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## Sharing Jesus with Buddhists

I was startled the day my Cambodian friend told me, “Fleeing from the war into Vietnam, I stumbled into a Catholic church. There I saw for the first time the tortured figure of Jesus on the cross. I was shocked to learn that Christians worship this man. How could they even respect someone who obviously had such terrible karma?”

My friend looked at Jesus through Buddhist eyes, assuming his suffering must come from something bad he had done in a previous life. This one man’s confusion alerts us to the many Buddhists who either do not know anything about Jesus or have major misunderstandings about him.

Tens of thousands of men have shaved their heads, donned an orange robe, and devoted themselves as monks to the Buddhist path of good deeds and meditation. They hope to someday escape the cycle of suffering and rebirth. Millions more Buddhist lay people depend on these monks for teaching, ceremonies, and blessings.

In fact, their numbers are increasing in certain places. In many Asian countries Buddhism is reviving and growing. It is also significant to note that people in the West are turning to Buddhism in unprecedented numbers.

Seventh-day Adventists have typically found it difficult to reach Buddhists with the gospel. The church has already been active in many Buddhist countries for over 100 years without seeing many Buddhists become followers of Jesus. In such countries as Japan, Korea, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand, there are only a few members who came from a Buddhist background. We have typically been more likely to bring into our fellowship other Christians, animists, or secular people.

It is important to understand what it is that makes it difficult for Buddhists to come to Jesus; Adventists must also find better ways to share him more effectively.

## Barriers to Buddhists Believing

One major barrier to Buddhists believing in Jesus Christ is the world-view or belief system of Buddhists. While Buddhism has many good moral teachings, at its core is the belief that one can be saved by one's own works. In addition, teaching about an eternal, supreme, personal, and loving God is missing in Buddhist writings. Concepts about life, death, and personhood such as karma, rebirth, and nirvana add to the confusion that makes it difficult to understand who Jesus is and what he can do to help.

Even the Buddhist view of their scriptures affects a Christian's use of the Bible when sharing biblical truth. Buddhists typically see their scriptures, not as an authority for belief and practice, but rather as encouragement towards finding one's own truth. In general, Buddhists have a different logic system from the people Adventists have typically shared the gospel with such as other Christians, Jews, Muslims, and animists.

Another barrier that keeps many from accepting Jesus is the reality that many Buddhists live in countries where all their family members and neighbors are Buddhists. Becoming a Christian often feels like a betrayal of family and country. In a few places there is serious persecution of Christians, while the busyness and pressures of life, along with an ever-growing barrage of fascinating entertainment, add further barriers.

Buddhists are often prejudiced against Christianity because they see it as a religion that is less moral and less spiritual than Buddhism. Sometimes this happens because of Christians in the community whose lives do not represent Jesus. Other times it is because Buddhists associate Christianity with the West, including its politics and materialism, its immorality and violence in the movies produced there. These things from so-called Christian countries influence Buddhists to see Christianity as inferior to their own religion.

Christian witness among Buddhists also faces the challenge of freezing, rugged mountains, congested cities, difficult languages, or repressive governments. However, Christians have not taken this mission field seriously enough and so the sin and laziness of God's people is another barrier that keeps the gospel from being within easy reach of Buddhists.

Two additional barriers include folk Buddhism with its evil spirits that fight to keep a knowledge of God from the people and the cultural conditioning of the human heart that is simply not inclined towards Jesus. These are barriers with which the Christian witness must contend; however, in spite of these barriers Buddhists still live in desperate need of Jesus. If Jesus' loving and passionate mandate is for his people to take the gospel to the entire world, it is good for us to ask, "How can we better present Jesus Christ to Buddhists?"

## **Presenting Christ to Buddhists through the Power of the Holy Spirit**

Jesus clearly answers the above question in his promise of the Holy Spirit as the means for taking the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The promise for Holy Spirit power is not a simplistic statement that ends in a quick prayer for the Holy Spirit and a return to searching elsewhere for some special method for reaching Buddhists. The Holy Spirit is the method, but he reveals Christ through various methods. This is his job; this is what he does. As Jesus said, "He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14). God's witnesses must search the Bible to know what those ways are in order to apply them to Buddhist people.

