

EVERLASTING GOSPEL

EVER-CHANGING
WORLD



Jon Paulien



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God Meets People Where They Are

When we think of “mission,” we usually think of people in faraway places whose language and culture are radically different from our own. We don’t think of our neighbors who speak our language and live in circumstances similar to our own. But the average Western Christian would find it easier to share his or her faith in Fiji, Indonesia, or Zimbabwe than in New York, Sydney, or London. So, it is time we think seriously about mission to the mainstream West.

Adventists today are as committed to public evangelism as they have ever been. Satellite evangelism, prophecy seminars, and/or a variety of bridge programs (stop-smoking plans, weight-control programs, family finance seminars) occur annually in most Adventist churches. And we continue to reach people with the gospel message. There are even a few major success stories. But we need to be honest with ourselves. The typical Adventist church is not changing its local community, much less the world, through its activities. We aren’t significantly affecting the heart of Western culture. Is this lack of impact our problem or the problem of the culture? Is mainstream Western culture just naturally impervious to the gospel? Or are we missing something?

The gospel comes in context

Many people would prefer leaving the audience out of consideration in outreach. They feel that we shouldn’t have to meet secular people on their own terms. They would agree with sentiments like these: “Truth is truth,

and it shouldn't be watered down to please those who aren't following God. Our job is to present the message as we know and appreciate it, and if they don't like it, that's their problem. Isn't it the Holy Spirit's role to bridge the gap between people?" Evangelism is " 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' / Says the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6, NKJV).

Of course, the Holy Spirit is essential to all effective outreach. To attempt to carry out any of the suggestions in this book without the guidance and support of the Spirit would be absolute foolishness. The Holy Spirit can certainly communicate directly to any human being regardless of his background! But Romans 1:18–20 indicates that the Spirit's work is generally quite limited in content. The Spirit does not normally function as a substitute for human effort (see Romans 10:14).

The biblical evidence underlines the importance of careful attention to the cultural horizons of the audience. And Ellen White counsels, "Lessons must be given to humanity in the language of humanity" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 34). The more familiar you are with the Bible, the clearer it becomes that every part of God's Word was given in the time, place, language, and culture of specific human beings. Paul, with his "Ph.D.," expresses God's revelation in a different way than does Peter, the fisherman. John writes in simple, clear, almost childlike Greek. In contrast, the author of Hebrews writes in complex and literary Greek. In Matthew, you have someone who understands the Jewish mind and seeks to meet it. Mark, on the other hand, reaches out to the Gentile mind. The Greek language of the New Testament is quite different from the classical Greek of Plato and Aristotle—so much so that in the nineteenth century many scholars thought New Testament Greek was some sort of "heavenly language," different from any other form of ancient Greek. Then an expedition to Egypt was organized in 1895 with the express purpose of finding documents from the ancient world. Reports suggested that the town of Oxyrhynchus would be a good place to start.

In Oxyrhynchus, scholars stumbled upon a massive ancient garbage dump with numerous piles as high as thirty feet, including the rubbish of several centuries. When the scholars started digging into the piles of ancient trash, they found a treasure trove of ordinary documents from everyday life in New Testament times; these documents were well preserved because very little decomposition had taken place in the dry Egyptian climate. They found still more everyday documents in the ruins of houses;

others had been buried with their owners. Some discarded documents had even been used to make painted decorations on the wrappings of mummies, both human and animal. These documents included personal letters, wills, accounts, bills, receipts, and agreements regarding divorce, marriage, adoption, and land sales.

When scholars began studying these everyday documents of the ancient Mediterranean world, they made a shocking discovery. The language of these documents was not the scholarly Greek of Plato and Aristotle or the public Greek of law and government—it was the language of the Greek New Testament! The common people of the ancient world and the writers of the New Testament were using the same language—the everyday language of people on the street! The New Testament was not written in a heavenly language nor in the cultured language of the elite but in the everyday language of everyday people. *In the New Testament, God went out of His way to meet people where they were!*

One might argue that the everyday language of the New Testament is simply the inevitable result of the human authors God chose to use. They were just using the language they were familiar with, and God had nothing to do with it. But the scriptural evidence shows otherwise. In the book of Daniel God even adjusted the *content* of visions in order to more effectively communicate to His prophets. Let me demonstrate this from the text.

