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## OPENNESS

### *Welcoming Others into Your Presence*

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*“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

LUKE 15:2

This chapter marks the first distinct step in becoming a servant. I use the metaphor of steps because becoming a servant is a journey—a pilgrimage. While not complicated, the steps require considerable discipline and perseverance to transact in cross-cultural situations because we are only accustomed to servant practices in our own culture. These practices may not translate into servant behaviors in another culture. Calling ourselves or believing ourselves to be a “servant” does not mean that we will be perceived as servants by others.

For those of us who live in or intend to enter another culture, I suggest we postpone naming ourselves “servants” until the local people begin to use words about us that suggest they see servant attitudes and behaviors in us. Humility requires that we hold off making such an important assumption about ourselves until we have some evidence from others. Therefore, let us intentionally, every day, ask what we have learned about how a servant looks and acts in this culture. Otherwise we may be deluded into thinking we are serving when others may not see it that way at all. This way we can avoid being a “monkey.” Furthermore, the servant principles in the following chapters will guide us in virtually

any relational situation. They certainly would have helped me and my wife navigate the poached-eggs situation.

#### **OPENNESS: THE FIRST STEP OF THE PILGRIMAGE**

The steps, as we go through them, may appear somewhat disconnected from each other. They actually make more sense when we go backward—that is, start from the end and work toward the beginning. Here is how it looks starting with the last step:

- *Serving.* You can't serve someone you do not understand; at best you will serve like the monkey.
- *Understanding.* You can't understand others until you have learned about, from and with them.
- *Learning.* You can't learn important information from someone until there is trust in the relationship.
- *Trust.* To build trust others must know that you accept and value them as people.
- *Acceptance.* Before you can communicate acceptance, people must experience your openness—your ability to welcome them into your presence.
- *Openness.* Openness with people different from yourself requires that you are willing to step out of your comfort zone to initiate and sustain relationships in a world of cultural differences.

We will rehearse these steps again in chapter ten, but I hope the overview and logic makes sense to you.

The first principle of servanthood is openness. I say this with some confidence because it grows out of scores of conversations with people from other cultures—but also because there is a wonderful consistency with biblical teaching and what social research reveals. Here and in following chapters I will develop a pattern of offering (1) a definition, (2)

relevant biblical teaching, (3) pertinent skills we need to exercise, and (4) a sprinkling of illustrations. While the headings may be different from chapter to chapter, I think you will recognize the pattern.

David Schuringa comments on Luke 15:2:

Why did it disturb the religious leaders that Jesus ate with “sinners”? To eat with someone is an important symbol of fellowship. And in those days, the Jews had a rule: one is not to have such fellowship with outsiders until they are changed.

If and when outsiders came to repentance, and when they had proven they were sorry by acting like insiders, the Jews could join with them and eat with them—and not a moment before. After all, God’s people had no business mixing with unbelievers, right?

Jesus appears on the scene with a new approach. He introduces a brand-new idea. He connects with sinners *before* they repent, before they change, so that they will change. He goes to those who need him even before they know they need him! He seeks out the least, the last, and the lost so that, hearing his voice, they can experience new life. Rather than keeping them at arm’s length, he embraces them.<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus welcomed sinners, he welcomed us, embraced us and made us feel safe in his presence.

#### **DEFINITION OF OPENNESS**

Openness is *the ability to welcome people into your presence and make them feel safe*. Please reread the definition slowly.

First, being open toward others is an ability, by my definition. This is important because if it is an ability, even if we are not particularly good at it, we can practice and get better.

Second, openness is directed toward people—others like us and, more importantly, others who are unlike us. In Luke 15:2, Jesus, the

holy, righteous Son of God, eats with sinners, the despised and rejected—unheard of for anyone concerned with their reputation. To sit and eat with another person indicated oneness with them, solidarity and acceptance—a very countercultural act for Jesus in the Middle Eastern world. God, of course, offers the ultimate welcome to all of us who were once sinners, strangers, aliens. He welcomed us, through Christ, into his presence, and today we enjoy the security of that relationship.

