

Clarifying the Frontiers

# Five Key Questions: What Hearers Always Want to Know as They Consider the Gospel

by T. Wayne Dye and Danielle Zachariah

**W**hen sharing the good news about Jesus, we often want to “get straight to the point.” Frequently, this can be ineffective since people have unarticulated questions and concerns that must be resolved before their hearts become open to hearing a new message. Although culturally relevant answers may vary, there are five key questions that are asked by individuals in every community: “How do I know what you say is true?”; “Why should I listen?”; “If I become a Christian, how will I live?”; “What is this message saying?”; and “What should I do to follow it?” Unless the first three questions are resolved to each individual’s satisfaction, the latter two questions won’t even be asked. It is only once these former questions have been adequately addressed that the individual will listen to the message of the truth of God.

Answers to the five questions do not have to come at the same time nor from the same person. In many cases, an answer might come from a person’s childhood experiences. Some hearers have some of these questions answered simply by the events of their lives or through their own observation of various Christians, or in many other ways. How they find the answers doesn’t matter. What is important is that a Christian witness must take into account that all these questions need to be satisfactorily answered before someone comes to faith, no matter where those answers have come from.

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## **Question 1: How do I know what you say is true?**

In John 5:31–40, Jesus called upon four witnesses to support his testimony about himself: John the Baptist, the miracles he performed, God the Father, and the Scriptures.

Although three of these make sense, Jesus’s inclusion of John the Baptist seems strange. After all, what need has the Creator for a testimony from his creation? Why use the words of a mere man to support the claims of God Almighty?

John 5:34 provides the answer: “Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved.” Jesus acknowledged that he had no need

for a human witness; he had no need of man's support. Rather, his use of John the Baptist as evidence is a kindness to his listeners. Jesus recognized the kinds of evidence his listeners had been culturally trained to accept and used that evidence *so that they might be saved*.

### Cultural Apologetics

Each culture has its own markers of truth. Western cultures, founded on Greek philosophy and impacted by modern science, tend to trust logical conclusions drawn from "objective" facts. Consequently, Christian apologetics in the West focuses on archaeological finds, historical facts, manuscript evidence, DNA structure, and abstract, logical arguments. This methodology works well—so long as our audience remains Greek-influenced. A substantial increase in the spread of globalization and technology, though, makes this unlikely. Furthermore, as missionaries, we are almost guaranteed to work in a culture with different markers of truth from our own. Not having been born in the community or raised in its language and ways, we are cultural outsiders among people who know very little about us. Locals do not know our parents, grandparents, or siblings. All they know is our lives and the stereotypes attached to our gender, age, race, and nationality. They have little reason to trust that what we say is true.

As in our own cultures, we must supplement our message with cultural apologetics, or cultural markers of truth. In so doing, we do not trust in our own apologetics to save—that is the Holy Spirit's job. We do not rely on "wise and persuasive words of wisdom but on the Spirit's power" since our goal is that people's "faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor. 2:4–5). The Holy Spirit, however, actually uses the natural cultural apologetics of the community. Therefore, we partner with the Spirit and what he has already been doing to present the message in a way that signals the truth as true. In the end, though, our trust is not in our apologetics but in our God.

With these principles in mind, let's look at a few cultural apologetics that signal "truth" to different communities.

### Genealogies

Many cultures have an oral tradition that establishes people's position in the world. The genealogy of an ethnic group, clan, or village is often used as proof to track family membership and inner-family hierarchies for the purposes of establishing land rights, determining leaders, and forming marriage alliances. Although biblical genealogies often seem theologically insignificant to Western audiences, in those cultural groups they are crucial in establishing the validity of Jesus's claims about himself and our claims



about the truth of Scripture. In the words of an experienced Papua New Guinean pastor:

I want to take this page of genealogies back to my village because there are people there who question the truth of the Bible. When they see this, they will no longer doubt.

### Dreams

In many cultures, dreams are thought to be messages from God. For example, I was visiting a remote village in Papua New Guinea where the people showed me a round stone the size of a volleyball and told me it had created the world. It was lying on the ground in the middle of the village.

I asked them, "Why do you leave it out here?"

The man who had shown me the stone responded:

Well, we didn't used to have it out there. We used to have it in a special house, but a teenage boy in our village had a dream that we should take it out into the open, so we did that.