First, we can examine the Gospels for how the Holy Spirit led Jesus to reveal his identity. Second, we can search the book of Acts and the epistles to see how the Holy Spirit worked through the disciples to reveal Jesus.

This article will look at the following methods of the Holy Spirit which are effective for revealing Christ to Buddhists: (1) the power of prayer, (2) the Christ-like character of the messenger, (3) the loving unity of the church, (4) leading Buddhists step by step to discover truth about Jesus, (5) the empowered proclamation of the Word, (6) the empowerment to heal and set free, (7) the conviction of sinners, and (8) the ministry of the new covenant.

### The Power of Prayer

A miracle of the Holy Spirit is required for any Buddhist (or anyone) to come to true conversion. Solid belief and trust in Jesus as the only eternal and divine Savior who has come in human flesh is a divine work of God in the human heart. Jesus clearly indicated that Peter knew him only because of a revelation from the Father (Matt 16:17). Paul declared that spiritual things are only discerned because of God's Spirit revealing them (1 Cor 12:3; 2:11-16).

If we truly believe that God alone can reveal Jesus to Buddhists, then prayer will be our greatest priority and method. It was by prayer and dependence on his Father that Jesus did his works of ministry. It was after the disciples prayed that the Holy Spirit came and thousands were led to Christ. The importance of prayer is stressed again and again in Acts.

To be truly effective in presenting Christ to Buddhists we must pray for that miracle of revelation by the Holy Spirit in every attempt to witness. Prayers of dependence will permeate every other method that follows.

## The Christ-like Character of the Messenger

Jesus' admirable character attracted many people. Kindness and generosity, justice and mercy, peacefulness and devotion were combined in an attractive balance. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples they had "favor with all the people," "gladness and simplicity of heart," and "shared whatever they had with those in need." The fruit of the Spirit is "love, joy, peace" and many more attractive qualities (Gal 5:22-23). Through these examples we can see that the Holy Spirit leads people to belief in Jesus by revealing Christ's beautiful character (John 16:14). Buddhists will be drawn to Jesus as his character is seen both by the stories of Jesus and in the Christ-like lives that Christians live.

Jesus' character is naturally magnetic, but part of the attraction for Buddhists is that many of his qualities match the values their religion teaches. It is helpful to know what Buddhists value and then present Jesus emphasizing similar qualities. Below are a number of examples.

Compassion and moral purity are both significant aspects in the character of the Buddha. The way Jesus treated the woman caught in adultery is an excellent example of how he masterfully combined the call to total moral purity with merciful compassion.

The sacrifice of position and power is another major part of Buddha's story and is repeated by monks who give up marriage, personal possessions, and entertainment to live a simple life seeking enlightenment. Jesus' life as a celibate teacher, traveling in simplicity with disciples who were dependent on people's hospitality, is similar to that with which Buddhists are familiar. Jesus' birth and death especially show this quality.

Millions of Buddha images portray Buddha in various positions of complete calm. In fact, serious Buddhists are attempting to put aside and not be controlled by any desire or situation. The stories of Jesus' calm under the religious leaders' verbal and physical attacks show his similar quality of peacefulness. His peace in the boat and the calming of the storm highlight these qualities.

In presenting the attractiveness of Jesus to Buddhists, our character will say more than any story we tell. If we want to be effective, we must let the Holy Spirit fill us with a Christ-like character.

This method has been effective in the conversion of many Buddhists at Seventh-day Adventist schools such as the Chiang Mai Adventist Academy in Thailand. "One of the factors which led former Buddhists and animists to become Adventist is the teachers' dedication and love for the souls of the students" (Insom 2008:169). The young people report that they came to believe in Jesus primarily through contact with various caring Christians, especially their teachers. In 2003 a study was conducted on

259 people, 155 Christians and 104 Buddhists. . . . This study revealed that the majority of Buddhists (55 percent) learned to know about Christianity through Christian family members and friends. Since the study was conducted at church institutions, 36.8 percent indicated that they learned about Christianity from Christian institutions. It is important to understand that institutions cannot share the message, but rather it is the people in the institutions. A Christ-like character was a significant reason for their attraction to Jesus (Phetchareun 2005:96).

