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insight

Speaking to the Heart

Communicating Effectively with Students from Many Nations

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A Journal for International Student Ministry in the UK

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We welcome your comments and responses to the articles featured in this edition of *Insight*. Please address all correspondence to: **insight@friendsinternational.uk**

A Word From the Editor

Lynette Teagle

Lynette has been a Staff Worker for Friends International since 2001, alongside her husband Peter. Based in Oxford, she is working part-time on a PhD researching identity change in international students at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

An East Asian student once confessed that he had sat in a CU mission talk for international students, only half-listening, keeping one eye on the messages flashing up on his mobile phone.

"It's just the usual Christian stuff. Will probably try to escape soon," he typed. At that moment, he heard the speaker ask, "Most of us don't know how to honour our parents well, let alone honouring God. Are you the older son in this story, or the younger one?" Captivated, he stopped texting and focused on the rest of the talk about the parable of the lost son. His closing text to his friend read, "Hang on, this is for me."

At the heart of all our talks, Bible studies, café evenings, time spent with students, is surely the prayer that our international student friends will hear the Gospel communicated in a million and one different ways and think, "THIS IS FOR ME."

In this issue of *Insight*, we explore the challenges of communicating in a way which reaches the heart of our audience, often a very diverse group of people not only in nationality, culture and age, but also in experience, maturity and spiritual understanding.

In a departure from our usual format, we have only two articles in this issue. The longer article, by Peter Teagle, explains an approach to teaching and preaching from the Bible which aims to help us communicate more effectively with a multicultural audience. There are two key sections: the first explains the thinking behind the approach, and the second is a practical step-by-step guide, taking us from choice of passage and cultural assumptions, to grading our language and choosing illustrations and examples. We felt that due to its very practical nature it would be best to leave the article in its entirety, and hope that you will find it both readable and usable.

The second article deals with language of a different kind. International students often tell us that they feel strangely moved by the worship music in church, even as non-believers. Based on her recent training with *Resonance*, Jenny Hunter explores the ways in which music from different countries and languages might be used by God to speak even more deeply to international students, moving them away from perceptions of Christianity as a Western faith, and towards worship that allows them to feel "God walking into the heart".

"The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart." And that message is the very message about faith that we preach. (Rom 10:8 NLT)

The Music that Resonates:

Discovering the place of music in international ministry

Jenny Hunter

Jenny is a Staff Worker for Friends International in Cambridge. A music graduate, she has organised an international Christmas choir for several years and leads an international student fellowship.

Music is a powerful language. Many listen to music every day, and most of us include it as part of the expression of our faith in Jesus and our love for God. Music is a wonderful gift from God which we can enjoy and give back to Him in gratitude. It helps us to express ideas and emotions which are beyond mere words, enabling us to better grasp and hold on to truths.

"Music is a universal language," we are so often told. But is it really? The famous Hallelujah Chorus by Handel may be uplifting and majestic to you, but when played to the Senufo people in Ivory Coast it sounded "like crying music", while it reminded the Maasai people in Kenya of "noisy jet engines"![1]

In May 2015 I joined a week-long course at All Nations Christian College led by *Resonance*, a ministry of WEC. We learnt that each person has a 'heart language' and that our worship can be more heartfelt and helpful when we use that language for praising God, singing prayers, singing about Bible truths etc. That language may be more traditional or formal, more pop or rock or folk. It may be quite a specific genre, or broader and more eclectic.

In this article I will give some background to the development of the understanding of 'heart music', before exploring some of the issues this may lead us to consider in international student ministry. I then conclude with some ideas of what we can do to take this further.

Development of the understanding of heart music

In the past, missionaries would often be very sceptical about or even against traditional ethnic styles of music. They would teach people to sing the hymns they had brought from their own countries. Sometimes they felt that the people they were ministering to were not musical and needed to be taught, when in fact they just had a completely different musical language! Sometimes they were wary of the use of the people's traditional music, since it was commonly used in worshipping spirits or other occultic practices. Hence in their minds, these instruments and styles were 'evil' and therefore inappropriate in church or Christian practice.

So imagine the local people who were already wary of the missionaries. They saw and heard that their own people, who had accepted the Christian message taught by the missionaries, were singing foreign songs and rejecting their own music. Surely it then seemed that Christianity wasn't relevant to their own culture. It was a foreign religion. They didn't have a reason to find out more about the Christian message.

