

EVANGELISM AMONG RACIAL MINORITY GROUPS

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The term "racial minority group" can be applied rather widely to any group that is ethnically distinct from, and smaller than, the people or nation within whose territorial bounds it is living. The characteristic which warrants separate consideration for such groups in regard to evangelism is that they are sufficiently different from the majority group(s) as to be very little reached by evangelistic efforts directed to the latter. This is due not only to a difference in race, but also to differences of culture and (generally) language which are also present.

Among the many racial minority groups in today's world, the two following categories constitute a special challenge, and require a distinct strategy of evangelism:

- (i) Immigrant minorities not yet assimilated into the national life.
- (ii) Indigenous minorities with a status which is inferior to that of the national majority.

Groups of the first kind are to be found within many of the developed countries of the world as a result of widely different factors. Examples include groups of Chinese in East Asia, Japanese in Brazil, Pakistanis in England, and Gypsies throughout Europe, to name but a few. Their circumstances, and the strength of their ethnic identity or degree of assimilation into the host nation, differ very widely. In many cases difficulties associated with language do not seem very acute (at least superficially) since members of such groups generally gain a fair command of the national language. There may also be adequate provision for education, which tends to reduce differences of culture over a period of time.

By contrast, many of the groups of the second category are much more isolated from the life of the nation of which they form a part, and barriers of culture and language are more serious. Indigenous minority groups are to be found in almost every part of the world except Europe, the number of minority languages spoken being estimated as upwards of three thousand. It must be noted again that their circumstances and the degree of their isolation differ widely in different parts of the world. Whereas the life of a minority group in the Amazon basin is radically different from the life of Latin American cities in both language and culture, a minority group of sub-Saharan Africa may be close to West African city life in both respects. Generalizations concerning evangelism among minority groups must therefore be understood to allow for exceptions arising from these variations.

How great is the need for evangelism among racial minority groups today? While some indigenous minorities remain which are virtually unreached, some kind of evangelism is being undertaken for many hundreds of indigenous groups, and also among many immigrant groups. Conversions are reported from many areas, but evangelism cannot be regarded as truly successful until an indigenous church is established which is able to carry forward the evangelization of the rest of the minority group. The question is not only, "How much more evangelism remains to be initiated?" but also, "How far is existing evangelism being carried on in a way which will bring the desired results?" and, therefore, "How far is a new approach to this evangelism advisable?"

Special Factors and Problems

The evangelism of racial minorities may involve special factors of location and political sensitivity. More basic problems, however, lie in the area of communication, with differences of language and culture, and in subconscious attitudes resulting from being a minority culture. These will now be discussed briefly. Indigenous minorities will be chiefly in focus, as the more extreme cases, but many of the problems are relevant, though perhaps less acute, for immigrant minorities too.

a. *Difficulties of physical location* — Some indigenous minorities live in places difficult for an outside evangelist to reach, e.g., tribal groups in Papua, New Guinea. Others are easy of access for brief visits, but very difficult for intimate contact over a long period, e.g., Gypsy groups. Even immigrant minorities living in urban centers may present problems of this kind, since it is often hard for an outsider to live among them. The upbringing and education of the evangelist's children may present serious problems in many cases.

b. *Political Sensitivity* — Minority groups frequently constitute volatile material, politically. Governments may seek to prevent work they see as likely to cause disturbance within the minority group, or to foster a spirit of independence. They have often regarded work in the vernacular, and especially the provision of an alphabet and literature, as dangerous, and therefore have forbidden it. They are increasingly sensitive to the activities of foreigners in such situations.

c. *Difficulties of communication* — In a large majority of cases, the people of the minority group normally use their own language for conversation among themselves. In extreme cases hardly anyone in the group speaks another language, and the few that do so only use this for elementary trade purposes. More commonly, many of the menfolk have a fair command of the national or trade language, while women and children, or people living in outlying areas, have only a few words of this, and the vernacular is used for all purposes except talking to outsiders. In other cases there is a good degree of bilingualism, but the vernacular is generally retained for the discussion of personal affairs, including the intimate hopes and fears that are the essence of religious and spiritual matters.

