

Looking for cultural context in sharing the Gospel

As we have more conversations with people from all over the world, it is important to appreciate how someone's cultural understanding of sin will affect how they receive the Gospel. When we can understand a seeker's background and cultural context, we can offer the Gospel in ways that are more likely to resonate.

Christian anthropologists classify cultures into three different sin-response types:

- **Guilt/Innocence cultures** view right and wrong primarily based on understanding of justice and law. The Gospel is most clearly understood as salvation from guilt and the penalty of sin. This is common in western cultures like the US.
- **Shame/Honor cultures** value relationships and understand right and wrong based on what grants honor (both to self and family/community) and avoids shame. The Gospel is most clearly understood as salvation from their shame and how God grants them an honorable position as son or daughter of the Most High. This is more often seen in Eastern cultures like Japan.
- **Fear/Power cultures** see life as a struggle for spiritual power in order to attain what they need. What is right is determined by what the individual god or spirit demands from someone to gain favor. The Gospel is most clearly understood as salvation from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of a sovereign and good God who is more powerful than all other spirits. This is seen in Tribal cultures throughout the world.

The Gospel does not change but how we present it may differ depending on the culture of the seeker. We need to recognize that we often use language and metaphors that we have grown comfortable with but that may not help someone from another culture appreciate the message the same way.

We must choose the language we want to use to communicate abstract ideas with concrete images. This means we may need to select language and examples that connect with the audience. Here are some examples for each cultural approach.

Guilt/Innocence Cultures

Westerners, coming from a guilt culture, often use legal terminology when sharing the Gospel. Words such as judge, works, punishment, and debt. These terms are certainly biblical and found in scripture. They may also work perfectly with someone from a western culture but not so much with someone from elsewhere.

Shame/Honor Cultures

Shame-based cultures rely upon community pressure (more than individual conscious) to guide social behavior. Members of these cultures preserve their honor, their reputation in the community, by adhering to the group's expectations. They avoid the shame that could result in exclusion from the group. These people are very communal since honor and shame ultimately come from others. Honor and community are top values in these cultures. So relational words such as mediator, disloyalty, adoption, and approval can be used to explain the gospel.

Jayson Georges writes for Send International and he offers this example of a possible Gospel presentation for someone from a shame/honor culture:

1. God wants to honor you as his child. He created us with glory and honor to live in his family.
2. But, our disloyalty disrespects God and brings disgrace. We are now spiritual orphans, separated from our Father.
3. Jesus' disgraceful death covers our shame. The cross restored God's face and mediates reconciliation. We are adopted as his worthy children with a new inheritance.
4. In order to harmony with God you must give allegiance to Jesus. Receive God's gracious welcome into his family and live under his name. Stop boasting in your own honor and receive God's honor.

Fear/Power Cultures

People from fear-based cultures believe that "invisible spirits inhabit the physical world," and these spirits are responsible for most of the good or bad things that happen to them. They work hard to manipulate or appease these spirits so that they can be safe, successful, and happy. These magical practices can include burning incense, wearing an amulet, or casting a spell.

"Since life is viewed as a perpetual spiritual battle, the language and imagery of warfare may resonate better with people of fear-based cultures." Words such as deliverance, healing, darkness, protection, and blessing can help explain "how Jesus delivers us from spiritual bondage."

Here is Jayson's example Gospel presentation for someone from a fear-based culture:

1. God is the sovereign King. He created people to rule his entire creation and experience his spiritual blessings.
2. But we rebel against God's rule, so we live in bondage to Satan. We are weak, and afraid.
3. Jesus is the warrior who conquered evil powers to release the captives from Satan's dominion. Jesus restores God's power and blessings to us.

4. You must know Jesus to access the Divine Spirit and overcome the power of sin and Satan. Jesus alone, not rituals or magic, provides us peace and protection.

Summary

The basics we encourage everyone to use in evangelizing remain the same no matter what culture we interact with online. We still focus on great listening, empathy with their story, and showing love and patience. However, as we think about things such as emphasizing concepts over words and word choices, these helpful overviews provide a template for connecting with the seeker's own experiences in a way that make the Gospel more alive for them. Pray over this article and ask the Holy Spirit to show you cultural clues that you may have missed in the past and provide the right metaphors and language to help the lost see their need for Jesus.

Credits: Jason Georges served as a missionary in Central Asia for nine years. He now runs HonorShame.com, a website devoted to exploring how to contextualize the gospel for those from honor/shame cultures. Much of this article comes from his article on cross-cultural evangelism written for Send International (<https://send.org/story/cross-cultural-evangelism>).