

A Relational Model of Evangelism to Differing Worldviews

Murray House

ABSTRACT—*The opportunity to communicate with differing worldviews has increased. Equipping those wanting to engage with diverse worldviews is necessary. Too often communication between diverse groups has taken a polemic or hostile form and therefore led to alienation and frustration. Our engagement with others needs to reflect the character of our God. Our methods must be as Christian as our message. Non-relational approaches misrepresent our goals and our God. They raise barriers that may never be removed.*

This paper provides a new model to minimise friction and maximise a more relational approach to communication. Nine steps from “Being Secure in your own identity”; “Listening to understand”; and “Searching for commonality;” through to “Inviting others into a bigger picture of reality and truth;” are explored from a relational perspective. Each step is evaluated in the light of its contribution to relational evangelism. Some illustrations on the effectiveness and practical use of the model are offered. This model seeks to build bridges in relationships slowly and journey people though to new learning. The security of knowing Jesus personally will enable our openness to discoveries that are contagious. In focusing upon an individual’s values our future interactions will be more respectful. Creative application of the principles of this model will be as diverse as the worldviews and people we seek to engage.

Keyword: *Worldview, communication, relational evangelism, witness, listening, commonality, multi-faith, apologetics*

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Murray House (murray.house@avondale.edu.au) is with Theology department, Avondale College, Wahroonga NSW, Australia. He is an Australian by nationality.

I. Introduction

The opportunity to communicate with differing worldviews has increased in recent decades. Expanded migration, the ease of communication and travel have meant that many Christians now have the same exposure to a variety of worldviews as missionaries experienced in a previous era. Representatives from the major world religions are now often evident in many neighbourhoods and cities. The multiplicity of Christian groups and worldviews correspondingly necessitates more training for those wanting to connect with others and witness to their friends. Equipping those wanting to engage with diverse worldviews needs specific focus and direction. Too often communication between diverse groups has taken a polemic or hostile form and therefore led to alienation and frustration (Samover, Porter & McDaniel, 2007, p 2).

This article will attempt to provide a model to minimise friction and maximise a more relational approach to communication between varying worldviews. Conversations that build relational bridges can potentially minimise defensiveness, and reduce the potential for a retreat into a more conservative siege position and attitude. In contrast an argumentative attitude can build negative emotions, create barriers, and perpetuate misunderstandings and insecurities.

I have used the principles of this model in thirty seven years of successful evangelistic ministry and taught it to my students throughout my eleven years as a theological educator. It has been used and adapted from my interactions with Buddhists, Hindus, and people from the Baha'i and Jewish worldviews. It has also been influenced by conversations with friends from other Christian denominations and from the research by Barna and Metzger who have explored best practice in our rapidly changing and diverse world. Security in one's own identity is suggested as being the first step in the following model for developing a relational approach (Metzger, 2012, p 12) to evangelism.

II. Being Secure in Your own identity

Security without arrogance and elitism must be pursued vigorously if we are to positively engage with diversity. Christians, who believe they have something worthwhile to share, and who add integrity to their certainty, portray a centeredness and serenity that is

attractive and disarming. The intensity of those who think that they are right can often create alienation. Security in a person's own identity frees them to focus on a personal Christian journey and growth opportunity as a way of evangelising others.

When Christians see that every dialogue is an opportunity to learn about themselves, and how faith works in the lives of others, they can be more secure in their journey and lose the potential for being judgmental. By watching Jesus witness to the diversity of others the disciples grew in their understanding of theology and method (Syro-Phoenician woman Mk 7:25-30). Sharing with others enriches personal faith and promotes the development of a balanced, relational maturity. One of the positive outcomes from dialogue with diversity is that we see our own perspectives within a new framework and understand more of the complexities of faith and its expression (Martin & Nakayama, 2011, p 92).

Our identity is not based on our ability to convince others of our viewpoints. Neither is it based upon convincing others that our views are better. As God's children our identity is grounded in what Jesus has already done for us and not upon human measures of competitive evangelistic success (John 1:12, Eph 2:20). Too often Christians have won an argument and sadly lost a friend. Competition is not the basis of our identity.

Increased personal certainty and peace can combine when we remind ourselves that Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matt 16:18). We also need to remember that in all our encounters with others it is the Holy Spirit that does the convicting and converting. We may be a witness but it is not our words that alone convince and convict. Rather it is the Holy Spirit that is quietly working in those around us to transform and reshape their lives (2 Cor 3:18). Carefully defining our own perceived witnessing limitations can set boundaries upon our self-imposed expectations. Knowing that change and transformation are God's work releases us from anxiety and the driven self. His peace is possible when our certainty resides in Him. In contrast, uncertainty regarding personal identity can be very destructive and undermine a sense of personal peace and security.

