

"Leave Your Ketchup at Home"

Steven Baxley

Back in 1992, as I was preparing to leave to preach the Gospel in what was then Czechoslovakia, I received a letter from a brother in Italy with whom I had been in touch while studying in college. He wanted to advise me with some thoughts about how I could be more effective in the Lord's work in Eastern Europe. I appreciated this wise brother's desire to help a very young (and inexperienced!) preacher by sharing with him some of the wisdom that he had gained through years of sowing the seed in Italy. I have long since lost that letter, but I have never forgotten the general advice that this brother gave me. Please allow me to share some of my own thoughts to those who are considering preaching the Gospel in a foreign country.

One of the first thoughts that comes to mind is the need to appreciate the local culture. Long ago, the "ugly American" was the reputation that our citizens often had while travelling abroad. When things weren't quite like many Americans expected or wanted them to be, then they expected them to be changed. Thankfully, those attitudes have changed quite a bit over recent years, and Americans are much more sensitive to local cultures when they travel. A preacher planning to go to a foreign country needs to especially be careful about appreciating and respecting the culture and customs of the country to which he's headed. The vast majority of cultural differences are neutral in and of themselves, so a Christian should have no problem in following whatever the local customs are. When an evangelist follows those customs, he is saying to the people that he respects them as a people. On the other hand, when an evangelist makes no effort to know the customs, or worse ignores them once he knows about them, then his work may be hindered. The natural reaction of the people who he is trying to bring to Christ is that this man has no respect for them as a people, and so they may not even begin to listen to what he is saying. The end result is that his effectiveness has been hindered, if not lost completely, by ignoring some things that are neutral and in no way violate the law of Christ. Evangelists working in foreign countries need to be very sensitive to the message they are sending through how they interact with the cultures of those countries.

A part of respecting the local culture involves respect for the local language. I firmly believe that a preacher considering working in a foreign country should resolve himself to learn as much of the language as he is able to. Of course, there can be some limitations. Some individuals are more talented than others with languages. Some individuals may spend a relatively short time in a foreign country, while others may spend years abroad. However, whether a person learns a little or a lot of the language, the natives will respect his efforts, and will immediately feel a closer connection to him. Getting to know the local language can also help the preacher to understand the people themselves, through knowing their idioms and their thought processes.

Another thing that evangelists need to remember is to recognize the difference between "American" and "Christian." Our duty when taking the Gospel to another land is not to make the inhabitants into "Americans", but to convert them to Christ! In the letter I received, I was counseled to "leave my ketchup at home." The meaning of that statement was that I shouldn't go to Czechoslovakia with the idea of converting people there to American culture and ideas. It wasn't my job to show them just how glorious ketchup (or America) could be, but to show them just how glorious our Lord and His church are!

One last item that needs to be stressed: evangelism, especially foreign evangelism, takes time. Preachers considering working in a foreign field should plan to spend as much time there as they possibly can. Good can and does come from short trips, when conducted properly, but more good can be accomplished when a person plans to stay on the ground for as long as possible. When I first went to Czechoslovakia, I had intended to stay only one year, and then I extended it out for another. While visiting with a group of Christians in Italy in 1993, they very pointedly (and yet lovingly) asked me what long-term good I thought could be accomplished by preaching for a couple of years and then leaving. They stressed that when the Gospel was taken to Italy in the years following World War II, churches were only firmly established where preachers worked for several years planting the seed and building up the new Christians. Although I didn't fully realize it at the time, I think these brothers were absolutely right. Short term trips spent watering the planted seed are profitable and necessary. But, when planting the seed, we need to make sure that there will be someone there to water it later on. I know of several churches in Eastern Europe that exist today only because the men who worked to establish them stayed long enough to plant and water, and made sure that more watering would be done after they returned to their homes in the U.S. Now, those congregations have reached a point where they are able to do their own planting and watering in their local communities. But, growing to that point takes time and a lot of effort.

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Steven Baxley worked in Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic) from 1992-2008. While in Europe, he had opportunities to visit with churches of Christ in Germany, Italy, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. He now resides in Texas with his wife Ivana and three children (Anna, Adela, and Samuel). Since August 1, 2008, he has worked with the saints at North Beach church of Christ in Fort Worth, Texas.