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EFFECTIVE  
INTERCULTURAL  
EVANGELISM

GOOD NEWS IN A  
DIVERSE WORLD



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by Walter Jay Moon and Walter Edward Simon.

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Reframing Evangelism*

*The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under  
whose shade you do not expect to sit.*

NELSON HENDERSON



And with the final “amen” closing the evening devotional, the campers jumped up from their seats on the floor in the meeting hall and rushed toward the door. The timber-framed room swelled with the thud of sneakers on the carpet, shouts about dibs on first showers, and questions on if there would be seconds on dessert. As the campers filtered out, the counselors and I (Jay) picked up the markers from that evening’s activity. One of the counselors approached me and asked to talk. “I’m not sure what to do,” he said. “One of my campers just told me they are practicing Wicca. How do I handle that?”



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As I (Jay) drove up our gravel driveway, I saw our Airbnb guest sitting on the front porch swing, watching the sunset. He was in his twenties, with long hair and a guitar next to him. I took my work bag out of the car and went up to greet him. As I dropped my heavy bag next to the front door, he asked, “Just come from work?”

“A church meeting, actually,” I replied.

“Oh really?” he remarked. The questioning look on his face betrayed his indifference and unfamiliarity with Christianity, but he was curious. “What is that like?”



The college lunchroom was busy like bees swarming around a hive eager to get honey. Exiting the lunch line, I (Bud) scanned the eating area to see if there was anyone I knew. One person stood out, sitting alone in the busy room. I meandered through the tables and asked if I could share a table. Kassim, a student from Iraq, immediately brightened as he looked up. I thought to myself, *How could I enter into friendly faith discussions with someone from a Muslim country without being offensive, or should I just play it safe and not mention my faith at all?*



Sitting in the passenger seat of the Uber, I (Bud) began a conversation with the driver by simply asking a bit about his day, his family, and so forth. As if he had been eagerly waiting for someone to talk with, he spilled out his concerns for his spouse and the prolonged sickness she suffered.

“It’s just not fair, it’s not right! We have young children at home, and my wife is so hardworking and kind—it doesn’t make sense she is so sick,” he exclaimed.

Obviously, this was weighing on him and was foremost in his mind. *Could I offer some hope from God, or would this simply make him more angry at God?* I wondered.



Not one person in these stories came to Christ that day. I didn't tell them Jesus died for their sins, and they didn't ask me to lead them in prayer to accept Christ. The consistent thread in these stories is this: *I participated in the conversation God was already having in the person's life and continued that conversation toward Christ.* Each of these conversations had a unique starting point, and Christ offered something unique to each one.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to evangelism. Instead, Jesus offers power to the Wiccan who is in fear, honor to the Hindu who is feeling shame, belonging with purpose to the Airbnb guest who is indifferent to Christianity, or justice to those feeling guilt for their sin. If we listen long enough, people will tell us where God is starting a conversation with them. Though these conversations are unique, this book will uncover discernable patterns for evangelism in various cultural contexts.

"I didn't evangelize unless I led them to Christ" is a sentiment we hear often. The truth is evangelism is not simply about getting people across a finish line. *Evangelism doesn't just mean they make the final spiritual decision with you; it means you are a chapter in their narrative of their journey to Christ.* The question is not, How do I make the salvation sale? The question is, How do I make meaningful contributions to the conversation God is already having with people he brings across my path?

The Holy Spirit's job is to move a heart. It is our job to pick up on the conversation in someone's life when God places us in their path. If you've felt the pressure that *you* are the one who has to move a heart, take that weight off your shoulders. That's the Holy

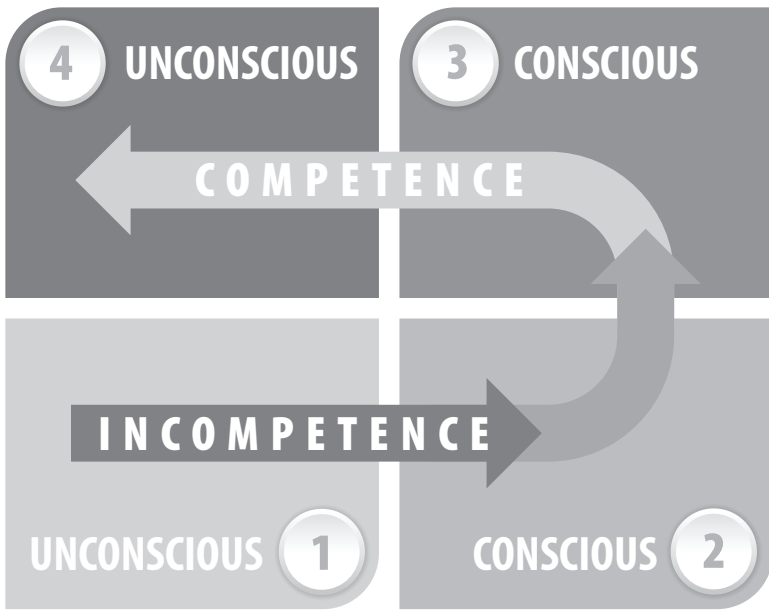
Spirit's job. Our job is to just cooperate with God in the conversation and trust he will do what only God can do, whether we are there to see the fruit or not. We may not be there to sit under the shade of the tree we helped to plant.

This book will discuss the unique challenges we face in a twenty-first-century society where we will encounter various religious worldviews. We need to reframe our definition of evangelism so we can live purposeful, God-honoring lives and fulfill Jesus' calling to tell the world the good news of the gospel. To help us in this journey, we will discuss how to discern various worldviews and how to continue God conversations that are relevant to each of these worldviews.