They had felt obligated to move the stone that they believed created the world simply because somebody had had a dream.

While many dreams are clearly not from God, he does sometimes speak to humans this way. Many people throughout the Bible have experienced God communicating through dreams: Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, Daniel, and Joseph, Mary's husband, to name only a few. God did not limit his gift of dreams to his people, though; Abimelech, Pharaoh, and Pilate's wife were granted dreams as well. Nor did he limit this method to the past; Joel 3:28–29 prophesies that God will

pour out my Spirit on all people [so that] your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.

Sally and I saw God use a dream to pave the way for our own work in Papua New Guinea. Before we had arrived in the village to begin our work, a young man had a dream about a white person bringing a book that would have the answers to their problems. Our coming there to translate the Bible was seen as the beginning of the fulfillment of that dream. Workers in many other ethnic areas have observed that dreams were instrumental in guiding believers from strong Muslim and folk religious backgrounds to Jesus. For example, in *I Dared to Call Him Father*, Bilquis Sheikh writes of her conversion experience which involved a dream of John the Baptist.

We do not trust every dream as coming from God, however. Some dreams are in opposition to scriptural truth. Since God does not change nor contradict himself, we can reject those dreams. With other dreams, we must

ask the Holy Spirit to guide us, talk with other mature believers, and listen to our consciences. In this way, what is of him and what is not of him may be clearly seen. With those safeguards, we can and should ask God to give people the right dreams at the right time, true dreams that will lead people to Jesus.

### Power Encounters

Power encounters are times of confrontation between the power of God and other spiritual powers. When Pharaoh dismissed the Almighty God, when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal, when Sennacherib's chief officer defied the Living God—each set the stage for power encounters wherein God showcased his authority and power. A modern example occurred in a rural area in northern India where the people had an ongoing problem with cobras. When a person had been bitten, he or she would be taken to the local shaman for healing with mixed results.

Some missionaries from southern India had been working there for several years with only a few converts. Finally, after much prayer, the missionaries decided to tell the people to bring those bitten by cobras to them instead of to the shaman for the next year. Ten people listened to the missionaries, and all ten lived. However, everyone who went to the shaman instead, died that year. There was not a large and immediate turning to faith, but what God chose to do was the beginning of what eventually became a strong church there. Experiences like this have been reliably reported from many parts of the world. Although power encounters do not lead everyone to follow Jesus, they can be a significant step in convincing people that the message is true.

It is important to note a few key points regarding power encounters. First, power encounters should not be framed as an “us vs. them” showdown between God and humans. God is not pitting himself against the traditional shaman but against the “powers of this dark world and . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” to whom the shaman

## *D*ifferent genres communicate validity in different cultures—in the West, documentaries and encyclopedias are genres considered true.

and others are unknowingly in bondage. Oftentimes, the shaman does his work out of a feeling of responsibility and a sincere desire to help his people. In some cases, the shaman may even later become one of the strongest converts. In Wagu Village, where I worked, the shaman was one of the first converts and became the leading Christian elder.

A second key point is that we must not manufacture power encounters ourselves; God is not One to be manipulated. The missionaries in the above story only initiated the power encounter after much prayer and the seeking of God's will. Sometimes, though, God himself will provide such an encounter. When that happens, we must ask in faith for God to show himself. If we choose not to pray due to fear that God will choose not to respond, we dishonour his name since people will see our fear and say, “That's what we thought. This god has no power.”

### Genres Deemed to Be True

Different cultures use different genres to communicate the validity of the information presented. For example, in the West, documentaries and encyclopedia articles are genres that are considered to be factually true. Using genres that are already trusted as vehicles for truth smooths the path to understanding the message of Jesus. For instance, among the Western Bukidnon Manobo in the Philippines, there is a traditional poetic epic genre that is used to share important truths. With this in mind, one of the local Christians, a talented singer of this epic genre, recorded several passages in this style—including the beginning of Genesis, stories of Jesus, the Olivet discourse, Jesus's death and resurrection, and the final chapter of Revelation—and then sent the recordings with colporteurs on their travels to different villages. These recordings touched people's hearts.

As one old man said upon hearing the recordings, “It is really true about Jesus Christ!” (Elkins 1983, no. 5: 20).

