

Article: DA010-2

## SHARING YOUR FAITH WITH ASIAN AMERICANS (PART TWO)

This article first appeared in the Witnessing Tips column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 15, number 2 (1992). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

In the first article of this series I suggested two steps in sharing the gospel with Asian Americans: becoming sensitive to their diverse backgrounds, characteristics, and beliefs, and developing friendships with them. The third step that I recommend is to *become aware of cultural influences that distinguish many Asian Americans from other ethnic groups*. Understanding these powerful influences will help you avoid misunderstandings and resentment that can emerge as you try to be friends. (It should be noted that my remarks and insights are based on one Japanese American's experiences and observations and do not necessarily hold true for all Asian Americans.)

**Indebtedness.** Any favors that are done for my parents, and any presents that are given to them, always compel them to reciprocate. If you invite them for dinner, they will want you to come to their home for a meal; if you give them a gift for whatever occasion, you can certainly expect to receive one for some occasion; if you help them paint their house, my dad will be over to your place within a week to mow your lawn. It is not that they are just being polite; indeed, they feel *indebted* to you — and they do not want to feel indebted to anyone. There are many Asian Americans who are just like them in this regard.

If you want to develop a friendship with people like my parents, go out of your way and do something for them, and keep doing things for them. They will be your friends for life.

Now, this may sound like manipulation. And if your motivation *is* to manipulate, then the results will be ultimately disastrous. Once they realize that you are doing these things only to proselytize them, they will not only despise you, but Christ as well.

If you sincerely want to become friends, however, it is important that you invite first, give first, take the first step. The reason for this is that many people like my parents are naturally shy. They prefer to stand back and see what you do first. If you treat them right they will warm up to you with open arms.

**Shame Instead of Guilt.** Shame and guilt are human qualities natural to all people. For whatever reason, however, shame seems to play a much more prominent role in affecting people of Asian descent than does guilt. Perhaps it is because Asian Americans are much more group-conscious than other Americans, who admire individualism.

While forming a relationship with an Asian American, it is important to remember that you are likely dealing with a person who makes decisions and behaves according to what her or his group — and particularly family — thinks and feels about something. For example, a few Christians I know had developed a friendship with a young Asian-American man. Although they socialized together, and he even attended church with them, they could never persuade him to become a Christian. They finally realized that his parents thought such a decision would bring shame to their family — not because they belonged to another religion, but because they wanted him to pursue a medical career. They thought that becoming a Christian meant he would become a minister or missionary when most of their friends' children were becoming doctors, lawyers, or engineers.

Although the young man also aspired to become a surgeon, he did not want his parents' friends to think he might become something else and thus bring shame to his family. Therefore, he resisted conversion though he wanted to accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Not until these Christians also

befriended his parents and assured them that a devout Christian can serve Christ in any profession did that young man publicly commit his life to Christ.

I certainly am not saying that we must please or even accommodate the wishes of a family before a person can be saved. I am merely suggesting that being friends with an Asian American may demand that you take the extra step in being sensitive to his or her family. Who knows? Perhaps the whole household will become believers. I've seen it happen.

**Saving Face.** One of the most difficult considerations Christians need to understand while sharing the gospel with Asian Americans is the Asian concept of *saving face*. Let me share from my own experience.

Throughout my youth I believed I was a Christian, though I had little understanding of what being a Christian meant, and though I didn't attend any Christian church. After I started spending time with some Christians, they emphasized my need to *become* a Christian. I was inwardly resentful that they had ignored my claims that I was a Christian. At the same time, I realized more and more that they were right. Nevertheless, I continued to protest that I was right with God — I was trying to *save face*.

It seemed that the more they hounded me about my faith, the more I resisted. Finally, the conviction of the Holy Spirit was so great that I had to either acknowledge my need to accept Christ as my Lord and Savior or depart from the presence of God. The decision I made is obvious, but I believe the ordeal would have been less bitter between those people and me had they understood what I was struggling with. Thank God, there were other Christian friends whose sensitivity helped me through it.

All three of these considerations entail *theological* difficulties while sharing the gospel. In the third and final segment of this series I will examine these problems and the solutions that are possible.

-- J. Isamu Yamamoto