Getting *on* with evangelism

by Sharon Uyeda Fong

In a survey that Iwa conducted of the Japanese American churches in Southern California, an overwhelming number of respondents indicated that they believe interpersonal relationships are a very effective means to share the gospel. For most people, this comes as no surprise. God chose to reveal Himself to us through the person of Jesus Christ. He also calls us to introduce Christ to those who don't know Him through person-to-person interaction. Interpersonal relationships provide the opportunity to share of ourselves and our faith in very real and yet nonconfrontational ways.

Yet, how can our interpersonal relationships with Japanese non-Christians be used to share Christ? How can new ones be developed for that purpose? And how can we communicate the gospel message to them in our conversations? Perhaps an understanding of the Japanese concept of *on* can provide insight.

The word *on* can be roughly translated in English as obligation or indebtedness. It describes the burden a Japanese person feels when someone does something for him or her. Etiquette requires that the person on whom the favor or kindness is bestowed must repay with a similar tangible or verbal expression of appreciation. If for some reason the debt cannot be repaid, the person will continue to feel *on* toward the other and feel indebted as long as "restitution" is not made.

The word "on" roughly translated means obligation or indebtedness.

Because of the predominance of *on* in Japanese culture, strong emphasis is placed on reciprocity. Mental notes are made to be sure that such things as gifts, dinner invitations, and favors are reciprocated so that no *on* is incurred by either party. This reciprocity is even found in conversations. For example, if one person asks another about his or her occupation, the person responding is likely to reciprocate by asking a similar question. The conversation usually ends when both people feel satisfied that all the *on* has been balanced.

How can such an understanding of *on* help us in evangelism? Too often we think that the only way we can share about Christ is to start the conversation by talking about Him. We are taught by one of the traditional approaches to evangelism that we need to constantly bring up the subject of Christ and initiate conversations with Him as the focus. Even though we can appreciate the merits of such an approach, many of us feel uncomfortable with it. By asserting our agenda for the conversation, we are unable to be sensitive to the needs of the other person, a characteristic highly valued in Japanese culture.

Perhaps we need to use the reciprocity rules that are associated with *on* to provide us with *invitations* to share. If we show a sensitivity and desire to find out what's really important in the life of our non-Christian Japanese friend, then it is likely that similar interest and sensitivity will be directed back towards us. This gives us an excellent opportunity to share how important Christ is to us and how He has affected our lives. And information that we give as a result of someone else's invitation is probably better received than information that we volunteer on our own.

Perhaps Japanese rules of reciprocity can provide us with invitations to share the gospel.

Of course, what we share must be appropriate to the nature of the relationship. Too deep a level of sharing too soon on our part can create a feeling of *on* for the other that is inappropriate to the relationship. The non-Christian may be left with an awkward tension as the balance is disrupted. However, as the *on* slowly gets passed back and forth over time, and each person reciprocates care and concern, the relationship usually deepens. And as the level of intimacy progresses, we can begin to ask questions about matters of deeper significance and expect to be asked questions of a similar nature in return. At that point our questions to our friend may include: What makes life meaningful to you? What are your thoughts about God? Are you at peace?

As Christians we very much need to be ready to share what difference Christ makes in our lives and to be able to identify and create opportunities where such sharing is appropriate. An understanding of *on* and the influence it has on people of Japanese ancestry can help us do that. As we develop friendships with Japanese non-Christians and give to them the love of Christ, let us pray that God will use the influence of *on* to draw them into a deeper relationship with us and ultimately to Him. □

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