

Chapter 29

Sharing the good news with those from further away

When waiting in the aisle of a plane I was once moved aside by someone who wanted to spread his prayer-mat in the same space. He needed to face in the right direction for his prayers, due at that time. He probably had quite wrong ideas about what Christians believe, perhaps never having met any as prepared as he was to make such a public demonstration of faith. He could also have thought that race and religion went together, as they would normally do for him. That was not the moment to try to enlighten him but instead to stand respectfully aside. The position of the body in prayer is secondary to whether the praying heart is in the right relationship with God.

At a more convenient time and under more relaxed circumstances those of other faiths are often very ready to compare their beliefs with others and Christians should be ready to listen as well as expecting others to do the same. All too often, this kind of exchange never takes off and each side continues to have mistaken ideas about the other. Some find it surprising that the God worshipped by Christians is a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit united as one, not three separate gods, and that the third person is not Jesus' mother, Mary, but his Spirit.

Mistaken thoughts from abroad

Some of those coming from overseas may believe that a once Christian country still practises that faith and everything they find there expresses normal Christian standards. If this judgment holds, then when they are greeted by certain prominent advertisements at one of our airports or other public places, they will find some of them very shocking. In the homeland of many, alcohol, semi-nakedness and certain forms of entertainment are taboo. Starting off with this bad impression of supposed Christianity, things do not necessarily get much better as they become more deeply involved in the culture, either as workers or travellers. Some continue to feel isolated, if only by the

language barrier of a regional accent. A Polish doctor friend had an adequate command of English until he went to Scotland and worked in a Glasgow hospital where, for a time, neither he nor his patients could understand each other. It would be natural then to look for friends among fellow nationals only.

This kind of displacement is now recognised by some organisations, but not all will be known of or trusted by the incomer, even if easy to find. Students can fare better and may respond to the invitations now issued by many university Christian Unions and others, giving a special welcome to any from overseas. Some professional bodies do the same and it can be by meeting real Christians for the first time that poor first impressions start to fade. For some, this will be to hear the familiar language of faith that they knew in a church at home and, possibly for the first time since arrival, they can relax and make new friends in an otherwise foreign land.

Yet there must be many more outside such welcoming circles, or in jobs too busy to give time to look for them. These are often the very people whose greatest need is for someone to show a little personal concern as they struggle with new systems. An Albanian doctor friend, on call for different parts of the hospital, found each ward's protocol very different and confusing but, as he went around, it was such a help to meet other Christians on the staff. He even married one of them! Together they began to invite others to meet in their new home. It can be so worthwhile for the locals to notice people who look like foreigners and to start a conversation, even if it is only to discover that they were born and bred in our own country. Some turn out to be members of our spiritual family. This was so with a Nigerian lady I once greeted when she was sitting on a wall near my home, cheering herself up by listening through earphones to what she told me were Christian songs. She turned out to be another doctor and a sister in the family of God, to our shared benefit.

The Great Commission

Before he died, Jesus spoke to his Father about his disciples saying, 'As you sent me into the world I have sent them into the world'.¹

Then, just as he was about to leave them to go back to the Father, he gave them what has become known as the Great Commission, his mission statement for the church.² It began, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’. They were to baptise new believers in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the true three-in-one Godhead – and teach them to obey Jesus’ teaching. He finished with the promise that (through his Spirit) he would always be with them.

For many, the word ‘mission’ creates a mental image of a delegate or ambassador sent overseas from one country to another, and at root the word does hold the idea of being sent somewhere. A missionary is someone commissioned for a specific mission and can be any one of us just where we are, not fitting one popular image of a flushed person under a palm tree, with a Bible in one hand and the other ready to swat flies. The mission for those early disciples, and for later ones, too, is to be compelled by his love to become ambassadors for Christ.³ This does not mean that he forces us to do this whether we like it or not, but in the same way as someone in love cannot help talking about the beloved, so when we delight in his love we may feel compelled to share (sensitively) with others that he extends this love to the whole world.⁴

After Jesus had returned to his Father, the disciples obediently waited in Jerusalem until his promised Spirit came to them. Then they began their mission just where they were. At the time many thousands ‘from every nation under heaven’ had gathered in the city to celebrate Pentecost and a great number believed their message straight away.⁵ What an encouraging start to their mission!

Taking opportunities where you are

It is probable that our own first outreach will be where we live and work and wherever that is we are likely to find a variety of listeners. Until we detect a real interest, we will probably start simply by being friendly, raising a few ‘flags’, and taking it from there. No one becomes an overseas missionary by taking a sea voyage or spending a few hours in the air. Like charity, mission begins quietly at home and for some there may never be a call to go further. Then, sometimes a new door opens.