[1] Joan Huyser-Honig: *http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/ethnodoxology-calling-all-peoples-toworship-in-their-heart-language*

But over the years, Western Christians have come to understand more about the interaction between the Gospel and culture. Missionaries are now encouraging and supporting local Christians in many different cultures to sing to God in their own heart music and language, with their own instruments and styles. This reminds people that God speaks their own language, that He understands and loves them; the Gospel is relevant to their own lives and cultures. In a short clip from the 'Ethnodoxology' YouTube channel[2] we see the difference in engagement among people from a people group in East Africa after the church music was changed from a Western 'hymn' style to a culturally appropriate musical style. In the former, ladies were sitting down and singing with bored-looking expressions. In the latter, the atmosphere was lively and people were taking notice.[3]

It's not only the style of music that matters. The words are also important. Of course, we want the lyrics we sing to be full of good theology. We would probably agree that many people in our churches get much of their everyday theology from songs, more than from the Bible! But the everyday experience of Christian life may look quite different in one place than another. The lyrics need to make sense in the culture as well. How well will very individualistic song lyrics work in a culture which is far more group-oriented? Christmas songs about snow or songs equating rain with gloominess don't work in all cultures! And the words of translated hymns don't often fit well with the melody of the old language,[4] which can cause stumbling-blocks or a lack of fluency and ease. A Chinese lady commented about some 'home-grown' Chinese songs: "With the translations of the Western songs we walk into the Kingdom of God, but because as these are Chinese-style, God walks into our hearts."[5]

It's good to stress that this doesn't necessarily mean purely 'traditional ethnic' music – it may be a fusion of pop and ethnic, or just a local form of modern urban music.

Relevance to international student ministry

But does this have any relevance with international students in the UK? We can't very well expect our churches to start singing in the musical heart languages of all the different people and cultures we meet!

And what about the many students we meet who thoroughly enjoy the music in UK churches? I have met a great number of Chinese students and scholars who have said that they were drawn to churches because the music they encountered there seemed to touch them in some special way. How can we then tell them to sing something different?

As people who are sharing the Gospel with others from around the world, we know that the Gospel is relevant to all people. We know that it is something that can and should impact us to the very core of our identity. But very often the students we meet approach the Christian faith as a Western idea and expression, from which they pick and choose certain aspects to embellish their own identity and worldview. Understandably at first, much of what they see in Christians and in the Christian events they attend may seem like external cultural issues. Music may be a part of that. The sound of our music may attract them, even though they don't understand either the lyrics, or that we're using the music to express and deepen our relationship with God.

> "...very often the students we meet approach the Christian faith as a Western idea and expression..."

Perhaps we should take a similar approach to that of introducing international students to the Bible. At first they may come to it as a piece of Western literature – interesting to read, with some new ideas that help them appreciate and understand Western culture and society. But we are constantly encouraging our friends to read the Bible in their own language, even though we don't speak it – reminding them that it's not the external appearance that is important, but the meaning. We

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4z9iTPV_eE

[3] A lot of thought does go into helping people to work out how to bring their traditional music into their Christian expression, so that misunderstandings and syncretism are avoided. It is not simply a case of transferring music from one context into the Christian context.

[4] In one case, a hymn translated into Swahili meant one thing on paper, but when sung to the melody the meaning of the words changed to something quite different.

[5] The Cross: Jesus in China - Part 4: 'The Canaan Hymns'

are sure that when reading a good Bible translation in their mother tongue (with context and jargon explained) our friends will grasp things in a special way that is harder to convey in a second language.

Likewise, we encourage our international friends to learn to pray in their own language, even though we don't understand it, because we know they should be able to express more fluently what they want to say to God.

Doing both these things in the mother tongue reminds people that Christianity is not a Western faith, and that God is God of the whole world. He speaks the language of every single person, and values them and the unique culture He has given them. It is surely the same with musical expression. I'm sure that some students, even while they enjoy the music in our churches, will be able to engage more deeply with songs which resonate more with their own culture.

> "I'm convinced that it would be good to use Christian songs appropriate to our students' own cultures."

And for those who still prefer the Western musical expressions, if we don't help them to engage with Christian music from their culture, don't we risk giving the impression that the 'right' way of using music as a Christian is in English, with the songs we are introducing them to in our churches? What then happens when they go back and don't find any of the churches they visit singing songs or styles they've become used to in the UK?

I'm convinced that it would be good to use Christian songs appropriate to our students' own cultures. It will help communicate that being a Christian isn't a 'Western' thing, but can and should be fully integrated into the whole of their life back home. It's another tool to help our students allow their faith to be rooted deep inside them, rather than an external change. It will allow them to engage with Christian responses to cultural issues that we perhaps haven't thought of. And it is a wonderful affirmation of the value of the good elements in their culture and of God's desire for their people to play a role in His worldwide church.

But how can we do anything about this?
Many who are involved in international student ministry are not musicians, and may feel intimidated by yet another area to engage with. We may be struggling just to get people to read the Bible in their own language, let alone wanting to add another element.

Perhaps we could start by learning a little about Christian worship music in other cultures for ourselves. By engaging with Christian music from other cultures, we give ourselves a further snapshot of the glory of God's church, united across so much diversity. We get to appreciate (or try to!) the wisdom of God in investing so much creativity in humanity. We might then find ourselves drawn closer to our brothers and sisters who have now returned home. Perhaps we'll find that our heart music is broader than we had imagined. Or perhaps we'll experience the challenge of learning to adapt to a different style of music in church.

In one prayer meeting we held, we listened to an Iranian song, following along with the translation in English. It was a very helpful way for us to identify in some way with, and pray for, the situation of our Iranian friends.

