

Locating Responsive Individuals and Groups: Strategy Considerations in Restricted
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We all recognize that people's receptivity to the gospel involves many factors in addition to intellectual reasoning. Some of these factors are relatively stable but others fluctuate over time. If we can learn to be sensitive to these factors it can improve our chances of fruitful ministry. These factors can help us select appropriate approaches, timing, and targets in our evangelistic efforts. This article will focus on five such factors which condition people's response to the gospel.

Preparatory Conditions

The first of these factors is preparatory conditions. People tend to be resistant to making significant commitments or decisions which are not consistent with their worldviews. This reluctance can result in a tolerance for a massive weight of evidence to the contrary of a person's belief system. In order for a significant change in religious allegiance to occur there must usually exist some preparatory conditions in addition to factual evidence. Some of these factors might include poverty, poor health, war, natural disasters, racism, sensitivity to socially tolerated hypocrisy, low social status, etc. Other preparatory conditions might include urbanization, new industry, relocation, colonization, Westernization, political changes, revolutions, and oppression. People experiencing one type of change are often open to another type. This other change may be to respond to the gospel.

Sometimes Christians have quite specific ideas about proper motives for conversion. Politics, social relationships, societal unrest, and many other motives are frequently considered by many to be too secular to be acceptable. History has shown, however, that whether we like it or not, social and political influences often take precedence over rational explanation in the process of conversion.

Cultural Context

The second factor we will consider is the cultural context. In particular we will examine three relevant aspects of the cultural context: opportunities for change, reaction to change, and forms of holiness. In other words the cultural context for a conversion decision refers to the opportunities for making such a decision, the cultural attitude toward such a decision, and ways to express such a decision.

Opportunities for Change

The concept of opportunities for change refers to the degree to which society is structured to provide opportunities to change religious commitment. This may relate to how religious decisions are made. Is it in a family context or an individual decision? Is there religious law such as in many Islamic countries? How varied are the opportunities? Is there freedom to change religions, but only within a narrow range of beliefs?

Reaction to Change

Decisions to convert to Christianity can either be encouraged or discouraged by the responses of the social group of which one is a member. This reflects the reaction to change. Typically cultural sanctions do not encourage conversion to Christianity because such religious changes upset the balance of relationships. The result is that culturally marginal or deviant members of society or those who have a smaller stake in society are more likely to convert. Such converts only serve to reinforce the convert's perceived position of marginality and Christianity's status as an alien religion.

One strategy implication is to seek out situations where the reactions to change are at least temporarily lessened. This might occur among immigrants or in areas undergoing massive social change. For instance, students or others who travel abroad can often be converted and potentially return to their homes to be change agents. Even if these converts do not return to their homes they can still have some impact because there tends to be a high degree of interchange between overseas members of people groups with those remaining in the homeland. In general, direct evangelism is more effective among groups which are less orthodox in their previous religion. One reason for this situation is because hostile reactions to change toward Christian conversion tend to be less in such circumstances.

Forms of Holiness

The forms of holiness which are practiced within a group involve how they view religion. What religion is perceived to be and what it does for a person is important. Additionally, what forms are associated with religion and what the ideal religious life consists of in the minds of the people are important. The closer Christianity is perceived to be to the ideas the people hold in regard to these issues, the more likely they are to convert. In other words, it is necessary to find functional substitutes for new converts related to some of the attitudes, activities, and social relationships which were meeting needs through their previous religion.

This can be a great challenge because of the fact that religions often involve virtually every aspect of life. Religion is intimately intertwined with worldview and values and is thus an integral part of culture as a whole. This means a theology of the Kingdom as a comprehensive framework for life is a natural approach. This provides a scope broad enough to deal with a person's total way of life. This can be a challenge for Western Christians because their faith is often intellectual in nature. Evangelism often becomes a matter of communicating propositional truths. Intellectual assent to such truths is taken to result in salvation. A biblical understanding is more holistic. Converts which result from a ministry which follows such a holistic approach will be people whose lives are totally transformed. Such an approach is perhaps even more important among folk religionists because they have already demonstrated a propensity for syncretism.

Many people hold that the goal of evangelism should be to plant churches which are similar in form to familiar places of worship while Christian in content. Unfortunately there is tremendous disagreement when it comes to the application of such ideas. To some people such methods imply a concession to the validity of other religions or even encourage secret belief. Others even view such approaches as encouraging syncretism. The golden mean which most practitioners aim for is that converts may be able to identify with and continue in the mainstream of life in their society, yet distance themselves from things which involve compromise of Christian truth. The question to ask is whether practices are biblically permissible and spiritually helpful. Every culture and religion manifests some demonic beliefs and practices but we can still redeem or adapt other aspects which are not inherently evil.