Some genres require a specific artist or creative process; others restrict the time and place where they are valid. Others are constrained to certain times or places. Research is vital to accurately communicate within each specific genre's constraints. For instance, the Rendille people of the northern Kenya desert only believe a message is both true and of great importance if it is first spoken quietly to the elders when they are gathered in the shade of a tree near a waterhole.

Bruce Olson, a missionary to the Motilone of Venezuela, worked for several years with only one convert, “Bobby.” Olson had expected Bobby to share the gospel with his friends and was frustrated by his continued silence. After praying, though, Olson felt the command to wait. One day, the entire community came together for a singing contest. During this event, one person would challenge another person to sing a story, periodically interrupting him with sung questions and comments with the goal of exhausting the other singer. The person who stopped first lost. This time, an older chief challenged Bobby. For the next fourteen hours, Bobby sang the story of the gospel. When it was over, the entire community decided to follow Jesus.

### The Character of Nearby Christians

One of the most effective evidences that the Christian message is worth hearing is the character of the messenger. Jesus said that others would know we belong to him by our love and would know that God sent Jesus by our unity (John 13:35; 17:23). Greg Pruettt found this among the Yalunka in Guinea. In a study conducted among the Muslims there, Pruettt found that

84.9% of responders answered the following question affirmatively:

If the lives of Christians were holier than the lives of Muslims around them, would that make Muslims want to become Christians? (Pruett 2014: 90)

As one Muslim background believer said:

The reason I followed Jesus [was] because I saw that everything they do is righteous. . . I followed Jesus because of the righteousness of his people. (Pruett 2014: 93)

### **Question 2: Why should I listen?**

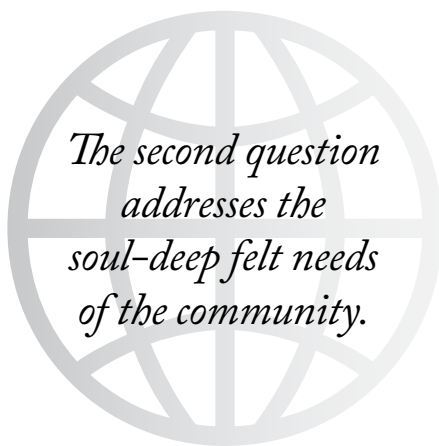
The fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah is one of the clearer Old Testament gospel messages. It prophesies the coming Messiah in verses 4–5, calls for repentance and shows God’s response in verses 6–9, affirms the efficacy of God’s word in verses 10–11, and shows the fruit of repentance, i.e., joy and peace, in verses 12–13. However, unlike many Western gospel presentations which start with man’s sin, in this chapter of Isaiah, God begins with man’s spiritual hunger.

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. (Isa. 55:1–3)

This second question—why should I listen—addresses that underlying spiritual hunger, the soul-deep felt needs of the community. These felt needs answer the question, “What makes me think that this is worth doing?” Different communities, subgroups within communities, and individuals will be concerned with different needs. Older people may differ from teenagers, higher castes may differ from lower castes, men may differ from women. Towns and villages are different from one another and the people within those villages differ as well. For some in

the United States, the felt need might be for family or community, or the felt need might be the ability to relate better with close friends, or it might be freedom from drug or alcohol addiction. In the Philippines, some of those I interviewed said, “Now I am able to live in a way that brings honour to my family instead of shame.” For some in Papua New Guinea, community peace, especially for enemies to become friends, is a strong felt need. One time, we had a large gathering for Christians in our Papua New Guinean village where people continually remarked, “Here we are, five language groups. We’re all together. We would have been scared to death to do this before.”

This is not a new question for many missiologists, and a clear method for



determining felt needs is forthcoming in a separate *IJFM* article by Sally Dye. Therefore, this important question will not be described further here.

### **Question 3: If I become a Christian, how will I live?**

Hearers of the gospel message have strong reasons (both valid and invalid) to fear that their lives as followers of Jesus might become much worse. This is a powerful motivation to find satisfactory answers to the questions of trust and motive.

In the West, we differentiate between the sacred and the secular, the “important things in life” and the mundane. It is therefore easy for us to imagine, then,

our religion changing and the rest of our life staying essentially the same. In many other communities, though, there is no sacred-secular distinction. As a technology for life, religion provides a detailed framework for how to interact with the supernatural, with other people, and with the physical environment. A change in religion affects every area of life, and listeners want to know if the new religious technology of Christianity will solve the same problems. Will the grain still grow? Will the evil spirits be warded off? Will people still be protected from tigers?