### The Loving Unity of the Church

Jesus said that unity among Christians would actually make it possible for the world to believe he is the one sent by God (John 17:21, 23). True love and cooperation is very rare in the modern world so when Buddhists see unity among Christians it will help convince them that something out of the ordinary is present—the very thing which gives credibility to what united Christians preach about Christ.

Many modern Buddhists are against organized religion. They see it tied to money-making, power-grabbing, and the extremism that leads to suicide bombings. They recall Christianity's horrific history of persecuting and murdering heretics for the sake of "truth." It is important for God's people to demonstrate in their church relationships the characteristics of Jesus, for Jesus is what Buddhists need instead of religion.

Harmony and peace are important values for most Buddhists. Buddhists are often known as a peaceable people. "Do not murder" is one of their five *sila*, or precepts. Forgiving one's enemy and remaining unmoved by other's praise or hatred is another Buddhist standard. However, many Buddhists readily admit how difficult it is to do this. When they see Christians care for each other and forgive their enemies as Jesus did, they will be drawn toward belief in him.

Buddha rejected the caste system of India and called people to live without prejudice. Jesus was kind towards the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant, and every ethnic group. His care for and inclusion of women is much appreciated by Buddhist women who sometimes feel undervalued because most Buddhist countries insist that only men can be ordained as monks or enlightened. Christian inclusiveness can be seen in Christian churches as God's people consistently reject prejudice and welcome every type of person into fellowship.

I remember the delight of one Buddhist lady who came to our house church with her mentally handicapped son. She had been chased away from other gatherings because of his problems, but had heard from a new convert that this group of Christians did not care whether people were

rich or poor, educated or of low status. She deeply appreciated the kindness shown to her and her son. When he became unruly and damaged property, she was awed by the forgiveness extended. Church members that love each other and welcome anyone are methods the Holy Spirit uses to reveal Jesus to Buddhists.

### Presenting Truth about Jesus in Progressive Steps

Because Buddha lived before Jesus was born on earth, there is nothing in the Buddhist scriptures concerning him. It is also true that the vast majority of Buddhists have little or no concept of who Jesus is. When sharing about Jesus we have much to say. Jesus is teacher, healer, exorcist, a compassionate friend, radical reformer, prophet, the Savior from sin, a mediating priest, Creator, and the eternal God. We cannot say all this at once and so must choose what to reveal and in what sequence. One of the Holy Spirit's methods is to present truth in progressive steps, starting with what the audience can appreciate and moving towards that which is more difficult to understand or believe. Jesus stated it like this, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth has come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12-13).

The Gospel of Mark demonstrates this when it introduces Jesus, bit by bit, showing him preaching, casting out evil spirits, and healing the sick (chap 1). Jesus does not announce his identity as the Son of God or the Christ. In fact, when evil spirits say that he is the Son of God, he tells them to be quiet (3:11-12). When the disciples declare that he is the Christ, he warns them not to tell anyone (8:29-30).

By the end of Mark, Jesus' identity as Son of God and Savior is clear. The Father himself declares that Jesus is his beloved Son (9:7). The centurion came to the same realization after witnessing Jesus on the cross (15:39). According to Mark's presentation, Jesus revealed his identity progressively (see White 1940:261).

Luke's gospel also gradually introduces Jesus to the multitudes by mentioning his character, actions, and teachings. Both Mark and Luke were likely written for Gentile audiences (*Andrews Study Bible* 2010:1293, 1326). Gentiles also found it hard to believe that the man Jesus could also be the supreme God. They had to be drawn towards this belief through qualities they could see in Jesus that were appreciated in that cultural context. This is also true of Buddhists.

Below is a progression I have found logical for some of the Buddhists I have worked with. It starts with Jesus' miracles, teachings, and admirable characteristic, moves towards his divinity and role as Savior. One

need not follow the progression rigidly, but simply be aware that the Holy Spirit often moves from the varied needs and interests of Buddhists, while progressively leading them on to know the whole truth about Jesus. Christian witnesses can cooperate with the Spirit by being aware of this progression and including it in their teaching plan.