In Daniel 2 and Daniel 7 the same basic message was presented to two different “prophets”—Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel. God gave both men a vision of four consecutive kingdoms followed by a different kind of kingdom, followed by the kingdom of God (see Daniel 2:28; cf. Daniel 7:1). In each case the message of the vision was that God was in control of the affairs of human history. He is the One who sets up kings and puts them down (see Daniel 2:21), and His “Son of Man” would have dominion over the kingdoms of this world (see Daniel 7:13, 14, 27). The two messages were virtually the same in essential content.

But to the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar, God portrayed the future in terms of an idol, something Nebuchadnezzar could easily understand (see Daniel 2:29–36). It’s clear from Daniel 3 that the image of Daniel 2 is an idol. Nebuchadnezzar knew exactly what to do with that image—set it up to be worshiped! This means of communication to Nebuchadnezzar makes perfect sense. To the king the great nations of the world were bright, shining examples of the gods they worshiped. God met Nebuchadnezzar where he was.

But to the Hebrew prophet Daniel, God portrayed the future in terms of the Creation story of Genesis 1 and 2 (see Daniel 7:2–14). The vision to Daniel begins with a stormy sea that has a wind blowing over it (see Daniel 7:2; cf. Genesis 1:2). Then animals begin to appear (see Daniel 7:3–6; cf. Genesis 2:19, 20). Then there is a “Son of Man” who is given dominion over the animals (see Daniel 7:13, 14; cf. Genesis 1:26, 28). This is a powerful recollection of the Adam story at Creation. God’s message to Daniel was something like this: just as Adam had dominion over the animals at Creation, God’s “Son of Man,” when He comes, will have dominion over the nations that were hurting Daniel’s people. In other words, God is still in control of history, even when things look completely out of control. God meets people where they are, and He certainly met Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar where they were.

This is also the reason we have four Gospels in the New Testament instead of just one. The fact that there are four Gospels in the Bible tells us that no one, not even an inspired writer, can reach everyone with the message about Jesus. We all see with limited vision. A variety of Gospels enables a variety of audiences to grasp the implications of Jesus’ life and death for their own lives and experiences. Some people gravitate to the Gospel of Matthew; others prefer Luke or John. Telling the story of Jesus in a variety of ways meets a variety of people where they are. This seems to be the way God prefers to work.

The ultimate example of God meeting people where they are is the person of Jesus Himself. When God chose to reveal Himself in person, He did not come as “Jesus Christ Superstar.” He became a first-century Jew, living in Palestine, who talked in terms appropriate to the local language and culture. He got dirty, hungry, and tired. At times, He even became frustrated, angry, and sad (see Mark 1:40, 41; 3:4, 5; 6:6; 10:13, 14). God didn’t choose to send us a “superstar” but One just like ourselves. The incarnation of Jesus demonstrates the depth of God’s commitment to meeting human beings where they are in their specific times, places, languages, and circumstances.

Ellen White clearly articulated this principle in *Selected Messages*, book 1, pages 19–22.

The writers of the Bible had to express their ideas in human language. It was written by human men. These men were inspired of the Holy Spirit. . . .

The Scriptures were given to men, not in a continuous chain of unbroken utterances, but piece by piece through successive generations, as God in His providence saw *a fitting opportunity* to impress man at sundry times and divers places. . . .

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. . . .

The Bible, perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought.

This incarnational principle motivated Paul in his missionary endeavors. His clearest reflection on the matter (see 1 Corinthians 9:19–23) is a mandate for secular ministry. Paul tells us that it requires considerable sacrifice to reach out to people who are different from ourselves. If we have had little success sharing the gospel with secular people, it is because we haven't chosen to make that sacrifice:

Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;

and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law;

to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law;

to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you (1 Corinthians 9:19–23, NKJV).

