Iwa Insights
Conversations with Iwa Staff
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The Closed Set versus The Centered Set
Part I: Introduction to the Paradigm Shift in Approach to Evangelism

When we learn about evangelism, we usually learn to do it in a particular way. We are taught to explain what is called the "plan of salvation." We want people to believe in certain points of doctrine and then get them to say a prayer at the end to accept Christ as Savior. So we try to get people to understand that Jesus Christ is God who came in the flesh. He lived a perfect life on this earth, did miracles, died on the cross, resurrected from the dead, and lives now. We tell them: "You can ask Him to come into your heart and cleanse you of your sins and give you a new life, and you can become His child, become a Christian, and live forever with Him in Heaven." That's the basic idea.

What we want people to do is to understand those points of doctrine, get them to believe them and then to say what we call a "sinner's prayer" at the end to acknowledge their sinfulness and separation from God, and to ask Christ to come into their hearts to forgive them of their sins and unite them with God in Heaven. So once people have done that, we believe then that they have passed from darkness into light; they've passed from Hell to Heaven; they've changed from non-Christians to Christians or unbelievers to believers. So the line of demarcation is whether they've said that prayer or not.

So a lot of effort goes into getting people to say the "sinner's prayer." There's a lot of stock put into leading them through that prayer. If we don't get them there, then we feel that maybe we've been failures, we haven't really done our jobs of evangelism, we're not good witnesses, we're not evangelizing as we should, we're not fulfilling the Great Commission as God and Christ commanded us to do. This is the **closed set approach**. The idea is that you're either in or you're out. If you've said the prayer, you're in--you're part of the Christian family, you're in the Kingdom, you can go to Heaven. Or if you don't say it, you're out--you're lost, you're in the darkness, you're probably going to Hell. It's very clear. You're in or you're out. This is often the idea of evangelism that we've grown up with.

It's like the bottom line, the most important thing is that people have this eternal life insurance policy. And once they have it, they've got it and everything else is sort of optional. So our obsession is getting people from not having the eternal life insurance policy to then having the eternal life insurance policy.

Another way of describing it is that it's like a business deal. You go through negotiations and you try to close it. The prayer is like closing the deal. You've got to get them to that point of closing it or else you haven't been successful.

Also with this plan of salvation, what you get is more of an idea of **what** Christ did for you than about **who** He is. You learn that He lived a perfect life, did miracles, died on

the cross, rose from the dead. Those are things He did. People who have had some kind of experience or background in Christianity may understand a little bit of who Christ is so the things He did might make sense to them. But nowadays fewer and fewer people are growing up in the church or going to Sunday School or having some kind of background in Christianity. A lot of Asian people come from countries where they don't have that kind of background and today even American society isn't necessarily church-going anymore. So this is called a "post-Christian" era. So explaining the plan of salvation may not be so effective because it doesn't really give people a good sense of who Jesus is.

What may be more effective would the **centered set approach**. The idea is that you're moving closer or further away in a relationship. In evangelism, we want people to move closer and closer in relationship with God and Christ. The idea is that you're moving toward a center and toward a person. It's not that you're in or you're out, but you're moving gradually, deeper and deeper in relationship with a person.

The way to best describe it, in a kind of analogy, is that it's like a marriage relationship. Before you can get to marriage you have to go through a certain process. The first step is meeting another person somehow, somewhere. And then maybe you spend a little more time with that person after the initial meeting. Maybe you see the person casually at events, and then maybe you get a little more exclusive. You date. And then maybe dating turns into courting. And then maybe it becomes more like a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. And then going deeper, it might lead to engagement. And finally you to get to marriage. When that takes place it's memorialized by a ceremony which we call a wedding. So there are all these steps that get you to that point of relationship where it's a committed relationship.

But if you start off with just meeting that person and then you jump to this committed relationship, you've taken a big step, made a huge jump. That can be a very discouraging thing for people who are thinking about evangelism according to the closed set approach. You are taught to meet strangers, even those off the street, and you feel you have to get them to this point of commitment by having them say a sinner's prayer. That's like jumping them pretty quickly to that marriage relationship. So we feel very uncomfortable about getting them to do that.

In the same way that there's a wedding that memorializes a marriage, we Christians have a ceremony also that memorializes that commitment to Christ. We call it baptism. You know when you've made a commitment to another person, and when you've passed from friendship into a more committed relationship. You know whether you're married or not. In the same way, you know whether you're in a committed relationship with Christ or not. Baptism, like a wedding, is a good indication, although it's not conclusive--only God knows for sure. With a centered set approach to evangelism, we are not just telling people good news, but we're leading them to something, and it's intentional. This idea of leading them into a relationship with Christ is an intentional process. And ultimately, the natural result will be baptism.

We also want people to know Christ. We don't want to just teach them about what He did. We want them to know Him and in that way know something about His personality, how He thinks, how He feels, how He relates to people, how He relates to

His Father in Heaven. We can see these things in the Bible through stories of His life, and not only through stories in the Bible but also stories in real human beings' lives like us Christians who know Him too. There are ways that people can get to know Jesus as a real living being. So when we're talking about moving people into committed relationship with Him, we need to think about introducing people to Him and look at evangelism in that way, not just think about it in terms of points of doctrine we need to get people to believe in.

We see this not just as a relational process that leads people to a committed relationship then stops. We must look beyond the initial commitment. In the example of marriage, after you get married to someone the relationship doesn't just stop there. You continue beyond that and you get to know your spouse more and more, and love your spouse more and more, and in that way grow more and more committed to your spouse. It's true with Christians as well. Even though we make a commitment to Christ and go through baptism, the relationship doesn't stop there. It continues beyond that. It's what is called the **discipleship** process--getting to know Him more and more and growing in deeper relationship with Him. The centered set approach helps us see evangelism and discipleship as a process that's on the same continuum of knowing Christ and growing in relationship with Him.