Chapter 13

Missionary Credibility: Characteristics of the Messenger that Make the Message More Persuasive

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Abstract

Missionaries seek to be credible to the people whom they try to influence with the message of the gospel. Although Christ first and foremost calls missionaries to be humble servants who love and serve him, empirical evidence from the behavioral sciences indicates that missionaries who are perceived as experts, who attract people to themselves, and, most importantly, who are trustworthy are most likely to be deemed credible. To be perceived as experts, missionaries need to demonstrate their knowledge of a topic and to speak with confidence. To be perceived as attractive to others, missionaries should have frequent contact with others, demonstrate appreciation to others, and take care with their physical appearance. To come across as trustworthy, missionaries need to demonstrate long-term integrity, trustworthiness, open communication, and concern for others.

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.
II Cor. 5:11, NIV

The apostle Paul did everything that he could, becoming all things to all people (I Cor. 9:19-23), in order to persuade his audiences to put their faith in the gospel. Following in Paul's footsteps, missionaries have long sought cultural relevancy among the people

with whom they work in order to increase their credibility. Adopting a new culture is in no way an easy task, but the vast majority of missionaries exert great effort to do so in order to effectively fulfill the Great Commission.

But cultural adaptation is not the only way that missionaries strive to become more persuasive. They seek to live out the gospel by loving and meeting the needs of those around them. Many also strive to make sure that their words are completely congruent with the gospel. Such efforts are not only pleasing to God, but they make the missionary more persuasive. Are there other ways that the missionary can be more credible?

Research in the behavioral sciences has also uncovered a number of ways that missionaries can increase their credibility. Three general characteristics of a messenger have been found to make a message more persuasive: expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Although there are other factors that make a *message* more or less persuasive (for example, the quality and types of arguments used to persuade; Dunaetz, 2016), expertise, attractiveness, and especially trustworthiness appear to be important personal characteristics that influence the degree to which the *messenger* is persuasive.

Expertise

In general, people are willing to listen to someone presenting new information if the presenter appears to know more about the subject than the audience and the audience is interested in the subject (Kumkale, Albarracín, & Seignourel, 2010; Pornpitakpan, 2004). Members of the audience who conclude that they have more expertise in the subject than the presenter quickly dismiss the presenter as someone low in credibility. So missionaries who want to be taken seriously need to be sure that the information that they present is true and comprehensive. Most appropriately trained missionaries have no difficulty presenting information about the Bible or about the salvation message. Compared to most people, they are truly experts on these subjects. Difficulties arise, however, when missionaries assume that their expertise in the Bible makes them experts in other fields, such as history or science. If a missionary is making a Gospel presentation, accurately presenting the biblical message but presenting erroneous historical information or distorted science, the members of the

audience who have more knowledge in these fields will find the message unconvincing. Missionaries who want to speak on topics outside their expertise would do well to confirm the information that they present with sources written by experts in the field, not limiting themselves solely to material published by evangelicals.

But expertise is communicated not only by the presentation of information. Research has demonstrated that people who speak confidently and authoritatively are more likely to be perceived as experts than equally knowledgeable people who are more hesitant (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, & O'Barr, 1978). This appears to have been one of the factors that made Jesus' teaching ministry effective: "The crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority" (Matt. 7:29, NIV). Speaking with confidence in a foreign language (as often required of missionaries) does not come naturally. One way that missionaries can speak more confidently is to practice what they are planning to say, whether it is a message to be preached or key phrases explaining the gospel that can be used in everyday conversations. For example, some missionaries memorize a dozen or so key sentences explaining the gospel and practice them repeatedly. When an opportunity arises in a conversation, they have these sentences ready on the tip of their tongue and assert them with confidence, thus making it possible to present at least one small aspect of the gospel in a clear and convincing way, appropriate for the situation. Practicing such phrases can make missionaries more confident, allowing them to present elements of the gospel more often and, most likely, more persuasively.

Confidence is partially communicated by the speed at which we speak (Crano & Siegel, 2017; Miller, Maruyama, Beaver, & Valone, 1976; Smith & Shaffer, 1995). Experiments have shown that fast speakers are rated higher in expertise and more persuasive than are slow speakers. For those who struggle in the language in which they minister, this is not encouraging news. They may struggle to find the correct words, hesitate as they search for the right conjugation, or feel that they should apologize repeatedly for grammar errors that they make. All these things can distract from the message they are trying to communicate and make them less persuasive. Again, one solution is to practice. The more they practice the key parts of their message, the more rapidly, clearly, and authoritatively they can present it. Another solution, or at least a way to limit the damage, is to only apologize for linguistic limitations at appropriate times. It might be quite appropriate

to apologize for limited verbal skills when trying to develop a friendship with someone; such transparency would demonstrate trust in the person, which in turn is likely to make one appear more trustworthy and one's message more credible. However, it might be less appropriate to apologize for a misplaced pronoun in a sermon or some type of presentation of the gospel. Usually (but not always) missionaries will want to keep the focus on the message and not draw attention to themselves, even if it is to speak of their limitations.