In this passage, Paul gives a mandate for secular ministry. It is a mandate for reaching out to people who are different than we are; it is a mandate for learning how to speak to people in a language that makes sense to them where they are. And the bonus is that if we are willing to make the necessary sacrifices, there is an excellent likelihood that many more people will come to Christ than would otherwise do so!

“Lessons must be given to humanity in the language of humanity.” People need to be addressed in a language with which they are familiar. The reason that the Adventist message is spreading like wildfire in places like New Guinea, the Philippines, Kenya, and parts of the Caribbean is that Adventism as we normally express it is exactly what those people are looking for. But in other places the same message seems out of context. God meets people where they are. And He invites us to follow His example and do the same.

Human learning styles

A second reason we need to meet people where they are is because that is how people learn best. We used to think of people in terms of “smart” and “stupid.” We assumed that some people are just plain smarter than others. But now we have come to realize that a lot of the differences in how people learn have to do with learning styles. Some people may appear unintelligent because the way material is presented to them doesn’t fit their learning style. But when these same people are allowed to learn according to their unique learning style, it becomes evident that they are actually quite smart in their own way. Of course, most parents of multiple children knew this decades ago.

I have three children. When they were small, one of our favorite family activities was reading books together. I would pick out a children’s book that told, for example, the story of a bunny rabbit hopping through the woods. I would sit down in my favorite easy chair, and the family would gather around on the couch or on the carpet near my chair.

But things never stayed quite so calm and organized. As I began reading the story, my oldest daughter would start repeating the story after me! I would read a sentence, and then she would interrupt and start retelling the sentence, sometimes in the same words and sometimes in her own words. Frankly, I found this rather irritating. I would tell her in no uncertain terms that *I* was the one telling the story—not she. Her job was to keep quiet and listen. And I thought I was being a good parent, training her in proper behavior so she would be successful in school! Maybe so, but I was completely blind to her learning style.

I have come to realize since then that my oldest daughter is an auditory learner. She learns best through what she hears. So, when she was repeating the story after me, she was reinforcing the content of the story in her

own mind. She was learning in the way that worked best for her. Unfortunately, most schools (and at least one father, evidently) are not set up so that an auditory learner like her can be most successful. In school, children are expected to be quiet when the teacher is talking. That makes for efficiency and order but is not the best learning atmosphere for many students.

My son, on the other hand, seems to be more of a visual learner. Perhaps 60 percent of all learners pick up information primarily through what they see. So, when I started reading a story about the bunny rabbit hopping through the forest, Joel would get up, bound across the room, hop onto the arm of my chair (another no-no in our family), and grab the book out of my hands! What was he doing? He wanted to see the picture of the bunny hopping through the forest! Because he was a visual learner, the story meant more to him when combined with the pictures that could be seen only from the vantage point of my seat.

Again, I thought that this childish behavior called for some “training” in good learning etiquette. I ordered him back to where he came from and chided him for disrupting the story. And the average teacher in most schools would probably react in much the same way I did. You can’t run a class of twenty students if everyone is running up to the teacher’s desk at the same time to look at the same book! Yet, I now realize that my son was trying to learn in the way that works best for him. A story that he could experience through what he saw would be a story that he would never forget.

But the chaos didn’t end with my son. You see, my youngest daughter is a kinetic learner. That means that she learns best when she is wiggling or moving around. So, when she heard the story of the bunny rabbit hopping through the forest, she would get up from her seat and start going *boing, boing, boing*, bouncing and hopping around the room. The story would have the greatest impact on her if she could act it out. She was learning in the way that worked best for her. Of course, I again took the opportunity to do some parental “training.”

