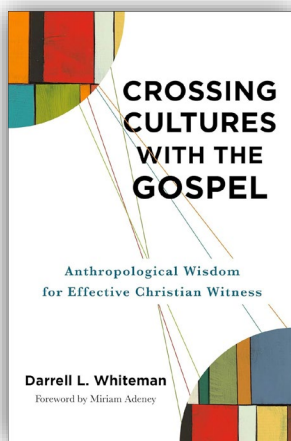


BOOK REVIEW

Crossing Cultures with the Gospel: Anthropological Wisdom for Effective Christian Witness

By Darrell L. Whiteman

Reviewed by Robert Canfield¹



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In an important new book, missiologist Darrell Whiteman tells a revealing story about a missionary who had been preaching in a particular community. Without realizing it, the missionary gave offense by wearing expensive shoes in a place where people couldn't afford shoes of any type. For Whiteman, this anecdote illustrates how much missionaries need to learn—and how many presumptions they might need to abandon—in order to bring the gospel to people in other cultures.

Whiteman's book, *Crossing Cultures with the Gospel: Anthropological Wisdom for Effective Christian Witness*, challenges his readers—and missionaries in particular—to recognize the possible ethnocentrism in their perspective, which can distort and impede their ability to communicate well across cultural boundaries. As he explains, each culture has its own ways of understanding and coping with the

problems of life. All of us understand biblical truths in ways that seem natural to us in our own cultures but not to people who have grown up in other cultures.

In each community, traditions of communication and interaction develop over time, resulting in distinct customs. Every community has its own sense of the past, its own traditions of loyalty and obligation, its own rules of courtesy, and its own conceptions of virtue and honor. If missionaries are to communicate with people who have grown up in other cultures, argues Whiteman, they must lay aside their own presuppositions and cultural conventions and commit to acquiring knowledge of unfamiliar customs and ways of thought.

Watching, Listening, and Asking Questions

The missionary project, as Whiteman reminds us, is to insert the universal message of the gospel “within the very heart of a culture.” As he observes, “Unless the gospel connects deeply with the culture of the people, there will be very little transformation.”

Furthermore, if the gospel makes no sense within a particular community, the people might well distort it to fit their own presuppositions. Whiteman recalls a community in Madang Province of Papua New Guinea, whose members heard the gospel from missionaries and turned it into the claim that after being baptized, blessed by a pastor, and living good lives, their spirits would leave their bodies and go up to heaven three days after dying. Even leaving aside such extreme misinterpretations, it's likely that a poorly understood message will be regarded as irrelevant, boring, or unimportant. Unfortunately, says Whiteman, “seldom is [the gospel] heard and seen as good news.”

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It was firsthand experience that brought Whiteman to the conviction that missionaries need better instruction on communicating within other cultures. After living for two years with missionaries in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, he realized that they had little awareness of how the gospel was reaching the local community. It seemed evident to him that preparation for missionary service ought to include training in cross-cultural communication.

Some people, he notes, spend years taking courses in Bible and theology, but these studies leave them only partially equipped to transmit the gospel to another people. They learn how to interpret biblical passages, but they are unprepared to interpret the situations they will encounter in a strange community.

Before going with his wife to the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, Whiteman completed a PhD in anthropology. After serving abroad several years, he joined the faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary, eventually becoming dean of its E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Ministry, where he served for 21 years. Along with his seminary duties, Whiteman worked with many organizations to help aspiring missionaries learn to communicate to people in other cultures. He has traveled broadly, visiting as many as 78 countries to teach missionaries and churches about delivering the gospel across cultural boundaries.

Anyone who wants to do this well, Whiteman says, should be aware of the messages we inevitably convey even without uttering a word. As he writes, “The lions’ share of evangelism is what is spoken nonverbally. The tone of our voice, our lifestyle and our behavior are all communicating volumes of information.” Indeed, what local people see and hear in the behavior of visitors can influence whether they will want to know them or learn from them.

How, then, is the deeply felt sense of God’s love to be brought across the boundary between missionaries and the people they wish to reach? Whiteman recommends a practical method that involves watching, listening, and asking questions.

