Strategies for Global Cultural Engagement

Part 2 of 2: Cross-cultural Evangelism and Apologetics
with Darrell L. Bock and Ramesh P. Richard
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Ramesh, earlier you talked about four key areas of the world where things are happening. Why don't we review what those are and then we can take a look at why those areas are significant.

Ramesh Richard: Right. I was addressing the systemic political socioeconomic differences of very proximate areas. For example, North Korea and South Korea: Within the space of 6 to 60 kilometers, you have two entire systems. Both came out of the war. For example, South Korea was among the poorest countries of the world coming out of the war, and now it's in the top 15. And the same people, same dynamics, same entrepreneurialism, same commitment, same language, same culture. But how sociopolitical systems make a difference.

The other one I visited was in Eastern and Western Germany. And once I read the rubber-band-put-together Trabants – as you recall, Darrell. You've been there several times. And, of course, West Germany had this most beautiful late model Mercedes-Benz. Again, one people – just a sociopolitical system kept them abreast.

Darrell Bock: And I think it's important to appreciate that, because I have spent four sabbaticals in Germany. I've watched West Germany rebuild almost from scratch East Germany. But the other thing that people don't appreciate is that East Germany's a bridge and a window into Eastern Europe and into Asia. And so it's a very strategic part of the world.

Ramesh Richard: Yes. And also Western Germany needed Eastern Germany for sheer population numbers. It was sitting in a demographic time bomb. You need something like 2.1 babies for every woman of childbearing age for population to remain stable.

Indonesia, for example, grows 25 times the speed of Western Germany. So Western Germany actually was doing herself a favor in absorbing Eastern Germany.

The third area that we can talk about is the China-Hong Kong line. I've just been there in the last couple of weeks. China and Hong Kong, they've had a relationship over the years, especially now it's classified as a strategic administrative region. Hong Kong China considers themselves a part of China, and yet, they have to keep themselves distinct because of their economic systems. Of course, Hong Kong is the world's most expensive property – real estate property in the world – and you can see two systems having demarcated the advancement of material economic progress as starkly as it can possibly be.
A fourth area I would say is what may be called the outright area of South Africa over against the rest of Africa. South Africa is the richest country inside the continent. Again, it was a system that was oppressive and built on a wrong view of Scripture, where they found the Canaanites being everybody else except those who dominated the sociopolitical economic system.

And it's one good reason why we need to say that it's a radical break at the cross, that there's an entire new people of God that have been put together. And in a concretely tight continuation theology, you'll start mixing up the people of God with the Israel of God throwing out the Canaanites. And I actually had an Anglican pastor in Cape Town express deep appreciation of Dallas Seminary for keeping the peoples of God not just continuous, but there was enough discontinuity between the Israel of old and the people of God now.

And so that's another socioeconomic demographic reality, except now, the entire Southern African region, while it is more economically more prosperous than the rest, is seeing the same heart of man in its corruption and its wickedness taking over. And so we've got to do a two-level kind of work: Address the health of the church. But the health of the church really impacts the health of the community. And so if we can address the health of the pastor, which is basically the health of the church, which is basically the health of the community, we can make material difference.

**Darrell Bock:** Now it's interesting, because the one area that you didn't mention that is another area of major Christian growth and activity, of course, is Latin America – which is its own story, because if you go there, the thing that's interesting about traveling in Latin America is with the heavily Catholic presence, talking about spiritual things in that part of the world is actually very easy to do, because there is a pervasive religiosity to the culture that has a deep impact. And yet the faith is also growing in that part of the world.

**Ramesh Richard:** Yes, unbelievably so. For example, the fastest growing area/region of the world, parts of Rio de Janeiro, outside the great city of Rio, something like 9,000 pastors exist. And it's just unbelievable, but they don't have training.
Yes, Latin America is a powerful story – and you hit on something very important. Asia, especially, does not have the same worldview heritage that the Roman Catholic missional enterprise gave to Latin America. So when we go into Latin America, we don't have as big a bridge from their worldview to the Gospel, coming to the Lord Jesus especially, because they have some view of a distant God, a God who's transcendent. They've got a lot of mediation processes, but it's not as big a jump from a Latin American/Roman Catholic worldview into the Gospel.

**Darrell Bock:**

So these different areas of the world come with different backgrounds, different technical language, sociological languages, religious pre-understandings, which the sharing of the Gospel has to deal with those. So, for example, in Asia, you've got the background of Hinduism, Buddhism, and some cases Islam, and you also have a lot of popular religion that's built around family worship – I don't know what other word to use. Latin America, you've got the Roman Catholic situation. Africa is completely different. It's more populous and animistic kind of religious experience. So sharing the Gospel in these parts of the world – even though the message that you're delivering is the same, the way in which it's being heard and has to be processed is different. Is that right?