These different learning styles certainly make things challenging for teachers. Formal school has proven challenging for each of my children in different ways. Are they dumb? Absolutely not! Each of my children has demonstrated striking brilliance in one or more areas. But each of them learns best when they are free to apply their unique learning style to the educational situation.

The lesson in this for us is that the more we meet people where they are—intellectually, culturally, and in terms of their unique learning styles—the more success we will have in presenting the gospel to them. We need to meet people where they are, not only because God does it that way but because that is the way people learn best.

Barriers against persuasion

A third reason to meet people where they are is that every human being has a built-in barrier against persuasion. James Engel, in the book *Contemporary Christian Communications*, discusses this at some length.* He notes that information processing is highly selective in human beings. In other words, we all tend to see and hear what we want to see and hear. People are fully capable of resisting attempts to influence them, and there is no magic potion that guarantees that the message you want to present will be taken seriously.

In today's world, everyone's attention is pulled in multiple directions. In order to cope with the challenge, we selectively withdraw from some options in order to place our attention on others. When you try to present the gospel to someone, you are competing against a wide variety of other options for that person's attention. Individuals rapidly classify incoming messages in terms of what will be useful or pertinent to their lives. People tend to give attention to messages that are relevant to their lives at that particular time. In other words, human beings have a "filtering system" that enables them to tune out messages that don't address the needs they feel at the moment. If they have little interest in the message, they will tune it out.

Related to this is a parallel discovery. Human beings have a natural aversion to changing their minds. They resist changes in strongly held beliefs and attitudes. And this aversion to change is good. If we didn't have it, we would all change religions every day. We would all believe the last thing we were told. People with a low aversion to changing their minds are known as credulous or easily duped. Most of us don't want to be like that, and most of us are not like that.

The average person has a strong barrier against persuasion. When somebody comes along with an idea that is radically different from what they

* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1979), 47–57.

believe, what happens? A psychological brick wall goes up. And the more you pound against that wall, the more it is reinforced. Engel calls it a “God-given defense” against unwanted persuasion. If someone comes at you against the grain, you have the capacity to simply tune them out. Even the most powerful advertising does not cause people to act against their natural desires.

But there is a way around those “brick walls.” There is a way around selective attention. And the way around is to approach people in the area of their felt needs. A felt need is a point in a person’s life when what is being presented intersects with that person’s own conscious needs and interests, where they are open to instruction. Students of world mission call this felt need the point of contact. It works with both individuals and groups. It is the point in a person’s or a group’s experience when they are open to instruction, when the gospel intersects with their perceived need.

I remember a time when I had a huge felt need. I was a young parent, and my biggest felt need had to do with “potty training.” Some toddlers love that warm feeling in their pants! How do you get them to do what they are supposed to do in the place they’re supposed to do it? No matter what I did, one particular child preferred to do things differently than I wanted. At that point I was wide open to information on the subject of “potty training,” no matter how crazy the suggestion might sound! All a person had to do was say, “I had a kid just like that, and here’s what worked for us.” I gave that person my full and immediate attention. And no matter how nutty the idea sounded, my wife and I tried it at least once, because we felt a huge need to resolve that problem.

Around the same time someone came to me arguing that “President Ronald Wilson Reagan is the beast of Revelation because he has six letters in each of his three names.” The idea made no sense to me then and makes even less sense to me now. And in any case, adopting that view would not make my life better. So, I frankly had no interest in that person’s opinion. But when someone shared the idea of a “musical potty” (leave a deposit, get a song!), I was all ears. While the musical potty idea sounds crazy to me now, at the time my felt need made the idea worth investigating. My barrier against persuasion came down immediately. Secular people are no different. When you approach them at the point of a felt need, they are wide open to instruction.