As an example, he describes one way he came to know some of the beliefs about spirits held by people in his Solomon Islands community. A friend had stopped by for a visit, and after staying a while, he said as he left, “I think it’s safe for me to go home now.” Asked why, the friend explained that he had come from the bush, where malign spirits had attached to him. He had stopped by to allow the spirits to dissipate

before going home, where he had a newborn child he wanted to protect from their attacks.

Fundamentally, the cross-cultural project requires following the example of Christ, who allowed himself, as he took on human flesh, to acquire the cultural conventions of a first-century Jewish community. “The Incarnation,” writes Whiteman, “is more than an important theological doctrine about God becoming a human being. It is also a model for cross-cultural ministry. Being incarnational means we empty ourselves of our pride, prejudices, personal agendas, ambitions and lifestyle in order to enter deeply into the world of another culture. Incarnation frequently means downward mobility.”

Some missionaries, Whiteman regrets, never make that transition. He points to a missionary who disliked the food of the people he was supposed to reach, which gave him little chance of being effective. Missionaries can unknowingly offend their host communities by violating their conceptions of correct behavior. For instance, one missionary offended his neighbors by talking to his dog. They believed that humans only talk to other humans, and they wondered what kind of relationship this man had with the dog.

A Second Conversion

In fact, argues Whiteman, the commitment to incarnational outreach requires a “second conversion.” Beyond their conversion to Christ, missionaries need to experience a “cleansing of unnecessary assumptions about the gospel and the way that it is to be communicated.”

That takes work and time. Whiteman relates the story of one missionary who lived in a Bangladesh community for 18 years before feeling like he understood it well enough to make the gospel appealing to its people.

Whiteman explains the ideal of a “second conversion” like this:

We take our understanding of the gospel, as culturally conditioned as it is, and we develop a relationship with people who are different from us in their culture. We attempt to read the Bible through their eyes and to understand and interpret it from the perspective of their worldview, not our worldview. When this begins to happen, there will no longer be just a one-way arrow pointing from the missionary communicator to the non-Christian receptor. Now arrows will go both directions because the missionary

will learn many new things about God when they view life through the lens of their host culture.

Essential to the second conversion, says Whiteman, is humility. Missionaries can come to appreciate the experience and perspective of others by entering into dialogue with them. As they develop friendships, they can become conversant with new ways of thinking and, notably, discover how other people see God in their worlds. As Paul declared, God has not left himself without witness in any society (Acts 14:17).

Whiteman describes the career of a German missionary who saw “the image of God in the Tamil people” of southern India and sought “to lead them to a fuller knowledge of God as revealed in Jesus.” The way that an imprint of God already exists among a people can be a starting point for explaining the gospel. Paul, in his speech on Mars Hill, presented Christ as the unknown God that the Athenians had already been worshipping (Acts 17:22–31).

The book also mentions a missionary in Nigeria who learned an important lesson from a local elder on how his service was perceived. When the missionary exulted in having been sent to these people by God, the elder responded, “We are glad you have come, but it is our Igbo god Chukwu who sent you to us so we could learn more about God, now that you have told us about Jesus.” Whiteman writes that God already has a witness in every culture “at every period of human history.” This makes the missionary project exciting and encouraging; as we see how the gospel becomes meaningful to another people, we “learn more about what God is doing in the world.”

Whiteman stresses that, in the end, the fundamental means of crossing boundaries is friendship. Miscommunication is inevitable when people come together from different cultures, but as Peter says, “love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). Miscues, blunders, and misunderstandings need not derail a relationship if people like each other and enjoy each other’s company. There is no substitute, concludes Whiteman, for kindness, respect, and love—qualities of the Savior who commissioned the missionary enterprise.



Robert Canfield is an emeritus professor of anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis. He continues to research projects deriving from his long interest in social affairs in Afghanistan. One of those interests is his intention as a cultural anthropologist to report on situations and social practices among the people he knew in Afghanistan when he collected field notes there in the 1960s. Two recently published memoirs based on that material are “Recollections of a Wedding in the 1930s” and “Trouble in Birgilich”. He is also author of the 2024 book, *Jerusalem Burning: The Terror and Promise of the “Wrath of Love”*.

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