- 7) Jesus as Savior
- 6) Jesus as Judge
- 5) Jesus as Creator
- 4) Jesus as Teacher Regarding the Living God
- 3) Jesus and His Admirable Character
- 2) Jesus as Teacher of Morality
- 1) Jesus as Miracle Worker

As Buddhists come to appreciate Jesus' character and actions in ways that are familiar to them, it will be easier for them to believe the truths about his divinity such as his eternal nature, his omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience.

"Omniscience carries special relevance to a Buddhist" (Wagner n.d.:12), with many of them believing that after enlightenment, Buddha possessed all knowledge and wisdom. They need to move towards recognizing that Jesus truly possessed all these things before coming to earth and that he willingly gave them up. It must become clear that Jesus was not another Buddha seeking enlightenment through his incarnation. Buddhists can grasp this truth as the fuller biblical story is shared with them and as the Holy Spirit opens their minds and hearts to understanding and belief.

### The Leading through Progressive Truth in Jesus' Teachings

Besides presenting the attributes of Jesus progressively, we can also present his teachings progressively, moving from what is similar to what is unique. Both Buddha and Jesus taught openly in temples, towns, and in nature. Both of them frequently used stories and parables. There are also close similarities in some of their teachings.

Most of the themes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) have clear connections to the Buddhist ways of thinking. Jesus called the people to go beyond rejecting murder and adultery by emphasizing purity of thought without lust or hatred (5:21-30). Buddhism emphasizes such purity and right thinking. Jesus emphasized loving ones enemies and forgiving those who have caused hurt (5:43-48; 6:14-15). Buddhism teaches harmony and forgiveness. Jesus urged that charitable deeds, praying, and fasting be

done in secret (6:1-18). Buddhism teaches the importance of correct motives and detachment from selfishness and pride. Jesus called people to stop seeking earthly treasures (6:19-24). Buddhism rejects materialism by frequently speaking of the transient nature of everything in the world.

Some of the parables of Jesus that share a similar emphasis with Buddhists include the seed and the four soils, the wheat and the tares, hidden treasure, the pearl of great price (all in Matt 13), the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21), and the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25).

Christian witnesses can focus on the areas of similarities that Buddhists already value when first sharing Jesus' teachings with Buddhists. This helps them develop a respect for Jesus as a great teacher. It helps them overcome any assumptions they may have that Christianity is less moral than Buddhism. In this way they are better prepared to be ready to hear about Jesus' unique teachings.

Witness is more than talking about similarities, otherwise Buddhists could reasonably assume they have no real need to study or follow Jesus since they already have Buddha and his teachings. They must soon hear that which is startlingly new and refreshing, the very things they need for salvation.

In the Sermon on the Mount there is a major emphasis that is entirely missing in Buddhism—the essential teaching about a trusting relationship with the living God. Jesus' moral teaching is not merely about purifying oneself or living in harmony with people. He relates basically everything to God the Father. Good works are done to glorify the Father (5:16). Loving one's enemies comes out of the truth that the Father gives rain and sunshine to both good and evil people (5:45). People are to do charitable deeds, pray, and fast for the glory of the Father (6:4, 6, 8, 9, 18). God is the one to be served instead of money (6:24). In fact Jesus says the final judgment will be decided by whether one has done "the will of My Father" (7:21).

In these teachings it is possible to see Jesus' style of progressively sharing greater and greater truths. He taught people by moving them from their basic understanding of morality to a deeper morality that is in the context of a relationship with God. Buddhists also need to know this essential truth about the importance of a relationship with the supreme God, by progressing from Jesus' moral teachings to his unique teachings about the Father.

This progressive truth approach can be used with Buddhists in conversations and sermons, and in the way the church writes pamphlets, Bible studies, and the content of web sites. Buddhist people will find it easier to believe in Jesus as God and Savior as they see him through the morality they already value.



In presenting Jesus as a great teacher we may encounter some Buddhists who think that Jesus' teachings and religious practices are shallow, and that they are lacking in the area of meditation and specific skills for purifying the mind. This offers an opportunity to share the special difference in Jesus' teachings. Jesus taught prayer and trust in a living God who has power to purify people's hearts.