**Ramesh Richard:**

This is very, very important. In all our strategies, especially with evangelism and church planting and training, the worldview-religion-culture, what are called the human matrix of every person, every group, significantly affects their reception of the faith. So if I went into a Hindu worldview and talked about the matter of birth and being born again, their understanding of being born again is heavily influenced by the baggage they bring in terms of reincarnation, that you can be born again, and again, and again, and again.

If you go into an Islamic worldview and talk about God sending his one and only Son, they read it biologically in terms of reproduction, how humans reproduce. So they very easily slip into God, Mary, and Jesus. And if you go into a Buddhist worldview in their non-theistic, maybe atheistic view of reading reality, while pursuing principles, you have to keep pressing them on these matters as to where they get their foundations for their principles if they don't hold to a foundational reality of God at all.

So in what may be called a +5 to -5 spectrum, you've got to identify how close their human matrix is to the Gospel matrix that we present.
Darrell Bock: Okay, you need to explain that matrix, because most people may not know what + or -5 is.

Ramesh Richard: All right. Let's say 0 is point of conversion. The -4 would be nominal Christianity. People who have grown up with the Christian faith, they are aware of God, they're aware the Gospel, they're aware of the cross. The Christian heritage that they have doesn't make them a Christian. They still have to embrace the salvation message, but they're nominal Christians. A -3 are those who may be theist, but not Christian theist. Theists believe in a god, but they don't hold to the God of the Bible.

Darrell Bock: But this is the way people who do evangelism and mission work talk about kind of where their audience is, right? This is a spectrum.

Ramesh Richard: It's the basic audience analysis, yeah. A -2 would be people of other religions who are not theists at all, like the pantheists of the world. And then maybe a -1 are those who are atheist or agnostic.

Darrell Bock: So the lower the number, the further away you are –

Ramesh Richard: And more of the work need to be done. For example, in your work, Darrell, you're finding that this -2, -3 are very common categories when America used to be simply a -4 deal.

Darrell Bock: That's right.

Ramesh Richard: And all of your writing, all of your media presence, you're able to bridge, moving them from, let's say, a -2 to a -3 – which also means that our success rate in evangelism and how we measure success needs to be changed. A lot of people like to just measure the -4 to 0. Everybody's really excited and happy –

Darrell Bock: Did someone get converted.
Ramesh Richard: That's correct. But for you and me to have moved somebody from a -2 with a little bit of seed sowing, little bit of reorientation, to a -3, that's just as significant, because he's well on the road towards the embrace of salvation. On the plus side a +1, let's say, is a new believer – brand new believer. A +2 is somebody who goes to church regularly. A +3 is a leader in a church. A +4 is a seminary student or a Bible College student.

Darrell Bock: A +5 is Jesus Christ. No, just kidding.

Ramesh Richard: Well +5 is probably a martyr for the faith. Yeah, or a missionary for the faith. So we want to take the minus side of it very much into consideration while we're presenting Christ.

I've suggested elsewhere a strategy when we go into those -3 and beyond. I'd like to suggest that there are four touch points to the Gospel that you cannot start with, "God loves you and has a great plan for you," when they have a different view of God, different view of plan, different view of sin. And those are very good when it comes to nominal Christians. They understand what God is and who God is in a sense that we understand.

So I ask for first what may be called an apologetic of life. But Christianity is not one idea over another idea. It's life on life, it's lived out – the transformed life which is so engaging and attractive and winsome to the unbeliever.

For example, yesterday, I was with some friends from Iran. In addition to all the visions and the dreams that people are seeing in the most unusual ways – this man made a case that a supernaturally transformed life inside of family is the most powerful testimony.

To the family, a sustained witness for Christ, and they are drawn to the faith, the changed life. So the apologetic of life.

And so I would ask every Christian, especially as they live with their neighbors from other backgrounds. And they're all over, as 30-some million of America now is foreign-born, and they come from areas where the Christian faith is not the majority faith. But they've come here with entrepreneurial zeal, some degree of seeking. Some of them get more fanatical and reinforced in their old faith. Since they are here, they've been alerted and warned in their countries, "Watch out for these Christians who will convert you."
But basic aspects of hospitality and helps, celebration of seasons, the times when they're in need – from helping them with driver's licenses to having them inside your home saying a prayer of blessing over a meal. Those are all brand new to them. So that really reflects what the Lord Jesus says: "Let you light so shine before human beings so that they, observing you, will glorify your Father in heaven, your good works."
Peter makes the same case: "Keep your behavior excellent among the nonbelievers, so that on account of your behavior, they'll glorify God on the day of visitation." It's sort of a subversive strategy, but just as important.

