

John 4: Sharing the Gospel Across Cultures, Part 1

Leader's Guide by Ken Behnken

From the Missional Bible Studies series of the Center for U.S. Missions

Jesus lays before us the real challenge of this Gospel in His commission to His disciples in 20:21: Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.

Our task now is to reach out to "all nations" (all ethnicities). We are to be about the same task as our Lord. We are to gather the "scattered children of the world," to bring them together and make them one with us, one with His church, and one with Christ. We are to lift up Jesus Christ with whom the Holy Spirit has made us one. We are to let the world know that our God has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, and that, because of His suffering, death, and resurrection, we can be assured that God now loves us as He loves His own Son. Jesus clearly states this in His High Priestly Prayer when He prays: . . . *Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

A text like this makes us want to cry out, "That all sounds good, Lord, but how? How do we do it?" Not only does Jesus take time to tell us how to reach out to other ethnicities (people of other cultures, of other nations), He takes time to show us how in John, chapter 4.

The verse-by-verse presentation in this Leader's Guide will help you guide the discussion of provocative questions on the participant handout and help contextualize John 4, to give it new meaning and application for our struggles in the church today. It is designed for use by individuals, small groups, or congregations who are interested in reaching out with witness and ministry to the ethnic communities that surround them.

¹*The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John,² although, in fact, it was not Jesus who baptized, but His disciples.³ When the Lord learned of this, He left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.⁴ Now He had to go through Samaria.*

This was the shortest route; however, they did not have to go through Samaria. Most Jews in those days took the long way around. "Now He had to" is actually a Jewish idiom that means, "It is necessary" or "It is God's will." The Samaritans were an alien, hated race for the Jews. Samaritans basically accepted only the first five books of Moses and they expected the Messiah to make Samaria, not Jerusalem, His seat of government. They were Jews who had intermarried with heathens (1 Kings 17:6, 24, 26, 29; Ezra 5:1, 9).

⁵*So He came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph.*

⁶*Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as He was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.*

Both the Jews and the Samaritans claimed Jacob as an ancestor. This place was known by both Jew and Samaritan and so was a perfect place for this encounter. It was the sixth hour—noon--the heat of the day.

⁷*When a Samaritan woman came to draw water; Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?"*

It was strange that the woman would go to draw water at noon. The women usually went to draw water in the early morning or in the evening to escape the heat of the day. She was probably trying to avoid having to mix with the other women. It is quite probable that she was a woman with a shady reputation.

Jacob's well is still there today, one of the few exact spots connected with a story of Jesus that can be identified. It is 100 feet deep and 9 feet in diameter. Jesus started by asking her to do something for Him. He made her feel wanted and needed. This is an excellent starting point for us as we reach out cross-culturally. We usually start by trying to do everything for the people of another culture rather than helping them build

their self-esteem by letting them know that we need them as part of the church. It is important that we let them participate as first-class members rather than "second-class ethnics."

⁸*(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)⁹ The Samaritan woman said to Him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (for Jews do not associate with Samaritans).*

Jesus dared to speak with a woman from an ethnic group with which His people had long refused to associate. The woman was baffled. Jewish men did not talk to women, and no Jew talked to any Samaritan. She immediately knew that this was someone different. Her curiosity was aroused. Wouldn't it be a blessing if people could just tell by the way we treated them that there was something different about us? If they would only ask the question, "Why are you different? What makes you care?" What an opening that would be for us to share the Gospel!

¹⁰*Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water."*

Jesus opened the door. He piqued her curiosity. He wanted her to ask more questions. He didn't start with a Gospel presentation or telling her about Himself. He just talked about something important to them both at that point--water.

¹¹*"Sir," the woman said, "You have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?"*

The Jews refused to share utensils with the Samaritans; this would be considered unclean. The well was deep. For a drink, Jesus would need to share the woman's utensil. He was not afraid to let her know that He needed her help. How often do we acknowledge that people of other cultures might have something of great value to share with us from their cultures? It has been said, "There are certain truths that a man cannot accept; he must discover them for himself." Jesus was leading this woman on a discovery trip.

¹²*"Are you greater than our father, Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"*

The woman acknowledged that they had some history to share. This was a point of contact. As we reach out to other ethnicities, do we have a point in history that we share?

¹³*Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again..."*

Jesus again worked on her curiosity. He wanted her to ask the questions rather than preach to a heart that was not seeking. Jesus used Jewish pictorial, religious language. The Old Testament refers often to the thirst of the soul that could be quenched only with living water, which was the gift of God (Jeremiah 2:13, 17:13; Ezekiel 47:1-2; Zechariah 13:1, 14:8).

¹⁴*"...but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

Jesus was taking this Old Testament language, which this woman probably understood, and giving it a new meaning. As we work with Buddhists, Muslims, and people who have different religious orientations, we too can start where they are and use their beliefs as stepping stones to introduce them to Jesus.

¹⁵*The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."*

Jesus had piqued her curiosity. He had started off by asking her to help Him; now she was asking Him to help her. Do you think it is possible for us to accomplish the same thing as we speak to people of different ethnic groups?

December 2000. Ken Behnken, after retiring as Director of the Center for U.S. Missions, is working part-time with the Pacific Southwest District in cross-cultural ministries.. Accompanying Participant's Guide is also available from the Center for U.S. Missions.