

Evangelism Expose

13 Hurdles to Evangelism in Africa



By Douglas Hammett

www.PurposedCoachingBlog.com

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My first visits to Africa were in the early 1990s. I was extremely encouraged during this time as I found the African people to be quite friendly and seemingly more open to the gospel than people in America.

I found that openness to be a breath of fresh air!

However it was not long before I found this friendliness did not insure they would respond to the gospel in a Biblical way.

From my personal interaction with Africans (mostly southern parts of Africa) and observance of missionaries that I interacted with from Africa, I was quickly able to discover that there were difficulties that did not show up at first glance.

- One of the first things that began to appear was that decisions were often very short-term commitments and seldom led to a life change.
- Upon further investigation it became clear that the depth of understanding of Bible doctrine was not bringing about a real consideration of life and how God's Word should impact daily living.
- That lack of commitment and lack of understanding led to an absence of continuing on the Word of God.

This caused working in Africa to be a difficult work because, although you could get into conversations easily, and with a little bit of encouragement get people to pray a prayer, seldom were the lives transformed.

Our first step is to identify some of the more common hurdles that keep an African from coming to grips with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of these hurdles are common in every culture.

I am indebted to a number of missionaries that graciously shared their insights into the hurdles that they have identified while working with Africans.

Some of these men have over 30 years of experience working with African people and their grasp of these issues has been very helpful and insightful. I appreciate their input and help in identifying these issues. I think you will benefit from their insights as well.

I have not named them as they may, or may not agree with my recommendation on the solution. So I am not going to paint them in a corner as being part of this. But I do appreciate the help they have given on this part of the problem.



Number One: The concept of God is perverted.

Because of the ancestral beliefs and cultural ideas, Africans are influenced to believe that God is a Being who is far removed from day-to-day life. They see Him as one who is influenced by the ancestors who have already died and are the spirit beings who often act out of petty jealousies and agendas. These ancestors then become the ones who influence God. If they want God to act in their world or be involved, they must get the ancestors to act as their mediator. Although they understand God to have somehow made the world they think that he has now backed away from that creation and no longer is personally involved in it.

This perverted belief that God is not personally involved and lacks concern for the life of men and women causes them to distrust any truth presented about a personal relationship with God.



Number Two: Lacking in the concept of being dead in sins.

The African people generally believe that they are made up of body and soul. They see the spirit and soul as being the very same and no difference between them. Because of that, they see departing out of this life as simply entering into the spirit realm. For many of them there is absolutely no difference for those who die which equates with a heaven or a hell.

This often opens the doors for the cults such as the Jehovah Witnesses or the Seventh-day Adventists to come in and teach their “no hell” doctrine. It dovetails nicely with their false concept of eternity.

So to be able to present the need of being born again one must also be able to uncover and illuminate this issue of the difference between the soul (which deals with the mind the emotions and the choices) and the spirit (which has a spiritual realm and connection to God). However a person apart from Christ is dead in that relationship with God although he can still have contact with demon spirits. That interaction with the spirit world leads them to believe their spiritual nature is alive.



Number Three: Following another Jesus.

The idea of who Jesus is in Africa is often a very confusing discussion. The concept of Christ having come down to this world as God, taking on human flesh, is something that is usually foreign in understanding. Added to that the fact that many Africans see Jesus Christ as a white man's God who has been introduced into their society and culture causes a natural resistance to the teaching of the Jesus of the Bible.

It is not unusual in African religion to see a preacher as being Jesus or John the Baptist come back to earth.



Number Four: Confusion in the matter of salvation

This confusion leads to a complicated view of how to be saved. If you ask an African how to go to heaven, it becomes apparent quickly that he has no idea. He will give a very long-winded and complex answer. It is very clear that he has been blinded by Satan and has no idea or concept of what it is to be saved from his sins.

Almost without exception you will find that Africans believe that salvation has something to do with their works. Their views of heaven or a relationship with God is often skewed as well.



Number Five: The seeking of selfish goals when dealing with spiritual matters.

The bulk of African society has been influenced by a false Christianity. It is one that has been taught by hyper charismatic movements, which teach that God is there for your own satisfaction. If a man is close to God he will be rich and healthy.

There are certain sects of the African religious life that actually teach that one of your family member should be killed in order for you to be able to advance in your relationship with God, who in turn provides for your financial success.

All of this plays a role in working on the greed of the human heart. Rather than seeking God, Africans are encouraged to seek wealth and health. Often when the charismatic teachers and preachers come to town, they promise deliverance from physical problems and from poverty. But they leave in their wake people who came trusting in their promise but found nothing but empty promises that could not be filled.

If one is to seek God they must be willing to set aside their own personal agenda, and to seek God alone.



Number Six: Cultural thinking.

It is not unusual for Africans to join a church started by an American missionary. They will have given all the right answers, but in the back of their mind they are still holding on to their traditional beliefs that they've been taught since childhood.

