GOOD NEWS FOR A CHANGE

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“I’M THE MOST BUDDHIST PERSON I KNOW.”

A college student said this to me, and I knew in my heart I had chosen the wrong person to share Jesus with.

“I’m the most Buddhist person I know,” he said. “In fact, my friends and family, who are all Buddhist, always say to me, ‘Hey! Could you stop being so Buddhist all the time?’”

This was one of my first times trying “random evangelism” . . . in other words, walking up to a stranger and trying to nonchalantly talk about the most deep, personal, and intimate topics imaginable, breaking all sorts of cultural taboos and making me feel like a colossal crazy person.

It was an assignment as part of my training as a missionary.
I had a whole script to use, and a tract, and here’s the thing: It wasn’t contextualized, not really. It was full of Christian lingo, and while it was vaguely targeted at college students, it wasn’t targeted at an Asian American Buddhist college student. The message had not been translated for him.

I had used this amazing icebreaker question: “Hey, would you like to talk about spiritual things for a few minutes?” (Feel free to use that any time.)

And it worked. Remember, when we communicate the good news, we are participating with the Holy Spirit. We are coworkers with God. I’ve used so many terrible sentences to start a conversation, but God empowers them.

The student said he would love to have a spiritual conversation, and he pushed his homework aside and gave me his whole attention. Then he said, “I’m the most Buddhist person I know.”

My heart sank. What I thought would be a pretty easy, “typical” conversation about Jesus became my worst nightmare: a comparative-religion argument. Best-case scenario: The guy listens politely and decides Jesus was a good teacher. Worst case: I don’t know. I become Buddhist?

Instead of entering an argument, I decided to ask him what he liked so much about the Buddha. If he liked the Buddha more than even his Buddhist family, I would know he was devout and that there must be something special there.

He loved the Buddha a lot. He shared some of the beautiful ideas and teachings with me, and I listened to him for a
while, just getting an appreciation of this guy and what he loved about his own religion.

Then he said, “There’s just one thing that bothers me.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“The Buddha said he wasn’t a god, and we shouldn’t worship him. But honestly, most Buddhists, that’s what we do. We worship him. I wish someone would come along and say, ‘I am God; you should worship me.’”

A shocked silence followed. Finally I managed to say, “Hey, I know a guy.”

His eyes lit up, and he eagerly listened as I told him the story of the great teacher Jesus, who was in many ways like the Buddha, with the big, big difference being that he claimed to be God. When I reached the end of explaining the good news about Jesus, “God with us,” who died and rose again so we could be in relationship with God, I asked him, “What do you think?”

He looked at me and said, “I guess I’m a Christian now.”

**Buddha at the Foot of the Cross**

It was a strange moment as we bowed our heads together and he prayed for God’s forgiveness, accepted Christ as his Savior, and became a follower of Jesus. Strange because he came into the presence of God not through the tract in my hand, not because I had a fight about Buddhism, not because of my clever arguments, but because the teachings of the Buddha brought spiritual truth that led him to the person of Jesus.
I’m not suggesting, by the way, that approaching strangers with the teachings of the Buddha is the best way to share the gospel. However, if someone is already a follower of the Buddha, it’s possible the Holy Spirit, the perfect communicator, has already started using the familiar terms, ideas, thoughts, and beliefs of Buddhism to insert truths about God into someone’s life. This is not to say that “all roads lead to God”—Jesus is clear that “no one comes to the Father but through me.”² No, this is just a reminder that God is the sort of Shepherd who goes out to find his sheep. He doesn’t just stand near the sheep pen and shout until his little lambs come to him.

Now, in my story, I didn’t have to learn a whole lot about Buddhism or the Buddha to be able to share. My new friend was ready for a message about God because of something that bothered him about the Buddha. But I know people who do lots of evangelism among their Buddhist friends, and they would say there are great ways to share Jesus from the teachings of the Buddha.

That sounds a little crazy, I know. We’re going to spend this whole chapter talking about how that might work. But before we do, let me share three quotes from the Buddha, and you think about whether you might be able to find a bridge from the words of the Buddha to the words of Jesus.

“If anyone should give you a blow with his hand, with a stick, or with a knife, you should abandon any desires and utter no evil words.” (Majjhima Nikaya 21:6)
“Consider others as yourself.” (Dhammapada 10:1)

“If you do not tend one another, then who is there to tend you? Whoever would tend me, he should tend the sick.” (Vinaya, Mahavagga 8:26.3)

These aren’t identical, of course, but you can certainly see some similar statements made by Jesus in Luke 6:29, Luke 6:31, and Matthew 25:45, respectively. It seems, at least, that Buddha and Jesus would have had an interesting conversation if they had been able to sit at a meal together.

But is it a good idea to do this sort of thing—start with pagan religion before getting to the good news and get to know the “other” point of view before sharing Jesus?

**Evangelism with Zeus**

Acts 17 gives us some good insight. It’s one of my favorite stories in Scripture, and the verses I love the most are when Paul says, “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.”

