

Humans have been creating pictures throughout history. A simple rock painting that might be thousands of years old; a colorful stain glass window that might be hundreds of years old; a photograph almost two hundred years old; and also today, movies tell a story... all these are pictures each with a message that communicates a detailed meaning as intended by the artist. Printed and spoken words are also messages that communicate, and as such, are also pictures.

God is the guide of the people who communicated His message. Those people used word-pictures to make the message clear. Consequently, the Bible is full of word-pictures. God intends for the audience to draw a specific meaning from these pictures. This meaning is, in a real sense, the learning opportunity the passage provides for the audience. Even though the meaning of these passages is universal, it was pictured so that it would be understood by the initial audience. Since today's viewers hold different worldviews, they don't automatically understand the meaning of the message God intended it to have. If the worldview of today's audience is different enough, it causes people even to understand a meaning that God did not intend. That is why a series of pictures that belong together, like in a movie, need to be considered in order to communicate effectively. Therefore, anyone communicating needs to consider this principle.

For example, let us look at the picture of the narrow gateway and path leading to living well with God and the wide gateway and path leading to disaster as presented in Matthew 7:13-14. The traditionally hunter-gatherer !Kung people in Namibia know within their worldview context the concept of pathways. But, the intended meaning of this picture doesn't make sense to them. Being hunters, the !Kung want to be on a wide pathway in the open, so nothing can surprise them and kill them. Being on a narrow path is dangerous, because a hyena could hide and attack easily without warning. They would need to understand first that Jesus is talking about following him or not following him. They need the necessary context from other stories or more background information to be able to understand this picture from Jesus' intention. They also need to understand that the passage is a parable, talking about gateways and pathways which picture a choice or decision. It becomes much clearer, when the !Kung understand the concept that only if each person embraces Jesus, they will live well with God. Faith in other people or other gods will not provide this life and consequently result in death. Doing rituals, hard labor or good deeds will not provide life either. Like in this

situation, people sometimes need several or even many messages to get a clear understanding of what God, as the communication artist, is trying to tell.

Because the !Kung only could relate to this parable from their own worldview perspective, they miss-understood the meaning about the wide and narrow pathways. They did not understand the meaning of the picture that was given in the Bible. Does that mean that this passage is not for the !Kung people? Certainly not!

All people relate new information to information they already know, and likewise when we use pictures, people link them to pictures that are already relevant in their life. For some passages the meaning may be clear from just about every worldview perspective, but for most, it is important to provide more context in order for people to be able to understand the message properly. We may need more supporting pictures or stories. So, what the !Kung first need is enough relevant pictures to be able to relate to the passage about the wide and narrow pathways.

There is great value in starting with passages that need minimal or no additional information, since they already create an accurate picture on their own. If they additionally tie into something that the people already know about and are interested in, then it creates a natural attraction. Typically, these kind of passages serve very well to help people be open for the message of the Bible. For example, for fishermen we could start with stories about fishing, for nomadic shepherd stories about nomadic herding, while women may identify with Ruth and Hannah. General themes of interest may also serve as 'door openers'. Some themes that are 'door-openers' for many audiences are:

- God being the Creator of life and all that is good, as seen in the narratives of Genesis, as well that it plays a part in many other passages and is also expressed in the Psalms.
- Stories about people's choices that have damaged their relationship with God, starting in Genesis 3 and throughout the whole Bible.
- God's His care toward those that had a damaged relationship with him, as seen in the narratives of Genesis, the Exodus, Daniel and the Gospels.
- God's benevolence as He works through events to oppose evil, to train his servants in righteousness and truth, and to fulfill His good purposes for His people. We can see this in the narratives of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, David, Jonah, Daniel, and Job, as well as in Revelation.
- The kindness, devotion, wisdom, and power of Jesus, are recorded in the Gospels.
- The love and forgiveness exhibited by true followers of Jesus, as seen in the Acts of the Apostles. We can see a similar theme in the life of Joseph.

- The personal forgiveness and acceptance offered by God, as presented in parables of the Gospels.
- The offer and example of grace to live through the strengthening and guidance of the Spirit, as seen in the Acts of the Apostles and in some of the Epistles.

Initially, it is also important to avoid issues or 'barriers' that will turn people away because of where they are within their worldview. If, for example, a person may resist God, because his father caused him much pain. So, a story about God being a father, may not be the one to start with. Also, if God is seen as a foreign God, belonging to the Westerners or the Jewish people, it may be good to confirm Him first as a God who cares for all people equally. Another challenge may be that foreign religious practices from Christian influences may be the only thing people know about, which can easily bias them about who God really is. In that case it is better to initially avoid passages about specific practices, especially if they are heavily depending on tradition or specific theological philosophies. Good communicators are aware of local customs and values, and they deal sensitively with cultural taboos. Introductory selections should likewise avoid offense where none is intended or at least help them with acceptable explanations.

A few examples are:

- for a Hindu audience, the parable in which a father killed a calf (cows are honored and regarded with sincere respect).
- for a Tibetan audience, the great catch of fish (fish being the incarnation of the god of water).

Sometimes 'barriers' actually need to be addressed before people will be open to listen to any stories from the Bible. It is therefore very important that we really get to know the people we're serving before we use a picture, or in our case, stories that paint a picture for them. We want to make sure that we will paint pictures that are clear and accurate. They should be like a positive invitation for them begin a journey with the Eternal.

All of God's spoken messages belong together, like many scenes of a movie that belong together make a complete story. This is why we always need to be open to help people to be able to engage with the whole message from God. Over time, those spoken messages were also written down, forming what we now call the Bible... a most wonderful and clear picture.