They have learned not to bring these cultural beliefs up in conversation with the white man, because he will not understand. So although they bury these in the back of their mind and will not discuss it with the missionary, they still hold them as truths.

In the African mind they can hold on to the false beliefs of cultural religion AND repeat the truths of Christianity that have been taught to them from the Bible at the same time. But when the two streams meet together in their mind it becomes a muddy stream and keeps them from being able to live a life committed to Jesus Christ.

Sadly the missionary often doesn't even realize that conflict is happening in the heart and mind of the person they're dealing with.



Number Seven: To many Africans their culture is their religion

If we are to call on Africans to turn their back on their religion which includes traditional beliefs and curses that can be put upon people, we must also deal with the fear of rejection by their own people.

They also fear the rejection and curses that they believe can come upon them by their ancestors, who in turn can inflict great trouble into their lives if they do not honor the ancestors.

All of this has been instilled in them from a very young age. Children are often seen taking beer and cooking it until it is warm and then taking it to the rock of the ancestors and pouring it out while they chant to those ancestors asking them to protect them in their life and help them with direction in their journey. From childhood those ancestral ideas are locked deep in their soul and become very difficult to break.



Number Eight: A refusal to believe in absolute truth

One of the encouraging things in Africa is that often the Africans are very respectful of the Bible. The mistake many Westerners make is in assuming that respect means that they believe the Bible.

Not only do they often not know what the Bible teaches, but there is also a deep-seated belief that the Bible is not clear and straightforward. Therefore anything that it says must be interpreted in some allegorical manner and only a true prophet from God can do that.

Therefore on one hand they will accept the Bible and revere it, which is encouraging. On the other hand they have rejected everything that it says by simply saying, "If you understand what it says, you must not be reading it right."



Number Nine: A lack of a sense of responsibility.

In Africa on one side there are some very encouraging interactions that are seen between family members. Family members support one another, care for one another, and help one another. When a young man gets ready to get married, it is a family affair. The whole family comes and gets involved in preparing for his wedding and talking with the other family to be able to get the bride for the young man.

We need to also see that coupled with that involvement of the family and community is also a lack of a sense of personal responsibility. Those who should be taking on personal responsibility in order to meet the needs of others will step back and let the whole family take care of that person.

The age-old story of waiting on somebody to do something, which means that nobody does anything, becomes the end game. This bleeds over into the issue of salvation.

To prepare for life after death becomes a family affair that the ancestors help that person with. Therefore there is a lack of responsibility on the personal side to feel like a person needs to find the truth for themselves.



Number Ten: A lack of urgency.

Because of this lack in personal responsibility there is also a lack of urgency to step forward to take care of anything in a person's life. The moment that someone steps forward in a material way to acquire things for themselves, they realize that they will be called upon by the rest of the family and friends to provide for them.

Therefore the more urgent a person tries to live in the material world by providing for themselves, they realize that that provision is going to be quickly taken away from them by family and friends. The only way around that becomes losing that relationship with family, which most people are not willing to do.

This lack of urgency then bleeds over into spiritual issues in that they have lived most of their life with things being handed to them and they see no real need to shoulder that responsibility and move with urgency to secure their relationship with God.



Number Eleven: Language barriers.

One of the more deceptive things in Africa is that often you will be dealing with people who have a limited use of the English language. At first this is quite encouraging because you think you can communicate with them with English and do quite well.

The problem is that their understanding of even the words that they use is extremely limited. But if the witness does not understand this barrier that exists, they will move right on getting verbal agreement from the person they are talking to and thinking that their communication has hit the mark. Only to find that after the person prays a prayer they disappear never to be seen again. Or they make a profession of faith and say they believe the Bible and Jesus Christ. Then in months ahead, they will be found offering sacrifices to the ancestors after that profession and their active participation in a church.

Language barriers must be broken down and unless the missionary zeros in on this very real problem he will be left with lackluster results.



Number Twelve: The desire to please the missionary.

This is part of their culture as well. Much of Africa has been taught that the white man comes with money and gifts and owes these things to the African. Therefore the African has learned to treat the white man with an outward respect in order to get the money or things that the white man has to deliver to them.

This is then transferred over because their society is one of generally trying to get along with others and keeping out of conflict.

Their culture is one of agreement. So if the missionary tells them something, rather than explaining where they disagree, they listen and politely give assent.

The missionary takes that as not only agreement but of having bought into what they have just been taught and often the missionary can go right on by thinking that they have communicated well when in fact the African has not agreed to in their heart any of the things of the missionary has just said.



Number Thirteen: The rote memory system.

The educational system in Africa is by and large a matter of rote memory. They are simply told something, they repeat it, and they are given a good grade for repeating it. I have found that most Africans have tremendous memories. Their ability to memorize truths you teach them goes way beyond anything I have ever seen in the States.

I can teach a Bible lesson one time, and then watch as that African takes that lesson and teaches it almost verbatim to others.