The seriousness of the language problem is generally underestimated. Even with wide bilingualism, it is commonplace for there to be serious misunderstanding of vital aspects of the Gospel when this is pre-

sented and discussed other than in the vernacular, while with poor bilingualism, real communication of truth may never really begin. This is not recognized because the misunderstanding that arises is only observable to one who can express the truth both in the trade language and the vernacular. An evangelist using the trade language can only measure the response he gets in terms of the answers he receives in that language, and these answers naturally tend to employ the same words and phrases that he himself has used. He has no means of knowing to what concepts, if any, in the vernacular thought patterns these terms have been related, or how they fit in with other religious conceptions already held. The language problem frequently means that, though the Gospel may be faithfully announced, something else is understood by the hearers.

Communication problems also arise from differences of culture, the most obvious being misunderstandings and prejudices arising from behavior which has an acceptable implication to the evangelist, but another and unacceptable one to the minority group. Such misunderstandings are essentially a failure by the outsider to recognize and use the accepted means of signaling intentions and attitudes. As with linguistic non-communication, the lack of cultural acceptability, or the failure to convey the intended meaning, is not recognizable unless the evangelist understands both culture codes.

d. *Difficulties arising from the minority culture* — These difficulties lie within the mind of the minority group, militating against acceptance of the message as it is perceived. There is often a sense of cultural independence or superiority. The member of the group may feel secure in the assumption that his group is basically different from, or superior to, other groups, so that the religious beliefs of others are not relevant to him. His group has followed other patterns of belief for centuries, and "everyone knows that these are right" and better!

There is also generally a cultural necessity to resist change and maintain solidity. A minority group, if it is to maintain its existence as distinct from other groups, must cling tenaciously to its chosen way of life. It therefore resists all forms of change, and exerts heavy pressure on any of its members that may seem sympathetic to innovations.

The culture of the group may accept and encourage practices which are contrary to the explicit teaching of the Scriptures, and it may discourage or forbid some Christian virtues. Should there be any acceptance of the message by members of the group, this will frequently lead to opposition from the group's leaders, who will regard this development as a threat to their authority and a danger to the continued survival of the group.

Another problem often encountered is the danger of undermining existing culture patterns. Among groups whose way of life is widely different from that of the culture to which the evangelist belongs, acceptance of the Gospel may seem to imply acceptance also of the cultural values with which the evangelist is associated. The evangelist may himself urge the acceptance of new cultural values as necessary to the Gospel, when in fact there is no biblical warrant for doing so. Apart from any urging by the evangelist, materialistic values typical of the "Western World" have commonly been adopted by minority groups along with the

presentation of the Gospel, and this has led to cultural breakdown and tragic demoralization as old established patterns of life are undermined. This state of affairs is not compatible with basic Christian values, and it affects adversely the growth of a Christian community.

2. *Towards a strategy of evangelism.*

a. *Effective communication is essential* — The message must be presented not according to what is most convenient for the messenger, but according to what will most effectively reach the hearers. Elementary though this principle may seem, it is in fact frequently overlooked in practice. Presumably this is because it is a long hard task for most of us to master another language, and because the ability to communicate concerning everyday matters in a national language leads the evangelist to assume that he can communicate spiritual truth in the same medium. But experience has proved this assumption false time and time again. It is not just that key terms will be misunderstood, though this is commonplace. The effects of failure to talk about spiritual things in the hearer's mother tongue — the language of his heart — go very deep, and influence attitudes of mind as well as the capacity to grasp ideas. If the evangelist has not bothered to acquaint himself with the thought world of his hearers, if his activities indicate insensitivity to their culture patterns and values, why should he expect their hearts to be open to his message?

It is essential for the evangelist to have a high regard for the culture and language of the minority group he wishes to reach. His first priority must be to become at home in their vernacular, to understand and where possible conform to their culture, to demonstrate his desire to identify with the people he wishes to help. Time spent among the people in the study of their language is rarely wasted, whereas evangelistic effort before the language has been mastered frequently is, or else it produces superficial results which make the task of disciplining all the harder later on. Effective strategy therefore calls for priority to be given to the task of learning how to communicate effectively, i.e., allotting time to studying the language and the people.