My eight year friendship with a Buddhist nun dramatically illustrated the benefits of this security of identity. She would often comment that I lived and worked in a wonderful Zen environment and that I was the most Zen Christian she had ever met. This enabled the lasting friendship and gave me many opportunities to express the core values of my worldview.

The security of knowing who we are leads us away from fear. God's testing of Israel especially evident in the book of Daniel teaches us that the exercise of faith in new contexts can strengthen not weaken faith. Insecure Christians need the assurance that engaging with diversity is not a slippery slope to infidelity but an opportunity for mutual learning and growth. It frees the Christian to be open to mutual sharing. It prevents them assuming they are the sole recipient of truth.

III. Listening to understand

Often when engaged in communication we are more focused on preparing our response rather than seeking to hear the underlying message of those speaking. In so doing we miss hearing the core values of the speaker and the intensity with which certain sections of their worldview are held. Listening enables us to be more intentional in our focus and more informed (see a complimentary model of leadership in Spears & Lawrence, 2004, p 13). We can then treat each person as an individual rather than speaking to them as if they are a stereotype or are identical to our preconceived view of them.

Listening shows we are searching for more effective communication (Prov 18:13). It shows we are not limiting the possibilities to the words of our last encounter or to words that may have been successful with other individuals. Active listening is an approach that has the possibility of intentionally limiting the detours and misunderstandings that seem inevitable in an inter-faith conversation. Acknowledging the emotions rather than simply addressing the dogma provides for a more respectful and relevant interaction. Listening enables us to feel and see their worldview as they do ensuring the possibility of a more effective relational response.

By placing emphasis upon listening rather than speaking we not only earn credibility but the right to respond and then they may listen. Too often this social contract of communication is ignored because our zeal to speak the truth causes us to be aggressive, impolite and irrelevant in our communication (Nichols, 2009, p 85). It is easy to talk over others without showing full respect. When our witness is conceived as "expert to the ignorant" we can turn the potential for dialogue into a blunt monologue. This results in making a viable

relationship with the listener impossible. Consequently we may remain in the outside world of those we wish to reach.

Many of us have had unique opportunities in planes and trains to engage in a spiritual conversation with a seat mate. My listening to a lady from the Baha'i community led her to ask the question, "So what is the main difference between your faith and mine?" This gave me a better entry into the expression of my belief in the gospel than if I had simply downloaded my dogma upon her.

Sadly, when others are unable to enter the conversation with this level of maturity we may find ourselves communicating with polemic minded individuals that revel in debate and are not focussed upon growth or learning. They may leave the conversation unconvinced by our words but respectful of our manner. When our approach seems more serene and humble we have truly modelled for them a view of our God and given a life witness rather than simply a doctrinal one. That influence maybe something that the Holy Spirit will be able to use in their future.

Listening to understand enables us to discern values. In so doing we journey past the artefacts of language and culture to the essence of being. Values may be a better motivator in our contemporary world than they were for previous dogma oriented generations e.g., the Survivors (born between 1900-1945). It is our conviction that communicating with the postmodern generation and their attitude towards values, rather than doctrine alone, will enable a connectivity that is currently absent. The Christian communicator who knows a listener's core values enjoys the advantages of being able to connect and identify with them. The outcome of good listening may result in more effective relational communication, shared values and opportunities for witnessing. When values are mutually discerned the search for commonality is simplified.

Inadequate listening hinders the search for commonality. In so doing it limits the extent of relational connection. The opportunity to mutually share perspectives and celebrate the common paradigms is missed. Adversarial approaches are inevitable if relationship has been replaced by telling and growth has been replaced by debate.

IV. Searching for commonality

Usually points of agreement, or commonality, can be found within differing worldviews. Listening may assist the discovery of

commonality and some points of agreement. The sacredness of life or the roles of devotions are common areas of shared beliefs. Active listening may lead to the discovery of common values or cultural similarities, metaphors or practices, as discovered by Don Richardson in remote Papua (Richardson, 2005,). He discovered that it was only when a bridge of commonality was found that his communication became relevant.

Emphasis upon points of commonality provides opportunity for personal credibility. It also serves as a foundation for the development of a mutual understanding of the implications and associations possible within each other's worldviews. Sharing that wider view results in enrichment for both parties as one is helping the other see these realities more clearly. There is no threat to either person's credibility when agreement to extend an awareness of the common areas is mutually beneficial.

Knowing what is held in common allows for a unity on essentials and provides a basis upon which we can develop thought. It allows for focused relevant communication that has the potential to build a relationship. Having an attitude to search for commonality removes relational barriers and builds trust (Abigail & Cahn, 2001, p 95). Barna p. 64 writes,

“Of the many approaches we have tested through surveys and through evaluating the actual experience of churches, we have learned that only two strategies seem to consistently appeal to the non-churched.

