

Ministering Across Cultures

Culture Matters!

Crossing Cultures for the Sake of the Gospel

Navigating cultural differences is a regular occurrence. How we respond to cultural differences communicates what we believe about God and people. Our love for people of every ethnicity and culture can be a witness to our campuses and a testimony to the power of the gospel.

What is Culture?

Culture is defined as the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group. Here are a few examples of how it impacts our lives and ministry:

- Practices of worship, prayer, or Bible study styles
- Leadership styles
- How people relate across genders, generations, and positions of authority
- Approaches to reaching cultural groups on campus
- Engaging conflict
- Food and fun preferences
- How time is valued

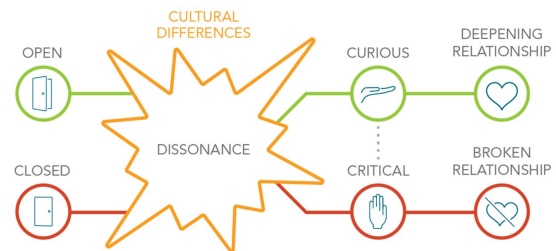
What Does Scripture Say About Crossing Cultures?

Read Philippians 2:1-11. In this passage, Paul uses Christ’s example as a model for how Christians should relate to one another. While he doesn’t specifically mention “culture,” we can use the underlying principles in this passage as you seek to build relationships across cultures in your ministry.

Crossing Cultures Well

The Approaching Differences Diagram

It's important to not immediately jump to deciding who is right or wrong when we experience dissonance in cultural differences. Instead, the diagram invites us to name the dissonance we feel and before jumping to blame or criticize, to bring it to the Lord.



InterVarsity

The Red Line or Green Line?

You can't control the dissonance you experience in cross-cultural interactions, but you can choose how to enter into that dissonance and how to respond.

THE GREEN LINE

If your posture is one of openness, when you hit the inevitable dissonance, you will be able to move forward from frustration and tension to curiosity. That will lead to understanding, empathy, deeper relationships – and a stronger Christian witness on campus.

THE RED LINE

If you enter into dissonance with a posture of being closed off, you will experience heightened emotions of frustration and tension, which lead to a critical response. That will eventually lead to alienation, withdrawal, and broken relationships – and damage your ministry on campus.

Identifying & Responding to Cultural Differences

Assessing Your Entry Attitude

WHAT DOES AN OPEN ATTITUDE LOOK LIKE?

1. **Trust:** Assuming the best intentions behind others' behaviors, especially if we might feel confused in the inevitable dissonance.
2. **Acceptance:** When we recognize others for who they are, not demanding that they act in a certain way or in accordance with my cultural or personal preferences.
3. **Adaptability:** When we are willing to adjust our expectations, our preferred ways of working/communicating, or our comfort in situations that don't go the way we planned or hoped.

WHAT DOES A CLOSED ATTITUDE LOOK LIKE?

1. **Suspicion:** Opposite of trust, suspicion assumes the worst intentions.
2. **Fear:** Believing that something or someone is dangerous, likely to cause pain.
3. **Superiority:** Believing that my way or my cultural values are inherently better than others, "common sense," or "right." Believing that others are not different, but wrong.

Assessing Your Responses to Dissonance

WHAT DOES A CURIOUS RESPONSE LOOK LIKE?

1. **Listen:** When we respond to dissonance by actively listening, we serve others and place their interests ahead of our own need to be heard or understood.
2. **Inquire:** Don't assume your initial assessment of the dissonance is the complete picture. Asking questions is a practical way to humble yourself and demonstrate that you can learn.
3. **Initiate:** Dissonance can paralyze us and draw us towards people who agree with us or are more like us. Rather, take the initiative to ask good questions, share honestly, and build trust.

WHAT DOES A CRITICAL RESPONSE LOOK LIKE?

1. **Criticize:** We focus on the perceived faults or mistakes of other people and other cultures. It makes us feel better by telling ourselves how bad and inferior others are. *"It's all their fault."*
2. **Rationalize:** We attempt to justify dissonance in a way that puts the blame on others, thereby excusing ourselves from responsibility. *"They're the problem, not me."*
3. **Isolate:** Dissonance can cause us to withdraw physically, socially, or emotionally, erecting walls to stop engaging with a group or culture. *"I just can't deal with these people anymore."*

Which Line Will You Choose?

Here are some applications steps to grow in openness and curiosity.

Growing in Openness

KEEP AN INTERCULTURAL JOURNAL

Using your five senses, document cross-cultural experiences along with questions and insights in a journal. After one week, share what you wrote down with someone you trust.

PRACTICE ACTIVE LISTENING

At your next meeting or community gathering, try to practice intentional, empathetic, active listening. Work on being completely present and focused on receiving what an individual or group has to say.

Growing in Curiosity

GET THE INTERCULTURAL SCOOP

Ask to meet with a friend from a different cultural background to learn more about their story, their culture, and their experience with your ministry and/or the campus in general. Practice asking good questions and demonstrating curiosity. Listen well and value their perspectives over your own.

Related Resources

- [Entry Posture Self Diagnosis Worksheet](#)
- [Response Self Diagnosis Worksheet](#)

Recommended Courses

- [Growing My Networks](#)
- [Inviting Well](#)

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