I have listed some resources below which we can access to get a flavour of these things. But these may not be what our students experience when they go back. So instead, could we ask those who have already gone back to send us some songs (together with translations) they're currently singing in their gatherings? We might be able to ask those who have come to the UK as believers to teach us songs which they sing in worship, or get in touch with local ethnic-based churches. Where appropriate, can we share these with our student friends – both believers and seekers?

Where we have gatherings of international students for prayer or Bible study, can we ask the internationals in the group to help us run times of worship? Or if no-one is confident to lead or teach a song, can we simply listen to a recording?

In the international fellowship I'm leading, we are just beginning to include a time of musical worship in our gatherings, and have tried using a number of songs from other cultures. We're just at the beginning of our journey. Sometimes it feels like it's the novelty factor which drives us, but now and then I glimpse something deeper which encourages me to go on trying this. I'm convinced that we will all be enriched by the experience; that as the members have a go at introducing us to songs meaningful to them, they will grow. That as a fellowship, we will learn more about following Jesus, together with all the varied gifts He has given us, as well as in our own cultures 'back home'. But even if the songs they are singing 'back home' are not remarkably

different from those in our churches after all, we have given our students the opportunity to broaden their own horizons about God's people, and open their heart to people from different backgrounds in their own countries or around the world.

There are many benefits of broadening our horizons in this area. But however we do it, let's make sure (for ourselves, and to teach our students) to:

> *"Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."* (Eph 6:19-20)

and to:

> *"Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."* (Col 3:16)

Resources:

Free albums:

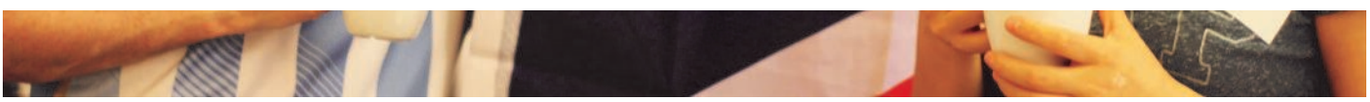
- *resonancearts.net* – 'Devotion' and 'Many Voices One Song 1'
- *heart-sounds.org* – 'Sounds of Global Worship 1'

Suggested listening:

- Aradhna – traditional Indian devotional music (bhajans) with Christ-centred themes *aradhnamusic.com* (on Spotify too)

Impossibilities or Exciting Opportunities?

Teaching the Bible to multicultural audiences



Peter Teagle

Peter is centre leader for Friends International Oxford. He also preaches and teaches at CU events weeks, training events and Word Alive in his role as events speaker for international student ministry.

Although not many of us may be regularly involved in actual preaching to groups of international students, my hope is that this article will be of use to all of us who are involved in one-to-one Bible teaching, small group Bible studies, café epilogues, or any situation in which we are called upon to teach the Bible to students from more than one culture at once.

In recent years I have had increasing opportunities to give both evangelistic and discipleship Bible talks to groups of international students, such as at Word Alive, university Christian Union Events Weeks and numerous individual talks at welcome dinners, weekends away and the like. In each case the audience has been made up of an eclectic group of students from quite a wide range of nationalities and cultures.

The question I am often asked (directly or indirectly), is: how is it possible to teach God's Word in a relevant way to a multicultural audience? Is it at all possible to meaningfully contextualise the message of the Bible to several cultures at once, without resorting to an approach so general that it lacks any cross-cultural distinctive?

The aim of this extended article is to unpack this: first, by looking at the understanding and approach we need, and then to focus on some of the skills that can be learned and applied to our various situations in teaching the Bible in a diverse international student ministry context.

I need to underline at this point, however, that though we will be looking at skills needed and 'tricks of the trade', this is not a purely human exercise. If it was up to us alone to explain the teachings of the Bible in an effective and life-changing way to many cultures at once, then the task would be simply impossible. But thankfully this is not a mere human endeavour. The Holy Spirit, the very Author of Scripture, is our interpreter. He is the One who speaks directly to people's hearts across all linguistic and cultural divides. At every stage we need to ask for and trust in His help.

But as someone once said to me, belief in the sovereignty of God is no excuse for lazy thinking, and while we rely on the Holy Spirit to ultimately interpret, convince and convict, we put ourselves at His disposal by doing all that we can to communicate as best we can.

Part 1: The Need for a Distinctive Approach

Jack of all trades?
Many years ago I signed up to do a four-week intensive TEFL course in London. My background being in science, I had very little idea of what I was getting into. My only experience of formal language-learning up until then was at school, where both my French and German teachers spoke English to us most of the time and translated every word into English. Therefore I could not entirely understand how one could teach the English language to a mixed class without being able to speak the languages of the people I was teaching.

I soon discovered, of course, that it is entirely possible. We were taught teaching methods – techniques and 'tricks of the trade' that TEFL[1] teachers use based on underlying principles of how language and language learning works. In short, by understanding the mechanics of language, teaching and language acquisition, we could teach English successfully to Japanese, French, Turkish, Arabic, Spanish and Polish students, all in the same class.

So, too, with teaching the Bible in a multicultural setting - we do not (in fact, we cannot) know all there is to know about every culture represented in the room. But we can and should know some of the underlying principles if we are to successfully teach the Bible to either many cultures at the same time or to someone from a culture with which we are not yet familiar.

