

Unit 19

Becoming bi-cultural

Cast:

- Missionary Li Wei
- Teacher Zhang Dong
- 4 – 5 students

Scene 19.1. Missionary Li Wei holding a dirty pearl which he washes and puts into a beautiful, polished box as he speaks into the camera.

Missionary Li Wei: The Gospel is like a beautiful pearl. If it is covered in mud and dirt, people won't recognize it for what it is. However, if it is clean, sparkling, and placed on velvet in a beautiful, polished box, they will stop and admire it.

Certain aspects of our own Chinese culture which our host culture finds off-putting is the mud. We must wash off the mud, however comfortable we are in it. Instead, our lives must become like this beautiful box with its velvet background for the gospel we are seeking present to people.

In other words, our life-styles must enhance our message. This involves adapting to our host culture in many little cultural ways. For instance, if a single woman in many Middle Eastern countries says she has been set free from sin but dresses and acts like a Westerner, she would be considered a prostitute, and no one will believe her message. Or if a man says he is a teacher but dresses in shorts, T-shirt, and sandals as if he were a useless young man, no one will believe him. When he speaks about knowing God as his personal Savior, everyone will think he is telling lies.

Adapting to the culture involves a couple of things for us as missionaries. First of all, our evangelistic message must, at the very least, be understood by the hearers. For that to happen our message must, on the one hand, be true to the message of the Bible and, on the other hand, relate to the cultural, linguistic and religious background of the hearers.

In other words, if a church is to be truly indigenous, it needs to look like good news to the community! How much of our message is really part of our own cultural heritage? How can we discern what is good, what is neutral and what is evil--and therefore must be rejected--in our host culture?

On a superficial level, there are the dos and don'ts of the culture. For instance, in certain Muslim countries women don't look men in the eye, you need to drink three cups of coffee at a formal visit, and you never point the bottom of your feet at anyone.

Beyond this you need to know WHY they do or don't do certain things. Women don't look men in the eyes because There are three cups of coffee because ... You don't point the bottom of your feet at someone because.... There are deeper cultural reason why people do things and how they relate to each other, and these you need to explore.

It is these deeper cultural values and convictions which governs group behavior, determines status, helps us know what other people expect of us and what will happen to us if we don't live up to those expectations. They also determine the boundaries of individual behavior versus the individual's responsibility to the community, as well as how a community deals with problems ranging from clothing and shelter to religion and family values such as honor.

So, getting to know your host culture involved more than having a bit of knowledge and the ability to talk about local subjects. Becoming an insider includes living and acting as an insider. It has to do with everything about you, from how you walk down the street to when you eat your meals. The more time you spend with local people, the easier this will become. Being adopted by a local family or tribe is a great help. This usually only happens when we display our weaknesses and ask our friends or neighbors for their help and support.

Your weakness in the area of culture and language is often the key to opening up opportunities in the lives of others. Rather than approaching people as a teacher, approach them initially as a learner. If you are willing to learn from them, they may become willing to learn from you. In time, you will be able to communicate the gospel message and be used by God to establish a church that actually looks like good news to the host society!

Scene 19.2. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class:

Teacher Zhang Dong: Can you think of examples in the Bible in which different communicators sought to contextualize their message, in other words, make their message understandable by adapting it to the culture?

Student #1: In a way God is the ultimate contextualizer. In the Old Testament He communicated to the Israelites in ways they could understand.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Very true. God's revelation of Himself to the Israelites was by using their own heart language, Hebrew, with its metaphors from daily life and nature, cultural poetic forms, as well as acts of power, the concept of covenant (already known in some form to surrounding people) and symbolic actions through their prophets. Can you think of some examples from the New Testament?

Student #2: Well, Paul adapts His gospel message to the Athenians in Acts 17 by quoting from their own poetry and uses the existing concept of the "unknown god". That probably struck a chord with them.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Very good. Can you think of anything else?

Student #3: Paul didn't insist that Gentiles be circumcised.

Student #4: He shaved his head and sacrificing before entering the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 21:20-26). Also, the nature of sermons he preached in the synagogue was different from those he preached to non Jews.

Student #2: The council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 set the gentiles free from having to conform to Jewish cultural practices. They could be full-fledged Christians without having to undergo a complete cultural change.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Very good! Excellent points... It is important in all of this to understand the distinction between cultural and Biblical principles and issues. What is crucial to the Gospel? How much of your own culture are you introducing, perhaps unwittingly? What is the biblical culture to which God contextualized his eternal message but which is, in and of itself, not normative?

The first things we need to do is to understand our own culture. How do we view ourselves, not a Christians but as Chinese?

Student #1: Well, we honor the family. We teach responsibility, respect and obligation.

Student #2: We believe in inner calm. We are patient.

Student #3: We are polite

Student #4: We are modest. We would not praise ourselves.

Student #2: We are hardworking.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes. That's right. Do you think others view us in the same way?

Student #4: Why not? That's who we are!

Teacher Zhang Dong: Who we think we are is not necessarily how others perceive us!

