

Relating to the Marketplace

The most powerful, transforming, liberating message in the entire world is the Good News that Jesus came to die and rise again to bring the human race back to personal relationship with God, and obtain eternal life. In the Apostle Paul's words, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

You are I are God's agents in this process. There are people in the marketplace whom we are best positioned to influence for Christ.

If you want to be able to reach people in your marketplace (real estate agents, tradesmen, fellow-students, academics, nurses, parents; the list is endless) with that message you have to speak their language and relate meaningfully to their world. The first tool of effective entry into any society is language. Communication is an art. The complexities of modern life demand that we have a mastery of both oral and written communication skills and employ them when interfacing with the world around us as Christians.

Recognising differences

A generation ago, many more people in the West went to Sunday School when they were little, or were exposed to religious instruction at school, so they had a modicum of Christian knowledge in their lexicons. For non-church goers today, Christian culture (language, concepts, forms) comes across as alien. However, being different *per se* isn't necessarily an impediment to understanding. It's what we do to overcome the difference that counts.

Remember Rocky and Bullwinkle? Rocket J. Squirrel, a flying squirrel, and his best friend Bullwinkle J. Moose, a dull-witted moose, from the imaginary town of Frostbite Falls, Minnesota, were the heroes of cartoons when I was a boy and were re-run over the following decades. They were "different". But they also had appeal. My school friends and I would sit around small TV screens each afternoon to watch new adventures that took Rocky and Bullwinkle all over the world. They spent exciting episodes trying to find missing ingredients for rocket fuel formulae and designing labour-saving mechanical devices. In others they went searching for the wailing whale "Maybe Dick", or preventing mechanical metal-munching moon mice from devouring America's television antennae. The characters eventually featured in a movie called *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, which appeared in cinemas in the year 2000. What made Rocky and Bullwinkle popular with viewers was that the characters, while outside of most peoples' experiences, appealed to children because of their quirky voices and story lines, and to adults because of the sophistication of the sub-plots.

The lesson: we can be different, but still appeal to peoples' hearts. Rocky and Bullwinkle overcame the bizarre and spoke the language of their audiences. We have to speak the patois of our work world and do so with a clear understanding of their dominant cultures. Then we have to work on translating our explanation of the Gospel into words they can readily understand.

Crossing cultures –a case study

If you want to see local culture at work, go to a wet market in Singapore early on a Sunday morning. From first light the customers are there, looking for fresh fruit and vegetables, keeping an eye out for bargains. They come every day, so they can afford to be selective. Vendors are constantly busy, unpacking boxes and bags and stacking produce neatly on the shelves. The smell of fresh fruit competes with aromas from the adjoining fish market (eels, mullet, prawns, mussels, jelly fish, scallops, squid, cuttlefish and fish heads, fresh every day, just don't wear sandals), punctuated from time to time by hints of spices, curry or smoke from incense sticks. Hawkers move around briskly, calling out prices and greeting one another in Hokkien, Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay. Sellers with scales and buckets of cash calculate each transaction, put the chosen items in bags, take payments and turn to the next customers. Blood from the butcher's trays drips onto the floor. A vegetable seller negotiates the narrow passageway spraying his stock with water, to keep the items fresh. A woman unpacks straw while a nimble-footed boy unpacks eggs from the kampong (village). The sound of Buddhist chants emanates from one stand, while, from another, the shrill voice of a woman singer intones a Chinese love ballad many of the listeners know well. This is wet market "peak hour", before the day becomes too warm.

Bridging the gap

Now try an evangelical approach in the same setting. Walk through the alleys and figure out how these people can be reached with the Gospel. There is a Tamil church nearby, but few know and even fewer care. They are just too busy. Besides, many of them would not fit, culturally, because they belong to other ethnic groups and religions. Try to place a Gospel tract in their hand. It will more than likely be put aside or trampled underfoot, for lack of shelf space. Nothing personal, mind you. You are just a visitor and business is business. You are a world away, culturally. Next, try and speak to the hawkers; quote John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life". You will find they are too busy to think about much beyond the next sale. Even if you speak their dialect (which you probably don't) Biblical concepts and church traditions will probably sound like a foreign language to them. Speak in Hungarian instead, or give them tracts in Braille? The result, in this frenetic environment, will probably be the same.

Those with the most realistic hope of communicating with wet market sellers quickly and effectively (to sow seed, at the very least) are already on the inside, Christian members of the group and their friends, who know them and can reach them when they are not at the peak of their morning sales. Often, you have to be "on the inside" to have the best chance of speaking into their lives. The same principle of acceptance applies right across society, whether in a Muslim neighbourhood, a hot bread shop, a high school class, a railway station, or your street. (Not so sure? Try taking a friend, putting Bibles under your arms, name tags on the pockets of short-sleeved white business shirts and riding bicycles down the street of your suburb and not running into major cultural perceptions that block your way. The assumption will be that you are a Bible salesman from Utah; like all the others who have knocked on the door in the past.)