Third, openness must be expressed in culturally appropriate ways so that others feel both welcomed and secure in our presence. This, of course, will mean different things in different places. Recently, a group of Central and Eastern Europeans on a brief study leave in the United States visited Salem Baptist Church, an African American church on Chicago's south side. On average, each visitor reported being hugged about eight times by members of Salem Baptist, who had never seen these European visitors before and probably never would again. Yet the most common response of the white visitors to this all black church was, "We have never felt so welcomed."<sup>2</sup> Even though the worship style was unlike theirs, they felt (and enjoyed!) the warmth and goodwill of the Salem people.

Hugging, even of someone you just met, is common in Latin America and other cultures. In South Africa I was shocked to see an Afrikaans father kiss his adult son on the lips as a regular morning greeting. The cheek kiss is more common in some cultures, and it is done every time a person is met, even if several times a day. However, in much of Asia, touch is not often used as an expression of welcome. Thus a bow is preferable to the hug or handshake. Most Asians are quite familiar with the Western handshake and are reasonably comfortable with it. But why not try to discover how Asian friends (new and old) greet each other and then fit into their cultural patterns—a good practice for any culture you happen to be in? But the kind of welcome I am suggesting goes far beyond the greetings.

Practicing openness in the new culture will require that we change. Miroslav Volf uses the term *embrace* when speaking of welcoming others into our presence. Then he says, “The will to give ourselves to others and ‘welcome’ them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying with them in their humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

#### NON-CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANS

Recently my wife returned from seeing our son and daughter-in-law in California. We both had much to talk about. One of her early stories had to do with two meetings she attended. The first related to a film location where our son was acting in a short movie. When she arrived on the set, the movie crew, mostly younger, figuratively embraced her, drew her in, engaged her in conversation, probed her history and made her feel welcome (openness!). She felt like a valued and instant member of the film crew. In fact, one crew member called her “Mother.” The whole evening was a celebration of her and each other while also accomplishing the tasks at hand. Sounds like a wonderful evening with a group of Christians, doesn’t it? Yet, with the exception of our son and his wife, none of them knew Christ as far as she could tell. Nevertheless, my wife called it one of the highlights of the trip.

The following evening she went to a small Bible study with our son and daughter-in-law. While she was introduced to everyone, no one asked a single question about her during the entire evening. It was as if she had become invisible. She almost felt like an intruder. As the evening wore on she made one comment during the Bible study but no one picked up on it. The stunning contrast to the previous evening caused her to think about the difference between the two groups—how differently each reacted to her presence and how she felt. In one she felt warmly received, valued and accepted as one of the group. In the other she felt like a stranger, excluded and distant. Why did she feel so much

more comfortable with the apparent non-Christians? It was their openness. They opened their hearts and lives to her, and made her feel safe, like family.

Surely the Christians in the Bible study group would be horrified if they knew how they were perceived by my wife. Certainly it was not intentional on their part. So what caused one group to beautifully embrace her and the other to seemingly ignore her? Think about it. Then think about some recent experiences you have had where a stranger entered your home, your group, your clique. How do you think the person felt when he or she left?

#### **THE CROSS SIGNALS GOD'S OPENNESS**

The cross may be the single greatest symbol of openness. On the cross Jesus' arms were open wide. In his dying breath he still signaled his openness to receive those who would come to him in repentance. But it is not only an openness to those who wish to repent of their sins but also to us who wish to draw near for comfort, peace, refuge, hope and grace. Openness is grounded in the very nature of God.

Openness is also captured in the biblical concept of hospitality. The apostles Paul, Peter and John all mention hospitality (Rom 12:13; 16:23; Tit 1:8; 1 Pet 4:9; 3 Jn 8). Twice it is listed as a requirement for church leaders. Why is this virtue so powerful in Scripture? In North America, hospitality conjures images of inviting someone, usually friends, neighbors or relatives, into the home for a meal, perhaps overnight. Showing hospitality and providing a meal seem synonymous, especially toward friends or relatives. Yet the Scripture expands the idea considerably.