For instance, we honor the family, but many foreigners would say, 'Oh yes? Isn't the ratio of men to women in China nearly 3 to 1? Hey, there must be a genocide of female babies taking place there! And then they talk about honoring the family? Sure, tell me another one.

Or they might say, "have you seen the way they drive in Beijing? Man as soon as a Chinese person gets behind the wheel of a car all this supposed inner calm and patience

flies out the window! They drive like maniacs; there isn't a shred of this so-called politeness left!"

As for the fact that we are modest, they would say that we are merely fishing for compliments. For instance, when you go to someone's house for a meal and the mother cooks a special dish, you know that it is the special dish because she will say, "Oh, this isn't very good", or "I didn't do a very good job of cooking this" or something along those lines. This means the guest should taste that dish and assure the hostess that it tastes wonderful. In other cultures that might be considered insincere, hypocritical fishing for compliments.

In short, you need to know who you are as well how you are perceived. We all believe in our heart of hearts that our race, our civilization, our culture, our race is the most important, worthy, civilized in the world. There is little hope of ever being wholly free from that, because it is a largely subconscious impulse that influences our attitudes and behavior without our being aware of it.

We must ask ourselves who we appear to be in the target culture. Often we move around in our own little expatriate worlds, criticizing the national culture and totally unaware of the impact that we are having on others. Our host cultures watches us and evaluate us according to our dress, our actions, and our words. When you enter your target community, people will immediately try to identify what sort of person you are.

Most of the cultures of the world that are yet to be evangelized are labeled as resistant. But what are they resistant to? If we come with our cultural baggage and with a narrow understanding of what the Gospel message is, it will not be understood, and thus not easily accepted.

Fade and Cut

Scene 19.3. Missionary Li Wei talking into camera

Missionary Li Wei: You need to know your own culture, you need to know how you are perceived by your host culture, and finally you need to work at understanding the host culture. You want to become bi-cultural—someone who is at home in his/her own culture, but is also considered an "insider" by their host culture.

When we go to a foreign place we first notice the differences. That's human nature. That's where the "look down on the local culture" syndrome comes in. An important way of building bridges into the community is to try and find things that are of common interest between you and people of your host culture.

If you have no common interests, then develop some. This means that you have to become interested in the things that they are interested in. Over the years I have had to develop an interest in the history, politics, economy, religion, sports and local issues of

my target community. In order to enter into conversations and identify with my audience I have had to expand my areas of interest. When you can engage your audience in conversation about the issues that concern them, you move a step closer to being seen as a credible messenger.

When I first went to my country I joined a chess club. I could play chess without having to say much. There are all kinds of other things you can do to get into the community. You could take calligraphy, drama or other art or music courses, or if you are a woman you could take sewing or cookery courses. There are almost always local schools or cultural centers around that offer such courses. You might even take up local folkdancing, to really get into the culture! You can start reading translated novels from some of the great writers of the Muslim World like Najiib Mahfoud, Yashar Kemal, Amin Malouf or Orhan Pamuk.

Reading their novels and coming to grips with their history and culture enables you to begin seeing the world from their perspective. We are all ethno-centric. Shed your ethno-centricity.

As you create common frames of reference you enter increasingly into the host culture, and in doing so become increasingly valued as a person. You cease to be a freak, a curiosity, or possibly someone who can be milked. Your opinion and your feelings begin to matter.

Fade and cut

Scene 19.4. Missionary Li Wei talking into camera. Title: The importance of appearance

Missionary Li Wei (studying the cover of an obviously Muslim book): You know a book by its cover. You are what you appear to be. Muslims recognize outward appearance as a way of making a statement of faith. A sincere inner faith must be expressed in outward forms also.

This means little things are important. Like dress. Dress is important. Teachers often hold an honored place in society. One who does not dress appropriately will soon lose the respect of the students and others in the community. How you dress on the street is important. You might even have to abandon your favorite forms of dress and adopt something more formal.

Watch carefully how the local people look at you. What do they look at first? For instance, in certain countries of the Middle East shoes often matter. Do respectable people wear running shoes? Are flip flops used only in bathrooms? Are slippers only worn indoors? Do men wear sandals? Or do only really religious Muslim men wear sandals? In other words, people often judge others by their shoes, so I wear formal shoes most of the time. I keep them polished and presentable.

What does the length of your hair or the amount of make-up say about you? Is your hair dry and clean? Cleanliness is next to godliness. What about the brightness of your clothes? Does that indicate a rebellious spirit?

What is considered modest? What should you cover up, particularly if you are a woman? Know what is decent, and go further. You might dress as modern as your friend, but does her mother approve? Are you considered as having a positive influence in their family? I Tim. 2:9 says, "I want women to dress modestly... appropriate for women who profess to worship God."

What about jewelry, if you are a woman? What message does your lack of it give? That it isn't important to me as a Christian, or that your husband neither loves nor appreciates you? Is there something suspicious here? These people travel from afar, have books, but no jewelry. That doesn't add up! In many Muslim countries gold is the woman's financial security, and they wear it to show how much their husbands appreciate them.