The need for incarnation

When God wanted to reach the human race with his message of reconciliation, He became one of us. The theological word “incarnation” literally means “in flesh”. Instead of visiting with a pile of clay tablets or tracts in his hand, he miraculously took on human flesh, lived our life and communicated as a fellow-traveller (Philippians 2:5-11). He managed to avoid falling into sin. He didn’t pick up our bad habits. He was “in the world, but not of it”. But when he spoke we recognized him as “one of us” and paid attention to what he had to say. He was closer to ordinary people than all the skilled religious leaders of His time. Almost His entire life was spent in the marketplace. Only the incarnation proved that God truly loved us and that He wanted to feel how we live.

As Christians, we are God’s redeemed people, the second-generation incarnation of His family in contemporary human society (Philippians 2:5). At the level of the marketplace, the challenge we face daily is how to live “normal” lives, without becoming hostage to its ungodliness, but not so different that we come across as esoteric, artificial or remote. How tragic it would be if the world around us failed to see Jesus Christ because His followers were more religious than their image of Him, and re-packaged Him in incomprehensible religious drag.

We cannot avoid bumping into non-Christians and meeting clashing values and priorities. Work colleagues often do not share our cosmology. In view of this tension, we need to consider the extent to which we can be visible and involved in the global marketplace, not as salespeople, but as peers? We pay taxes (most of us), we vote, we care about the environment, we face the stresses, strains and joys of family life, we earn and use money and our cars break down from time to time. We have a lot in common with our non-Christian friends.

We cannot afford to be aloof. It is simply not practical to adopt the obscurantist posture of a man who told me he did not want to pollute his mind by watching television or reading newspapers, but wished to interface with the community on every other level. He tried sharing his faith with people, but was rebuffed each time. How could he retain credibility while putting his head in the sand and pretending he lived in some rarified atmosphere above the fray?

Some Christians are poor “witnesses”

Christians should stand out where they work, but for the right reasons. We’ve all heard stories about “horror Christians” in the workplace, who claim to be believers and talk about God but bad-mouth others; who go to church but whose attitudes towards others are obnoxious. There are Bibles on their desks, but they are the least reliable colleagues. They have judgmental opinions about anything and everything (just ask them about mildly controversial subjects), but they are slack and distracted in their work standards. They are motivated by fixed ideas about justice, without a sense of grace. They give the imperious impression they are “untouchable” and morally unimpeachable. No one wants to be like them. (When people like this fall into immorality, corruption and major business failure the damage they do to the cause of Christ at a local level is often incalculable.)

The presence of some poor Christian modelling does not invalidate the overarching principles. If we are to be effective, as Christians in a non-Christian environment, and not be alienated and drawn into culture wars with fellow passengers in the marketplace who need to hear our hearts and God's message, we need to seek and get supernatural wisdom to do it Jesus' way.

A personal account

My initial foray at Christian testimony at work backfired badly.

My first job (I worked during the school holidays and kept the position, returning to night school instead) was as an office assistant in the accounts area of a big shipping company in Brisbane, Australia. As a Christian teenager, schooled on the fringes of what some people latterly called the Holiness Movement, I had never before encountered what I saw on the wharves: posters of naked women and salacious stories that appealed to rough "wharfies" but shocked me were ubiquitous. I didn't know people lived like that. I felt safer in the office, where people wore ties and did not display their vices quite so egregiously.

The more I considered the ungodly environment in which I was working the more I felt compelled to share the Gospel with my work contacts. But, I realized, I would have to do so subtly. Pulling down offensive posters and loudly declaiming against immorality was never going to make their hearts receptive to my message. I therefore decided that I would do what I could in my small corner of the business. But, where to begin? Then I hit on a brilliant idea.

One of my daily tasks was delivering company mail around the central business district of Brisbane. I decided I could "make a difference" by targeting my company's principal clients. Low key at first. I would insert Christian tracts in the company mail. It sounded so "right", so inoffensive. I had visions of recipients reading the message and quietly falling to their knees in board rooms and praying for God to have mercy on them. I would be available by telephone to direct them to my church, where they would be fully instructed in the Christian life. This was my crusade.

The venture only lasted a day. I was called into the office of the Accountant (who was not amused when he discovered what I had been up to) to explain my actions. The evidence lay on his desk: an open envelope with a tract on top of it. There was no doubt this was my handiwork. Thinking on my feet, rather than hedging, I told him I had thought it was harmless and apologized. I don't know why, but he decided to be merciful. Chastened and back in my hole in the wall I thought about the lessons this had taught me. I concluded that I needed to be more sophisticated.

After mulling over the situation for a couple of days, and rejoicing in what I took to be suffering for my faith, I decided to put my name on the back of a new set of tracts and put them in separate envelopes, which I would deliver at the same time as the company mail. It only took another day and a series of irate telephone calls to the Boss, for my stratagem to be uncovered.