### The Empowered Proclamation of the Word

In addition to the many Buddhists who have never heard about Jesus, there are a large number who have. Some have studied the Bible or have formed various opinions about Jesus in various ways. Some Buddhists simply view Jesus as a good human. Others see him as a *Bodhisattva*—an enlightened being who has power to help people. In general, Buddhists are likely to be very inclusive in their beliefs. They may be happy to put up a statue or picture of Jesus with their Buddha image and the elephant god from India. They may even value Jesus as an enlightened Buddha. These same people are likely to be surprised or even offended to hear a Christian say that Jesus is the *only* way for salvation. This sounds arrogant and ignorant, for they place great value on other teachers and other ways of enlightenment.

When meeting Buddhists who have incorrect views of Jesus it is important to care enough to tell them the truth. A time is coming when there will be wide-spread confusion and deception regarding Jesus. Satan himself will appear and deceive many. It is not easy to share with Buddhists the truths about Jesus as Creator, as the resurrected one, or as the high priest in heaven. Good apologetics and explanations are important, but usually are not sufficient to generate faith.

In order for faith to grow God has promised the Holy Spirit to empower the proclamation of the Word. In the book of John there is a much more direct presentation of truth about Jesus' identity than in Mark and Luke. John boldly declares his purpose: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (20:30). From the very beginning of the book, Jesus is described as Creator and eternal God (1:1-4). The disciple Nathaniel declares, "You are the Son of God!" (1:49). A searching Pharisee, Nicodemus, hears about the Son of God and salvation. One town of Samaritans are quite quick to recognize Jesus as "the Christ, the Savior of the world" (4:43). Jesus refers to himself very boldly with the many "I AM" statements (6:35, 43; 8:12; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5) to the point that he is nearly stoned for making himself to be like Jehovah, the great I AM (8:58).

The religious leaders in Israel were not being won over by the miracles, teaching, or kindness of Jesus, so he determined to not leave them without a clear message. After Pentecost the book of Acts records many sermons that directly spoke of Jesus as the Christ.

In all of these passages is found a solid dependence on the Holy Spirit to empower the proclamation of the Word of God. The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus to empower him for preaching (Luke 4:18). The direct result of the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost was mighty preaching through Peter in which thousands were converted (Acts 2). Buddhists also will come to believe in Jesus when the Word of God is taught, not by human wisdom alone, but by the Holy Spirit's power.

Paul emphasized this in the context of presenting Jesus when he said, "And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:4). When answering the many questions Buddhists have, it is important to have complete prayerful reliance on the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit will lead them to understanding and belief. God has also promised the Holy Spirit to help us know what to say (Matt 10:19, 20).

Both Peter and Paul used reason to argue that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy and that his death as the Christ was the means of salvation (Acts 2:14-39; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 19-20; 5:29-32). Paul gives a vigorous defense of Jesus as the Christ when speaking to Jews in their synagogues (Acts 9:20, 27; 13:16-41), but presents a very different and carefully crafted approach when talking to the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). His statement in 1 Cor 2 simply shows that our confidence must never be in our logic, but in what the Holy Spirit can do.

When the Holy Spirit empowers preaching, the words are spoken not only with boldness, but with deep love. Paul said, "Remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31). Jesus spoke passionately with the residents of Jerusalem and likened himself to a mother hen who was earnestly seeking to protect her children from danger (Matt 23:37-39). This means that in answering the questions Buddhists have, we should be in earnest while determinedly avoiding a proud, combative spirit. Debate for the purpose of winning arguments is not effective in winning hearts. Most Buddhists are taught to have a calm, peaceful spirit and can easily be turned away by heated speech. Whole dissertations have been written to show the value of approaching Buddhists with a meek spirit (N. Majudhon 1997; U. Majudhun 1997). In every situation it is best to express compassion and true interest, relying on the Holy Spirit to change hearts and create understanding.

It is important to realize that behind every question and objection is a Buddhist person. Therefore, seek to answer each person's needs rather

than just his or her intellectual questions. One of the ways to do this is by sharing your story of what God has done for you. Many who have witnessed among Buddhists have found this to be much more effective than offering purely logical explanations.