In 2012, the Olympic and Paralympic Games in London attracted many thousands of athletes and supporters from across the world. Some were welcomed into local homes, some placed with Christian families who were able to give reasons for their faith, helped in this by simple literature already prepared in many languages. A special 'sports edition' of the Bible was given to the athletes and those who took this literature to share at home would become missionaries, whether they knew it or not.

Prepared hearts

We only know a few of the stories that followed this outreach, but it seems that some who received the good news had already been on a spiritual search. On their return home with the new Bibles and booklets, perhaps hungry for further teaching, some would find help through Christian broadcasts, often to be picked up even in unsympathetic countries.

When Albania was still under an atheistic regime, the officer appointed to check the media for subversive channels became captivated by a Christian station that he would have been expected to block. Taking a great risk, he continued to learn from its messages and eventually gave his life to Christ. Many other Albanians had listened in secret for 20 years before there was a change of government, when the Christian broadcaster received 200 letters from those whose lives had been changed through learning, through his messages, to have faith in Jesus. At times, airwaves reach places that other missionaries cannot reach.

The Holy Spirit uses many other routes to touch hearts and change lives. Soon after Albania opened up a thoughtful teenager saw an advertisement nailed to a tree. It recommended a correspondence course of teaching about the Bible, a previously banned book, so she took note, wrote off and joined up. Later, through an unexpected series of events, she met Christian friends who helped her to find a personal faith in the Lord Jesus. It had started by keeping eyes and heart open, then following that unusual first lead. The Spirit of God had been at work all the time.

Looking further afield

There are still parts of the world that are quite unreached by the good news of Jesus and his love. Some of us will be called to take that news to them in person, but before changing countries we need to be clear of our calling. For various reasons, including gifts and responsibilities, others of us may have to help from a distance. Unseen numbers have been convinced of the truths they first heard on the airways, and someone has to prepare such programmes! In whichever way our help is to be channelled, acting on impulse is unwise without more assurance of God's guidance.

Seeking and finding God's will

In the mid-19th century, a man named George Muller set up a number of orphanages in the English city of Bristol. He had complete faith that God would supply all he needed and never asked for money to support the hundreds of orphans in his care. It always came and they never went hungry. Then, one morning the children sat down to an empty breakfast table. Muller had just given thanks for the non-existent food, trusting their heavenly Father to supply it, when they heard the local baker arriving with a load of bread. It was surplus to his needs but exactly matched theirs! The Father must delight to honour such simple faith and supply genuine need.

Aware of his need for daily wisdom, George Muller made a dependable checklist to use when facing decisions great and small and that can still help us, so here it is: First, he said, our hearts must be completely ready and willing to obey God before he will normally show the way forward. This openness to him is an absolute priority.

Then, feelings are poor guides but God's word and the Holy Spirit together form a reliable combination, neither to be taken as the last word without support from the other, for the Spirit's guidance will always agree with and illuminate the Scriptures he inspired.

Thirdly, circumstances can act as pointers but all these checks and balances need to be thought through in prayer until our hearts find peace. We may add to Muller's list that when taking major decisions

we would be wise to ask others to join their prayers with ours.
(For further discussion about God's methods of guidance, see chapter 30)

These pointers⁶ can be helpful when wondering whether our Lord is calling us to go to a different part of the world to fulfil his commission. We will need clearer ideas about where and when to go, what training is needed and what to do when we arrive in a foreign culture with a new language to learn. Sometimes we have to go ahead, trusting that God will bless what we think is his path without many very obvious signals, though he is often merciful in giving a clearer sense of direction.

For varied reasons some will not be called to such work but the rest of us should strongly support those who go, perhaps especially those already known to us.

If we do feel drawn to work in a particular country, we need to find more about the needs and customs of that place before we set off. In many countries, the job description of missionary is unacceptable, as is the open teaching of a different faith, so those doors will not open without added professional qualifications. Foreign teachers or doctors can still be refused entry or expelled after some kind of national crisis.

In countries opposed to Christianity growing hostility towards them is affecting the believers who live there, increasing as well as decreasing their numbers. Unable or unwilling to leave their homeland, some are ready to suffer and sometimes to die for their faith. Some of these countries are being torn apart by war, but an increasing number of residents previously opposed to Christians have been so touched by their steadfastness and willingness to help other sufferers that they have decided to follow the Lord Jesus with them. In a recent message from members of one persecuted church, they said how touched and grateful they were to feel supported by the prayers of brothers and sisters elsewhere. We must not fail them.

Closed doors can mean diverted routes

Most regular road users are likely at some time to come across a notice saying, 'Road closed: follow the signs'. When needing God's fresh

guidance and looking for more signposts it will be helpful to recall that many believers in the early church were driven by persecution to find refuge elsewhere, and it was in this way that they spread more widely the good news about the Lord Jesus.⁷ This is how we eventually came to hear it, as well as the many others in the world. God is never at a loss and will overrule when our plans are changed for any reason. Many have found that failure of a job application has brought an uncertain interval holding a lesson in faith, often to be strengthened by the final outcome.

