

Good news for the cultures of the world

Acts 6:8-15

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Introduction: We begin by remembering the story of Stephen today, a deacon in the early church whose powerful preaching of the Gospel got him in trouble with the authorities. Accusations against him grew until he was taken before the Jewish Council, where he preached to that hostile audience, according to their own worldview, by using Scripture and referencing their cultural heroes: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and Solomon; but of course, he ended by presenting Jesus as the ultimate revelation. Here they reacted so harshly that they gave Stephen the same fate they had given Jesus -- and he reacted just like Jesus did! It took the early church several years to catch on to their true calling to take the **gospel to the whole world**. They were quite stuck in their comfort zone until the threat of persecution helped to move them out. It often requires suffering and persecution before the seed gets scattered to the winds. It's part of the "pedagogy of suffering"; even our Savior was perfected in His divine mission through what He suffered (Heb. 2:10)!

So we want to focus on the church's mission today: from across the street to the other side of the world. One of our yearly emphases in this area at IBC is called "National Missions," because we believe that **where we live is our first mission field** (how many of the 17 autonomous regions of Spain have you visited?). Spain is the *first place* where our message must be communicated in a way that people can comprehend it, see its relevance to their situation, apply it to their needs, and act on it. Spanish Baptists have set a goal of planting 15 new churches by 2030 in provincial capitals that have no Baptist work. Now obviously we are an English-language church, so where do we fit into this? Well, we have a Filipino congregation as well as a Spanish congregation that meet within our walls. So we're not *just* about English, even though that is our main focus. Let's remember our vision statement (since 2007): "We are an English-speaking international community of believers in Jesus Christ seeking to glorify God as we know Him and make Him known *through our spheres of influence in Madrid and around the world*." Speaking the right language – contextualized for age and life circumstances – is certainly important, but knowing something about **people's worldview** is just as important. Worldviews are "lenses through which we see and interpret the messages and events around us," and they're often unique to particular cultures. When you share the gospel from your worldview with a person from a different worldview, will they be able to understand it? Even more important, will it resonate in their heart deeply enough for them to be able to act on it?

Communicating the Gospel effectively to people of different cultures begins with understanding 3 primary worldviews, each of which revolves around a different axis: guilt

and innocence, shame and honor, fear and power. Let's illustrate each of these. Think about **how the West operates**: individualism and rights are valued; morality is based on right and wrong as defined by the law. You have the right to your own opinions and beliefs, your own path to happiness, as long as you don't break the law. But if you do, you will be assigned a punishment in proportion to your crime. Most Western cultures are in a constant search for the solution to guilt. **Much of the Middle East and Asia** operates differently. Family and community are valued above everything else. Personal relationships, reputation, and social status are the primary motivators. Come from a good family, do good things in the community, follow the social norms, and you will have honor. But do something dishonorable, or have something dishonorable happen to you, and both you and your immediate community will be shamed. So these cultures do their best to avoid shame. Some of Latin American, sub-Saharan Africa, and **most tribal areas** operate differently still. For them, reality is built on the spiritual realm just as much as it is on the physical realm. Most of their decisions hinge on the perceived positive or negative reactions from the spirits around them, which results in taboos, superstitions, spells, and sacrifices dominating these cultures. And it results in their living in a constant state of fear, always seeking power over whatever terrorizes them (but seeking it in the wrong places).

Here in Madrid, we come in contact with people from all these cultural backgrounds living among us! So we need to be prepared to recognize where people are coming from – not just geographically, but culturally – in order to share the Gospel appropriately with them! And in fact, a colleague of ours who teaches at the seminary, Dr. Duane Miller, is a missiologist who insists that there is a 4th cultural axis that is very prominent in our world today: emptiness and purpose (especially relates to postmoderns). How do postmoderns operate? They are suspicious of reason, skeptical, uncomfortable with universal certainties: "Everything is relative, *your* truth cannot meet *my* needs, my truth is based on what matters to me" [narcissism]. So there's little stability, no over-arching metanarrative to explain life, a strong tendency toward anti-authoritarianism and deconstructionism; the only purpose for existence is whatever you decide to do with your life. And the result can be really chaotic, quite a jungle, full of irrationality, because life **is** irrational, fluid, disconnected, and that results in a lot of loneliness, relational fragility, and general precariousness.

So **what is good news** to each of these worldviews? Let's look to Scripture for the answers.