Frog-marched back to the Accountant's office I listened as he told me that the General Manager of my firm's leading meat export agency partner, the Australian Meat and Livestock Corporation, had been "sick" since receiving another tract. "Surely", I thought, "God is speaking to him and he will repent of his sin". I was brought back from my reverie by the voice of the Accountant, telling me I was being dismissed. I was stunned. Sacked! How ignominious. I packed my bag and left the company for good. Later in the day I secured another job and started almost straight away. I felt that God was looking after me, but admitted to myself that I had not properly defined what being a Christian in the marketplace was all about. I have a sneaking suspicion that my actions made me a laughing stock in the firm and did bring anyone to faith in Christ.

Was I wrong in attempting to share the Gospel with my business colleagues? I believe that God loved them and that Christ died for them. However, I suspect that my approach did nothing to draw them to God. My zeal was not balanced by wisdom. I was treating my circle of work contacts as "targets", rather than seeking to understand how Jesus would have acted in my situation.

Was I right in using the Manager's time to engage in Christian work? Probably not. That wasn't what I was being paid to do. Was inserting the Gospel in company mail a legitimate form of outreach? At the time I felt that, if the earth and everything in it were God's (Psalm 24:1), my employer and his business contacts were part of His Plan. I didn't find much support for my position from more mature Christian friends.

Speak the language

How can we speak the language of our marketplace, in a way that will penetrate walls of unbelief and plant seeds in peoples' hearts?

For a start, we can try to understand where they are coming from. What do they need? What are they interested in? There is no "one size fits all" approach to sharing the Gospel. People don't want to hear a well-rehearsed set of answers, like a polished recording. As someone has wisely pointed out, non-Christians don't care about what we know until they know we care. The Gospels record a wide range of conversations Jesus had, with people from diverse cultural backgrounds: rural fishermen, a Samaritan woman, a Jewish Rabbi, a Syro-phoenician woman, sick and dying people, grieving relatives, wealthy patrons. Each of them was very different, in his or her own way. Every one of those interviews conducted by Jesus was tailored to the circumstances of the individual. Likewise, we need to take stock of where people are coming from before we launch into a set witnessing piece. Get to know people: your neighbours, fellow-commuters; take a genuine interest in them. Put yourself in their shoes. Learn how to read their environment and values.

Second, we have to recognise that, in an age of supply and demand, people often set the terms under which they will listen to us.

I once visited a stone cell in Cajamarca, Peru, where the Inca Atahualpa (1502-1533) was detained by Spanish conquistadores while his subjects amassed gold to pay for his release. Ultimately condemned to be burned at the stake, the Spaniards told Atahualpa he would be spared pain by being garroted before the fire was lit if he became a “Christian”. Faced with horrific alternatives, Atahualpa agreed. Sprinkled with water in the name of a religion he did not understand, in the name of a God who was a foreign import, he submitted to being strangled in order to save the excruciating pain of the flames. End result: one “conversion” notched up by the priests. Pizarro’s army raised the cross high, committed greater slaughter and conquered an empire in the name of the God of love.

We do not have that power of coercion today. People will generally decide whether or not they will listen to us and how much they will allow us to impinge on their comfort zones and time. They don’t want to be on the defensive. They don’t want answers to questions they haven’t asked. Remember the last time you tried to leave an escalator or make it through a shopping centre but your way was barred by people wanting to shove promotional materials into your hand? You probably found their “interest” in you irritating and contrived. We need to be subtle when looking for opportunities to share with people who don’t think they need anything. Are they ready for what you have to share with them?

Third, non-Christians need to understand and be attracted to the “product”. I have a cartoon of a man in a suit standing at the door of an unshaven householder who is dressed only in pyjamas. He has a notepad and pen in his hand and he is pompously putting the question to the bemused man. *“Next question: I believe that life is a constant striving for balance, requiring frequent tradeoffs between morality and necessity, within a cyclic pattern of joy and sadness, forging a trail of bittersweet memories until one slips, inevitably, into the laws of death. Agree or disagree?”* The poor householder just stands and stares uncomprehendingly. People today are “product-driven”. They want to know what they are getting before they sign on. This puts the acid on Christians to know what we believe and why, so that we can explain with honesty why Christ is so important to us. Don’t be “super-spiritual”. Be “normal” around people. Listen to your language and cull obscure Christianese dialect that unchurched people do not grasp. Break the mould and loosen up.

Fourth, we need to communicate optimism and hope, not simply lecture. Fresh air and refreshing spring showers are always more welcome than lightening strikes or cyclonic winds. Lightening usually makes us dive for cover. On the other hand, I recall the first time I visited the town of Cajamarca mentioned above. After living in desertified Lima for a year I was like a small child when it rained the first evening. I stood out in the shower with my arms and mouth wide open, drinking in the welcome shower. It was just what I needed. Everyone needs hope. Optimism opens peoples’ hearts.

Above everything else, listen to the Holy Spirit and ask Him for wisdom and strength. Whatever your marketplace, whether you are an IT geek, a financier, or involved in health, education, government, international relations or parenting,

you will be given new ways of relating to your colleagues that will surprise you.
Remember: God wants to relate to your market even more than you do.