To whom am I talking?
It is true to say that there can be no real communication unless the speaker has his listeners in mind at all times. Throughout every stage in the process, from study to delivery, I need to keep reminding myself who it is that I am speaking to. So many talks and studies go awry, not through incompetence with handling the biblical material, but in failing to put oneself in the shoes of one's hearers.

My guess is that we often fail to really have our hearers' interests at the forefront of our minds when we teach because, faced with a mixed group of nationalities with varying Christian experience we actually don't know the people we are talking to. So we back off and instead resort to patterns we are familiar with and hope for the best.

We may not be able to fully answer these questions, but we must always be asking: W*ho are the people I am talking to? What do they know? How do they think? What are their key values or what is their moral framework? What is their level of maturity/ English/education/biblical knowledge etc.?*

The journey may start in English
Some would argue that contextualisation is only truly possible when using the heart language of the hearers. Quite apart from the fact that being able to speak another language does not necessarily mean we understand our hearers' thinking and values , in international student ministry we have no such option.

Unless our groups of students are entirely uniform in their language background, we will almost always be using English as the medium of communication. Indeed, students often want to speak English with us, they will often come to events at least partly to improve their English, and may wish to use English to prove to themselves and others that they are conversant in the language.

Ultimately, of course, we want all students to eventually be studying the Bible in their own heart language. However, their journey often starts in English.

Not being able to use the heart-language of our hearers does not need to be a total handicap. My wife, Lynette, has recently been studying the Bible with a new Vietnamese believer. At one stage the student struggled with some of the terms for God used in the Vietnamese Bible. To her they sounded cold, remote and all-too-close to her Buddhist roots. I do not speak Vietnamese (nor does Lynette) and I do not know the terms she was referring to. Her reaction may or may not be common to Vietnamese believers. However, in this case, English acted as a sort of buffer. She could learn about who God truly is using English terms, so that later she could ascribe new meanings to the terms used in her Vietnamese Bible.

East Asian bias?
It is sometimes said that the work of Friends International ministry is numerically biased

[1] TEFL – Teaching English as a Foreign Language, often known as TESOL – Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages .

towards reaching East Asians. I am sure this is mostly due to the simple fact that East Asians have been the most responsive group, in terms of numbers attending events and responding to Christian teaching. That is not, however, the whole picture, and many among us will speak up for the Muslim (often meaning 'Middle Eastern') students, or Western Europeans – and rightly so.

But we will have to accept some generalisations. Each speaker or teacher will have their own cultural experiences and biases, but these should help us rather than hinder us. ***What we each bring to this is not our expertise in one particular culture, but our ability to understand how cultures work***. There are ways to make maximum impact across a broad range of cultures without necessarily sacrificing contextual depth.

> "Every time we read the Bible for ourselves, we automatically go through some of the process of contextualisation."

Starting where we are

So, this is where many of us are. We have to be generalists, though we may also be specialists. We are able to work with many cultures because we understand how culture itself operates in human society, and skills picked up in one culture enable us to learn others. We work in English, not because we are necessarily unable to do otherwise, but because a multi-cultural ministry requires it. We may not see students as they are in their home environment, but we are called to minister exactly in that place of flux, of shifting identity, where students are discovering more about themselves and the world around them as they learn how to operate in this culture. We become interpreters, guides, as they negotiate a time

in their life which will change them forever. We hope, we pray, that in this 'time between times' students will find the solid rock of the Gospel on which to stand.

This is ministry at the complex interface of cultures.

Part 2: The Process

We have our audience: a group of students from a diverse range of nationalities and cultures at a café ready to listen to an epilogue, or an international student guest service, or simply our weekly Bible study in our home. How do we go about bringing God's Word into this complex interface of cultures?

Choosing a passage

The hardest talks for me to write, the ones I sweat and panic over, are the short, five-to-ten minute presentations, such as at the end of a café evening. My difficulty is that these often come with a title, rather than a passage in mind. I either have to find just the right verse or passage to do justice to the title, or squirm my way around a more 'after-dinner' talk style. Without a Bible passage I am without an anchor, and in dangerous territory of becoming an entertainer, a mere teller of anecdotes.

Even when I do have a short passage, such as The Pearl of Great Price (Mt 13:45-46), to give a full Gospel address, I may need to go beyond the strict rules of expositional preaching. That is, I feel, acceptable in these circumstances. But where possible I always try to speak from a Bible passage, making sure that the students listening have access to the Scriptures during the talk (perhaps printed out for them to see and take away).

I often choose a passage from the gospels for an evangelistic talk, but many parts of the Bible, used creatively, can be highly appropriate for talks to international students. The Psalms, for example, are useful in explaining our experience of God as a Person, both immanent and transcendent, and can be a great springboard especially for a 'pre-evangelistic' talk.

In a Bible study context, a study guide is most useful for precisely this point, that it ascribes a passage to each session's study, saving the leader from trying to search round for a suitable passage, and additionally it gives the students the chance to pre-read the passage ahead of the study. It is perhaps more important *how* we use the guide which ensures its relevance to the students.

