The World at Our Doorstep

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personal weaknesses and prompt better listening skills, a softer response to verbal attacks, and a desire to grow as a friend. Cronkite extols the benefit of conflict by stating, “All individual growth can be linked to the facing and managing of conflict.” If this is true, then growth is not possible without recognizing and managing those elements in our life that bring us conflict.

James told his readers to count it all joy when they faced difficult situations, for those situations would teach them to rely on God. Paul states clearly that the goal of all of life is to demonstrate God to a world needing His love.

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks, or the church of God—even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.
(1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1)

Interpersonal conflict is often a painful reality for the Christian. To overcome the discouragement it brings, we need to address it and respond to it biblically. If we learn to manage our interpersonal conflicts, the situation may become God’s tool for spiritual growth.

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Many of us recall singing that chorus enthusiastically as children. As adults, we give mental assent to the truth of the message, but ways to process that truth may seem vague and elusive. As Christ welcomed people from all walks of life and a variety of cultures, the Jewish leaders of His day were scandalized. In our changing society, however, cultural diversity is becoming more and more a part of our daily life. How we respond to it depends on how well we understand scriptural teaching in this area.

The church urgently needs to build bridges of cultural understanding by which Christians can reach out and more willingly embrace people from all cultures. While we profess admiration for those missionaries who invest their lives to carry the message of salvation to people in faraway places and strange cultures, do we ourselves sense the need to reach out to those around us who may be different? Are we willing to push beyond our own comfort zones in order to establish bridges with others who live and work in our midst?

In response to the question, Who is my neighbor? Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to show clearly that anyone who reaches out to someone in need understands the command to love your neighbor as yourself. Along the same line, Scripture also

gives us principles and instructions for dealing with “strangers” or “aliens.” In the Old Testament, strangers were those people who were not Israelites, but who chose to identify with and live among God’s people. By extension, it is possible to consider as a stranger anyone who moves into and settles down in our community. Several times in the book of Exodus, the Lord reminds the Israelites to care for widows, orphans, and strangers. The motivation is one of empathy: “And you shall not oppress a stranger, since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you were also strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9 NASV).

In the New Testament, Jesus broadens the scope of the concept by indicating that our treatment of others is an indication of our love for Him (Matthew 25:31-46). In 1 John 3:16-18, the true test of our love for God lies in our willingness to meet the needs of others—our actions must bear out what we profess.

At heart is the recognition of God’s grace freely bestowed to each one of us, regardless of race or nationality. Our cultural identity is part of God’s design for us, so we should value individuals from all backgrounds as God has created them.

Have you ever been on an extended trip away from home and felt alone and vulnerable because you were unfamiliar with the surroundings and habits of the people? About ten years ago I spent one summer in a study-abroad program in Lisbon, Portugal. I stayed with a family who spoke no English, and the only Americans I knew were the Southwells, Cedarville graduates serving as missionaries in a town a half hour away. For some reason, I could not make any contacts, even among the other students in the program, in order to have some companionship.

The study-abroad agreement did not include a meal contract, so I had to eat out twice a day, every day for six weeks. Since Portugal is on the Atlantic coast, the cuisine includes a lot of seafood—unfortunately, I don’t really care that much for seafood!

Consider the feelings of those strangers with whom you come into contact, particularly those folks from other countries who are now living in our country for a variety of reasons. The feelings of loneliness they experience are probably very similar to those I experienced, and which all of us feel from time to time. A friendly face, empathy, and kindness will minister tremendously. The same is true for others who are not strangers but who belong to another race.

The first principle of cross-cultural understanding is to recognize the fact of our common humanity—deep down, we all have desires, fears, and fundamental needs such as significance and belonging. Just as Israel was to demonstrate empathy for strangers based on their shared experience, so we should try to find ways to put ourselves in the other person’s position and understand his/her point of view. One easy way to understand another culture is to read something about its history and traditions. Read authors of that particular cultural point of view, rather than second-hand reports or interpretations.

Another way is by sitting down with the other person in a comfortable setting and genuinely and respectfully asking about his background experiences and circumstances. By all means, be careful to avoid a condescending or patronizing attitude that would make the other person feel belittled or not taken seriously. Your interest in the other person’s culture can create a bridge of understanding because it shows your respect for the other person and his ways.

While we certainly recognize that the absolutes of Scripture provide standards for moral conduct in every culture, many of our
actions and habits represent cultural preferences and choices not regulated by Scriptural principles. You may not accept all of the other person's ways of doing things, but you can at least understand a little more about the reasons why he acts as he does.

Secondly, don't let your knowledge inadvertently become a barrier: see people as individuals, not as stereotypes or statistics. People in other countries usually stereotype Americans as loud, informal, rich, generous, lovers of baseball and hamburgers—do you fit into all of those categories? Recognize which patterns of behavior are acceptable for a particular culture, but do not let those patterns dictate how you respond to someone. Related to this notion of individuality, always try to separate the person from the problem. Some ethnic groups are erroneously portrayed as troublemakers by the media or other sources that promote stereotypes. But of course all racial groups are subject to the sinfulness of human nature, a reality which is often unfortunately compounded for some by the dilemmas of economic, political, and social pressures. No one individual is solely responsible for the perceived problems caused by a particular group.

What are the benefits of making the effort to understand another culture? First of all, we get to enjoy the richness of that culture's traditions, customs, and beliefs—the Hispanic and Oriental respect for family, for example, can challenge us to spend more quality time with our own families. My own experiences in Spain and Latin America have challenged me to become more people-oriented and less time-oriented; that is, choosing to spend quality time with someone rather than give in to the pressures of the clock to keep moving.

Learning about another culture is like looking into a mirror—you can't help learning more about yourself and those things that you value when you see yourself from someone else's perspective. Those of us who have spent significant time with people from other cultures can recount valuable insights (and probably humbling experiences) we have received from those contacts.

Finally, building cultural bridges instead of barriers on an individual basis becomes a clear expression of peacemaking. The Hebrew word for peace, shalom, conveys much more than just the absence of war—it is the establishment of right relations with other human beings, fulfilling God's kingdom purpose here on earth. It is critical that we identify our own personal attitudes towards people of other cultures and that we progressively operate more and more on the principles of grace and shalom.

Admittedly, such openness involves taking risks, and also a willingness to seek or give forgiveness when offenses occur. But we have a profound responsibility to model respect, understanding, and empathy since others, especially children, learn from what they see in us. Instead of furthering distrust or fear towards a particular race, we can choose to treat others humanly and biblically. “Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in my sight” when seen through the lenses of God's love and grace.

A 1977 Cedarville graduate, Dr. Barbara Loach serves as associate professor of Spanish at the College. She also studied in Spain, Portugal, and Quebec and has traveled in Chile and Puerto Rico as well. Dr. Loach led students on MIS experiences to Argentina and Mexico.