### The Empowerment to Heal and Set Free

Buddhism, especially in Southeast Asia, does not emphasize praying to gods. In fact the Buddha called people away from the gods, spirits, and magic in India to depend on themselves—their own good works and meditation. This creates a void for many Buddhists. In basically every Buddhist culture there are many who seek for spiritual power. Shrines or idols for Hindu gods and local spirits are frequently seen even inside Buddhist temples. Encounters with ghosts and spirits are commonly reported.

This environment creates an opening for a God who works miracles to help people with the everyday problems they face. We know that God wants to be known, so Christians can be confident that God also desires to have people pray and ask for his help so they can experience miracles and taste and see the God is good—all things that help lead Buddhists to Christ. This is why the Holy Spirit still empowers believers to be involved in healing people and setting them free from evil spirits.

One of the first ways Jesus revealed himself was through miracles of healing or delivering people from evil spirits. A survey of the book of Acts also reveals that the kingdom of God advanced because of such miracles. When talking about Jesus with Buddhist friends, one of the best places to start is with the stories of Jesus' miracles. Buddhists already believe in the supernatural, so the biblical stories of miracles, healings, and demonstrations of God's power will ring true.

In addition to sharing such stories, Christian witnesses should pray for and expect miracles from God in order to reach Buddhists today. Christians in many places are seeing Buddhists converted as they pray for their problems and teach them to ask God for help. In fact, in one study of 259 people, primarily from Buddhist backgrounds, it was found that "the majority, 48.4 percent, of Buddhists who have become Christians indicated that their personal experience with God was the main factor for their decision to accept Christ as their Savior" (Phetchareun 2005:96).

Seventh-day Adventist teaching includes the belief that the gifts of the Spirit continue to the end of time, which include healings and miracles (1 Cor 12:9).

Christ has empowered His church to do the same work that He did during His ministry. Today He is the same compassionate physician that He was while on this earth. We should let the afflicted understand

that in Him there is healing balm for every disease, restoring power for every infirmity. His disciples in this time are to pray for the sick as verily as His disciples of old prayed. And recoveries will follow, for “the prayer of faith shall save the sick.” James 5:15. We need the Holy Spirit’s power, the calm assurance of faith that can claim God’s promises. (White 1957:210)

Sometimes Christians avoid such things because they recognize that at the end of time Satan will work with lying wonders even through professed Christians (2 Thess 2:9-10). This is a real concern so God’s people must be extremely watchful for counterfeit movements. Nevertheless, God has a special end-time plan that includes a healing ministry through which God’s people can introduce Jesus to Buddhists as a healer.

In Cambodia, global pioneers have frequently seen God answer prayers for physical healing and for setting people free from evil spirits. Many Buddhists have become believers in Jesus, confident that he is alive, powerful, and personally interested in them. I can picture the peace and smile of one lady I personally saw find freedom after she had been harassed by evil spirits. There are many places, especially among tantric Buddhism in places such as Tibet where so-called Buddhist practices actually visualize demons and call for them to come. God’s power can help such people find true freedom in Jesus.

Miracles come in a wide variety of forms. Some receive answers to prayer such as receiving protection during an accident, other receive help finding a job to help with their finances, while others are helped to resolve a family conflict. Others experience visions or dreams where Jesus is actually seen or speaks to them. A Thai Buddhist attending a health program at Mission Health Promotion Center had a vision of Jesus in his room urging him to read the book *Ministry of Healing* which lay beside his bed.

Buddhists, especially folk Buddhists, are searching for power. Christians have the privilege of helping them see Jesus through stories in the Bible and through present-day experiences of how he miraculously interacted in people’s lives. A ministry that includes the miraculous must also include teaching about truth so they can avoid counterfeit miracles.

### The Conviction of Sinners

The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in revealing Christ by convicting people of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11). He works directly on people’s hearts and through the words and actions of Christian witnesses. Christians can partner with the Holy Spirit to bring conviction to Buddhists. This is important since Buddhists usually cannot truly see and know Jesus until they recognize their need for him in their lives.