Hospitality refers to an attitude that prevails in a person's lifestyle, an attitude of extending grace to people, including the stranger, the person who is different. It certainly includes inviting people to your home, but if that is the extent of it, we have missed the core meaning. Hospitality is extending love to those we don't know and who may be of a different

ethnic or cultural history. It is the idea of being gracious to all people, welcoming them into your presence and making them feel valued. A true servant is characterized by hospitality—one who welcomes and embraces those who are unlike us—just as Jesus embraced us across our radical differences.

Hospitality is rooted in the word *hospital*, which comes from two Greek words meaning “loving the stranger.” It evolved to mean “house for strangers” and later came to be known as a place of healing. Eventually, *hospitality* meant connecting with strangers in such a way that healing took place. Therefore, when we show openness toward people who are different from us, welcome them into our presence and make them feel safe, the relationship becomes a place of healing. As we welcome people just as they are and invite them to join us just as we are, it becomes a sacred event reflecting what Jesus did for us—providing us with a healing relationship.

#### IN THE COMPANY OF ANGELS

Stephen Rhodes says:

The most important virtue any church can embody is the virtue of hospitality. Because God has welcomed us, we are called to welcome others—and not because it is the nice and polite thing to do, but because it is the holy and just thing to do. Scripture warns that our unwillingness to be hospitable may cause us to miss out on a divine encounter. As the letter to the Hebrews advises: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb 13:2). Simply put, we have to welcome and be gracious to everybody, because we can’t be sure who the angels are.<sup>4</sup>

Being open, hospitable and gracious is warranted for another compelling reason: when we “touch” another human being for good or ill, we

“touch” God himself. Matthew 25:31-40 records Jesus’ story of the sheep and goats, a most dramatic story because it metaphorically deals with life and death. To the sheep, who represent the believers, Jesus says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (v. 34). The stunning reason for the sheep entering the Father’s eternal kingdom is: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (vv. 35-36). To me these are examples of being open—graciously responding to people around us as an unheralded lifestyle, not as something special or extraordinary.

Equally astonishing was the response of the “sheep” (the righteous): “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” (vv. 37-39). They had no idea that these acts of everyday kindness toward others were touching Jesus himself.

Jesus’ striking response to their bewilderment is, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (v. 40, see also v. 45). When we touch others in gracious ways (with God’s grace) we are touching God himself! Therefore, every act toward other human beings is either a sacred or profane act. It either treats them with dignity or it dehumanizes them. We have no other choice.

### PROFANITY

Every human contact requires an openness that invites others into our presence for a moment of grace, if we so choose—or a moment of profanity. Yes, that is the right word. We profane another person whenever we fail to honor them as human beings. Because every human being is made in the image of God, each is intrinsically connected to him and is



therefore sacred, being stamped with God's own imprint. How I treat "the least of these" is how I treat their Creator. If I extend to them hospitality, I reveal God's beauty and grace. If I am uncharitable toward another person, I fail to honor the God who gave them dignity. Jesus' identification with us is so intense that whatever touches us touches him. And whatever I do to another human, I do to him. By profaning another person, I profane God. Thus the greater profanity may not be cursing, bad as that is, but failing to extend openness and hospitality to another person who bears the Creator's image. "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker" (Prov 14:31).

Perhaps the family metaphor will clarify this further. I am a father. My children bear, in part, my image. We are connected. You touch my children, for good or ill, and you touch me in the same way. The same is true for my wife and grandchild. In whatever way you touch them, you also touch me. God has created us all, and in that sense we are his family—his family in creation. He is our Father in creation. He has shared his image with us. He is connected to each of us. Touching one of his own is touching him.

Stephen Rhodes summarizes so powerfully:

Hospitality, when you get right down to it, is unnatural. It is difficult to place others first, because our inclination is to take care of ourselves first. Hospitality takes courage. It takes a willingness to risk. But as our Lord reminds us, if we only love those who we are sure will love us and welcome those who will welcome us, then we have done little to share the love of God, for as Jesus says, even the heathen do that.