The exposition

Every time we read the Bible for ourselves, we automatically go through some of the process of contextualisation. That is, we accept that God's Word comes to us in and through a set of related, ancient Near-Eastern / Mediterranean cultures. God has revealed His Word to us through these cultures, and as such we necessarily read and interpret, drawing out those timeless, 'eternal truths'[2] and enduring principles that reflect as

[2] Nicholls, B.J., *Contextualisation: The Theology Of Gospel And Culture* (Canada: Regent College Publishing, 2003).

accurately as possible the original writers' intent and faithfully represent God's will to us.

We then apply those eternal truths and enduring principles into our modern context. Put more simply, we observe, interpret and apply.

By and large this process happens automatically, at least for those of us who are conversant in Scripture. We do sometimes need the help of commentaries and other Bible study aids to enable us to examine the original context and make those applications more accurately.

There is no shortcut to this process. If we are to teach God's Word accurately, then we need to understand its meaning as closely as we can to the writer's original intent. But in cross-cultural or multicultural Bible teaching, the process of interpreting and applying Scripture is made substantially more difficult for two key reasons:

1. our own interpretations of Scripture, our understanding of those 'eternal truths' are inevitably coloured by our own cultural or worldview bias, and
2. our listeners' understanding of what we say to them will additionally be coloured by their cultural or worldview presuppositions. Thus, what we say is not always what we ought to mean, and what our hearers understand may be quite different again.

In the exposition process, those who deal well with details will need to be extremely selective in which exegetical details to include. This may go against the grain for many, especially in a preaching context (perhaps less so in a Bible study situation), where it seems almost irresponsible to gloss over details of context, the meaning of Greek or Hebrew words, references to other parts of the Bible and so on. But again, our hearers' needs must come first. Meaning can actually be lost in detail.

But for the more 'big-picture' thinkers among us (and I am one), the challenge will be to make sure we are thorough in our understanding of the passage. Then, even if our audience gets to hear only a small proportion of the work done in private, the hidden work of exegesis is nevertheless vital so that **we speak from knowledge, from a passage we know and understand so well that we can explain it simply but accurately**.

Step outside for a moment

Even as we are trying to understand the passage ourselves, it is necessary to take a step outside our own culture and ask ourselves, what would (for example) a Japanese student think of this? Or, what would my Kenyan friend ask here?

There is no shortcut to experience here, but many of us have more expertise than we think. Week by week we read the Bible with students from very different backgrounds to our own. We hear their questions and we become familiar with the kinds of things they will see in a passage, what they will ask, and just as importantly, what they will not ask.

More than once I have come away from giving a Gospel talk with the realisation that I had just spent twenty minutes answering a question less than half the room may have been asking. But what questions were they asking instead, silently, even as I was speaking? I am very wary of asking a student to comment on my talk as they will usually just 'give face' and make complimentary remarks, but their subsequent questions are often very revealing – though we may have to listen carefully for the real question behind what they say.

> "There is no shortcut to experience here, but many of us have more expertise than we think."

For example, many students we meet come from parts of the world where the supernatural is an accepted reality of life. But such things are not talked about in educated circles in this country, because the assumption (even amongst Christians) is that all talk about spirits is just superstition. Our default Western position is to rationalise away any such experiences, or we simply do not often experience them, so encounters with spiritual forces are rarely talked about. Therefore, international students from Africa or Asia will rarely speak of such things openly because they instinctively know their Western counterparts will not understand. Yet the careful listener may pick up clues to a hidden worldview issue that the student cannot articulate.

Our listeners are from a range of cultures whose worldviews and cultural assumptions are in a state of flux. At the point where we meet them, they are in the process of adapting to their new environment and grappling with their new and emerging identity as students in this country, that is, they are not the people they would be in their home environment. This is what we have come to call, the "complex interface of cultures".

Bringing people on the journey, from start to finish

In the British evangelical tradition, we joke about having three point sermons with each point starting with the same letter. However, I am increasingly finding myself favouring one-point messages, based less around a linear 'A then B then C' model and instead working around a single main point.

A good introduction (in a Bible study as much as a talk) will grab people's interest, but also give direction for the journey we are taking people on. A single question may be asked, and our hearers anticipate that this question will in some way be answered and so listen on.

Each aspect of the study or talk then builds on this. Stories and examples strengthen and direct people along the way so they are with us each part of the journey. At the end, they know what to do. They know what the application is.

At the end of the Bible study Lynette was leading one afternoon, the student laughed and said, "I know what you are going to ask! 'So, what are you going to do about this?'" Such is her habit that any students studying the Bible with Lynette know that they cannot just simply sit back and be told nice stories; they are going to be asked *the question!* This applies as much to evangelistic studies as to discipleship ones.