After my lecture on this in a Youth With A Mission course, one of the class members, a man from Nepal, approached me and said, “You know the big question everybody’s going to ask in Nepal? If I become a Christian, how do I drink water?” In his community, each caste had separate drinking vessels. As a member of the Brahmin caste, he was not allowed to touch the vessels of other people. However, all of these rules were tied to Hinduism; thus, new followers of Jesus needed to know how to appropriately drink water.

Christians in every culture must engage in the difficult process of learning how to successfully relive life as a Christian. Parsing out what aspects of culture can be maintained and what aspects must be removed or altered is a thorny task. It was one which Paul and many other apostles had to work through. The epistles are filled with details regarding whether circumcision was required, when to eat or avoid eating food sacrificed to idols, whether to set aside a Sabbath day, how Christians should dress and act, etc., all answering concerns of the new believers in those places.

Practically, and in contextualized detail, Christians need to know how to live. The process of discovering that will require much interaction and feedback, especially from local Christians who will have both the Holy Spirit and an intuitive understanding of their own culture. For example, all over India, people want to know how to make rice grow. Planting

rice the “right way” often involves praying to the rice gods and carrying out certain rituals. Such a method would not do for Christians, but rice must be made to grow. Now pastors pray to God in the fields before planting begins instead of following the old traditions.

### Life Cycle Rituals

Every community has certain very important life cycle ceremonies, whether those are birth rituals, initiation and coming-of-age ceremonies, burial rites, or others. Since many, if not all, ceremonies have religious components, Christians must decide how to perform these life cycle ceremonies in ways that honor God and seem good to them. Even if the ceremony itself is recognized as antithetical to Scripture, avoidance alone is not the answer. If there is no Christian way forward, Christianity will seem empty or even dangerous. For example, some burial rites include aspects that do not honor God. Nevertheless, the dead must be respectfully “sent off.” In Pruett’s study of barriers and bridges to the gospel among the Yalunka, the most prominent barrier was the fact that no one knew how to bury a Christian (Pruett 2014: 81). Therefore, either the old ritual must be altered or a new one created.

### Worship

People want to know how to worship, especially if the culture values worshipping “correctly.” For those cultures, the issue of how to worship changes from important to imperative. For example, in John 4, once the Samaritan woman recognized Jesus as a prophet, she immediately wanted to know how to worship. For her, that was a vital question.

Many other people hold similar concerns since (in their worldview) incorrect worship can incur the anger of the spirits. Local Christians need to understand the basic principles of Christian worship and what God actually desires of them. With those underlying principles understood, they can then worship God using artistic expressions valued by their community. For some, worship might

*In Pruett’s study of the Yalunka, the most prominent barrier was that no one knew how to bury a Christian.*

look like music that only uses certain musical instruments. For others, worship might look like a communal dance. It is important not to judge other people’s expressions of heart worship by our own artistic standards. The artistry needs to feel worshipful to their hearts, not ours.

While in northern Australia for a workshop, I discussed the idea of local heart worship with some missionaries working at Elcho Island. Earlier, I had visited an Aboriginal church service. It had met at eleven o’clock in the morning, with the sun beaming down on a tin roof and flies buzzing all over. I thought to myself, “It’s a struggle for me to worship in this context. I bet it is for them too.”

Later, I had the privilege of visiting an Aboriginal traditional dance ceremony for the initiation of some young boys. It was set at dusk in the outback, with the sun painting an incredible sunset across the sky. The place was open and big, with a small group of people—it was hard not to sit in awe. There was a completely different ambience compared to the church service.

When I spoke with some of the Western missionaries about holding church services in the evening, one of the missionaries mentioned that they had tried to do just that. They had even tried to encourage some Aboriginal interpretive dancing of Christian teachings. However, in spite of initial success, support quickly fizzled out.

“Why didn’t it work?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he responded. “It was strange. They kept up the rehearsals a little longer, but stopped the services quickly.”

“Rehearsals? They were rehearsing first?”

“Yeah,” he said.

We asked the people to rehearse the night before. We knew how casually

they did things, and we wanted them to get the dance dramas right. We thought the rehearsals were pretty funny because they didn’t know how to do it, and they were doing awkward stuff. So that was a good time to get in some laughs.