1) The apostle Paul writes in Rom. 8, **"there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."** In Jn. 8, Jesus shows His ability to cleanse us of our sins in His interaction with the woman caught in adultery. The Pharisees bring her to Jesus, cite the law she has broken, and lay out the punishment of stoning as prescribed in the law. She is guilty and her punishment is clear (Jesus is drawing in the dirt). So Jesus invites any of the accusers who have *not* sinned to cast the first stone. One by one, the Pharisees walk away. Jesus was the only one who could rightfully judge her for her sins, and He chose to forgive her (reflecting His Father's heart). Col. 1:13-14 says that God **"has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."** For all those being crushed under the weight of their sin because of their guilt, Jesus offers forgiveness that makes us innocent before God. He was the Innocent One who bore all our sinful cruelty in His face, and He did so with such patience and kindness instead of giving us what we deserved; He was incarnating our forgiveness and liberation from the burden of sin. That's the same thing He

will do with your wrongdoings, idolatries, and guilt: He'll declare you innocent just by your calling on His Name and putting your trust in Him!

2) And what about those hiding their faces from God because they feel like outcasts due to the shame of their failures? In Lk. 15, Jesus tells the story of a son who shamed his family by squandering his inheritance, giving free rein to all his sinful desires, and ending up so low he got a job herding pigs and wished he could eat pig food. But when he returned to his senses and remembered his father's household, he decided to go home, still covered in filth, wearing tattered clothes and carrying the shame of his past; and his father runs to him and covers all that shame with his loving embrace and kisses, with clothes from his own wardrobe, a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet, and he throws a feast to welcome him home. The older brother wants to maintain his sibling in the shameful category, but the father declares him "alive from the dead!" Eph. 1:5 says that in love all those who come to Jesus are adopted as sons/daughters in Him, in accordance with God's good will and pleasure, not according to any merit of their own. Eph. 2:19 expounds on that sentiment: **"So you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of his household."** Jesus restores humanity's relationship with God, covers our shame, grants us the honor of being in God's kingdom.

3) And what about those who spend much of their lives using sacrifices, spells, and superstitions to appease the spirits that strangle them with fear? Jesus is the perfect example of power in the face of all our fears: He calmed storms, multiplied bread and fish, walked on water, healed the sick, and cast out demons as a demonstration of his power over the spirit realm, just as later, on the cross, He would demonstrate his total power over sin, the evil one, and death (Col. 2:15, Heb. 2:14). 1 Jn. 3:8 says Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil, and Eph. 1:19-21 talks about the power that God grants us as being **"the same as the strength He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms."** Jesus holds all authority in His hands, and when his Spirit dwells in us, He gives us that same authority over fear and sin and the evil one. His perfect love casts out fear!

4) Finally, how does the Gospel relate to those who are floating in the postmodern ether? Devoted to their narcissistic bubble, convinced they must seize the day before their opportunity vanishes forever. Jesus says to them, **"the kingdom of God is at hand – repent and believe the Good News!" "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's, that's the one who will save it."** Jesus is all about restoring the family that God created where they can come to know their true identity and purpose!

So when we tell the good news **1)** in **guilt/innocence cultures**, we help people understand that God sent His Son to live the life we couldn't live, to forgive our sins personally even as we tortured and murdered Him; He canceled all our debt. We show them how our guilt is taken away by his gracious pardon in the face of our worst crime (He was Himself the Judge!), and his subsequent resurrection is the proof! **2)** To those living in **honor/shame cultures**, we try to help them know there is a Father in heaven who through Christ has established a place of honor for them in his kingdom, like that father who welcomed the prodigal son back into his household by throwing a party to honor him in front of the entire community. In the same way, our heavenly Father is preparing a feast for all of His children

and heirs when his kingdom comes into its fullness. **3)** And to those in **fear/power cultures** who are afraid of spirits, who feel like they are cursed, or who are constantly having to offer sacrifices for some semblance of freedom, remind them that Jesus showed his power and authority over nature, evil, sickness, and curses all through the gospels. Tell them that they can give their allegiance to the Son of God who walks on water, raises the dead, calms storms, and destroys the works of the enemy. **4)** And for those lost in the **postmodern haze**, reassure them that they're not a cosmic accident, that God created our universe with a great purpose and invites us to be His partners in the redemption of creation, beginning with the rescue of our own lives from vanity and futility through Jesus' victory over sin and death! His Word is totally trustworthy – it's the Truth that sets us free!

So the Gospel doesn't have to be twisted or manipulated to satisfy the needs of the people groups, nations, and tribes of the world; it addresses every need head on. Jesus answers the heart cry of every individual and every culture. If you're looking for innocence, Jesus washes away the stains of your sins so you stand before God blameless. If you're in need of honor and acceptance, Jesus makes you a child and heir of the King, a citizen of the kingdom (and it won't matter what you've done). And if you're seeking power due to your weakness and fear, by trusting in the Lord Jesus you will experience His death-defeating power dwelling within you. If you're lost in the fog of irrationality and purposelessness, Jesus' kingdom makes sense of everything, connecting you to the greatest rescue mission in all of history! That's good news! We need to keep growing in all these aspects of the gospel message and we need to share it with others according to their background and worldview.

(Much of the content on worldviews was summarized from Global Frontier Missions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2XNoAFtqOw>)