Tools of the Trade

1. Identifying strands

Cultures do not work as discrete units, with mutually exclusive values and patterns. There are, of course, huge overlaps between cultural groupings. Confucian-based, or Confucian-influenced East Asian cultures, (for example, Korean, Chinese, Overseas Chinese, Japanese and Indochinese) all have the value of 'filial piety', meaning the appropriate deference and honouring of one's elders, particularly parents, as a keystone virtue. This takes different forms in different cultures across Asia, and how people seek to honour their parents will significantly differ, even from family to family. Generalisation is inevitable, but care is still needed.

Such values are not exclusive to East Asian cultures at all. South Asian, Middle Eastern and African cultures also value the respect of parental authority and honour in a way that is substantially closer to our East Asian friends than to us as Westerners. In fact, although 'filial piety' may be a distinctive of East Asian cultures, nevertheless it is so common in the world that it is Westerners who are the odd-ones-out.

There are many such 'strands' that run through related cultures, which we can pick up on, and should be aware of in our teaching.

2. Cultural touch-point amplification

One way in which to speak into such 'strands' without seeming to critique another culture and avoiding the risk of speaking of what we do not know, is to use the technique of *cultural touch-point amplification*.

I am delighted that there is an increasing awareness among those in cross-cultural ministry of the terms 'honour and shame' when discussing presentations of the Gospel. This is good news indeed, and is significantly thanks to the excellent writing of Roland Muller, in his books[3], *The Message, the Messenger and the Community,* and *Honour and Shame, Unlocking the Door*. This theme has also been picked up in a Chinese context by Jackson Wu's book, *Saving God's Face*[4]. All this is a refreshing rebalance of our presentation of the Gospel to non-Western cultures.

But unless we have grown up in an honour-shame culture, we will struggle to understand, much less communicate, such complex ideas. So what hope do we have of using this knowledge?

Quite simply, we have to understand that such concepts are not actually so foreign to us at all. As I said before, cultures do not act as exclusive units. Neither is one set of values in one culture totally without meaning in another. Japanese people sometimes act individualistically, and Americans sometimes act collectively. Chinese people are not unable to feel guilt, just as British

[3] Muller,R., The Messenger, the Message and the Community: Three Critical Issues For The Cross-Cultural Church Planter (2nd ed.) (Canada: CanBooks, 2010), and Honour and Shame: Unlocking the Door (USA: Xlibris Corporation, 2000).

[4] Wu, J., Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation Through Honor and Shame (Pasadena, California: WCIU Press, 2012). See also Wu's blog Jackson Wu: Doing Theology. Thinking Mission. on www.patheos.com

people are not unable to feel shame. But we experience those emotions and express those values in different ways and to different degrees.

Coming back to my point about honour and shame cultures, I remember my mother's old imperative, *never eat in public*. Eating on the streets is hardly immoral, but my mother didn't want me to walk down the road stuffing my mouth with fish and chips as she felt it reflected badly both on myself and on her as my mother. It was, in another shape or form, considered *dishonourable behaviour*.

Granted, it was probably far less important in my family compared to some of the imperatives in East Asian families. Nevertheless, understanding this cultural touch-point from my own context and *amplifying* it (not exaggerating, but underlining it), enabled me to secure my hearers' confidence that *to some extent I recognise what is important to them.* Moreover, it had the advantage of telling a story from my own family to which students could relate, *without the risk of commenting too closely on another culture I do not fully understand*.

3. Use of language: more than English-made-easy
I was once in a group listening to a speaker facing his first non-British audience. Thinking that his Chinese postgraduate listeners would not understand the word 'disciple', he ended up spelling it out using the letter sounds we use in pre-school ("duh-ih-suh-kuh-ih-puh-luh-eh")! Thankfully, I think they had no idea what he had just said because those letter-sounds are not generally used in Asia. Then again, I have been in this business for two decades and I still make rookie mistakes.

If our international talks and Bible studies are just English-made-easy versions of what we would do normally, then we should forget the whole idea. International students are intelligent people and even if they do sometimes struggle with idiomatic English, that alone is not sufficient reason to set up 'special' talks or studies which would seem to segregate them on their assumed language ability.

That said, we should be very careful in our use of English. I remember my TEFL course tutor's instruction to pitch (or 'grade') our language in class so that our students could understand at least 80% of what we said. Likewise, our international student audience is not going to get every word we say, but they *do absolutely need to follow our meaning*. I have had students say they understood 50% of one talk and 100% of another. They almost certainly did not understand 100% of all the words spoken in the clearer talk, but they *felt they did* because they were able to easily follow the main ideas, the point of the stories, the flow of thought and the key words.

- **Explaining key words and terms**

Similarly, decades ago, my 'O' Level physics teacher stood perplexed (and a little irritated) as she tried to explain electromagnetism to us over and over again. To her it was as clear as day and she could not understand why even the best minds in the class were unable to understand the most basic principles. The penny dropped when she realised that we were confused by the word, 'flux'. We didn't know it simply meant 'flow' or 'movement' (of electrons).

"I have been in this business for two decades and I still make rookie mistakes."

Likewise, many talks and studies seem to hang on one or two key words. A former FI colleague related the story of the time he led an international students Bible study in Luke 5:17-26, the healing of the paralytic. One Japanese student preferred to rely on his electronic translator for the word, 'paralytic', and so went through the entire study thinking Jesus was helping a man so drunk that he couldn't stand up!