The first, and most successful, is for church people to build honest, caring relationships with non-churched people...”

V. Sharing life's experiences

When communication is personal, relevant, and practical, we open up the possibility for identification with the other. When our conversations are also a sharing of our journeys then relationships and influence are built. Our mutual humanity and happy times shared in eating and laughing together enable our future words to have a greater impact.

Our clothing, language and customs have often been external barriers that telegraphed to the hearers that we were indeed strangers

and aliens to their culture and life experiences. More of Paul's desire to be, "all things to all peoples" (1 Cor 9:22) is needed in our Christian witness. While the diversity of culture will always persist, the personal sharing of life experiencing in the web of common humanity facilitates the growth of communication and relationship.

In our process of mission as a visitation from a world beyond them, from the outside, we often rush in to snatch someone and bring them back into the fortress. In contrast Jesus used symbols of salt and light to teach us that witness involves being available and being present (Matt 5: 13, 14). If we conceive our primary role is to rush into alien communities and snatch people away from false thinking we are guaranteeing limited success. In our haste we have forgotten the basis of witness is relationship and trust.

Jesus commanded the demoniac to go home and tell his friends (Lk 8:39). Too often as Christians we are reticent to make friends and become personally involved with those to whom we witness. Communication with strangers often lacks the power God intended our witness to have. But by the process of making oneself vulnerable and sharing one's life experiences it enables a mutuality that will continue to enrich the hearer long after our witness has ended.

VI. Enriching the relationship

Our capacity for empathy and community greatly impact our success in reaching others with friendship. Shared time and shared experiences make for greater understanding and open up the opportunity that two diverse parties care enough to understand and take a journey together in exploring newness and diversity. We often speak to others before we have made them friends. In our rush to seek conversation and membership, we have short-circuited Jesus' injunction to witness to our friends (Mk 5:19).

My Hindu friend and I share a love of vegetarian food. Whenever there was a potluck Sabbath lunch at my church I invited him to eat with my family. We had a special connection having shared in the same meals. It gave us a deepening relationship as we again demonstrated that food, friendship and faith go well together. Every Sunday many Romanian Seventh-day Adventists offer food to those walking to church. For decades this has provided the connecting point and opportunity to build new relationships with people of other faiths. It is vital that our evangelism is built on an ever enriched relationship.

Sadly the tellers and information peddlers rarely model people-centred ministry. They have seen their ministerial task as one of salvation through knowledge dispensing. Such a model is unsatisfying and focused upon the short term goals of perceived success.

VII. Communicating with respect and relevance

The old Western model of telling and evangelisation through declaration has not been a model that always fosters respect and relevance (1 Pet 3:15). Finding communication styles that suits a specific culture does not need to be seen as selling out on our Christian principles. Rather it is merely being aware of the needs of the audience and seeking to find more effective ways to give the Holy Spirit time to work in our witnessing interactions.

Metzger (xvii) reminds us,

“While the Lord Jesus certainly does not fit with static notions and cultural stereotypes of God, we can easily reduce the way we talk about him to clichés. And so it is important that we guard against speaking of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith in a rote manner when engaged in apologetics - that is, presenting a truth or and meaningful account of the Christian faith, especially in an increasingly diverse culture that does not accept pat answers. After all, we are not dealing with intellectual abstractions when we discuss the truth, for the truth is the living God”

Communicating via Elizabethan English is not seen today as being effective or relevant. Unfortunately this form of English often acts as a metaphor to caricature Christians who attempt to connect with diversity via a canned, pre-packaged formulistic witness (Scriven, 2009, p 129). Our speech and our methods need to engender respect and relevance. Then acceptance not barriers will be the result.

Many of us have experienced the alienating approaches of people who are not culturally sensitive and whose manner is brash, arrogant and disrespectful. People like this often do not realise that they are cultural beings and this lack of self-awareness influences their ability to be effective communicators. After millennia of being treated with disrespect by Christians, Jewish people are very sensitive to our

communication style. My conversations with Jewish people have taught me the need to reposition my faith in new ways that do not represent historical Christianity. It is much the same with people from Islam. To define oneself as a Seventh-day Adventists is a much wiser pathway than to primarily define oneself as a Christian. It makes possible an increased level of trust and openness as representatives from these worldviews see the amazing commonality that we separately share with them.

VIII. Extending the commonality and adding stepping stones

Earlier we explored why commonality is crucial in understanding differing worldviews and how it enriches a developing relationship. Extending commonality can provide a broader foundation for the discovery of new views and ideas.

Often people have underexplored their faith and worldview. They may know what they believe but they have not seen the full implications it plays in life and thought. It is enriching for them and foundational for future learning if we can encourage them to expand their understanding of their own thoughts and opinions. This may build their appreciation of our contribution. It makes it easier for us to suggest small steps that lead from the extended commonality towards positive new insights. In time, sufficient small stepping stones of new thought and theology may guide a person to new discoveries than can impact their worldview. These stepping stones may involve the previously unforeseen implications of our commonality. Based upon our shared understandings, previously unexplored understandings can now be reviewed and accepted by those we are seeking to influence.