I wrote about this at length in my book *Into the Fray*, a modern exploration of the book of Acts. There’s a little overlap here, but it’s an important moment, and insightful
for us today as we try to figure out what Paul meant when he said he became “all things to all people so that by all possible means [he] might save some.”

The second half of Acts 17 takes place in Athens, one of the greatest, most beautiful cities in the world at the time. It’s packed with cutting-edge technology, gorgeous architecture, idols to every god imaginable, temples on every corner. Think of it as a living version of the Internet: Everyone was there, and anything you wanted was available. And there was this place called Mars Hill (or the Areopagus), where philosophers would get together and make speeches and debate and argue with one another, like a great big chat room.

Two warring religious ideas fought for dominance in the world of Greek religion and philosophy at the time: the Stoics and the Epicureans. The Stoics believed God permeated everything—sort of like the Force in Star Wars, without the dark and light sides. God was in everything. God made up the universe. All the material of the universe—matter and energy, all of it—made up God. They would use the name Zeus to refer to God and/or the universe. They were pantheists.

The Epicureans, on the other hand, believed that Zeus and all the other gods in the Greek pantheon existed but didn’t interact with human beings. The gods were so far superior they would never answer prayers or respond to human pleas any more than you or I would respond to a single bacterium crying out in distress. Reverence for the gods, religious
rituals, sacrifices, and so on were less than useless, according to the Epicureans.

Paul found himself greatly distressed by the idols and religious practice of the Greeks. He wandered the city, studying their practice and their rituals. He watched their plays, learned their poetry, and saw in the midst of them all a chance to talk to the Greeks about Jesus.

Remember—Paul’s *message* was the same it had always been: Jesus the Messiah, who came to save the world through his death and resurrection so humanity could be in relationship with God. Paul preached it over and over, and there are plenty of examples in Acts of him sharing this in a straightforward way, using the traditional terms and approach he often used in Jewish circles.

The *messenger* was the same. Paul was still Paul. He hadn’t fundamentally changed as a human being. The *signal* was the same, too, so far as the mode of transmission: He was giving a public speech. What’s different is that he *translated* the message to aid his audience as they received it, taking on the translation burden himself instead of expecting his communication partners to do it.

The way Paul did this was by knowing, understanding, and quoting from the Greeks themselves. He didn’t start with Scripture; he started where the Greeks were looking for greater knowledge (“*AN UNKNOWN GOD*”) and then pointed out places in their own theology where they had found truth about the one true God.

Paul shared the gospel by quoting first from the philosopher
Epimenides. In Epimenides’s poem called “Cretica,” a man named Minos corrected the Greeks who believed Zeus had died. He was a Stoic, so he didn’t buy that. He said,

> They fashioned a tomb for you, holy and high one,
> Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies.
> But you are not dead: you live and abide forever,
> For in you we live and move and have our being.⁸

So that famous quote about how we live and move and have our being in God⁹ is from a Stoic poem about Zeus. In that same verse, Paul also quoted from a poem called “Phaenomena,” by Aratus, telling the Greeks that their own poet said, “We are God’s offspring.”

> Let us begin with Zeus, whom we mortals never leave unspoken.
> For every street, every market-place is full of Zeus.
> Even the sea and the harbour are full of this deity.
> Everywhere everyone is indebted to Zeus.
> For we are indeed his offspring . . .¹⁰

One again, Paul was talking about Zeus! The gospel of Jesus started with quoting the Stoics. Why? Had Paul gone off the rails? Was he suggesting “all roads lead to heaven”? Was he saying Zeus and Jesus were the same person?

Not at all. He was sharing the good news in a way they
could understand: The one true God had some similarities with their understanding of Zeus. He quoted pagan poetry and philosophy to help them understand. He had read it, studied it, and memorized it. He was using their terminology, their vocabulary, and their philosophy to bring them into the conversation about Jesus.

Now, he didn’t shy away from hard-to-understand topics. He made it clear that there was a big difference between Stoicism and Christianity. In fact, he dove right in to talking about Jesus and how he not only died but also came back from death.

And what was the response?
Some mocked him.
Some said they wanted to hear more.
Some believed.

Speaking someone else’s language isn’t a magic formula that will cause people to believe. The response may be mockery, disbelief, a desire to hear more, or confusion. But Paul wasn’t afraid to use every tool at his disposal to make the good news clear, including using the religion and philosophy of his hearers to show them the way to Jesus.

We don’t need to be afraid to study and get to know other religions. We don’t need to shy away from using pop culture, or politics, or sports, or whatever thing might most interest our friends in the message. If talking about Harry Potter or superheroes or the latest fantasy epic or the Super Bowl or quilting or Hinduism or atheism will give us a flicker of a chance to maybe make things clearer, then let’s participate...
with the Holy Spirit and trust that God will make the message clear if we push things too far. God can protect the message as well as translate it.