- **The art of self-interpretation**

Rather than ask, "Do you understand?" (which *never* works), I find it more helpful to be my own interpreter. At risk of sounding like a human thesaurus, I try to self-interpret as I go along. For example:
"Jesus tells a story about a merchant, a businessman… "The Kingdom of God is like a merchant looking for fine pearls…" Here is a man who buys and sells precious things for a profit, and he knows something of value when he sees it."

The problem word is 'merchant'. It is not in common use, but it is essential to the story. So by introducing it using synonyms (businessman), and retelling part of the story by explaining what a

merchant does, there is very little risk of missing the meaning. But neither is the speaker being condescending to his audience by suggesting they will not have understood the word 'merchant' in the first place.

This 'trick' of self-interpretation can be used in many ways, and can be used to self-correct if speaking more ad lib, or answering a question when it is so easy to slip back into our more normal patterns of speech.

- **Tripped up by phrasal verbs?**

It is an obvious thing to say that many English idioms and turns-of-phrase are difficult for speakers of English as a foreign language, but so too are many phrasal verbs (verb+prepostition combinations) which liberally litter our speech. To 'turn up' can mean to arrive, and to 'turn down' can mean to refuse something. They do not mean the opposite of each other as 'up' and 'down' might suggest – unless you are talking about music volume. Also a language learner may hear the word, 'turn', and not know how the accompanying preposition alters the meaning of the verb. This could throw them completely because on its own the word, 'turn', has a completely separate meaning. It is made even more complicated by the fact that to 'turn down' can have an object in the middle (i.e. 'I turned *her* down'), but 'turn up' usually cannot (i.e. we do not say, 'she finally turned *her* up to the meeting').

All this means that phrasal verbs are a minefield in spoken English. It is not possible to entirely do without them (even in this sentence it would seem!), but again they can be reduced by habitually listening out for them and self-interpreting as we go: "Finally, he turned up to the meeting. He was late, but I am so glad he arrived at last."

> "Our attempts to make our talks and Bible studies 'international-friendly' need to go beyond the inclusion of token 'international' examples"

4. Beyond tokenism

In our church there is a well-loved story about a well -loved member of our congregation, 'Jack', a physicist of immense intellect whose work includes building satellites and space probes. As children are often fascinated by stories of space, he was invited to give a children's talk in the service about his work. Jack turned up wearing a NASA baseball cap, and then explained his work as if to a group of postgraduate students, leaving a group of children completely mystified as to what he was talking about. The NASA cap was all he had done to make concession for the fact that his audience were children, rather than Oxford postgrads!

The same could be said of some of our attempts to make our talks and Bible studies 'international student friendly'. We can use 'English-made-easy' versions of Bible study materials, or even have the text available in different languages (helpful as that may be), and yet completely fail to address students' questions and needs at the heart level.

Again, there is no substitute for experience, but we have to start somewhere, and the most important 'ingredient' is to have an attitude of a listener.

During one Bible study, I forgot to explain the context before launching into reading the Parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15. A Japanese student looked hard at the passage for a while and said, "Ah! I know! This is teaching us to always apologise, no matter how hard it may be to do so."

Now, the student was amazed – and very moved – when she was told that the father in the story represents God and His forgiving love towards us. But let's pause for a minute. What led her to that initial conclusion on her first encounter with the text? What do we know about the importance of respect and the place of apology in Japanese society which might have led her to think this? And how can I look out for further clues as to her thinking as we continue in our discussion of the Gospel in this story?

Our attempts to make our talks and Bible studies 'international-friendly' need to go beyond the inclusion of token 'international' examples, and cultural side-comments. They need to reflect the fact that we are really listening to try to understand what is really important to people at the heart level.

5. Equipping the imagination – illustrations and examples

When C.S. Lewis wrote the Narnia Chronicles, his intention was not to convert his young readers directly through his books. Rather, he was equipping their imagination, giving them stories they would understand and enjoy so that when they were older and heard the Gospel explained, the central Truths of the Christian faith would not seem so alien to them. He hoped that they would

[5] From the lectures of Dr Michael Ward, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, 2012.

hear about the cross of Christ and understand it because they had encountered those concepts in story form when they were children.[5]

Many non-Western cultures (again, to use a generalisation) are comfortable understanding things in terms of story, rather than purely logical explanation. Indeed, a good story barely needs explanation. If I am spending more than a couple of sentences explaining a point of theology, then I am badly in need of a good story.

I first learned to teach the Bible in a bilingual, English-Mandarin church in Singapore. Most people could operate in both languages (except me), but were more comfortable in Mandarin. They were almost all born and brought up in Singapore or Malaysia (again, except me). My choice of examples was therefore extremely restricted to what ***I*** understood of ***their*** world. Instead of using pop-culture or historical examples, which are always hit-and-miss, I was forced to keep my examples very simple and very close to home – family, daily living, eating, home-life, relationships – things which we would all have in common.