For example, a wider view regarding the teaching of “Ransom” (Matt 20:28) may help dialogue with one for whom “Reunion” (John 14:3) has not been a necessary core. It is an easier transition from the implications of Calvary (Heb 9:28) to Jesus’ return being necessary, once it is clear that God’s love wants us to be with Him. “Reunion” can then be framed as an integral aspect and implication of “Ransom.”

In our Christian witness we begin with the presupposition that all truth is interconnected and is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ (John 14:6). Acceptance of this concept enables a natural progression towards truth via small stepping stones of commonality. Stringing these stepping stones together makes it possible for us to arrive at

differing teachings to the common ground, but teachings that are true because the common ground is true.

It requires deep thought and careful theology to move, for example, from “Ransom” to “Reunion” - from the cross to the return of Jesus. Yet, in the human sphere, a move from “Ransom” to “Reunion” is relational, natural and desired. This has been demonstrated so often in my conversations with people of Catholic and Anglican faith. They have not seen the need to be involved in any study of eschatology, so it has been an important transition to explore together the links between Jesus first coming and his return. This has greatly increased the success of my evangelistic endeavours.

In previous decades religiously motivated interfaith interactions may have introduced strange and different views in isolation and disconnectedness. Unfortunately such abrupt introductions of new thought may have been easily dismissed. This new model of finding small steps of commonality appears to be a more effective approach than some arbitrary introduction to teachings practised by one’s Christian tradition.

IX. Exploring sensitively the possible contradictions

Consistency and harmony is not always evident among the diverse worldviews we can encounter. Often a closer listening and examination of an individual worldview leads to a discovery of the presence of conflicting values. Some ideas may be out of synch with other ideas or practices. This illustrates that something is awry. Perhaps there is a lack of authenticity or veracity. A careful and sensitive examination of these variables may lead some people to discover that their strongly held views are likely to be incompatible. This may make new learning a possibility.

In the South Pacific we have people calling themselves Jehovah’s Witnesses who come to our houses in twos to proselytise. Conversations with this group have been most fruitful when I have not attacked their faith but rather shown that within their faith they have contradictions. They take a very strong stand against the eating of blood based on the law in Leviticus and yet they still eat the blood in red meat. Highlighting this contradiction amongst many others is one way of helping people break free of the limited thinking imposed upon them by their religion.

X. Inviting others to a bigger picture of reality and truth

Christian missionaries have a big God and Saviour to share with others. The attraction of Jesus is often underestimated. Doctrine and teachings may have dominated the missionaries' witness masking their witness to the person of Christ. The rediscovery of the personage of Jesus above the dogma-raising-barriers will release a new journey towards a real spirituality that transforms with power.

Metzger (xxii, xxiii) states,

“In this light our task as Christian witnesses is not to build on some supposed neutral, logical philosophical system but to retell the Jesus' story and show in word and deed how the Christian story makes better sense of life in view of Christ sacrificial love... And so, we invite these diverse religious practitioners to share life with us, just as the Father and Son share life with us through the invitation of the Spirit... As witnesses it is not our place to bracket and bookend others but to approach our dialogues and lives with them as open books, where the truth claims come off the page and into people's hearts.”

Unfolding progressively the dimensions of Jesus' ministry to our planet provides opportunity for surprise and challenge, enjoyment and completeness. When Jesus is exalted above human ideas, more listeners will be willing to accept Him. In my experience I have found that they are searching for a more complete picture of Jesus and a relationship with God that is satisfying and Biblical. Teaching others all that Jesus reveals about God is a great privilege that we should pursue with wisdom and gentleness.

XI. Conclusion

Current practice, it appears, has not resulted in large population groups making changes to their worldview. Christians seeking to refine and refocus their effective witness should engage their listening skills intentionally so they can discover how best to approach the individual as a friend. Relational approaches reduce barriers and make possible a mutual journey of trust and discovery. Our engagement with others needs to reflect the character of our God. Our methods must be as Christian as our message. Non-relational

approaches misrepresent our goals and our God. They raise barriers that may never be removed.

The security of knowing Jesus personally enables our openness to a discovery that is contagious. Focusing upon an individual's values both guides our future interactions and focuses our words on that which is most important. Shared experiences will deepen the respect we have for each other. In this new relational space a partnership is possible. Mutually beneficial outcomes are more likely. Both sides will enjoy the discovery of commonality and its implications. This model seeks to build relationships slowly and journey people though to new learning. Creative application of its principles will be as diverse as the worldviews and people we seek to engage.

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