What kind of home do you live in? Is it very simple? That is OK if you are trying to reach the poor in society. Don't expect to have much of a ministry to the middle class if you live in very simple dwellings. When you decorate your house make it a harmonious whole with things obtained locally and kept clean. That indicates you are someone who has it together. You are mature, and people will listen to you.

Have lots of photos of your family around and talk about them. Show family picture albums. Show that you miss your family, that you write them. Show them that you love your family.

How you relate as a family matters. How do you relate to your kids and they to each other. Do they respect you, their parents? Others cannot understand what you say when you speak Chinese, but they can understand your tone of voice! How much freedom do you allow your daughters in a society where everything is done to protect the daughters' virginity? Are your kids the type they want their kids to play with? Do your kids talk loudly on the stairs, never mind run? When you visit them, what do they do with their kids? Are they allowed to eat anywhere in the house or only at the kitchen table?

You know, it is a blessing that we cannot speak initially. We'd no doubt put our foot in it time and again. During your first months in the country you much observe, observe, observe. Learn to live such a good testimony that when you learn to speak they want to listen.

Hospitality is very important in Muslim cultures, and it is centered on the home. How much of Jesus' ministry took place around meals? If you want deep relationships with people, then invite them to your home for meals. When you invite people in Islamistan over for food, prepare lots of it. Be generous and eat the left-overs later. Don't come across as stingy, miserly. Note that people are afraid of what you might feed them. It is, in fact, a huge sign of trust if someone is prepared to come to your house for a meal.

They have dietary laws that they must adhere to, and you must assure them that you won't feed them stuff that will gross them out! Remember, we love our cuisine—every culture loves its own cuisine—but much of our food has a nasty reputation with Muslims!

Learn the polite ways to say you've had enough in case you are invited to someone's house. Do they leave a bit of food on the plate to indicate that you've had enough? Or does that indicate you didn't like the food? If you put a teaspoon across your tea glass does that mean you don't want any more tea?

How do men and women relate in public? In many Muslim countries people alter their demeanor and tone of voice depending on whether they are talking to a man or a woman. They are effusive, warm and affectionate when talking to someone of the same sex, but cooler, using softer tones of voice and no eye contact with speaking with someone of the opposite sex.

It is very important in such cultures for a woman never to be alone with a man—or even appear to be. Keep your front door wide open if plumber calls, or invite another woman in. If you invite him in and he makes a pass, whose fault is it? Be above reproach by going overboard. Don't think nobody sees! "Avoid every appearance of evil". You have to prove that you are godly. Surprise them, and explain that there is a difference between being a Christian by name and a true believer. 2 Cor. 6:3 says, "We put no stumbling block in anyone's path so that our ministry will not be discredited."

Once you are able to speak, share details of your life with your new friends. In many Muslims cultures there is women's talk and men's talk: Men talk politics, soccer and religion. Conservative women talk about babies, kids, food, clothes and the female body. There are certain taboo subjects; find out what they are. Avoid long intellectual arguments—you cannot sustain it linguistically. Instead, share how you experience God. Testify how He helped you that day. Demonstrate that your faith works for you. Share the down times and let them minister to you. It must be a two-way thing for it to become a true friendship.

Ask for forgiveness when you make a cultural blunder and find out later. Ask for advice: what should you do and say to a friend upon the death of relative. What is appropriate to take for different occasions?. How do you give a gift: do you present it to the person or do you leave discreetly in a corner? What do you do when you are offered a gift: unwrap it then and there or leave it till later?

Think long-term. They will watch you like a hawk, and what they observe will make them decide whether they want to cultivate a friendship with you or not.

Don't befriend people in order that they become Christians. The concept of "Friendship Evangelism" is a strange contradiction for it isn't geared at making friends, just converts. You want to make a few really good friends. A friend is someone you like, whom you love to spend time with. A friendships must click naturally. You must be friendly to all, but eventually a FEW will become your real friends. It is a mistake to rush into

friendships too quickly in the enthusiasm of making contacts. Let the Lord develop it. People live in extended families--know one, then you meet them all.

Some days you just cry out to be yourself. You become weary from always being careful not to offend. That is part of the sacrifice of being a missionary. The reward is genuine friendships, enriching relationships, and sharing yourself and your faith!

Scene 19.5. Things learned in the lesson

- For our evangelistic message to be relevant it must be understood by our hearers! In other words, it must relate to the cultural, linguistic and religious background of our hearers.
- At the same time you must beware of introducing your own cultural ways of doing things. You need to know your own culture and how you are perceived by your host culture.
- Our message must also remain true to the message of the Bible. Know what is crucial to the gospel and what is culture from Bible times to which God contextualized his eternal message, but which is in-and-of itself not normative.
- If we come with our own cultural baggage and with a narrow understanding of the Gospel message, it will not easily be understood.
- To become a respected teacher you must seek to become an “insider” in their culture. If you are willing to learn from them they may, in time, be willing to learn from you.
- People will watch you carefully. Based on what they see they will decide if they want to develop a genuine friendship with you.
- Seek to build bridges into the community by developing common interests between you and them. Don’t just befriend people in order to lead them to Christ. Friends are people who meet a social need in you—even if they don’t come to faith! They are people whose company you enjoy...