I still do the same. Someone recently met Lynette and said that he felt he had met her already, "… because of the numerous stories Peter tells in his talks about your family life"! While I use examples from family life (with permission from my wife and children!), another person I know effectively uses examples from the world of information technology – not my strong suit, but a good choice for crossing many cultural divides.

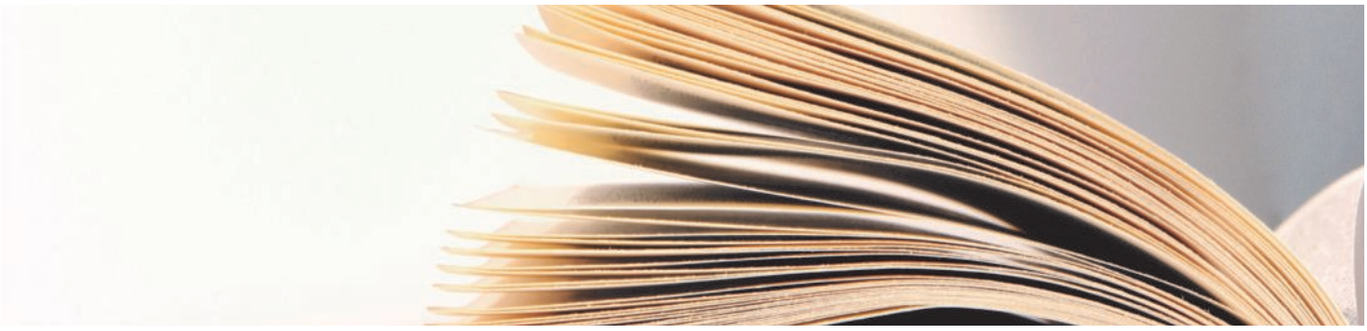
Personal anecdotes from travel and encounters with other cultures are often useful. The danger is that we may either make unintentional value-judgements on, or be sycophantic of, the parts of the culture we have experienced. It is difficult to strike a balance and we must be careful to always cast ourselves in the role of the learner, not the expert. I have made the mistake of trying to be too clever to impress an audience with my knowledge of a culture, and conversely, I have seen others fail to connect by not venturing far enough and sticking to what they know.

I therefore need to be ruthless with my stories and examples. I try them out with Lynette and our older children; I look at them from different angles and ask myself: does this example lead to clarity? Does it *really* illustrate the point or is it mostly for entertainment? Does it raise more questions than it answers, or does it introduce an unhelpful element into a talk which could be a distraction or offence to someone from another culture? If it doesn't work, throw it out. We cannot afford to be precious about our examples.

Always learning, never standing still…

While we need to be clear in our own biblical understanding, it is equally true that teaching the Bible cross-culturally is never a uni-directional process. It is not, "Here I am, telling you what you need to know." Every talk or study is an experiment in communicating biblical truth clearly. It is a learning process where the teacher is actually the student, feeling their way as they see what connects and what doesn't, what works and what falls flat. We constantly revise, review, change, throw out and refine every talk, every study, every epilogue, as we encounter the reactions and feedback (most often unspoken) of our hearers. The moment we stop doing this is the moment when we fail to connect.

This is not the preserve of those who have been specially trained. Neither is it just for those who have a non-Western background, lived extensively overseas or, like me, have married cross-culturally. If we are learners, ***of Scripture AND OF PEOPLE***, then with the Spirit's guidance and grace, we can also be a teacher of His Word.



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Jack Bentley

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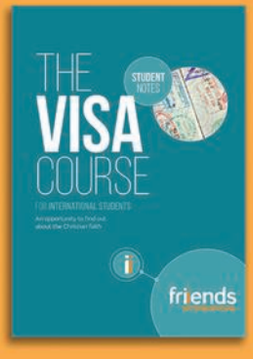

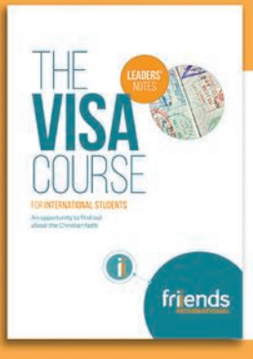

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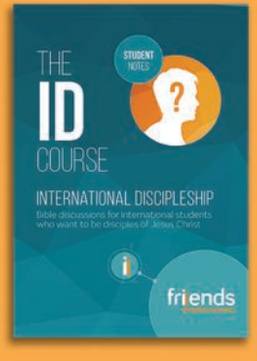

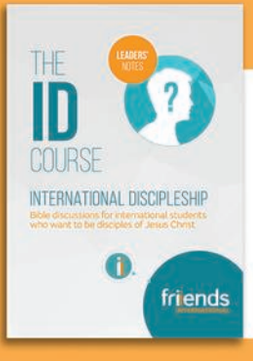

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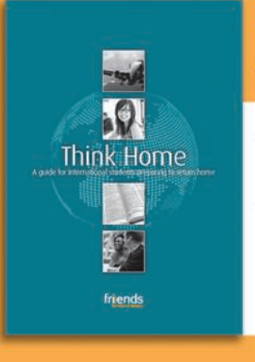

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