You see, most of us know what true hospitality feels like. It means being received openly, warmly, freely, without any need to prove ourselves. Hospitality makes us feel worthy, because our host assumes we are worthy. This is the kind of hospitality that we

have experienced from God, and all that God asks is that we go and do likewise, particularly to “the alien among us.”<sup>5</sup>

Exhibiting a spirit of hospitality creates an atmosphere of safety and security whereby deep, meaningful conversation can blossom. In doing so we affirm people as human beings and speak peace to their inner being. We also signal that there is One who extends hospitality to all people and who can satisfy our ultimate need. Cultural differences, however, tend to interfere with staying open and extending hospitality toward others.

#### **OPENNESS AND HOSPITALITY**

Showing openness and extending hospitality is not a one-way street. Being a gracious receiver may be equally important even though those extending generosity may have much less. The following illustration makes this point:

When I was doing campus ministry, a Mexican American student leader in our InterVarsity chapter expressed concern about his mom, who had just had surgery. I suggested that we buy her some flowers and he would take them to her and let her know they were from his Christian friends at school. When I saw him the next week, I asked how his mom had responded. His face fell. “You know, she was really embarrassed to get flowers from people she didn’t even know.”

I was disappointed, but I thought quite a bit about it and realized that to try to start a relationship by giving wouldn’t work. That was focusing on her need and weakness, and she and the family probably had way too much of that already as working-class Mexicans within the Anglo-dominant American culture. We didn’t have an already-established relationship between us that would allow reciprocity. So I told Eduardo that I’d really like him to ask his mom—after she had recovered—to invite a couple of us over for

dinner. For Christians it seems counterintuitive, but I realized that we should meet her in a receiving posture that would affirm her dignity by honoring something she had to give.

It took a while, but eventually there was a family barbecue, and Eduardo invited another student and me. I took my guitar and played and sang a couple of Latin pop songs I had learned as a teenager in Colombia. Eduardo's mother and aunt, as it turned out, were very musical and knew lots of songs—and they started singing. I put down the guitar and just listened in delight. I'll never forget sitting in their driveway as they stood next to the grill, heads thrown back, singing *rancheras* in harmony. And the food was delicious!

I have realized since that this is very biblical. After all, when Jesus ate with people, he was usually *their* guest. We sometimes honor others most by receiving their kindness and hospitality and music rather than by trying to give to them.<sup>6</sup>

#### CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND STAYING OPEN

Dichotomizing—the Western tendency to see things in discrete categories—shows up in our desire to quickly know where things fit. When we have labels on things, we can manage them. One of our favorite ways to dichotomize is in the area of “like me” or “unlike me.” If something is like me, then it is in the “good” category. I approve. I move closer to it. I promote it. I have positive feelings about it. If something is unlike me, I respond with suspicion, distance, frowning, critiquing and trying to change it (or change *you*) to look like me.

A while ago I read a study about how quickly American people like me make decisions about other people. The study measured how quickly people made judgments about other people when they first met. Imagine you and I were standing in line somewhere and you, in a friendly way, turned around and introduced yourself to me. How long do you think it would take me to determine if there was a possibility of friendship be-

tween us? Thirty seconds? A minute? Five minutes? How long?

The surprising result: it took the average person between 2.4 and 4.6 seconds to decide if there was a potential for a relationship.<sup>7</sup> (Two things about this should be noted: usually the decision is unconscious, and given time and opportunity, we may change our mind.)

Two other points from this study are relevant for us regarding openness. We categorize other people (and their cultural practices?) very quickly and very unconsciously. Once we have them categorized, often negatively, we close our mind about them. Then our behavior follows, also unconsciously. That is, what happens in our head in less than five seconds influences the future of that relationship. Efficiency may not be a virtue in the area of relationships.

More frightening: on what basis do we make that quick judgment? The decision can only be based on a visual scan of the other person. Like an electronic scanner, our eyes instantaneously survey the other person. We observe the physical makeup: skin color, height, weight, clothing, accent and maybe smaller features like skin texture, hair style, nose size or ear shape. We judge primarily on surface characteristics. Isn't this stereotyping? I gather three or four bits of appearance data about you, and in less than five seconds I determine whether I am interested in a relationship—whether you are worthy of a relationship.