It is also desirable to present the Gospel in the way which is most relevant to the life and needs of the group. The evangelist will be accustomed to thinking of certain aspects of the Gospel as crucial, because of the influence of his own background and the established patterns of evangelism within his own culture. But these will not necessarily be the aspects of the Gospel most crucial to another culture. Christ's authority over demon forces may not be of primary importance to a European, but it will certainly be crucial to an animistic minority group whose life is dominated by fear of evil spirits. This underlines the need of the evangelist to sympathetically understand the hopes and fears of those he seeks to reach.

b. *Establish contact with the minority group in some role other than that of "professional evangelist."* This follows from the difficulties outlined above which arise within the mind of the minority group members as they begin to hear the Gospel. The role of the professional evangelist, from the point of view of his hearers, is essentially that of one who is seeking to change them, regardless of whether or not they wish at first to be changed. The potential for provoking resistance to change is inherent in any

direct evangelistic approach which challenges men to accept the Gospel as soon as possible after they have first heard it. That essential characteristic of minority groups, their need to resist change so as to retain their own identity, coupled with the fact that they will understand the Gospel so imperfectly at its first presentation, means that an approach which demands a quick response will be favorably received only by a few individuals who are marginal to the group as a whole. The remainder, including the leaders, are likely to adopt a resistant attitude.

Since this kind of result cannot be accepted as adequate evangelization of the group, it is necessary to establish some other role which will allow the Gospel to be made clear in a way which does not demand an immediate response. This avoids triggering a defensive resist-all-change reaction, and leaves the hearer's mind open to evaluate the Gospel in the light of the behavior and character of the man who brings the message. Where the teaching of the Gospel is diametrically opposed to group beliefs at some points, it can only triumph when Gospel truths become self-authenticating. This normally requires time for the new ideas to be reflected on, which also allows for extended practical witness in the life of the messenger.

The role that the Gospel messenger must play, if he is to obtain the privilege of non-pressure personal witness, will be determined by the situation of the group he is seeking to reach. For indigenous groups, that of linguistic investigator or literacy worker may be possible, or there may be opportunities for medical, agricultural, educational, or social work. It is usually important to be meeting a felt need, but the vital thing is to establish personal relationships and a nonthreatening context which allows Gospel truth to be presented and discussed without putting the community on the psychological defensive. If the friendship of group leaders is cultivated and their authority acknowledged, it may be possible to avoid opposition from them, and instead gain them as the first to accept the Gospel, thus making a "people movement" possible.

To adopt a servant role, meeting the felt needs of the minority group in some clear way like literacy or agricultural work, may also be helpful in obtaining government permission to work among minority groups. Such a role is more likely to be viewed as making a positive contribution to the nation than that of the "professional evangelist."

c. *The development of indigenous leadership is crucial to the evangelization of minority groups*, and must be given priority attention from the start. One thing in particular is essential for this. The Gospel must be made available to the group as something distinct from the person of the evangelist, lest too much authority come to center in him. Authority does in fact reside not in the messenger but in the message, the self-revelation of God to men contained in the Holy Scriptures. But if these are not made available to the minority group in a form that they can handle for themselves, and respond to as distinct from the evangelist himself, then authority is bound to come to reside in the latter as the only known expression of the message. Moreover, if the Scriptures are available but are not constantly focused upon as the source of the message; if the believers are not taught to turn to them rather than to the evangelist as their standard and guide; if they are not shown how to use the Scrip-

tures for themselves without the help of the evangelist; then he will inevitably become essential to all the activities of the believing community, and thus be, not a channel for revelation, but a bottleneck inhibiting indigenous development. Hence the translation of the Scriptures, where these do not already exist in the vernacular, accompanied by literacy work where necessary, and teaching concerning the understanding and use of the Bible are items of the highest strategic value.

If strong indigenous leadership is to emerge, the evangelist must also foster from the beginning the recognition that he is not the only person who can present the Gospel or give local leadership. He must learn to refrain from doing some of the things at which he is more capable than the new believers, so as to give to them the opportunity to develop leadership and take responsibility. Planned absence from the area can be very beneficial in this respect, or better yet, the development of a pattern of work in which the evangelist is present only for short-or-medium-term periods of time, and never settles there permanently and allows too much to come to depend on him. Such a pattern may also be an answer to some of the problems of physical location mentioned above.

3. *Implementation of strategy*

While it is important to consider what is the best strategy for the evangelist to follow, it is equally important to consider how such strategy might be implemented. The formidable list of unmet needs in this area of evangelism today prompts the question, "How can the resources of the whole church be mobilized to meet these needs?"