Our Buddhist landlady was surprised when I mentioned that we are all sinners needing a Savior. “I haven’t sinned,” she said. I was confused until she clarified that she had not broken the five precepts of Buddhism—avoiding killing, stealing, lying, committing adultery, or drinking alcohol. The Holy Spirit worked to convict this kind, noble lady as she saw a higher standard of unselfish service and devotion to God in my wife. The landlady finally recognized that she too was a sinner and sought forgiveness through Jesus.

Other Buddhists may be more aware of their failures, but do not think too seriously about it. One effective worker among Buddhists often asks people if they have kept the five precepts of Buddhism. They typically admit that they have not. He reminds them of the potential consequences, including hell. God has used him to help many Buddhists come to understand their need for a Savior (Cioccolanti 2007:71, 84).

Christians and Buddhists share some similar concepts of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Buddha clearly taught the law of *karma*. Many Buddhists understand this to mean that they will receive the consequences from their good or bad actions in this life, in heaven or hell, and in the next life. They also think that everything good they experience and everything bad they suffer comes from something they did in a previous life.

However, many are not very motivated by this threat of punishment. Life often seems very unfair and this can create doubt in the Buddhist’s mind regarding the danger of sin and the value of doing good. In Southeast Asia there is a saying, “Do good and receive good; do bad and receive bad.” But a well-known saying has been added: “We did good, but it flew away, and it’s running after those who’ve done evil.” This can lead to a careless attitude towards sin.

Most Buddhists do not have a sense that there is a supreme being who will make sure the judgment of sin and right-doing happens. As we present Jesus to Buddhists as the Judge who ensures justice, the Holy Spirit can use this to bring a greater sense of conviction. Paul suggested this method when he wrote, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor 5:10-11). Paul first presented Jesus to the men of Athens as a judge (Acts 17:31). Peter did the same when speaking to Cornelius’ household, with the result that they became some of the first Roman converts (Acts 10:42).

Buddhists already have an emphasis on judgment and justice. They can easily understand that in order to have true justice there must be a living, fair judge. As they learn that there is a holy, righteous, and trustworthy judge, their conviction of sin will increase. They will be ready for

the good news that this judge is Jesus, the compassionate one they have come to admire.

### The Ministry of the New Covenant

After the Holy Spirit works to draw Buddhists to Christ, there is still the need for conversion. Jesus made it clear that no one can enter heaven without being born again—something that the Holy Spirit provides (John 3:5-6). This new birth is also connected to the New Covenant in which God forgives sins, brings people into a relationship with him, and writes the law upon their hearts (Heb 8:8-12; Ezek 36:26).

The biblical record shows that Jesus' death and resurrection was understood by the majority of the people of his day only after they came to know him as a miraculous healer, teacher, and as a compassionate person. In the same way, it is easier to share Jesus as Savior with Buddhists once they have come to appreciate his teachings, power, and admirable character. As previously mentioned, the initial response of many Buddhists to Jesus' death on the cross is one of misunderstanding with questions that assume Jesus had bad karma. If time is spent teaching about his life of perfection and communicating clearly who he was before his incarnation, it will be easier for Buddhists to understand that Jesus died for the sins of others, not his own.

However, the story of the cross itself truly does have a great drawing power for Buddhists (John 12:32). I was visiting a layman in a Buddhist temple who was very humble and had committed himself totally to Buddhism. I wanted very much to share Jesus with him, but my Thai language was too limited. Imagine my surprise, when he, seeing my attempt, began to speak about Jesus on the cross. "Whenever I'm angry at someone," he said, "I think of Jesus on the cross. As I contemplate the way he did not get angry at the soldiers, but instead forgave them, all my anger melts away."

We should tell the story of the cross to Buddhists by emphasizing Jesus' character, connecting it to characteristics they highly value. His compassion can be seen in how he treated the sorrowing women and the dying thief. His self-control and patience can be seen in his silence and peacefulness under the verbal attacks of the religious leaders and the physical torture. His care for his mother while he was in pain will also be significant to those who highly value honoring their parents.