#### THE BAD NEWS GETS WORSE

Imagine again that you and I are in waiting in line and you, wanting to be friendly, turn around and strike up a conversation. In less than five seconds I have already placed you in a category—let's say I'm not interested in a relationship (don't take this personally; it's my problem). Let's say further that your hair and overall appearance are disheveled. You look like you just got out of bed and picked your clothes from the bottom of a pile. Now something else also tends to happen. Not only have I already decided there is no future in this relationship, but I decide that

you are undisciplined or disorganized or a social misfit or weird or . . . whatever pops into my head.

I have made a second judgment about you. I assigned to you negative attributes: undisciplined, disorganized and so forth. When people don't speak or look like what we prefer, we assume negative things about them. In the social research, this is called "negative attribution."<sup>8</sup> Negative attribution, in essence, states that whenever we hear, see or experience someone or something that confuses us, we assign him, her or it a negative characteristic. We blame the person or thing for our confusion. It seems to be a universal human trait, but people in the United States, where the research was done, may do it more quickly than others.

#### **AMERICANS MEET GERMANS**

Occasionally I have been a corporate consultant. In a large automotive company, German engineers met with American engineers to cooperate on a joint project. Each group was asked to share their perspective about the others. Even though this was their first meeting, comments were honest and revealing. When the lists were made, the overwhelming number of perceptions each held about the other were negative. Compounding the problem, both groups believed their negative perceptions to be true, not just stereotypes. Consequently, both groups entered this relationship with suspicion, resistance and predetermined negative characteristics about the other.

Stereotypes, whether based on past experience or learned from others, tend to close us off to being open toward members of another group. When we categorize another group of people, it's usually negative, and then negative behaviors invariably follow.

Not only do we make two-to-five-second decisions about whether people are like us or dissimilar to us, but we somehow feel free to also name the negative things about them. This tendency can be a major problem when entering another culture where people (1) look very dif-

ferent, (2) their environment is very unlike ours, (3) they have a different language or accent, and (4) they live in ways that confuse us. By God's grace, there is a better way. And with the power of the Holy Spirit we can learn to practice skills that will move us beyond these natural but ungodly tendencies.

### SKILLS FOR OPENNESS

For each of the steps to servanthood I have identified a set of skills. While awareness of these skills helps, they are useless unless practiced. The skills are such that they can be practiced in the home, church, stores, school or neighborhood. Practicing these skills in your home culture will make them more natural, so when you enter another culture, you will not need to develop them, but only find the appropriate ways to express them. This book introduces the attitudes and practices of servanthood across cultures, but you must actually apply the ideas in your own culture first.

***Suspending judgment.*** The first skill necessary for developing an attitude of openness toward others who are different is the ability to *suspend judgment*. Suppose I am standing in a store waiting to pay the cashier. An unkempt woman with ungroomed hair, sloppy dress and neglected hygiene stands behind me. In less than five seconds I will probably draw some conclusions about this person, none of them positive. Yet if I catch myself and analyze my thoughts, I might reconsider. Maybe she just learned her father has cancer and is rushing to help him. Maybe her sick child desperately needs medicine. Or maybe she's depressed. Or carefree. By suspending judgment, I can keep my mind open to alternative explanations for what I see and hear rather than immediately assuming something negative. The issue is not so much what might have caused her appearance but what is my response to this "stranger" whom God has created. If I allow negative attribution to take over, I am inclined to ignore the woman's humanity and her true needs. But if I sti-

fle a quick response and remain open, it becomes an opportunity for hospitality—a moment of grace, maybe even healing.

Attribution theory says we quickly and unconsciously think negatively about others if, in some way, they do not measure up to us or our expectations. We then assume the attribution to be fact—before checking it out. The Bible calls this “judging others.” When Jesus was accused of violating the sabbath, he declared, “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment” (Jn 7:24). Not all judgments are wrong, but most premature judgments are. We must suspend judgment until we see more clearly. That is unnatural and takes time. This is why we must practice suspending judgment.

