

## Can You Hear Me Now? Insights from Communications and Missions for New Religions

By John W. Morehead

Have you ever shared something with someone and when they tell you what they heard you say it's something almost completely different from what you intended? Sometimes communicating effectively can be a difficult process. This is especially true when we speak with people that we have disagreements with, or when we talk to people who understand things very differently than we do. We may even make things more difficult without realizing it. Let's consider a few examples of miscommunication and what we might learn from them.

David and his wife Karen, are having an argument. They don't see eye to eye on a simple issue of dividing up the responsibilities of maintaining their home between them. David was raised in a home where the wife assumed most of these responsibilities. Karen was raised in a different setting where the responsibilities were divided equally. David and Karen do not realize that their differing personal frames of reference are preventing them from truly understanding each other, and as a result, no effective communication takes place. While they have talked a lot, and passionately so, each has become highly frustrated.

Consider another example, one that may reflect your own experience. On a Saturday afternoon David answers a knock on his door to find two Latter-day Saint missionaries on his porch. As they discussed spiritual things David pointed to biblical passages that seemed at odds with Mormon teaching. The missionaries responded by sharing passages from not only the Bible, but also other Mormon Scriptures. They also passionately shared their heartfelt inner convictions, or their testimonies, that the LDS Church was the one true church. At the conclusion of their discussion, David felt the Mormon missionaries were at odds with clear biblical teaching, and they felt that David should have been emotionally open to praying about the LDS Church.

What do these two seemingly very different examples have to do with each other? More importantly, what lessons might we learn from these examples that will make us more effective communicators of the gospel?

*Where are you coming from?*

The two examples above have more in common that we might first believe. They boil down to problems in interpersonal communication. It is easy to forget that even though we may share a lot in common with someone, each of us understands and interprets the world around us through different personal frames of reference.

In the first example with David and Karen, each of them viewed the issue in dispute from their own perspectives, but neither made an attempt to understand how the other person understood the situation. The example of David and the LDS missionaries might seem very different, but a similar dynamic is at work. David understands

spirituality from an evangelical perspective which emphasizes harmony with biblical teaching, while the LDS missionaries approach it from the perspective of feelings and personal experiences. In both examples miscommunication occurs because no attempt has been made to consider different perspectives and to communicate in ways that will be more readily understood.

With this insight in mind, we need to recognize that “cults” (or new religions, to use a less emotionally-loaded term), such as the Latter-day Saints, understand religion and spirituality from distinct perspectives very different from those of evangelical Christians. If we play with the title of a popular book we might understand the significance of this insight. It might be said that Evangelicals are from Mars, Mormons are from Venus. In other words, just as men often fail to communicate adequately with women (and vice versa) because they don’t recognize differing perspectives, likewise, evangelicals often fail to communicate effectively with those in other religions. We have assumed that our message is understood, and perhaps rejected, when in fact it may never have been properly understood at all.

#### *Insights from cross-cultural missions*

It will be helpful for us to reflect briefly on how Western missionaries prepare to share the gospel overseas in a cross-cultural context. Missionaries study the many facets of other cultures, including not only the more obvious elements like language and religious beliefs and practices, but also other features, such as how they understand and interpret the world around them. Missionaries engage in this process of study so that they will be effective communicators of the gospel from the culture of the Western missionary into the culture of those the missionary is called to share with. The gospel is then shared in word and deed through a form of communication that is “other-centered.” This means that the cross-cultural missionary overseas attempts to put themselves “in the shoes” of the person of the other culture and to communicate in ways that are understood from their cultural perspective, rather than a perspective more familiar to the missionary.

Western missionaries ministering overseas recognize the importance of interpersonal communication in a cross-cultural context. At times conflict may arise between the gospel message the missionary brings and the people of another culture, but overseas missionaries are careful to focus on being effective, loving communicators of an “other-centered” presentation of the gospel as Christ’s ambassadors, and not to focus on being confrontational or personally offensive.