However it becomes quickly evident when questions are asked that although they can repeat word for word what is been taught to them, there is not an understanding of those things that have been taught.

They have not thought through the implications of that truth in their life or in the world. And because of that they can hold these truths in a memory system and repeat them back to prove to the Westerner that what they believe is right. The Westerner will be very impressed. However in actuality they are holding to false teaching and that will

never surface because they have not been taught to think critically about what they have been told.

It is not a natural part of their life to come to grips with comparing truth from God's Word to the teaching they hold as true. This change must take place if they are to confront the error of false religion in their life.

Answers MUST be Found

Seeing the hurdles that keep a man from coming to Christ in a genuine heart commitment is the first step. But it is ONLY the first step.

The Answer that Isn't

As the issues that caused this lack of life change became more apparent to me, I then needed to find a way to approach these issues. Of course I could simply tell people what was wrong with them. Then when they reject hearing 'the truth' from me I could blame them for not wanting the truth of God's Word.

But that is too simplistic to me. It would be so much easier to blame others for my lack in communication. But I cannot bring myself to excuse the problem so quickly or naively.

Wisdom is Necessary

Ultimately how to bring about change is the work of the witness. Please don't understand this as a belief that somehow we are to do the work of the Holy Spirit. Certainly any real change is produced by the work of God in a man's heart.

Yet Scripture is very clear that those who are witnesses should be wise in that witness. I understand wisdom to be a practical outworking of biblical truth. Prov. 11:30 *The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise.*

So the question began to nag me, 'How can I present truth in a winsome way, that helps others listen to the bad news and come to the conclusion that they need to change?' Thus opening the door to understand and embrace the good news in Jesus Christ.

For a man to be born again there needs to be the presence of the Word of God, providing clear revelation from God's Word, which in turn transforms his thinking.

Added to that revelation there must be the working of the Holy Spirit who stirs his heart and causes him to recognize the difference between his life beliefs and the teaching of God's Word. This in turn brings about a conviction that many of his assumptions of life have been wrong and he needs to turn from his own understanding and lean upon God's understanding.

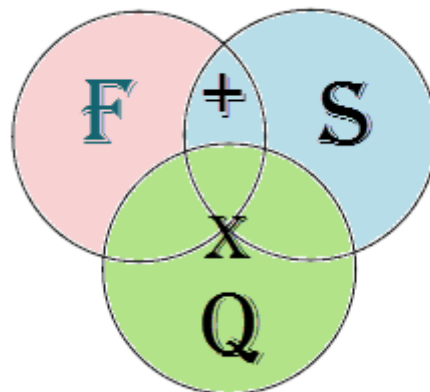
This conversion then culminates in a man making a clear decision to follow Christ turning from his own idols and following the true God of the Bible. 1Thess. 1:9 *For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God;*

The wise winner of souls will recognize that he can work alongside the Holy Spirit by pointing to the Word of God and encouraging the person to yield to the work of the Spirit in his life. At the same time we cannot engineer that decision and must give the person room to make their own choices.

Seeing those hurdles is only the first step. How to address those issues and give God's truth in a winsome way becomes the real challenge.

In wrestling with these issues I have developed what I call Clear Focus Evangelism. It has shown itself quite effective at...

1. Identifying the perverted doctrines that must be corrected to bring a person to Christ.
2. Getting to the essential elements of truth with clarity to effectively communicate the gospel.
3. Uncover the hidden thinking of the person being dealt with so you know exactly what issues to address.
4. Effectively presenting a clear call to Christ, so those making a profession of faith will be clear, committed and soundly converted.
5. Thus far, the converts dealt with in this manner have 'continued in the Word'.



There are three areas that must be address to come to a Clear, Focused presentation of the gospel.

First, is a clear framework, or worldview that becomes thoroughly Biblical.

Second, a clear and concise presentation of the gospel that connects with the hearer.

And third, there must be an opening of the mind and heart of the individual being dealt with so you understand his beliefs, misconceptions and heart motives.

But getting into that is more than I have time for here.

Be sure you sign up for notification of the webinar giving a more full explanation of Clear Focus Evangelism. <http://www.PurposedCoachingBlog.com/CFE>

About the Author



Douglas Hammett has been in the gospel ministry for 40 years. He has been involved in many areas of ministry, often covering several areas at the same time. Those areas include Pastor, Church Planter, Staff Evangelist, College Professor and President, Author, Life/Ministry Coach, and Missionary. He has traveled extensively on mission trips around the world as well as preaching for Bible, Missions and Revival Conferences. He has a heart for God's people and desires especially to help preachers advance their ministry for Christ whether in the United States, or on the foreign field. He served for over 20 years as Senior Pastor of the Lehigh Valley Baptist Church in Emmaus, PA. Then in October, 2010, he moved to Botswana, Africa, to serve there as a missionary. Pastor Hammett and his wife, Beverly, have 4 children and 7 grandchildren.

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