**Darrell Bock:** So the point that you're making is that what is applying to some degree and what's going on around the world, is also kind of coming to our own doorstep in a very real way, and having some awareness of what the global options are is important.

**Ramesh Richard:** Yes. And historically for 200 years – this is the 200th year or so right after America sent the first missionary overseas. Now, all the people that we sent missionaries to are now our neighbors. And our entire country is built on a immigration platform. So let's harness it and see it as an opportunity for the harvest.

**Darrell Bock:** So global engagement then, to think about it this way, isn't just a matter of thinking about what's going on elsewhere in the world, but it's also thinking about how the world has come to us.

**Ramesh Richard:** That is correct. And the majority minorities, and the minority majorities, the shifts there – it takes a heart that needs to be wider, because the deep level of Christ inside your life wanting to reach out to them, so that we're not stereotyping and categorizing people from all over the world as belonging to one kind of philosophy of life.
So that's the first, the apologetics of life. Life on life is the most powerful dynamic, basic Christian love. Love is uniquely Christian, because we have somebody who loved us, and we can base this on a cross that demonstrates unconditional love.
The second apologetic tactic, or method, is what I'm going to call the “apologetic of word.”
A lot of people directly go into conflict and contesting others’ views of themselves, rather than having established the groundwork or the right to be heard. But no life is perfect enough, no life is good enough to, in itself, carry the Gospel, so there has to be a word component.
Looking for opportunities in order to sow a seed here, a prayer there, a wish for them, and really, really wanting their good, their ultimate good, even though they don't particularly see their felt need right now. And that's, you know, a good ol' basic proclamation of the Gospel. So the apologetic of word. The next level – not only apologetic of life and the apologetic of word – I'm going to call the "apologetic of reason".

Too many apologists get to reason first. There's an old Indian proverb which goes, "You don't cut off a man's nose and give him a rose to smell." We try to do that with the Lord Jesus all the time. Here is this amazing gift of eternal life that we can give to people, and then we destroy them in the process of contest and debate, when all you're doing is first establishing the groundwork of relationship, then presenting gently – and straightforwardly, but gently – the claims of the Gospel; and then, of course, a reason for the hope that is in you.

I think there's good pattern and precept inside the book of Acts to follow these three. You are the expert in the book of Acts, so you might want to weigh in on this. But the apologetic of reason. The number of times it says Paul reasoned, Paul persuaded, Paul even argued with his audiences. And the classic difference is, Peter and Paul approaching both the Jews and the Gentiles at different starting points and worldview premises to present the Gospel.

At this point, after building life, word, and reason, I actually invite them to consider Christ. I did this last Saturday in New York with about 400 at a very fine event. That's a point of deep fear and anxiety when you're asking to trust Christ, and yet, when you lay out an invitation, people trust Christ.

And so I would like to add a fourth layer to this, the apologetic method, and call it the "apologetic of meaning".

It's just old-fashioned discipleship. It's like finding a new pair of glasses. Your prescription has changed, you go to the optician, he gives you a new pair of glasses; it takes you a little while for you to get used to the new pair of glasses, because you have been so engrained into your former habits and practices. And then good discipleship grows them into vital vibrant servants of Christ.

**Darrell Bock:** Okay. Well you've talked about mission. Let's talk a little bit about the nature of some of the issues that we see globally. And I think the way I want to get at this is to say – and maybe it's a sociological question of sorts – what is different about sharing the Gospel in Asia, in Latin America, in Europe, and in Africa? In other words, what about the way people live and about those cultures?
And I realize it's a broad question. For example, I'll illustrate it. In Latin America, I, for years, taught a course with Danny Carroll who teaches Old Testament at Denver.

Ramesh Richard: A classmate of all of us.

Darrell Bock: That's right. And who had spent time in Guatemala teaching at SETECA. And we used to take our students down and teach a course on hermeneutics and theology down there. And the assignment for the North American students was to say, "If you lived in this culture, what issues would you be sensitive to that you tend not to be as sensitive to in North America because you're living here?"

And it was kind of an eye-opening question, because it made them think about how they expressed their theology, what imagery do they use, that kind of thing. And, of course, the thing that stood out was the poverty that is so transparent in much of the culture required that certain passages that they tend, perhaps, to just brush by when they're teaching here in North America and the United States all of a sudden, become important texts.