Some people hold that converts wish to distance themselves as much as possible from everything even remotely connected with their former life and religion. They say that indigenous forms are not necessary. This is more likely to be true for those who are only on the fringe of a given society, or who believe they have much to gain in wealth or position by making such a break. People with this view often view Christianity as a religion competing with other religions instead of a relationship and allegiance which can be expressed through a variety of cultures.

For example, some working with Muslims would say the use of the Qur'an by a Christian lends it credence and suggests the evangelist believes it. These would say that since it is satanic it should either be attacked or simply be ignored. This is certainly a possibility. On the other hand Paul did not hesitate to quote from local poets and refer to religious objects when he was in Athens, for instance.

Ecclesiology and leadership forms (selection, support, and training) can also be utilized to make Christianity more palatable to converts. For instance, in areas where the family is the primary locus of religious practice, house churches can aid in tying the Christian experience to the rest of life because of the intimate family setting.

Sensitivity

The third factor we will examine is sensitivity. An individual's or a group's sensitivity refers to the subjective impact which the preparatory conditions have upon them and how that impact interacts with the messenger and with the characteristics of the message itself. Sensitivity perhaps more than any other factor demands a personal relationship or familiarity in order to be most effectively applied to ministry situations.

Impact of Preparatory Conditions

The impact of the preparatory conditions depends upon how keenly people feel about those factors and whether or not they believe anything can be done about them. Unless people are dissatisfied with their present situation they will not be motivated to seek change. Therefore the discontented or those among whom large societal changes are occurring are the most likely to respond to appeals for change.

This is related to attempts made to appeal to felt needs. A purely logical apologetic approach to evangelism fails to take into account the whole person and ignores the emotional and social implications of the gospel. Felt needs approaches can present ethical problems, however. It is easy to convert "rice Christians" either in reality or appearance, particularly with institutional work.

Power encounters are a non-institutional form of felt need ministry which avoid one set of dangers but present another. Important considerations include ensuring the ministry occurs in a team setting, that the glory goes to God, and that it be an accompaniment for a teaching ministry rather than an isolated event. Signs, wonders, and miracles are a confirmation of Christ's identity and claims. Power encounters can also convince converts to stand against political, social, cultural, and religious pressure. We must be clear as well that we are not preaching a shallow triumphalism. God uses His power in the way of the cross, not by the sword. His way is the way of suffering, and not of ease. He is, however, a God who brings wholeness and casts out fear.

Nature and Carrier of the Message

The nature of the message needs to be such that it helps to bring needs to the person's awareness and to do it in such a way that the proposed solution seems to be desirable. Similarly, the carrier of the message needs to be someone who is respected and to whom people will listen. A negative example can be seen in Bangladesh. There many Muslim converts have reverted to Islam because of the Hindu terms and thought forms used to express Christianity there.

Scripture is often an effective tool for bringing people to an awareness of their needs. There are numerous stories of people who have been converted merely from reading the Bible or other Christian literature or by hearing it over the radio. This is evidence of the living nature of God's word. Teaching methods can also be a part of the nature of the message. An example is the chronological storying method of evangelism.

Researchers have identified several attributes of messages which are related to the likelihood of their acceptance. During the knowledge gaining stage a message's compatibility with the receiver and its complexity are significant factors. During the persuasion stage its relative advantage and observability are important. Finally, during the decision stage, the message's trialability is important. This has implications for what methods of communication are appropriate for each stage of the decision making process. Radio, correspondence courses, and newspapers are often effective for locating responsive opinion leaders. Discussion, tracts, and literature are important during the knowledge gaining stage. Personal relationships and small group settings are usually the most appropriate for the persuasion stage.

The nature of the message also impacts how quickly it is likely to spread throughout a given population. Those movements which have the following characteristics are most likely to spread.

1. Cellular organization with diffused leadership. (Like house churches!)
2. Personal recruitment carried out through existing relationships. (Sounds a lot like multi-individual conversions, the basis for people movements.)
3. Personal commitment tied to an act or experience. (A practical reason for baptism following conversion closely in case theological reasons are not enough for you.)
4. A shared ideology which forms the basis for unity among a network of groups. (A good reason to establish relationships among congregations.)
5. Real or perceived opposition from the society or another group. (This is easy enough to do in restricted access environments!)

Generally, the closer the carrier of the message can be to the receiver culturally, the more effective he or she will be. Typically people are most likely to witness to someone at, or slightly below their own social status. For carriers of the message who are radically different from their target audience, identification becomes a significant issue. This is where the forms of holiness come into play again. The carrier must identify in ways which will make him or her recognizable as a devout and godly person without compromising the message or giving a false impression of being other than a Christian.

While cultural adaptation is important, relationship is the real basis for witness. Incarnational witness in intimate relationship is an integral aspect of effective church planting. Some of the most effective Western church planters among the unreached, however, have been those who led a few people to the Lord and then trained them to be evangelists to their own people. Culturally close carriers of the message are almost invariably more effective.