Who should be expected to undertake this task? No simple answer is possible, since the task is so vast and so varied. For immigrant minorities, surely the responsibility rests on the church in the countries where the immigrant groups are found. This should also be true for indigenous minorities, where a national church exists. In the latter case, however, historical and cultural factors often mean that a national church does not develop much concern for indigenous minorities within the borders of its own land, being more interested in work in other countries. This is regrettable, particularly in view of the advantages that a national evangelist often has over one from abroad, in being able to work without a visa, and not having to adjust to an intermediate language and culture before reaching the minority group. An expatriate evangelist does have certain advantages, however, in that he is able to bring a more objective viewpoint to the study of the minority language and culture. The national evangelist, by comparison, finds it hard not to feel that these are inherently inferior to his own, and therefore exerts unconscious pressure on the minority group to conform to or adopt national ways, and this may well weaken a truly indigenous development. There surely remains an urgent need for both national and expatriate workers in this field.

There is room for personal witness and practical evangelism by non-specialist workers in all minority groups which are accessible to visits by outsiders. But these will be most fruitful when accompanied by the long-term work of specialists who are concentrating their efforts on those strategic points which will make the growth of an indigenous church

possible, i.e., Scripture translation, the development of literacy or educational materials, and the training of indigenous leadership. Even for immigrant minorities there will often be a need for someone to study the life of the minority community, and produce specialized materials or services through which the Gospel can be communicated. There is a real and continuing need for full-time specialist workers, supported by the Christian fellowships that have set them apart for such work and adequately trained in the skills that the task demands. This will generally include the study of linguistics, social anthropology, and literacy, in addition to basics like theology, and the principles of evangelism and church planting. Such training is currently provided by Bible colleges, and by such courses as those of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, but it tends to be less accessible to nationals of non-English speaking, or less developed, countries. Strategy therefore calls for specialized training to be more widely available.

A more fundamental problem, however, is the lack of vision and drive on the part of the church to fulfill this aspect of its mission. This may spring from ignorance of the need, or from a false assumption concerning priorities, i.e., that because minority groups contain few persons (compared to majority groups or the growing urban centers) their evangelization is not very imperative — a rather low priority at best. In view of the clear teaching of the Scriptures that God is concerned for every man regardless of the size of the community to which he belongs, and that he is calling to himself a people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues" (Rev. 7:9), it is urgent that this assumption be replaced by truth. The task of evangelizing minority racial groups is an essential part of the church's responsibility, not less important or urgent than other forms of work, but of equal importance and urgency, and therefore to be carried forward at the same time. We cannot shrink back from the task because of its extent, as if our resources were adequate for only a part of what the Master has given us to do. Rather we must press forward, trusting in him who has called us to be with us, as he promised.

EVANGELISM OF MINORITY RACIAL GROUPS REPORT

We believe that Christians in all parts of the world should take the following steps toward the evangelization of these groups:

a. Repent of our unbiblical attitudes in regarding them as inferior, and of our failure to show as much concern for them as for groups more numerous or more easily reached.

b. Ascertain the facts about such groups, both in our own countries and in other parts of the world, so as to prayerfully determine our responsibility toward them.

c. Set aside specialist (E-3) personnel to study the language and culture of each group, and by close identification with them communicate the Gospel to them in a way that is relevant to their culture and situation. Personnel sent to cross-cultural situations should, if possible, receive suitable training — including social anthropology and social psychology, with emphasis on the culture of the target group. (The above applies particularly to indigenous minority groups.)

d. Engage in local (E-2) contacts with individuals from such groups, where possible. This could include sharing with and concern for individuals within the home, choice of housing location so as to facilitate contact and involvement, and the provision of evangelistic and worship activities geared to the minority culture as part of the local church program, possibly with specialist staff.

The resources required for the evangelization of all such groups cannot be computed without fuller information. It seems certain however that the number of immigrant groups must be many hundreds, while the number of indigenous groups still needing specialist workers is probably well in excess of two thousand. (The W.B.T. Ethnologue, 1974 edition, lists 568 languages definitely needing Bible translation, plus 3,438 others which may need this.)

Resources currently available include specialist training for workers among indigenous minorities offered by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Australia, England, Germany, and the U.S.A., with shorter practical courses in a number of other countries.

We recommend that such training and in-service help be made available on a wider basis, to facilitate personnel from many countries engaging in work among these groups. We also call for continued research into the number and circumstances of minority racial groups throughout the world, as a means of stimulating action by the church on their behalf.