

Creative Ways to Reach Out to Young Japanese Students: A Case Study of a Christian High School in Tokyo

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Abstract

Christian-founded "mission schools" in Japan have had the opportunity to convey the gospel for several generations. These institutions, facing many challenges in living up to their potential for mission to students, ninety-nine percent of whom are non-believers, are testing and implementing new and creative ways of communicating biblical truth. This article examines some of these approaches, looking in particular at Bible classes taught in a Christian high school in Tokyo. It then discusses more generally how young people in mission schools in Japan might be reached with the gospel.

Key Words: church fathers, Japan, mission schools, students, worldview transformation

Introduction

Japan has long eluded evangelists' efforts to bring the gospel. For generations, missionaries, local pastors, and believers have planted seeds that have yet to produce a widespread response. Less than one percent of the population in Japan is Christian, a statistic hardly changed for decades. Even so, there are some bright prospects and possibilities for missions in Japan, particularly among students. Japan's Christian-founded "mission schools" require students to take Bible (or Introduction to Christianity) classes that can introduce them to the gospel. Properly grasping this opportunity can make a difference in reaching the next generation for Christ.

As a teacher in mission schools, I have been part of this endeavor for several years now. I will discuss what I have been doing in my classes and introduce some of what is happening in other mission schools. I will also note some of the difficulties and opportunities we are facing and make suggestions on how we might reach out to young people in Japan.

Mission Schools in Japan

Missiologists and theologians often ponder the challenges faced in bringing the gospel to ultra-modern yet deeply traditional Japan. Reaching young Japanese with the gospel remains a difficult task. Even so, we can note reasons for hope today in Japan's Christian-based mission schools. Some of these schools, started by missionaries that arrived in Japan after the 1868 Meiji Restoration, boast long histories. Meiji Gakuin, for example, has roots in a private school started by J. C. Hepburn in Yokohama in 1863 and is recognized as the oldest of these schools.

According to the Association of Christian Schools in Japan (*Kirisutokyo Gakko Kyoiku Doumei*), as of May 2019 there were 344,071 students, from elementary school through university, attending the 286 member institutions (ACSJ 2019). This figure does not include Catholic schools or kindergartens run by local Protestant churches. By comparison, according to the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, a total of around 16 million students are in elementary schools through universities (not counting those in kindergarten and special schools) throughout Japan (MEXT 2020). Although the number of

students attending Christian schools may seem insignificant, these institutions are reaching out to more young people than any other type of Christian organization possibly could. The students involved, and their families, constitute a mission field that should not be taken for granted.

One of these schools, International Christian University (ICU), was founded as devastated Japan sought to recover and start anew after the Second World War. International Christian University High School (ICUHS) was established in 1978 to provide a bilingual education for the increasing numbers of Japanese students returning to Japan from overseas. I teach Introduction to Christianity classes to these students.

Topical Approach to Classes

ICUHS takes a Bible content-based approach in the first year and a topical approach in the second and third. First-year students learn the basics of the Bible and Christianity through their study of Genesis and Mark. In the second year, students consider various social and ethical issues as they explore such questions as, “What is love?” “What is sin?” “Why did Jesus die on the cross?” “What is forgiveness?” and “What is difference between brainwashing and belief?” These first two years provide an indispensable background for the third-year classes I teach.

Harold Netland of Trinity International University in Deerfield, IL discusses two distinct approaches to Christian apologetics: *transcultural* apologetics (hereafter TC-apologetics) and *culture-specific* apologetics (hereafter CS-apologetics) (Netland 1988:293). According to Netland, TC-apologetics is mainly concerned with “questions about the justification of central Christian truth claims.” It deals with the following types of questions: Does God exist? Is there such thing as religious truth? If so, how do we know? Does the Christian understanding of salvation differ from that of other religions? How do you explain the reality of evil in this world? Did Jesus actually rise from the dead? If so, what is its significance? (Netland 1988:293). These universal questions are not culturally specific. CS-apologetics, on the other hand, deals with questions that pertain to specific cultures and contexts. Netland states that “CS-apologetics is the utilization of justification procedures and relevant data in the actual presentation and defense of the gospel to a particular target audience in a given cultural context” (Netland 1988:294). In the Japanese context, people ask such questions as, “Does everybody go to heaven after they die?” “Why is salvation exclusively through Jesus?” “Do science and faith have anything to do with each other?” “Are creation and evolution compatible?” “What relevance does the Bible have in modern society?” “How does Christian faith relate to AI and extraterrestrial beings?” CS-apologetics in Japan must deal with a mix of scientific, metaphysical, and epistemological issues in relation to the Bible.