For example, when preaching before a relatively large group, a missionary may make what seems, at the time, to be an inexcusable error of grammar. He might feel so ashamed that he stops the message and presents an immediate, heart-felt apology to the audience. It is possible that some people will appreciate a demonstration of such concern for their language, but it is more likely that such an apology would simply be a distraction which makes the missionary less persuasive. The missionary will probably be a better and more convincing speaker if he simply continues with the message, focusing on the ideas he wants to communicate, not on his own grammatical errors, no matter how serious they seem at the time.

Attractiveness

Experiments have also demonstrated that people are more easily influenced by people to whom they are attracted (Chaiken, 1979; Praxmarer, 2011). When people are attracted to someone, they want to spend more time with him or her because of some benefit they receive from the attractive person's presence. This desire to be present with someone lowers their defenses and makes them more open to considering the message associated with the attractive person. Attractiveness here is not limited to attractiveness that comes from one's moral character. There are a number of other factors that influence a person's attractiveness which are relevant to cross cultural ministry.

Attractiveness Due to Frequent Contact and Physical Proximity

We tend to like people (and things) with which we are most familiar. Relationships are most likely to form among people who have frequent contact with one another, typically from being in the same

room with each other and conversing. This is part of the *mere exposure effect*; we tend to like whatever we are exposed to, compared to things we haven't been exposed to (Bornstein & Craver-Lemley, 2017; Zajonc, 1968). An extreme example of this effect occurs when speakers of non-Asian languages are shown a series of Chinese pictograms (Zajonc, 2001). The pictograms which occur twice in the series are generally rated more attractive the second time they are viewed. Similarly, we tend to like people with whom we have frequent contact. So the more missionaries can have regular contact with individual members of groups they are trying to reach, the more attractive they will become and the likelihood that they will be able to influence these people increases.

Attractiveness Due to Expressed Appreciation

People are attracted to people who like them (Kenny, Bond Jr, Mohr, & Horn, 1996; Kenny & La Voie, 1982). Although this phenomenon can be abused, if a missionary communicates that she genuinely likes, appreciates, and values a person, it increases the likelihood that the person will reciprocate and be attracted to her and be more open to the Gospel. If she communicates that she does not appreciate the person, that she does not enjoy being near to the person or value the person's presence, it is unlikely that the person will be persuaded by anything she says.

Many, if not most, people are attracted to God because he first loved us (Rom. 5:8, I John 4:19). Similarly, we can be attracted to non-believers and see their value, even before they are attracted to us, because of God's love working in us. By seeing people as God sees them, creatures made in his image and of infinite worth in his sight, we should appreciate them and see the potential beauty that God wants to create in them through the redemption provided in Jesus.

Of course, attraction to someone can come from pure or impure motives, so we need to continually seek God's guidance and wisdom to prevent us from being directed by our more fleshly desires. But if our desires are pure and we seek nothing from people other than to see them come to know Christ, communicating that we like and appreciate them will make our message more persuasive.

Physical Attractiveness

Outward beauty, often strongly influenced by genetics, is no sign of what counts from God's perspective, but it is a factor that makes people appear credible (I Sam. 16:7). People are more easily influenced by people who appear healthy and symmetrical, and who have no unusual features that indicate that something might be wrong (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Langlois & Roggman, 1990). Yet physical attractiveness is also highly influenced by culture, a factor that missionaries should consider in their dress, hairstyle, make up, and other aspects of outward appearance (Law & Labre, 2002). If missionaries' physical appearance is attractive in culturally relevant and appropriate ways, the first impression that they will make on people will enable them to more easily establish relationships that can lead to various aspects of sharing the Gospel.

This does not mean that missionaries should necessarily dress and groom themselves like the people whom they seek to reach, but rather they should seek to come across as the type of people who have the greatest positive influence over their audience (Pornpitakpan, 2004; Praxmarer, 2011). For example, if a missionary is working with urban factory workers who aspire to have children who will hold middle management positions, it may be appropriate for missionaries to dress in a way that corresponds to a slightly higher social class than the people with whom they work.

So both expertise and attractiveness make missionaries more credible. The same is even more true for trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

Some experts are trustworthy and some are not. Some attractive people are trustworthy and others are not. Experts and attractive people who are viewed as trustworthy will be much more credible than those who are not viewed as trustworthy. So a third factor, beyond expertise and attractiveness, which will make missionaries more persuasive, is how trustworthy they appear to be (McGinnies & Ward, 1980). Several factors have been identified experimentally that increase a person's trustworthiness: long term integrity, trusting others, open communication, and concern for others (Ohanian, 1990; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998).

Trustworthiness through Long Term Integrity

Even if missionaries can speak the language perfectly, it is not realistic to expect to be viewed as trustworthy as soon as they meet someone. At the most fundamental level, missionaries must earn the trust of the people with whom they work. Most people assume, when they meet someone new, that this person, even if he or she is morally despicable, will say socially appropriate things and try to make a good impression on them. So the average person does not know if the missionary is trustworthy or not when they first meet. Certainly the missionary will say nice, respectable things, but only time will tell if the missionary is trustworthy.