I asked, “Do they normally rehearse their traditional dances?”

He said:

No, come to think of it, they don’t rehearse them at all; they just interrupt the traditional religious dances and stop from time to time to discuss the next steps.

I had already noticed this principle in that other ceremony. The Aboriginal dancers that I had observed also frequently interrupted their traditional dances to discuss the next steps, but they never rehearsed.

I asked:

Do you think they thought the rehearsals were the worship and that the missionaries were laughing at it? Is it possible that would have discounted the worship in their eyes?

“Yeah, that’s possible,” he said.

Five years after the workshop, I heard about a widespread revival across the outback. The Aboriginals in Elcho Island had started a revival, using their own money to travel across the outback to evangelize people—even people who were trying to attack them for it. The reason they gave was that “we have discovered that God is the God of the Aboriginal and not just the white Australians.” They had resumed the dance dramas, and through them, they had learned that God accepted worship done in the Aboriginal way.

### Dividing Culture and Sin

During the process of learning to live as followers of Christ within their own context, Christians must learn to discern

between culture and sin. Not all cultural practices—even ones not explicitly addressed in Scripture—are sin, but neither are all cultural practices acceptable on the basis of being “culture.” When discipling new Christians, it is important that we, as outsiders, do not impose restrictions that the Holy Spirit has not imposed or teach applications that are based on our own cultural understanding of a passage.

For example, the essence of morality for many communities around the world is to care for their immediate and extended family. If we encourage new Christians to oppose their family and comfort them with the idea that they have a “new family in Christ,” we present a mixed moral message. We might be proud of the new Christian for “taking a stand” but he or she will often feel guilty. The new Christian’s conscience and community teach that the morally right choice is to care for the family, but this “joining a new family in Christ” message teaches the opposite. While there are times when obedience to Christ must be placed above loyalty to the family, we must not neglect the Scriptures that encourage and command respect and care for family members. Matthew 10:37 can be appropriately applied to situations where the family joins together to worship false gods, but we must not expand that verse to encourage new Christians to break kinship ties with their families.

In some societies there is no way to begin following Jesus without being perceived by other family members as disloyal. Even in societies where people are driven out by their families, however, those Christians might be welcomed back into the family through consistent acts of love and respect. Although this process might take twenty years, the important fact is that change often does occur. Once the family realizes that the loyalty remains in spite of the change in faith, their attitude towards the Christian member, and his or her God, begins to change as well. As an older Muslim man told his Christian son, “You know, as a Christian, you’re the best Muslim amongst all my sons

because you support your family.” In spite of following the teachings of Jesus rather than the practices of Islam, this son was seen as behaving honorably due to his maintenance of family ties.

#### *Question 4: What is this message saying?*

Once hearers are satisfied with the answers to the first three questions, they are ready to hear the message, as we more narrowly think of the message. Even then, however, the hearers’ understanding and values must be considered.

Whenever two or more people communicate, and especially when those people come from vastly different cultural backgrounds, the environment is ripe



for misunderstandings. The speaker assumes he or she is communicating one message while the listener understands a different message. This is especially true when communicating biblical concepts; we use one metaphor to communicate a certain message while our audience understands a different one.

Herein lies the brilliance of the all-knowing God, though: Scripture is full of multiple explanations of the same concept. Consider the different metaphors used when discussing the relationship between God and us: father and adopted children, shepherd and sheep, vine and branches, husband and bride, king and subjects, master and slave, friend and friend, potter and clay, and judge,

advocate, and wrongdoer. Each metaphor is vastly different on the surface but nevertheless reveals an important facet of our relationship with God.

Because there are multiple ways to explain the same truths, a Christian witness is free to choose the metaphor that will most clearly communicate accurate biblical truth. Eventually, all metaphors and facets should be introduced and explained, but not all are equally good places to begin. We start with bridges, not barriers.

