

Understanding Expectations in Discipleship

by S.R.

*When they came [to visit me] they often brought singers and musicians to entertain me. The only hitch was that [the Moroccans] went to such lengths to treat me as one of them that they also assumed I was not interested in going out into the city. During the entire fortnight I spent with them I never once found my way out of the house. For long hours I sat in the patio listening to the sounds of the city outside, in the hope that someone would come, something would happen. But as I say, if I was bored, that was my own fault. They were doing everything they could to please me. (Paul Bowles in *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, Storti, Craig, (1990) ___. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc., page 16.*

Even when we do our best to please someone else, a spouse, teacher, parent, or boss, we fail more frequently than we would like to admit. Our own assumptions about life, rooted in our mental software, can blind us to the expectations of others. As cultural distance increases, so does our blindness. And though we are well aware of the fact that people are different, when confronted with this differentness in real life, there is always an accompanying element of surprise.

It's a funny thing: the French call it a "couleau," the Germans call it a "messer," but we call it a knife, which is after all what it really is. (Richard Jenkyns, Ibid, page 85)

I heard a story about an American teacher who wanted to build a good rapport with his North African students. On the first day of class he

loosened his tie, sat on his desk, and began to "get acquainted" with the students. They were unimpressed. In fact they were shocked and offended. It wasn't long before they walked out of class and demanded that the administrator provide them with a real instructor.

What did the students expect? They expected a professional, an authority who knew the subject well and who could articulate it clearly. They had no time for chitchat. They wanted a lecture they could write down and from which they could learn.

The teacher on the other hand had hoped to get to know his students so that he could effectively guide them and lead them in discovery. He wanted to meet them on their level and coach them.

This was rather incomprehensible to the students. Why should the expert act like a student, unless he doesn't know the material? And why should they be expected to discover, deduce, and infer what the teacher already knows? Fortunately, this teacher was able to adjust to the culture and kept his post, though he never returned to his first class.

Before we consider the student/teacher relationship further, let's look at some of the different underlying assumptions about learning in the East and the West.

Westerners emphasize learning how to think. Education is based on discovery, problem solving, and the Scientific

Method. Children are taught to make inferences and deductions. Students expand their knowledge through questions, experimentation, and debate. Truth is assumed to be consistent. There is little room for contradiction.

Easterners emphasize learning a body of knowledge. Memorization and recall are key abilities. Truth is passed down from the teacher to the student. Students are not encouraged to question their teachers. If they are diligent they will in time come to understand the wisdom they have received.

Instead of analyzing and systematizing, Easterners pay much closer attention to the whole context. The speaker, the situation, and the spoken message all constitute a given meaning or idea. These ideas can stand independently and may seem disorganized or contradictory to the Westerner. They often include elements of emotion, imagery, and subjectivity. Requiring them to be objective would strip them of much of their force.

Westerners like to discern truth by judging its consistency. The Easterner is more apt to consider the context (the speaker, the situation, and the message). The resulting implication for discipleship in the Arab world is not to focus primarily on convincing the disciple of the truth of a given study, but rather to gain the disciple's confidence. Is the truth evident in the discipler's life? The Bible study is of secondary importance. The main focus should be on the discipler, the model.

The disciple may expect to memorize a creed or learn a ritual, and one might take advantage of this propensity. However, we are teaching living truth.

Discipleship is not simply passing on a body of knowledge or teaching a logical system. Discipleship is relational. God's truth is relational.

I would recommend that the discipler think of himself or herself as a senior partner or a serious older brother or sister, a role model. An expert or authority role is too high and a personal friend or coach is too low.

Life speaks. Even before any formal teaching begins, much has already been taught. The discipler's attitude toward God and the Bible is largely communicated non-verbally. I believe it is crucial that our attitude be one of fear and humility. By fear I mean a holy reverence and awe of God: We are under His authority. Humility is a response to the knowledge that we are recipients of God's grace and that He alone is God, and we are not.

Secondly, we need to approach God's word with expectancy. God speaks through His word. It's alive. It calls us to respond, to follow Him. God's word is fresh and challenging both for the new believer and the experienced believer. We cannot exhaust its depths. The disciple needs to see the discipler meet God in the Scriptures and respond in obedience. The disciple as well needs to hear God's voice and follow Him. True knowledge of God comes through believing and obeying. Teaching biblical principles and content is not enough. We have to model a dynamic relationship with God, to teach it, and to expect it.