When in the last century missionaries were expelled from China, they did not all go home but moved to other parts of Asia where the work grew and is still effective. The Holy Spirit must love to touch previously unreached people and often does so through God's uprooted but willing and obedient servants.

Why go overseas at all?

Before we engage in sharing our faith, whether with those from abroad who now live in our midst or when planning to go overseas, there are people who will probably ask, 'Why go and impose your views on people who are happy enough with their own beliefs?' Yet so many, especially in developing countries, are poor, malnourished or downtrodden, and are not at all happy to be living in fear of local violence or national warfare.

The work of organisations such as Tearfund or Wateraid shows how the life of a poverty stricken community can be transformed through a relatively small cash gift plus training in how to use it well. A supply of clean water will save lives and more sensible farming offers better nutrition. Preventive medical care is less dramatic than treating acute illness or doing heroic surgery but, apart from those called to be specialists in major centres, doctors often need to be generalists. To immunise all children in a village would eventually pay for the cost of the vaccines by preventing so much disease and death. Teachers, too, will cover subjects more likely to have relevance to the local community, unlike the recitation of Wordsworth's poem, 'Beside Westminster Bridge', that I once heard in an African village!

Of course, many kind-hearted people go out as teachers, or to help physical or mental illnesses, without knowing anything about relieving spiritual sickness. They still do valuable work, and all credit to them for that. Yet when workers are inspired to share the love of Jesus in creative, practical and life-saving ways, people sometimes ask, 'Why are you doing this for us?' The door is then wide open to explain how much more satisfying life could be for those whose spiritual awareness is often directed elsewhere, such as to costly worship of idols. It is a double blessing when those providing a well for a village also tell of Jesus' offer to quench spiritual thirst. It is a joy when some then learn to put their trust in him and find life transformed by a new hope.⁸ It certainly seems fairer for those with such life-changing news to go and share it with people who never heard it before.

Culture shock

Whether we stay close to home or go much further away, the Great Commission will not be fulfilled without his followers knowing and obeying our missionary Lord. We should not then be dismayed if we encounter and experience a degree of discomfort or suffering as we leave behind the comforts of home. Whether expecting it or not, culture shock will still be shocking until the newcomer learns to adapt. The different climate, strange language, new customs, sights, sounds and smells can together be overwhelming and will be viewed either as an exciting challenge or a cause for homesickness. Even the threatening drone of a tiny mosquito can become a disproportionately huge trial.

Experienced and supportive new friends will help to see the newcomer through the early days but to have been first convinced that this is the place of God's leading gradually steadies the emotional turmoil. The daily reading of his word will also bring assurance of his sympathy and support.⁹ No culture shock we experience could ever be as great as that of our Lord Jesus when he left heaven's highest glory to live in poverty and die in pain on a cross; yet the resurrection and ascension that followed was the route to our salvation. In our turn, what can sometimes seem like death to self can bring in a changed new life not only for us but sometimes for others.

Death to self

For many persecuted Christians, dying for their faith is a reality. It is also a possibility faced by expatriates working with them. Jim Elliot was an American missionary to South America who was killed by the tribesmen he had been trying to tell of the great love of Jesus for them. Years before, he had written in his journal, 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.' Those who did not understand this spiritual truth probably thought that his sacrificial life and death showed that he had indeed been a fool. Yet Elisabeth, his widow, stayed on to continue their work and in time met some of her husband's killers, to find that after all they had taken his message to their hearts. Accepted by God and forgiven for all wrongdoing, they now knew and welcomed the Father's love for themselves, and loved him in return. This would indeed have brought about the joy in heaven described in some of Jesus' stories.¹⁰ No doubt Jim's delighted participation would add to that celestial celebration.

For further thought

- Do you know someone from another culture?
- Have you ever asked them what they believe, and really listened to the answer?
- Do you ever wonder if God may be asking you to share his love in another country?

Further resources

- SGM Lifewords: www.sgmlifewords.com
- Bible Society: www.biblesociety.org.uk
- Butterworth J. *God's secret listener*. Oxford and Grand Rapids: Monarch Books, 2010.
- Pierson AT. *George Muller of Bristol*. London: James Nisbet and Co, 1899. Steer R *George Muller: delighted in God*. Tuin, Rossdale: Christian Focus. 1997
- Elliot E. *Shadow of the Almighty*. Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2005.

References

1. John 17:18
2. Matthew 28:16-20
3. 2 Corinthians 5:14-20
4. John 3:16
5. Acts 2:5-12, 41
6. I am grateful to Dr. Valerie MacKay for sharing with me these guidelines, used by George Muller and preserved in notes made by her husband, Professor Donald MacKay.
7. Acts 11:19-21
8. John 4:13-14
9. Hebrews 4:15-16
10. Luke 15:7, 10, 32