Consider, for example, what Jesus said when Andrew and Philip brought some Greek visitors before him in John 12:20–26:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

Jesus began by looking towards his crucifixion and ended with an application to follow him. His key metaphor, though, is about “a kernel of wheat.” According to E. M. Blaiklock, a renowned Bible scholar, the Greeks of that day had one main annual ceremony which they believed was necessary for their crops to grow in the spring. At the core of this ceremony, the Greeks would say those exact words:

Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

Jesus began the conversation with these visiting Greeks by quoting the core of their most important religious ceremony. He then expanded their understanding of this idea to apply it to himself and what would be required of those who followed him. Jesus communicated the same truth to the Greeks that he’d been communicating to the Jews, but he began with what they already understood.

It is important to note that we do not leave people with their original inaccurate beliefs indefinitely. However, those inaccurate beliefs usually have an element of accuracy from which to begin. When speaking to those visiting Greeks, Jesus used the kernel of truth in their beliefs to give them a newer, clearer understanding of divine truth about himself and his work.

### Biblical Analogies

Since there are a variety of Biblical analogies and metaphors used to explain God's relationship with us, we can choose the appropriate one for each context.

For Papua New Guineans, the idea of God as Father and Jesus as Elder Brother is immensely exciting. Kinship relationships in that area center on brothers—older brothers and younger brothers—so verses such as Romans 8:29, which states that Jesus is “the firstborn among many brothers,” speak to the heart. On the other hand, for the Aborigines, the idea of oneness with God is key. Thus, the metaphor of the vine and the branches, wherein the two are so connected that it is impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins, is the “right” starting point.

We still need the other metaphors because people must eventually be led to understand the whole counsel of God. That is why we do Bible translation and not just evangelistic presentations. However, we start with the metaphor that pierces the soul, the one easiest to understand and most meaningful to know.

### Redemptive Analogies from Their Culture

Cultures also have analogies that can be used to explain Scriptural truths. Through paying attention to what is happening and seeking to understand the underlying reasons, it is possible to find redemptive analogies built right into a community's cultural understandings of the world. In many cases, however, creativity is an important component in drawing those connections. At all points, we must seek God's wisdom, and he will provide what is lacking. After all,

**R**edemptive analogies may be built into a community's cultural understandings, but creativity is necessary to draw those connections.

God has been working longer than we have to build an understanding of who he is. Ask him to provide eyes to see the redemptive analogies he wants used and wisdom to use them as he intends.

When Paul Robinson was gathering data for his PhD in ethnohistory, he travelled to northern Kenya to collect stories of a pastoral people group. After he had been collecting these stories for a while, the elders approached him and said:

You've asked us a lot of questions. We have a question for you because there's something we just don't understand. Maybe you can help us.

An elder then told him this story:

Another clan and my clan were camped at the same water hole. We were getting along really well together—usually clans don't do that because we each have to defend our own territory—but this time, we were getting along really well. Their young men and our young men were enjoying time together, and their young girls enjoyed talking with ours. One day, though, the young men got into some horseplay that escalated into a fight, and before we knew it, my son had killed another man's son from the other clan. Both of us were just devastated because we knew that they would feel obligated to retaliate and we would feel obligated to defend. Our friendship was over. We didn't want to see that—more people were going to die.

In desperation, I said to the father of the boy my son had killed, “If we killed one of yours, would you accept it as payback and let it go?”

He agreed.

So, I took my daughter and we tied her to the tree since I was going to kill her in the morning. I came back the next morning with a heavy heart. I didn't want to do this but there was no choice. Many more people were going to die if I didn't. As I came to the tree, my

daughter was sleeping still tied under the tree, and there was an unblemished sheep lying on top of her. The sheep was not tied. As the father of the boy my son had killed came near, I said, “That's not normal sheep behavior. I think God is telling us to sacrifice the sheep.”

He said, “I agree with you. That's the only explanation I can think of.”

So, we sacrificed the sheep.

When the man finished telling the story, he said, “We think God had more to say; we just don't understand what.”

When God is working, we have no need to figure everything out ourselves; rather, we work with the Holy Spirit who has been at work for far longer.

### Explanations of Sin

While God's relationship with us is the most important aspect of the gospel message, an understanding of sin is also important. People can only genuinely repent of the sins which they recognize themselves as sins. It is useless to attempt to convince people to repent of sins they do not yet believe are sins. Instead, we must begin with those sins which their consciences already tell them are wrong. In time, as converts are taught and grow in maturity, they will gain a more biblical understanding of what is wrong with their actions.

