could spend years trying to learn at a language institute and make little progress, yet if they learn while interacting with local people on a daily basis they will learn much more quickly and effectively.

BTJ: Brother John, what do you see as some of the biggest challenges facing the Back to Jerusalem movement at the moment, and what are some of the ways

people can pray for it?

John: Practical realities are posing some of the biggest challenges. Many readers may not understand that freedom of travel is still somewhat restricted for Chinese people. It can be quite a complicated process just to secure a passport. Then the workers need to have valid reasons to enter the different countries they intend to go to in order to obtain visas and be able to remain there long-term. There are a number of initiatives presently in progress to help Chinese Christians go out of their country as witnesses for Christ. Please pray that God will help with the practical obstacles so that the vision He has placed in the hearts of the Chinese Church may become a reality.

Secondly, once the workers get to their destination, the BTJ workers need the ability to learn the language and culture effectively. Please pray that we will be able to provide the kind of training that will be God-sent and structured in such a way that will greatly assist the Chinese to do this.

Yes, there are many challenges facing the implementation of the Back to Jerusalem vision, but I am encouraged by what I have seen, because the Biblical mandate that the whole Church should go into the whole world with the gospel applies to China's believers just as much as it does to American or European believers. There are many in China who are getting a vision, given by the Spirit of God, to go outside of their country and bring the Good News to Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, and animists wherever they may be on the way back to Jerusalem.

This is exciting! What a great privilege it is to serve our Chinese brothers and sisters in this way. Please pray we would be pleasing to the Lord, and He would empower and motivate us to glorify the Name of Christ in all we do and say.