Methods of Decision Making

The methods of decision making refer to the people and processes involved in making decisions. Decisions might be made on the individual or family or community level. These mechanisms also involve the means for formalizing commitments, which is often

related to the issue of baptism. This can have a major impact on the shape and character of the church.

In many cultures the family is the strongest and most basic social unit. It is the environment which most supports and provides avenues for religious commitment and expression. In such cultures, aiming evangelistic efforts at heads of household helps to maintain the social solidarity and preserve cultural decision-making patterns. Women and children should not be initial targets if men are the undisputed heads of households. Similarly, single people should not typically be initial targets. Targets should rather be those who are respected and can support themselves financially and will be able to teach others. Until the church has families, it is not clear that it will continue.

In many situations the decision makers and the opinion leaders are not the same. For instance, in much of the developing world, mobile younger people who have greater education are the opinion leaders. They often still submit to older men for making decisions but they clearly have significant input and influence over those decisions. In such cases these younger people could provide good initial evangelistic targets.

In terms of formalizing commitment in hostile environments some believe open conversion is not even an option. They would have converts be baptized but remain secret believers. Others hold that being a secret believer is theologically untenable. These often opt for delaying baptism until there is a cluster of believers and until spiritual maturity is demonstrated. This approach can easily reduce baptism to something less than the sign of our transfer from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and the beginning of a life of discipleship and commitment to God. Baptism instead becomes either an unnecessary option or a sign of the super-committed and can lead to discouragement and fear.

The challenge is to make an approach with the gospel which is relevant and provides for a positive and active response. We must recognize that baptism can indeed have far-reaching social consequences. These consequences, however, can also served to raise the stakes in terms of the converts' commitment and the reorganization of their value systems. A balance must be struck between delaying baptism until safety and support are more assured and a convert's spiritual maturity is proved on the one hand, and preserving the declarative and initiative aspects of faith which baptism represents. This issue naturally introduces the next section.

Methods of Reinforcing Decisions

The period immediately following conversion is a key time for confirming the convert's commitment. This confirmation can come in terms of support for behavioral changes, developing strong relationships with other believers, or in some other form. Whatever form it takes, this time is significant for providing a convert the strength to face the typically encountered resistance and discouragement resulting from conversion.

Becoming a Christian nearly always results in a degree of loss of being part of the community. Therefore it is essential for there to be a replacement community in terms of the church. The importance of meeting with fellow believers for much needed encouragement and support is one good reason for aiming for group decisions. This might be in existing churches although occasionally new converts are not welcome into existing churches because of nominalism in the existing church or because of fear.

From a practical standpoint, it is unlikely for people to envision themselves following Christ unless they know someone with whom they can identify and who is respected that has also made this decision. Asking someone to assume that every person they have ever known is wrong, and that the carrier of the message is right about the most important issues of life is a lot to ask. That is why conversion to a group of already converted people of similar backgrounds or with such a group holds much more promise.

Certainly extraction evangelism militates against church growth by removing converts from the very relationships in which they have the most influence. Converts need to remain in their communities and families as leaven. If there are not existing churches that new converts can join and no other converts with whom to join in starting a new church then some other alternative must be found which will enable disciples to follow Christ in the context of their existing communities.

Conclusion

The “solution” to evangelism among unreached peoples in restricted access environments does not exist in terms of human methods or genius. Only the Holy Spirit can convict, call, and redeem a person. The observations made in this paper cannot be used to manipulate anyone into the Kingdom of God. God’s chosen method for reaching the unreached is the obedient service of His servants.

There are many religio-cultural barriers to leading the unreached to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We can do our best to remove or reduce those which are unnecessary. This paper seeks to discuss some ways this can be attempted. The real obstacle, however, is the offense of the cross... the Suffering Servant Messiah. The message of the cross will constantly be a stumblingblock to proud mankind.

This paper presents various aspects involved in making a conversion decision and makes some relevant strategy observations. Church planting clearly represents the necessary goal of evangelism. There are at least three reasons this is the case. First, a church is required for effective self-propagation. This has to do with the acceptability of the carrier of the message. Second, a church provides a demonstration of Christian relationships and community. This has to do with the nature of the message in terms of its trialability. Finally, the church is supportive in that it provides for fellowship, worship, and appropriate discipline necessary for the persistence of faith. This is involved in the methods for reinforcing decisions.

The Church is called to suffering. This suffering refines Christian character, but it is also a means of witness to the world. Effective witness among the unreached will likely require suffering on the part of the bearer of the good news. It will certainly require suffering on the part of those who accept the good news. Let each of us pray for those whom God is calling out to evangelize the unreached and for those whom God is calling out from among the unreached, that their faith might be strong and that God might be glorified in them. Let us pray as well, that as God calls us to the task that we will be ready and willing to take up our crosses and follow Him, and that He will strengthen us for the task.

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