In my book *Present Truth in the Real World*, I tell the story of a blood-pressure-screening ministry in New York City back in the 1970s. Only one out of every twenty or thirty people who had their blood pressure checked expressed an interest in Bible studies when asked. Then someone created Bible studies that helped people cope with the stress of life in the big city. As soon as these lessons were available, the number of people who accepted Bible studies skyrocketed to about five out of every six (about 85 percent). The moment they were told, “We have a free set of Bible study guides on how to cope with stress,” people were just grabbing them, sometimes collecting extras for their friends. One day, in front of the New York Stock Exchange, 242 people came to have their blood pressure checked, and every single one accepted Bible studies! Two hundred forty-two out of two hundred forty-two! It must have been a *very* bad day on Wall Street! But that is what happens when you meet felt needs—the barrier against persuasion is gone. That’s what meeting people where they are is all about.

Now, the leaders of the blood-pressure ministry in New York have always insisted that the key to their success was primarily the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in response to prayer. Ministry to secular people will succeed only in an atmosphere of God’s presence and power. Nevertheless, attention to people’s felt needs is a major corollary to the Spirit’s work. Prayer without an understanding of method will work wonders. But even more powerful is a ministry that combines prayer with intelligent sensitivity to how secular people can be best approached.

Meeting people where they are does not make life easier for those who want to reach secular people. Secular people are as diverse as snowflakes. Talk to twenty of them, and you will likely discover twenty different sets of felt needs, many of which you will have never met in quite that form before. But meeting people where they are will prove to be a great adventure that will enrich your life. And we meet people where they are because that is what God does, because that is how people learn, and because it bypasses the God-given human barrier against persuasion. When our lives are also bathed in prayer, this is the basic formula for success.

Meeting people where they are means that analyzing the audience is the first step in reaching out to the secular mainstream, whether modern or postmodern. We need to listen before we talk. People have the power to tune out the gospel. If we fail to meet them where they are, the message

will not reach them even if it is staring them in the face. We need to spend time discovering the felt needs of individuals and groups before the gospel can be presented to them in power.

Illustrations

A couple of stories from the mission field are powerful examples of what happens when people follow—or don't follow—the principle of meeting people where they are. One of these stories took place in Irian Jaya, the western part of the island of New Guinea.* A missionary couple went upriver into the interior and settled in with the Sawi, a group of tree-dwellers who had had no previous contact with the outside world. The couple tried to understand the Sawi's language and customs. They ministered to their medical needs and brought them major advances in technology, such as mirrors, knives, and axes. Because of the advantages the couple brought to the tribe, the people welcomed them with great enthusiasm.

When the couple reached a working knowledge of the language, the husband felt it was time to try to present the gospel. He went to the long-house and told the story of Jesus. And he did it well. But the Sawi showed little interest in the story of Jesus. They didn't much care what "the greatest Spirit" had done for some far-off tribe (the Jews) in a faraway land. The biblical message did not seem to apply to them until the missionary came to the story of how Judas betrayed Jesus. Suddenly, the people began cheering and celebrating. The missionary was mystified by their behavior until he discovered that, for them, the hero of the story was Judas, not Jesus!

Why? Because in their particular culture, the highest level of respect was reserved for what we would call treachery. The Sawi honored Judas as someone courageous enough to betray his best friend. They were impressed that he could keep close company for three years with a powerful figure like Jesus, sharing His food, traveling together, and finally betraying Him all by himself, without any of the other disciples ever suspecting! Such treachery exceeded all the examples they had honored through the years.

How does one present the gospel to people like that? The local culture honored and revered behavior that was directly contrary to the gospel. From the missionary couple's perspective, the husband's presentation of the gospel had been clear, powerful, and convincing. But to the Sawi tree-dwellers,

* See Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (n.p.: Regal Books, 1975).

the gospel story confirmed their own hideous practices. The gospel is not truly heard or understood until it comes to people in context. But where in that hideous culture was a context for the gospel?

Shortly after the couple's attempt to share the gospel, war broke out between the Sawi and another group the couple had been working with, as well. The couple did their best to intervene in the conflict but to no avail. Finally, in frustration, they told the people that they would leave and go to other tribes who would not betray and kill each other. Because the people didn't want to lose the economic benefits that the couple had brought, they promised to make peace. But how do you make peace in an environment that glorifies treachery?