### **WHERE ARE YOU IN THE EVANGELISM JOURNEY?**

Thomas has an evangelist's heart. He loves to tell his African friends about the power of Jesus to overcome evil spirits. As a result, he led many people in Africa to Jesus, and Thomas was known as a powerful evangelist. When he first arrived in the United States, he was certain that he could share his faith with success. Then his confidence hit a brick wall. Whereas Africans had responded with great enthusiasm, now he was met with indifference as he shared his faith. He confided, "I am frustrated, and I do not know why people are not responding. I am doing the same things I did before in Africa, but these Americans are not interested!"

William Howell described the levels of cultural awareness that help explain Thomas's journey.<sup>1</sup> Howell notes that people usually start their journey of cultural awareness at level one: unconscious incompetence, as demonstrated in figure 0.1.<sup>2</sup> This is the stage of blissful ignorance where Thomas was not aware of the cultural differences that would affect his evangelistic methods. He unconsciously assumed that his previously successful practices were universal. At this level, he had no reason not to trust his cultural reflexes based on his prior experiences.



**Figure 0.1.** Levels of cultural awareness

Thomas reached level two as he became aware of these cultural differences. He recognized that they were significant, but he did not know the severity and depth of his misunderstanding. He knew there was a problem, but he did not know where or how to adjust. He could no longer simply trust his reflexes. In short, he was frustrated. He was tempted to simply give up.

Thomas's story is not unusual. With widespread travel and globalization, most of us will encounter others from a different faith system at our school, work, neighborhood, or sports venues. Like Thomas, our cultural awareness is likely at level one or two. As a result, it is difficult to know how to move forward in sharing our faith. We have a gospel message or presentation that we are comfortable with but does not connect with our audience. Our prayer is that you will gain new hope for intercultural evangelism. Instead of giving up and abdicating evangelism to a few experts with

special gifts, you can learn to increase your competency in intercultural evangelism as you move from level one or two to levels three and four. You will learn about different worldviews and how to adjust your starting point for evangelism. You will discover that you can make a conscious effort to learn and develop new reflexes for faith sharing. Along the way, you will develop more confidence and competence in sharing your faith in intercultural contexts. As you continue to practice over time, you can move to level four, where your cultural awareness is second nature and you can trust the new reflexes you have formed.

We authors are uniquely suited to guide you in this journey. I (Jay) encountered intercultural evangelism firsthand as I served thirteen years as a missionary with SIM International, largely in Ghana, West Africa, with the Builsa people. I also have fifteen years of seminary teaching experience, presently at Asbury Theological Seminary. In addition to my role as co-vocational teaching pastor in a local church plant, I regularly train international church planters and missionaries to effectively evangelize in the various contexts where they find themselves. As an entrepreneur, my passion for mission in the secular marketplace will also inform the latter chapters of the book.

I (Bud) served twenty years as an evangelist and church-planting missionary in Brazil with Vineyard Missions. I am presently a United States-based missionary with TMS Global and a PhD candidate at Asbury Theological Seminary (where I first met Jay). As Jay and I compared intercultural evangelism experiences and then trained others, we were encouraged to share our experiences in this book. My passion for understanding and engaging different worldviews will emerge early in this book.

With over thirty-five years of combined missionary experience in various cultures, we have engaged different worldviews with the gospel and trained others to do so. For the last five years, we have



researched and taught more than five hundred students to practice evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary.<sup>3</sup> The confidence of seminar participants increased 107 percent, and their ability to practice evangelism increased 300 percent when measuring their skills before and after the training. Students were often surprised at the openness they experienced with spiritual conversations, and some students have seen their friends and family come to Jesus as a result. We are excited to share how to see fruit in intercultural evangelism! There are new opportunities in the twenty-first century that did not even exist in the twentieth century. Be encouraged that there is hope for your family and friends to come to faith in Jesus Christ!

This book isn't a quick-fix diet pill or a miracle hair-growth serum (we've all seen those ads and are right to be wary of them). There is no quick fix for evangelism, but we will reframe our approach to evangelism by first identifying the worldviews of the participants so we can engage in meaningful conversations to encourage someone in their conversation with Christ. We will also discuss how your actions and lifestyle can combine with your words to become a powerful witness of Jesus. In the twenty-first century, we will also explore the evangelism opportunities that technology creates. God has already started a conversation with everyone walking the earth—and God brings us in at different moments to participate in the conversation and move that narrative toward Jesus.

## **PRACTICE**

This book is written for practitioners in both domestic and overseas contexts. At the end of each chapter, you are invited into practice exercises. These are meant to help you become more confident and competent in intercultural evangelism. Whether you are an international student on a university campus, an overseas missionary

about to step into a new mission field, or a neighbor to people of other faiths, you are asking similar questions about the people around you who hold very different religious worldviews. The exercises get you started in intercultural evangelism. These are best done in a small group, but they can also be done alone. Just don't skip over them. For this chapter:

1. Pick one of the initial scenarios at the beginning of the chapter. What further questions would you like to ask to catch up on God's conversation with that person? Describe where you would start to share the good news of Jesus with this person.
2. Where would you place yourself in the levels of cultural awareness (from one to four)? Recount your previous experiences of intercultural evangelistic encounters that you felt either did or did not go well. What can you learn about yourself and others from these experiences? What attitudes, skills, or knowledge do you need to move to the next level of intercultural awareness?
3. Where would you identify yourself in your confidence and competence for intercultural evangelism? Take the Faith-Sharing Survey in appendix two. Share and discuss your results with others in your small group.
4. Pray for each other, that God will give you all a bold humility as you take steps in obedience through intercultural evangelism.

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