People will observe at least three aspects of a missionary's long term behavior to determine if the missionary is trustworthy (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Whitener, et al., 1998). To determine if Joe Missionary is trustworthy or not, the people around him will ask themselves questions such as:

Is he fair? Does he treat everyone with equal respect? Does he deceive people for his own benefit? Is he hiding something? Is he trying to make a profit or exploit others for his own pleasure?

Are his words and actions consistent? Does he say one thing and live another? Does he preach love and patience but treat those around him abusively? Does he say things that hurt other people?

Is he reliable? When he says he will do something, does he do it? Does he accurately explain his intentions and follow through with them? Is his behavior consistent and predictable?

As people observe Joe Missionary over the long term and the organizations with which he is associated (Dunaetz, 2010), the answers to these questions will influence how trustworthy and credible they perceive him to be.

Trustworthiness through Trusting Others

Trust begets trust (Cullen, Johnson, & Sakano, 2000; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Most of us, by nature, feel we are likeable and like to be liked. If someone trusts us, we tend to think that this person has made a good choice. We reckon that such a person has made this choice to

trust us because of some combination of his or her intelligence and values: If this person has good values and is reasonably intelligent, then he or she is most likely trustworthy. So whenever people trust us, they themselves become a bit more trustworthy in our eyes.

So if missionaries want to be viewed as trustworthy, they need to demonstrate trust in the people with whom they work. Yet, as evangelicals, we might believe that people, especially non-Christians, are intrinsically not trustworthy, because “the heart is deceitful above all things” (Jer. 17:9, NIV). This is true, but the image of God still resides in humans and people tend to do good things to one another, especially if they hold many things in common (Matt. 5:46). Paul can serve as an example for us. He demonstrated trust in his Roman captors and governing authorities during his Jerusalem and Caesarea captivity recorded in Acts 21-26. Specifically, he trusted them to protect him from the violent crowds and to afford him his rights as a Roman citizen, a trust which begot trust and enabled him to share the Gospel several times, coming across as at least fairly persuasive (Acts 26:28).

Showing trust in others is important in developing one’s credibility, but people who have demonstrated a lack of trustworthiness (due a lack of skills or inappropriate behavior) should not be trusted in domains beyond their competence.

Trustworthiness through Open Communication

Another way people determine if we are trustworthy concerns the degree to which we are transparent and communicate openly with them (Ohanian, 1990). People tend to look, first, for truth in what we say. Does what we say correspond to what they already know? Do we seem accurate in our interpretations of the world around us? If people conclude that what we say is not accurate or truthful, they are highly unlikely to trust us. But even if what we say sounds credible, people need reasonable explanations of what we mean and why we believe or do something. People who are open to the gospel want credible reasons to believe it, whether it is through personal dialogue, apologetic sermons, or books that defend the faith.

People also want explanations for our behavior, not just our beliefs. If we are the primary model that someone has of what it means to be a Christian, people are more likely to trust us if they understand why we do what we do, whether it is how we treat our family, the food we eat, or the car we drive. This requires transparency and open

communication with people on a level with which we are perhaps not always comfortable. The more we openly communicate with people the easier it is for them to trust us. Unfortunately, most of us suffer from the *illusion of transparency*, the belief that others can easily see our motives behind our actions (Gilovich, Savitsky, & Medvec, 1998). In reality, people cannot see our motives and often assume the worst about us. We must repeatedly explain the motives and goals behind our actions in order to be more persuasive.

Another aspect of open communication is openness to other points of views. People who come across as closed to new ideas have a hard time gaining the trust of others. If other people's views carry little weight in our eyes, we are perceived to be uncaring and untrustworthy. So whenever people share with us what they believe, whether it be true, false, or confused, we need to respond with openness, expressing our understanding of why they find the belief to be important. Such a response will give us the credibility required to share a different point of view and perhaps influence them to move closer to the gospel.

Trustworthiness through Concern for Others

A fourth factor that influences a person's perceived trustworthiness is the concern the person has for others (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). The old saying is true, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Missionaries who are perceived as caring about others, who seek the good of others above their own good, come across as being more trustworthy. If we are willing to sacrifice our own interests for the well-being of others (Dunaetz, 2017), people are more likely to believe that our message is not for our benefit, but for theirs.

Demonstrating our love and concern for others is especially important if we are perceived to be cultural outsiders. Humans, by nature, doubt the motives of foreigners, people who look different, people with different accents, and any type of person perceived to be an outsider (Kramer & Messick, 1998). This places many of us missionaries in the "untrustworthy" category. By demonstrating that we genuinely care about others and are willing to sacrifice our well-being for theirs, we can gradually move into the "trustworthy" category, making our message much more credible.

Conclusion

Good motives are not enough to make us credible in the eyes of most non-Christians, especially those who do not see us as cultural insiders. When we communicate the gospel, we must seek to persuade people to believe it (II Cor. 5:11). The more we can demonstrate expertise, the more attractive we are to others, and especially the more trustworthy we are perceived to be, the more persuasive our message will be.

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