In my classes, I usually take the CS-apologetics approach. This seems more effective as it focuses on subject matter students find relevant. However, as Netland points out and my own experience attests, CS-apologetics is actually based and reliant on TC-apologetics (Netland 1988:294-295). I find it helpful not to separate the two types, normally starting with topics and questions that students come to realize are vital for their daily lives. I then present, with a soft touch, biblical concepts and verses that show how Christians might approach these issues. By the time I actually elaborate on biblical truths, gaps between students and instructor, as well as between subject matter and students, have been reduced. Students show more attentiveness to the biblical message I present. I find that TC- and CS-apologetic approaches prove effective when used creatively together.

Artificial Intelligence: A Shocking Subject to Ponder

Perhaps the highlight of my classes is our discussion of AI (Artificial Intelligence). While I am certainly not an expert in this area, I do try to keep myself informed. I use this topic to help students think about the nature of human beings. Recent developments in AI force us to contemplate who we are as humans, providing a great opportunity to look at God and creation. Psalm 8 speaks to us here. The psalmist contrasts puny humans with the vast universe, giving us pause to consider the meaning of human life: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Psalm 8:3-4, ESV).

I then show *CHAPPiE* (Sony 2015), an entertaining movie with a shocking message. Students normally pay close attention, as they will discuss the outcome and its significance after the movie is over. The movie raises a series of questions: Can we separate our bodies and minds? Who are we? What constitutes who I am? Why is our world as it is? Where are we heading in the future? This movie helps students engage with these questions, triggering curiosity into what the Bible has to say about human beings and our relationship with the Creator of the universe.

Conventional ways of conducting Bible classes might be more cognitive and knowledge-based, but this CS-apologetics approach starts conversations among students who begin wondering what this life is all about and about the possibility that there is a Creator who loves and is mindful of us. This approach opens their eyes and challenges their worldviews. They begin questioning if things they had thought normal might not, after all, be that normal.

Using the CS-apologetics approach has had other benefits. I realized that not only do I reach out to my students, but to their parents and family members who hear what we have discussed in class. As we engage in mission in Japan, we need to take the expansive potential of our message and approach most seriously.

Timothy Tennent asserts, “Effective twenty-first-century missions requires a new determination to proclaim and herald the ‘grand narrative’ framed by creation, fall, incarnation, redemption, and a final eschatological climax of the divine/human drama to an increasingly postmodern world.” He continues, “Jesus Christ and the biblical message do not change, but how we communicate the gospel effectively in such a new context requires some significant changes” (Tennent 2010:44). I believe from my own practice that altering our communication method will help students open their hearts and minds and allow our message to be heard. It will also help them realize that there are other perspectives out there in the world. Oftentimes students have already established their perspectives and are not willing even to consider other possibilities. Yet changing our ways of communication will challenge them, in a positive way, to reevaluate their own thinking. Students often note in their comments that they came to realize how relevant the Bible is to our modern world. Through class, they saw their worldview transformed. Mission schools can prove fertile ground for effecting such change.

Difficulties Faced by Mission Schools

Challenges faced by mission schools today include the following:

- 1) Lack of Christian teachers. Although mission schools are Christian in name and roots, the percentage of non-Christian teachers and staff at these institutions has continued to increase. In some cases, the dwindling minority of Christian workers may feel discouraged by subtle, but

powerful, non-verbal pressure from coworkers not to express their faith in school. Christians in mission schools are on a spiritual battlefield. They need weekly, if not daily, encouragement and spiritual support. They are indeed in battle fields each day and desperately need to be sustained spiritually. Mission schools also need a fresh supply of Christian teachers and workers take on the mantle of those who are retiring.

2) Gaps between students and teacher and between students and subject matter. Narrowing the cultural, social, and intellectual gaps that make the average student see the Bible as remote, the church exclusive, and Christianity as anti-scientific and irrelevant is crucial, asserts Brian Byrd, a veteran American missionary teaching at various Christian institutions in Tokyo (Byrd 2019:114). Byrd introduces Christianity and the Bible to students, most of whom have had no prior exposure to Christianity, using both contemporary and traditional Christian music. Byrd sometimes presents the music live, since he plays the violin himself, and students report liking, listening to, and even singing the music outside of class. Byrd also uses clips from movies such as *Amazing Grace* (Samuel Goldwyn Films and Roadside Attractions 2006), the story of William Wilberforce's lifelong campaign to abolish slavery in the British Empire, and a task-based small group discussion format that gives students, even in large classes, a forum to explore vital questions with their peers. Byrd finds that the notes and short videos of *The Bible Project* (BibleProject 2020) help students understand the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. This well-designed and appealing video series can be reviewed and explored at home (Byrd 2019:101). *Manga Mission* (NEXT 2016), another gap-closing tool, skillfully illustrates the biblical text and helps students comprehend the Bible's central plot (Byrd 2019:101). One can observe people on a train in Tokyo, smartphone in hand, skimming through *manga*, making apparent the role this universal media has to play in popularizing the Christian message.