The depth of Christ's sacrificial character will be seen more clearly when Buddhists understand that Jesus chose that pain and suffering as a way to remove the separation that comes between people and God. We should show clearly that Jesus knew in advance that all this suffering was coming, and yet still chose it. Though he had the power and the perfect

right to escape all earthly suffering, he embraced it in order to bring to an end the vicious cycle of sin. This will also help Buddhists understand that this suffering did not come upon him because of his own bad actions. As the beauty of Jesus' character on the cross is shared, many Buddhists will be able to say with the centurion, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!" (Luke 23:47).

Another significant aspect of the cross is described in Col 2:15 and Rev 12:11. Satan and the evil powers were at the cross to tempt Jesus and stop his work of salvation. However, Jesus was victorious over the powers of evil—something that is a tremendous encouragement to people who know the reality of evil spiritual forces. Many Buddhists live in fear of evil spirits, so a significant part of our story is the fact that Jesus can set people free, that he can protect them from harassing attacks, and that Jesus' power is greater than the spirits they fear.

The idea that Jesus died as a substitute for our sins is a concept that initially seems to go against Buddhist teaching. Buddhism teaches that each person must pay for his or her own sins and no one else can do this. Some sects of Buddhism are very adamant about this. However, when we share the story of Jesus' death we can point Buddhists to examples in history and even recent news where an individual sacrificed his life to save someone. They can understand this concept. Especially as they come to appreciate Jesus' character and believe in his divinity it is easier for them to trust that Jesus' death provides a way to forgive their sins.

Grace for the repentant sinner is a major difference between the teachings of Buddha and the teachings of Jesus. Grace can best be shared after people have heard the truth of what Jesus did for them. Jesus said, "'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Matt 9:13). Jesus told parables like the prodigal son, the lost sheep, the lost coin (Luke 15), the great supper (Luke 14:16-24), and the generous vineyard owner (Matt 20:1-16) to help people understand God's grace.

This is the good news that is missing in Buddhist lands. On one weekend I met a Buddhist man who had come to church for the first time. He had experienced a stroke and was partially paralyzed. I watched the tears stream down his face as he heard about Jesus' death and how he could forgive any sin. This man had been involved in terrible crimes, in particular the trafficking of children into prostitution. He felt that his paralysis was because of his sins and eagerly grasped at the hope of forgiveness through Jesus' mercy. Many other Buddhists have found hope and eternal life when they heard that Jesus took their punishment and gives them grace. Teach on the substitutionary ministry of Jesus.

One more important aspect of Jesus' death is the truth that God's power gives people the ability to die to selfishness and live a new life of generous love. This truth, so clearly expressed in Rom 6, Gal 2:20, and 2 Cor 5:14-21, is significant because many Buddhists are working hard to detach themselves from their desires and be freed from the impurities of selfishness.

The fact that God gives each person power to overcome answers the concerns of those Buddhists who express the idea that Christianity with its idea of the forgiveness of sins is too easy, even immoral. They see many Christians glibly continuing living a lifestyle of sin while claiming God's forgiveness. The true gospel is one of repentance and faith. Baptism is a death of self and a rising to new life. These deeper truths of the cross must be shared for they will speak to the hearts of many Buddhists.

The story of Jesus on the cross is an attractive story for Buddhists. Christians should tell it often, sharing the various parts of the story in ways that will speak to the interests and needs of the Buddhists we are talking to. Do not neglect to invite them to ask God for forgiveness and for power to live a new life, for Jesus can become known as Savior among Buddhists.

### Summary

There is much beauty in the person of Jesus that is extremely special and necessary for Buddhist people. There are many connections in the Bible stories to Buddhist values that can be used as bridges in presenting Jesus. There is also much that Buddhists are lacking that can be found in Jesus.

Nothing is lacking on God's side, and God holds nothing back from his witnesses as they work among Buddhists. Perhaps what is lacking is concerted effort to press forward, praying earnestly for a greater movement of the Spirit in all the areas mentioned above. The methods of the Holy Spirit are as valuable and valid today as they were in the days of the apostles. Boldly and lovingly tell the truth about the world's greatest teacher, miracle-worker, God, and Savior. Allow the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus the Christ to Buddhists.

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