

Chapter 25b, Jesus Avoids Cultural Stumbling Blocks:

Stories from a friend of ours who works in a large country in Asia reveal yet another interesting, amazing, encouraging aspect of the Immanuel Approach.

Jennifer¹ and her colleagues have been working in a remote region with ancient, complex cultures. Furthermore, there is a lot of diversity in this area, so they have often needed to transition between three or four different ethnic groups in a single day, with each group presenting its own set of complex, subtle language and cultural challenges. No matter how hard they tried to be informed and sensitive with respect to the many language and cultural issues, Jennifer and her colleagues were constantly stumbling over misunderstandings. And sometimes the offenses caused by these misunderstandings could be quite costly.

The good news is that Jennifer and her colleagues discovered a fun fringe benefit of the Immanuel Approach when they brought it into this incredibly complicated, challenging situation. Once recipients established a strong interactive connection with Jesus, they could engage directly with Jesus regarding any and every issue without Jesus ever stepping on subtle, complicated language and cultural land mines. Jesus could do healing work, he could provide mentoring, he could talk to the recipients about pastoral issues – Jesus could engage with the local peoples regarding all manner of subjects – without ever making the kind of subtle language and cultural mistakes that the mission team had always had so much trouble with.

Jennifer and her colleagues have also noticed that people just seem to intuitively trust Jesus – even when local people are feeling guarded and suspicious toward the foreigner, they will still be trusting and receptive toward Jesus as they interact directly with him in the context of Immanuel prayer.

Furthermore, having Jesus at the center (with the foreign missionary just facilitating the connection) shifts the system dynamics in a way that has been very helpful. I have just had a number of communications with Jennifer to make sure that I am correctly understanding the details for this story, and in one of these recent e-mail exchanges she commented, “I still marvel at God’s goodness in His interactions with cross-cultural situations. It really eases the miscommunications and fosters trust when people realize that the foreigner is not the center of attention, but rather God. And there is no cultural barrier with him!”

Of course the Immanuel Approach hasn’t solved the problem entirely, since the mission team still needs to engage with the local people in many situations outside of Immanuel sessions; but it has been tremendously helpful to have Jesus in the middle of everything, and it has been fun to watch him interact with people from so many different ethnic groups regarding so many different subjects without ever stumbling over language or cultural issues.

As I ponder the implications of this story, one of my conclusions is that any person, ministry, or mission team working in any kind of cross-cultural situation should have the Immanuel Approach in the middle of what they are doing.

¹We are not using Jennifer’s real name due to security concerns.