WHY LISTENING IS IMPORTANT

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Category: Observations

It is not unusual to hear people say that listening is one of the most important things that you can do when you are involved in mission and evangelism. Equally, some people affirm that we don't need to listen to people's wrong ideas, our job is simply to proclaim the truth. I'd like to suggest a few reasons why listening (and listening well) is a key skill for Christians when sharing their faith.

It's a matter of politeness. If you are rude and don't pay attention to other people, it reflects badly on the message that you are trying to convey. Why would anyone be interested in Christianity if it makes people unpleasent? It's also true that by it's nature human communication is a two way thing. Information flows better in a dialogue than it does in a monologue. If you aren't listening to the other person, the chances are that they aren't listening to you either.

You'll address the right issues. Yes, there is one Christian message, but people engage with it in various ways. Life experience, family background, mental health and a whole list of other things impact the way in which people receive the good news about Jesus. If we don't take these things into account and listen to people's concerns, we are unlikely to be able to communicate clearly with them.

You'll answer the right questions. There are generally reasons why people are not Christians. It may be that they have never really heard the gospel message, or it could be intellectual doubts about the existence of God, or questions about how a good God could allow suffering and the list goes on. If we don't engage with their questions and reasons, we are - in effect - confirming them in their views that Christians don't have any answers.

You'll know how well you are communicating. If you are just set to transmit and not receive, you will never know if people grasp the things that you are saying to them. In a two-way conversation, you can adjust what you are saying to help people follow you. If you aren't listening to them, you can't do this and you may just leave them baffled.

You might learn something. The thing about people is that they are really interesting. They have all sorts of experiences and ideas and you can learn an awful lot by listening to them. Yes, some of their ideas may sound a bit odd (but remember, your faith probably sounds odd to them, too) but unless you are confident that you know everything that their is to know about everything, then you can always learn something by listening. At the very least, you can learn to sharpen up your evangelistic technique.

These brief thoughts are relevant to anyone sharing their faith in any context. However, if you are involved in cross-cultural mission they are absolutely essential. In different cultures, people not only do and say things differently, but their underlying beliefs and values are different. You can't begin to understand where people are coming from without taking time to listen, to learn and to understand. Not only that, but in all probability you will need to learn a new language and that takes time and it takes a lot of listening. I have an ongoing concern, which I've expressed here a number of times, that the way in which traditional mission agencies work today means that people often don't get the time they need for listening and learning before they start ministering. This is a huge mistake!