Making a judgment is the same as coming to a conclusion. If the conclusion is wrong, we have acted unjustly toward the person. Furthermore, once we have formed a conclusion, our mind is closed to new information that may change our conclusion. Even worse, once our conclusion is formed, we tend to see only the evidence that confirms that conclusion. In a new culture, faced with a multitude of differences, we are prone to judge from our cultural perspective. Too often we see negatively what God sees as difference. If it is merely different and not wrong, we should stay open and be accepting.

We all struggle to keep our judgments impartial. We are rightly cautioned by God to judge only with extreme care because to misjudge is to damage another human being and thus touch Jesus with the same disregard. *Suspending judgment*, therefore, is the first skill in maintaining an open attitude. It keeps us from premature negative judgments. It also keeps us open to new information that may help us judge accurately.

The following are some steps you can take to avoid premature negative judgments:

- Recognize you are making a negative judgment. It will serve you well to be able to monitor these kinds of thoughts in virtually every social situation. Ask yourself, *Am I jumping to a negative conclusion?*

- Stop as soon as you recognize you have a negative thought or make a negative remark or negative judgment. Ask whether you have enough information to be negative about that person. Should you suspend judgment, get more information and seek cultural understanding before drawing a conclusion?
- Does the observed behavior violate some clear mandate of Scripture or should it be labeled as a cultural difference?
- If it violates a clear biblical mandate, how can you respond so that you still communicate openness while addressing the concern? This takes great wisdom and should not be done quickly and probably not in the same way as in your own culture.
- Unless you are a veteran of several years in a given culture, I would strongly urge you to share your thoughts with a mature local pastor or an experienced missionary rather than tackle it yourself.
- If, however, you are concerned about something that is a cultural difference, then you may remain open, even celebrate it as a part of God's wonderful diversity. Then try to understand how this difference is part of the larger tapestry of the culture.

Practicing these steps in our home culture will contribute to better communications, fewer misunderstandings and stronger relationships with siblings, parents, spouse, in-laws, children and colleagues. Notice I did not say friends in the above list. The reason is that with friends we usually practice positive attribution. That is, most of what they do we cast in a positive light.

Anytime we evaluate another culture from our own cultural perspective, the other culture is likely to look worse. We generally favor our own cultural perspective and believe it to be superior to other perspectives. Such ethnocentrism often causes us to assign negative attributes to the things we observe. Those negative categories interfere with our ability to show open, positive regard toward others. Not everything will be posi-



tive about the new culture, but at least for the first couple of years you should exercise negative attribution with caution. The apostle James offers help: “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak” (Jas 1:19). Perhaps by listening we might learn something that will keep us from the grievous error of misjudging someone.

**Tolerance for ambiguity.** A second skill necessary for openness to function effectively is *tolerance for ambiguity*—a prominent topic in the cross-cultural communication literature. Tolerating ambiguity, or living in uncertainty for periods of time, taxes our emotional strength, which in turn drains our physical capacity. Most Westerners manage their lives using PDAs, daily planners or computer pop-up reminders. Little room remains for the unexpected or ambiguous. We work hard to avoid uncertainty and to live an ordered, predictable life. The unknown, the unexpected, is an unwelcome intrusion in our schedule. We believe it to be dangerous to the order we have built into our existence.<sup>9</sup>

During times of ambiguity we want things to clear up, we want answers, we want understanding, we want resolution, and we want it *now*. Some of us don’t perform well during times of uncertainty. There are, however, two compelling reasons why we should exercise patience, keep the anxiety in check and patiently endure the difficult time: (1) God wants us to know that he is in control of our lives and will act in love toward us at all times even though it may not seem so at the moment; and (2) God wants us to learn through this experience, to grow us in some important way. Practicing patience during times of ambiguity in our home culture means the skill will be available for us to cope with the ambiguities of the new culture.

When entering a new culture, ambiguities press upon us at all times. Sometimes we feel like hiding. A temporary escape may help sometimes, but usually we get better at handling the discomforts by hanging in there, keeping an open mind, processing our observations and asking

questions. Slowly the pieces of the cultural puzzle will fit together and a beautiful picture will emerge from the confusion. Tolerance for ambiguity allows us to persevere when criticizing or running away is what we would prefer.

**Thinking gray.** Steven Sample, president of the University of Southern California, notes a third skill for promoting openness: *think gray*.