A comparison of a cross-cultural missions approach overseas with evangelism on the “home” mission field of America is instructive, particularly when we see how different the approaches can be. In an evangelistic encounter with “cults” evangelicals are eager to defend the truth of Scripture that they feel are being distorted, and as a result, these exchanges with Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses (and others) often become heated debates over the proper interpretation of biblical texts. While sound doctrine is an important consideration, if the conversation becomes focused on debates over biblical interpretation and doctrine the result is that little effective communication of the gospel takes place. It seems that in missions contexts overseas missionaries focus on the

effective cross-cultural communication of the gospel message, but in the American context, with our perceptions of a Christian America, we tend to engage in confrontational approaches that emphasize doctrinal orthodoxy.

*Applying missions insights to the mission field on our doorstep*

Perhaps you have experienced frustrations as you tried to share your faith with people from other religious groups and movements. We may have missed some important and simple principles of effective communication, and in the process made our evangelistic efforts more difficult than they have to be. There is a promising way forward out of this familiar frustration if we are willing to learn and apply a few lessons from cross-cultural missions to the mission field on our doorstep.

How can missions be of help in sharing our faith with those in new religions and world religions in America? Consider the following insights and recommendations:

1. *View “cults” (or new religions) as religious or spiritual cultures (people groups).* People groups can be classified in a variety of ways, but they tend to be identified by a core of common characteristics that bind them together and sets them apart from others. While we don’t often think of new religions in this way, there is precedent for this kind of thinking. For example, *The Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups* classifies Mormonism as an ethnic group, and in 1980 the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization recognized new religions as unreached people groups. Viewing new religions as religious cultures is helpful as we will see in the next insight.

2. *Engage in a holistic ministry to new religions that seeks to positively communicate the gospel in culturally relevant ways rather than merely refuting false teaching.* If there is some validity to the notion that new religions are unique religious cultures, then this insight should inform not only our understanding of them, but our response to them as well. Many evangelicals interact with new religions largely by refuting unbiblical doctrine and offering apologetic arguments against a group’s teachings, history, or founder. While this method has been used for many generations it does not take important cultural and communication considerations into account. As we learned earlier, many new religions approach spirituality from perspectives that differ from evangelicals. Evangelicals value biblical teaching and are eager to test a religion’s doctrines by the Bible as the source for spiritual authority. But as we noted earlier when discussing Mormonism, other religions have vastly different perspectives. If we want to learn from missions we need to recognize that effective communicators share their message in ways that are culturally relevant for the appropriate for those in a given culture. This involves putting ourselves in the mindset of those we hope to reach and communicating appropriately. A positive emphasis on the gospel as good news that makes sense in a given culture will be more effective than an approach that focuses largely or solely on refuting someone’s beliefs.

3. *Use apologetics when appropriate, but recognize it is not an end in itself.* At times it is appropriate to disagree with teachings and practices that are unbiblical. As evangelicals

engage those in new religions and world religions they will encounter teachings that are not Christian. As we share the gospel with the adherents of the world's religions there are times when we must lovingly, and perhaps forcefully, disagree. But as we share our criticism, we must offer culturally relevant arguments with respect, and we must also be careful to remember that apologetics (or the defense of the faith) is not an end in itself. Apologetics is only one of many tools in the evangelist's toolkit, and it is best used when it is in service to and compliments effective missions and evangelism.

*4. Remember the importance of authentic relationships.* The history of missions teaches us that the most effective evangelism takes place within the context of relationships. This may be one of evangelicalism's greatest challenges as we face our need to move increasingly outside our evangelical subculture in order to develop relationships with our neighbors representing differing religions. We should also remember that these relationships need to be authentic and open, and not merely a means to the end of evangelism. Evangelicals might consider that not only do we have something to offer in relationships with those of other religions, but we can learn things of value from these relationship partners as well.

The church must always reflect on her missional and evangelistic methods with an eye toward improvement. The application of the insights of effective interpersonal communication and missions may be very helpful in transforming our evangelism of new religions in our global village of increasing religious diversity.

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