I remember one glaring example of a different kind in which there was text where the John the Baptist addresses soldiers, and basically he tells them, you know, not to abuse people and to be content with their wage. Well, in the North American context, in most North American contexts, we don't have to worry about the military abusing their authority. We don't hear too much about that. But in the context of Latin America, it can be a given. And so the exhortation resonates in Latin America in a way that oftentimes North Americans don't even think about.

So that's the kind of question I'm asking. What are the outstanding cultural features in different parts of the world that someone pays attention to that they may not be as sensitive to as North Americans?

Ramesh Richard: Correct. I really think there are two issues. One, you've already touched on, Darrell. One is the issue the poverty, and also the causes of poverty. For example, corruption and wickedness. On just our border between the US and Mexico where, you know, Juarez City has had over 10,000 people killed because of drug trafficking and so on. In what way are we going to present the comfort of Christ and the protection of Christ to them?

I have friends there who say, "God has called me to live here. And even though we see 100 bodies every day on the way from here to church, we are going to stay here, because God has called us to stay here."
So poverty and the causes for poverty. Not only the passive causes, but the ongoing continuous cause. It's not only historical causes, but continuing causes. They're just drastic, they are visceral. You've got to address them.

The second area is a plurality of religious options – just sociological pluralism. And, historically, evangelicals have been good at addressing the uniqueness of Christ, but not the poverty issues. And those were not evangelicals or other appellations – they are very good at addressing systemic poverty issues, but not the uniqueness of Christ issues.

Somewhere, there needs to be a comprehensive theology of society, theology of social action, without confusing it with evangelism and the Gospel, because while the content of the Gospel is that Lord Jesus is the only Savior of the world, the scope of the Gospel affects the existence of the Church in a particular locality, which takes into account issues like crime and justice issues and other deprivation.

Our daughter, for example, now lives in Malawi, and Malawi, till recently, was the highest misery index in the world. She works at a school which spends a lot of money on maintaining the lawns with water. But just outside the school, there is no water; there's no water to drink. And what kind of witness is that when there's no water or fuel outside, but because this particular school is well-endowed, it can have water – just, you know, water their lawns when people don't have no water to drink or take a shower.

If you came with me to Kolkata – Kolkata, it used to be called Calcutta before. Nobody knows the population of Kolkata. It could be 28 million or it could be 16 million, because in the daytime it swells and in the nighttime it goes down. There are more people sleeping on the sidewalks of Kolkata than live in Ottawa, the capital city of Canada.

Where is the touch of the Gospel there? In the Proclamation, we've got to keep the Gospel distinct that the Lord Jesus is the only way in order to possess and secure eternal life, not just secure, but possess eternal life. But the Church, which lives in this context, has to have an impact on both the plurality of religions around it, as well as the economic deprivation around it.
Darrell Bock: You know, it's interesting, because I look at a curriculum in western seminaries and I don't see a class, say, on poorology. We might see an elective on poverty, but we don't see a focused study on the hundred of passages really in Scripture that address the issue of the poor, God's concern for the poor, issues of justice, that kind of thing. Someone who I used to work with who did innercity ministry said to me, "You know, there are 400 such passages in the Bible." I mean you literally could give a year's worth of study to those kinds of texts.

And the idea of dealing with the diversity of options is something – we have talked about this in other podcasts – that one of the ways in which the world has changed significantly in our time versus the time of the Bible is that in the time of the Bible, everyone, or almost everyone believed in some form of the spirit world, some form of transcendence. That was a given in the ancient world. I tell people, "Don't think of Rome as being a secular society, they had 150 religious holidays every year that people were to participate in."

But our world's different in that we – at least certain parts of the world are different, it depends on where you are – in that there are many pockets of our world, particularly the western world, where the idea of a transcendent being and a transcendent reality doesn't exist for people. And so the moment you present the Bible, where transcendence is the driving force of the entire story, you've got a problem. You're back to your scale of the minuses.

Ramesh Richard: That is correct.

Darrell Bock: And so it makes doing evangelism harder. So in one sense, the world has become – if I can say it – more diverse today than it was in the first century, because at least if I address spiritual realities in the first century, almost everyone would at least go there.

Ramesh Richard: Yes. And I think the third phrase, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." We are heavier on the truth, and perhaps, more so on the way than Jesus being the life. And when you present "the life," no one comes to the Father – for the way, the truth, and the life, except through the Lord Jesus.