So, yes, it might be important when I talk to a Muslim to know that the Koran speaks of the “holy” Jesus who was born to his mother, Mary, who was a virgin. With an atheist, I might talk about the universe coming into being with an explosion of light, or about the importance of humanity.

Jesus reveals himself in the truth of other religions not because those religions are true but because Jesus himself is the Truth, and all truth points inexorably toward him.

The Good News in Heart Languages

I love when people come to know the good news in their own language and culture. They’re less likely to convert to the culture of the person who shared with them and much more likely to convert their culture toward Christ.

What I mean is, there is no reason African believers needed to start building little wooden buildings with steeples and white picket fences in the twentieth century. There is no reason they couldn’t have come to Christ and learned to follow him without adopting the culture of those who brought Christ to them. The places where Christ rises up within a culture are more effective for the spread of the Kingdom and more faithful to the future vision of the Kingdom, when people from every tribe, tongue, and nation will worship God together.
Paul believed that, too, and for years a large part of his ministry was explaining that you don’t have to be a Jew to follow Jesus. You don’t have to be an American, or in a democracy, or a Westerner, or an English speaker to follow Jesus, either. (You also can be any of those things!)

One of the most beautiful things about people from various backgrounds coming to know Jesus is watching new believers internalize the good news in their own cultural context. If I allow new followers of Jesus to express themselves in their own heart languages rather than teaching them my language and expectations, they will create expressions of the good news that are already culturally attuned to others in their culture.

I love the stories of Jesus’ arrival in Hawai‘i, because they are so dramatic that they sound like something from two thousand years ago, but they are recent enough that we have firsthand newspaper accounts and journal entries and stories about it.

One of the early Jesus followers in Hawai‘i was a woman named Lili‘uokalani, the last queen of Hawai‘i. Her story is, to me, a sad one. The early missionaries to Hawai‘i did some wonderful, amazing things. Their children, however, got involved in the politics and financial colonization of the islands that led to the shameful annexing and eventual theft of the Hawai‘ian islands by the American government. Queen Lili‘uokalani was both surprised and deeply saddened that Christian people could participate in this. Although she had been grievously wronged by some she would call
brothers and sisters, and wrongfully imprisoned for political reasons, she stayed deeply committed to Jesus. She wrote a hymn while under house arrest in 1895, and it has become a song that every schoolchild in Hawai’i learns.

QUEEN’S PRAYER

`O kou aloha nô  Your loving mercy
Aia i ka lani  Is as high as Heaven
A `o Kou `oia `i`o  And your truth
He hemolelo ho`i  So perfect

Ko`u noho mihi `ana  I live in sorrow
A pa`ahao `ia  Imprisoned
`O `oe ku`u lama  You are my light
Kou nani ko`u ko`o  Your glory, my support

Mai nânâ `ino`ino  Behold not with malevolence
Nâ hewa o kânaka  The sins of [humanity]
Akä e huikala  But forgive
A ma`ema`e nô  And cleanse

No laila e ka Haku  And so, o Lord
Ma lalo o kou `éheu  Protect us beneath your wings
Kò mákou maluhia  And let peace be our portion
A mau loa aku nô  Now and forever more

`Âmene  Amen¹²
This song, written in Hawai’ian rather than in English, continues to communicate the good news to the people of Hawai’i because it is in their words, written by their queen, and it has a uniquely Hawai’ian way of expressing the good news about God. It is her continuing witness to the people of Hawai’i.

Going back to my formerly Buddhist friend, one thing I love about this method is that we can see our participation with God in the evangelism process even more clearly. God, the transmitter of good news, had already translated the words of the Buddha into something my friend began to recognize as good news. Then I was allowed to come along and take his question (“This good news seems incompatible with what I know about Buddhism . . .”) and help him see the rest of the message God was already communicating to him. It’s a beautiful thing to participate in!

That’s an important question for us to consider with people, no matter how far away from God they seem: What is God already communicating to them about the good news? And how can I join God in that communication?

Reflection Questions

1. Evangelistic training sometimes focuses on the uniqueness of Christianity and how to point out where it’s different from other religions. What do you think
about starting with the similarities and then moving toward the differences? What are the potential risks? Potential benefits?

2. Is there a difference between “all roads lead to God” and “God will go down any road to show people the way to salvation”? Why or why not?

3. What is the difference between starting a conversation using people’s interests (whether religious or not) and the “bait and switch” technique described by Chelsea in chapter 3, when she complained that Christians think “Jesus is boring”? Is there a balance here? If so, how do you keep the balance?

**Exercises**

1. Choose someone who has a different religious belief than you do (not another denomination but an actual other religion). Get together with them and ask, “What do you love about your religion?” Don’t interrupt or tell them what you disagree with. Legitimately get to know them and their point of view. Don’t talk about Jesus and Christianity unless invited to do so. If you are invited to talk about Jesus, start with things you love about Jesus that are similar to what they love in their religion.

2. Talk to a stranger about spiritual things this week.