Instead of feeling guilty of sinning, though, people may be feeling ashamed or unclean. Both ways to understand the results of sin are equally biblical. In fact, there are more passages in the Bible about sin leading to shame than there are about sin leading to guilt.

### Theological Stumbling Blocks and Moral Quandaries

Other important aspects of the gospel message address a community's world-view issues and theological stumbling blocks. These questions and confusions

must be discussed before the rest of the message can be accepted. Where people have a complex traditional worldview, this can be a major issue. The Ifugao of northern Philippines were just such a cultural area. I watched a leading local evangelist named Ilat talk far into the night, patiently working through each concept that was keeping his hearer, a priest of their ancient rice religion, from coming to faith. I was finally overcome with sleepiness, but they continued all night long. In the morning Ilat told me, “The word of God is stronger than our mouths; this man wants me to baptize him today.”

An almost endless range of questions could, in one group or another, be the hindrance to deal with. In some communities, the problem of evil and suffering is a struggle; for others, following only one God is a challenge. Regardless of the issue, it must be appropriately addressed so that the only hindrances that remain are the demands of the gospel itself.

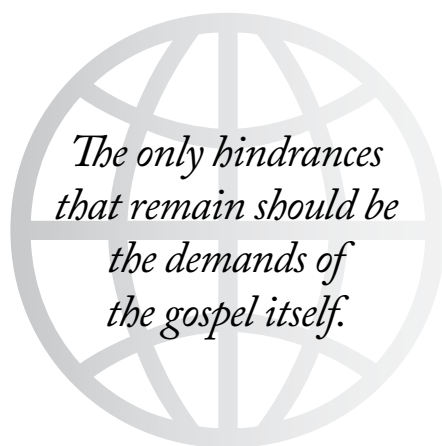
### *Question 5: What should I do to follow this new way?*

At some point, hearers will be ready to become committed followers of Jesus. However, it is equally important to explain what this loyalty excludes, i.e., what they are turning away from. God is a jealous god and those who follow him must understand exactly what that undivided loyalty entails. Furthermore, prospective Christians must be encouraged to think about how to publicly demonstrate their new allegiance to Jesus. This display should be done in such a way that it does not require the individual to break family ties. There is some cultural variation in the answers to this last question, but three elements are universal: turning from alternatives, whether false gods or science or self; turning to God in trust and loyalty; and publicly demonstrating the change.

### *Conclusion*

Evangelism is most effective when it goes beyond cultural relevance to personal relevance, when it speaks to a person's heart. Such an explanation involves answering the questions of trust, motivation, and outcome before the story itself will be seriously heard. It involves explaining the gospel in a way that is easiest for people to understand. In many ways, it involves meeting people where they are, just as God meets us where we are.

Here is how God spoke to a certain people group in Indonesia. They believed that birds were the source of supernatural wisdom and understanding. According to their legend, this people previously had holy books like the Christians and



Muslims on their island. Unfortunately, when everyone had to cross a river, the people in this group had no clothing with which to wrap their books. For that reason, they had left their books behind on the river bank, and the birds had eaten the books that were lost. Therefore, this community listened to the birds because the birds now had knowledge from the lost holy books.

Upon hearing about this belief, the missionaries decided to first tell a set of Bible stories focusing on birds, beginning with creation and culminating with Jesus's baptism when the Spirit descended like a dove. On the day that the missionaries were preparing to tell the story of Jesus's baptism, a group of

people from the same language but a different village arrived to visit their distant relatives. Trekking through tropical forests is exhausting, so the visitors told their hosts that they would rather rest than attend the meeting. Later, when the hosts returned home from the presentation of the story of Jesus' baptism, they told their guests what they had heard, causing a quite a stir amongst the guests.

Curious, the (host) villagers asked why this was so amazing.

The guests responded:

You must not have seen it. All the time you were talking, there were birds—a huge flock of birds, white birds—flying over the house where the meeting was, circling and circling and circling.

When they heard this, the missionaries were as amazed as everyone else. They realized that God was making use of the community's starting point to begin explaining the gospel. He cares about the salvation of peoples and the honor of his name. He knows the lenses through which each person and community views the world, and he communicates through those lenses first. As we seek to be culturally and personally relevant witnesses, then, we must seek him and ask for his help to learn the situation, and his help to partner with what he is already doing. To him alone belongs all wisdom and all power to change hearts and draw people to himself. **IJFM**

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