Life component in every situation is different. And places of the world, which I'm going to call "overall" societies or "pre-literary" societies rather than just voodoo animalistic, they hold on to the fact that Jesus is very life to them.
Darrell Bock: Interesting. Well, that's obviously a significant area of thinking about global engagement. And, again, all this reality of what's going on around the world is coming towards us in a very real way, because our own demographics are changing.

Ramesh Richard: We cannot excuse ourselves from what's happening in the rest of the world. It's visually close, not only in television screens, but next door in our grocery stores, in our markets, in our stadiums. They are right next to us. And I really think in this restructuring of the world, God is giving America an incredible new challenge in touching people from around the world who all have connections and contacts with the rest of the world. They go to their homes frequently. They're calling them on Skype every day. And if some change happens as a result of the Gospel, it is a powerful witness for the rest of the world.

Darrell Bock: Well, that's helpful, Ramesh. What other advice would you give us in terms of thinking about engagement in global terms?

Ramesh Richard: Yes. I think in the middle of all the crises the world faces presently, it is possible to become afraid and anxious, and the proverbial ostrich syndrome becomes ours.

Darrell Bock: So withdrawing and just getting out of everything.

Ramesh Richard: Yes, because it allows us to be a bit more comfortable, even in our ignorance. I don't think that's what the Christians’ mission or calling is. When he said, "Go," he really meant go. Sometimes we downplay the “go” because we know the imperatives of making disciples. But there is a going that's implicit there. And that going does not need to be far anymore. It's just next door. It is literally next door. In my city where I live in a suburb of Dallas, 106 languages are spoken in the school district. 106 languages. I don't have to go to 106 countries anymore. These guys are right next to me, and they're looking for everything from help in filling out forms for FAFSA to driver's license to help and care when their loved ones come to the United States for a little while. So in a basic hospitality and helps platform, don't stay there, but start there and continue with the Gospel.
**Darrell Bock:** You know, there are several terrific ministries I know working in university campuses dealing with people who come to the United States from overseas trying to connect them to American hosts who will help them transition into their university life, get acclimated to American culture, be taken care of, and have people who they can know and the culture can help them negotiate that. And having done that myself, you know, having gone to Germany and having to deal with a different language and different set of rules for how people live, et cetera, I know how helpful that can be.

**Ramesh Richard:** Yes, and that's sort of the middle section. We also have the very wealthy coming to the US, and I mean they're heads of the corporation. I've got people coming and saying, you know, "I have a Brazilian boss. I have a Chinese businessman who owns my company, and they're investing from all over the world." So not just at the college level, but the highest socioeconomic strata.

And then the poorest levels who are coming – the Lost Boys of Sudan, for example, or Ethiopia because of refugee status. I mean this is the genius of the country. I mean there are many, many aspects of this land that's just absolutely incredible, from entrepreneurial zeal to a philanthropic tradition, but our immigrant platforms. And God has brought something like 12 percent of the country from all over the world, foreign born, right here.

**Darrell Bock:** Well, actually, if you go back far enough, almost all of us, except for the American Indians are –

**Ramesh Richard:** I'm glad you clarified it.

**Darrell Bock:** So there ought to be some sensitivity to the fact that one level or another, many of us are immigrants if we go back four generations. I know that's true in my family.

**Ramesh Richard:** And we're just extending what others have extended to us. Global engagement, cultural engagement – I cannot think of a greater application of the Gospel right now that's needed. And I'm grateful for both your work, Darrell, and the Seminary's vision for you, and I'm grateful for the vision for what they've done in my own life. And I think Dallas Seminary is positioned at a very critical moment theologically in higher education, but also in terms of reaching out to the world.
Darrell Bock: Well, it's our hope that not only people who are associated with the Seminary, but people who identify with the call of being a Christian in general, in interacting, and thinking about some of the issues that we raise in the podcast will come to have a deeper appreciation for what mission means in the Church, what God is calling them to do and to be. And in that process, maybe reach out with a little more sensitivity to those around them who are different; and in the process, perhaps be that witness and that opportunity and that one or, perhaps, part of a larger story of one among many whom God uses to draw people to himself.

And when we think about global engagement, engaging on a global scale, moving outside our own world – in some cases, our own ethnicity – is an important step in being able to show the very diversity that God created in the creation when he made many nations. So our hope and prayer is that we will be Christians who reflect that diversity in the healthy sense of the term, in the way God has created it. So thank you, Ramesh, for being with us.

Ramesh Richard: Thank you, Darrell. What a great joy. If anytime I can assist you and Seminary in any which way, I'm happy to serve.

Darrell Bock: Thanks, Ramesh.