Thinking gray is an extraordinarily uncommon characteristic which requires a good deal of effort to develop. But it is one of the most important skills which a leader can acquire. Most people are binary and instant in their judgments; that is, they immediately categorize things as good or bad, true or false, black or white, friend or foe. A truly effective leader, however, must be able to see the shades of gray inherent in a situation in order to make wise decisions as to how to proceed. The essence of thinking gray is this: don't form an opinion about an important matter until you've heard all the relevant facts.<sup>10</sup>

Get the information before making a judgment. Monitor your thoughts as you experience new people, places and situations. Stop those fleeting thoughts and name them. Analyze them. Are they negative? Positive? True? Have they been tested for accuracy? In most cases you can think "gray" and not force a premature judgment.

**Positive attribution.** The fourth skill to practice in developing an attitude of openness is *positive attribution*. Whereas negative attribution assumes the worst about the others when we are lacking certainty, positive attribution assumes the best, while not being naive. I am inclined to quickly think negatively about others. This serious flaw has handicapped me over much of my life, especially in initiating and building early stages of relationships. One thing that has helped me is traveling extensively. The people of the world have been kind, gracious, open, trustworthy and generally wonderful to me. Slowly I have made some

significant changes by intentionally thinking the best about them. Then, if necessary, I may notice some of the less pleasant things.

A side effect of my tendency to see the negative in other people is that I then judge the whole person (or group) by that one negative. I generalize from one characteristic to the whole person. Of course, this is grossly unfair. I am the big loser because I might have learned and grown so much from the people I stereotyped. While we should not overlook a person's weaknesses or pretend they are not there, neither should we cast that person aside for one weakness. Positive attribution keeps us open toward others, allowing for a stronger relationship.

Paul encourages us to think about the good, the positive: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil 4:8).

#### **REFLECTION ON MY EXPERIENCE**

Nearly forty years of observation suggests to me that my (older) generation has tended to reject cultural diversity because we have not adequately distinguished it from religious diversity. We have tended to mix our culture and Christianity quite easily, quite comfortably and with little critique. Often confusing cultural differences with religious differences, we have judged cultural differences as wrong. In recent years the opposite seems to be more true. The younger generation, perhaps influenced by postmodernism and the general relativism of society, has been less inclined to distinguish between cultural and religious differences. They often prefer to see both as valid choices. Thus the younger generation blurs religious and cultural issues, tending to believe if peoples' hearts are sincere, whatever their religious convictions, God will accept them. Both tendencies have their dangers, though they are not the same. My own sense is that the two generations need to converse, moderate each other's extremes and in doing so move closer to where God is.

Having made this statement, I tend to affirm the relational priorities I see in the younger generation. They don't see people as a means to an end, as objects for their witness or as sinners to be conquered. Rather, they place genuine value on building strong relationships and letting witness grow out of life together. In many ways the thoughts of this book will connect more directly with these values.

#### **A RESTRICTION ON OPENNESS**

While openness is a wonderful virtue, it is not to be misconstrued as religious relativism. Hopefully, you have sensed this throughout the chapter, but I want to be intentional in stating it. Our challenge is to be inclusive in extending grace to all people yet exclusive in affirming that the Bible is the authoritative truth of God. While this often brings charges of exclusivism, narrowness, rigidity and elitism, the fact is that to make the Bible only one of many truths is to destroy its claims. It negates its value and authority, turning it into a good piece of literature among many other equally good pieces. Thus religious pluralism or religious diversity denies the distinctiveness of the Bible. Failure to speak to the unique claims of Christ has serious consequences. Stephen Rhodes quotes Lesslie Newbigin in saying, "Relativism which is not willing to speak about truth but only about 'what is true for me' is an evasion of the serious business of living. It is a mark of a tragic loss of nerve in our contemporary culture. It is a preliminary symptom of death."<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, we should not reject cultural diversity, because it is born of the natural differences that exist in people. We can remain open to the cultural diversity as long as it doesn't violate a clear mandate of Scripture. Openness to cultural differences will lead us into acceptance, the next step in being a cross-cultural servant.