3) Geographical discrepancies. Japanese tend to see elementary through senior high mission schools in metropolitan areas as academically competitive institutions for the privileged and as paths to upper tier universities. Outside cities, however, mission schools may be seen as backup options for students failing to enter better public high schools. Students may not be at all interested in mission school Bible classes. Yet a CS-apologetics approach to these mission school Bible classes may help engage otherwise uninterested students.

These are only a few of several difficult challenges that mission schools face. Perhaps the main issue is how to get students intrigued about the content of classes. However, once the wall of disinterest has been torn down or scaled, an incredibly vast amount of opportunities for reaching out to the next generations and doing missions present themselves.

A Call for “Christian Japanese” rather than “Japanese Christians”

One more major issue needing to be addressed here relates to the realities of *honne* (private opinion) and *tatemae* (public stance). These dialectically paired concepts describe a silent river running through the forest of interactions in Japanese society. Japanese are said to commonly circumvent upfront conflicts by not expressing their private opinion or true feeling, eschewing a direct, straightforward manner in preference for what they see as more harmonious communication. Careful not to hurt the other's feelings, Japanese try to get along with others, at least on the surface, using their non-confrontative *tatemae* (Davies and Ikeno 2002:116). This dynamic presents another challenge for the gospel to be proclaimed and accepted in Japan. Even so, I believe there is a way for a breakthrough because people, especially those who are young, are looking for authenticity.

Respected Japanese Christian scholar Tadataka Maruyama, in his article “The Cross and the Cherry Blossom: The Gospel and Japanese Culture at a Crossroads,” calls for “Japanese Christians” to become “Christian Japanese.” Maruyama’s cherry blossom tree represents Japanese culture, and the cross the Christian worldview. “Japanese Christian” “conveys the idea of a Japanese who has become a Christian” (Maruyama 2000:59). The accent is on the first word, “Japanese.” “Christian Japanese” portrays one who “assumes a prior allegiance to the universal religion of Christianity before any particular association with the nation of one’s birth” (Maruyama 2000:59). Such is authentic faith.

At the March 2019 Lausanne EAYLG (East Asia Younger Leaders Gathering) on Jeju Island, South Korea, General Director of OMF International Rev. Patrick Fung challenged young participants with a similar idea. He said: “Do we live out the Gospel in our deed and word?” This is exactly what young people in Japan are looking for. They are wondering if Christians actually believe in what they say they believe. Young people are looking for authentic faith and people who live their lives according to this faith. In a culture of *honne* and *tatemae*, young people are very sensitive to authenticity in deed and word. That is why we need “Christian Japanese” whose allegiance to Christ comes first rather than “Japanese Christians” whose primary identity comes from nation and culture. The Lausanne Covenant defines evangelism in Section 4, “The Nature of Evangelism” as “the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Savior and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God” (Lausanne Congress 1974). Fulfilling this task in Japan requires that Christians live out their primary loyalty to Christ.

Learning from Church Fathers

Christians have as their heritage those who have exemplified authentic faith during critical moments. The Church Fathers, for example, teach us much in how they understood the essence of scripture and lived out its message. Among these, the fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa, fought for theological clarity while stirring fellow Christians to practical acts of charity in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire (present-day Turkey). Basil and Gregory of Nyssa were brothers, and Gregory of Nazianzus was Basil’s close friend. They debated against the rampant Arian heresy, helping the church express its doctrine of the Trinity in credal form.

The Cappadocian Fathers led the way in deed as well as word. Patristic scholar Kenji Doi examined how, following Clement of Alexandria and Origen, these scholar-leaders expanded the understanding of the well-known Greek term *philanthropia* - love shown towards fellow human beings - to the incarnation of Jesus, God’s true *philanthropia*. (Doi 2016:50-72). God expressed His true love in Jesus, and Basil applied this love to his ministry, for example establishing a hospital to help the poor and sick, so conveying the true meaning of the love of God. We need to take to heart this word and deed approach as we reach out to the next generation in Japan. Basil and his contemporaries, as supergeneralist educators, apologists, theologians, pastors, and missionaries, lived out their faith in all that they did and said, providing models for our missions today.

Conclusion

Our missions should aim to transform worldviews through creativity, passion, and word-deed consistency. Japan, long a toilsome place for missions, is becoming a field ripe for plentiful

harvest. We need more workers to labor, particularly among the young people, who live out a vibrant, authentic faith. Paul G. Hiebert reminds us wisely, “As missionaries and ministers, we should remember that transformation must begin in us. We must first experience transformation in ourselves and our churches. Only then can we bear authentic witness to the gospel and exemplify the transformation to which everyone is called” (Hiebert 2008:316). Our message does not change; our communication methods do. When we experience God’s transforming empowerment in ourselves, the next generation will realize that something worthwhile is going on.

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