Their treacherous culture did allow for an impressive and effective peace ceremony. Warriors from the two tribes faced each other in an open area. A leading man from each tribe, in anguish and trembling, selected one of his own treasured baby boys and brought him to the most trusted man on the other side. Each baby became known as the "peace child." Each tribe loved and guarded their peace child. The peace child was their protection from the other tribe. As long as that child lived, they knew that they would be safe from attack. Why? Because they had become "family." You could betray a friend, but you couldn't betray family. As long as the peace child lived, the two tribes would be at peace with one another.

The couple observed all that had happened and asked many questions. Here was the redemptive analogy they had been looking for! At their next opportunity to address the Sawi, they told about a war between heaven and earth. They told how God so loved the world that He sent a "Peace Child" to the human race. He gave His Son to the human "tribe." And although peace among the Sawi people lasted only as long as the peace child lived, God made *permanent* peace available in Jesus, because He now lives forever. God was now on their side. They had become family! This gospel in context appealed effectively to the Sawi, and many of the tree-dwellers accepted Christ.

A similar experience occurred in a part of the world far distant from New Guinea. Ed Dickerson tells the story of Bruce Olson's attempt to take the gospel to the Motilón people in a remote part of South America. Olson learned to speak the language, and the people came to accept his presence. Eventually, his closest Motilón friend became a Christian, but the work proceeded slowly.

One Motilón custom included marathon singing sessions in which, suspended in hammocks high above the ground, they sang out the news that each person had heard and experienced during the last few days. During one of these festivals, Olson listened as his friend, the first Motilón Christian, sang out the story of Jesus and the story of his personal conversion. For fourteen hours, while a formerly hostile neighboring chief repeated it word for word and note for note, the gospel rang out through the jungle night.

Although this was a positive development, the missionary himself was uncomfortable with what happened. “It seemed so heathen,” he wrote. “The music, chanted in a strange minor key, sounded like witch music. It seemed to degrade the gospel. Yet, when I looked at the people around me and up at the chief, swinging in his hammock, I could see they were listening as though their lives depended upon it. Bobby was giving them spiritual truth through the song.”

The music sounded like “witch music” to the missionary. It was Motilón music. Yes, their music, as well as their language, had previously served false gods. Yet, the missionary would not hesitate to translate the Bible into the Motilón language in spite of its pagan connotations. The gospel had to come to the Motilón people in a language they could understand.

The same was true of their music. How could God sing to the Motilón except in a musical language that communicated to them? Bach chorales and early American folk hymns wouldn’t do the job. The missionary’s Laodicean comfort zone had become an obstacle to presenting the gospel. When it came to spiritual things, he thought his way was the only right way, his favorite Christian music the only appropriate music for communicating the gospel. He seemed unable to move past his comfort zone, so God bypassed him and sang to the Motilón in their own way.*

The challenge to communication in both these stories occurs on a smaller scale every day and all around the globe. People struggle to find the right words to communicate what they are thinking. Communication is a struggle because every person on earth has what I call a “cultural horizon.” Every person has areas of specialty and areas of limitation. Let me illustrate this concept from the physical world.

* Ed Dickerson, “Dead Languages,” *Adventist Review*, March 4, 2004, 28; based on Bruce Olson, *Bruchko* (Orlando, Fla.: Creation House, 1973), 146.

In a room, each person's physical horizon is the four walls and the ceiling of the room, with a bit of a view out the windows. If I go outside, my horizon expands, but it may still be limited. In a city, for example, the horizon is limited by buildings and landscaping. In a valley, the horizon is limited by the trees and hills. In flat, treeless country, one can see even farther. But if you can get on top of a mountain peak, your horizon expands much farther still.

Every human being also has a cultural horizon. This is a horizon of the intellect, of the emotions, of experience. Our knowledge and experience tend to be limited by such factors as our geography, family background, and schooling. When we encounter another human being, we can communicate most effectively at the points of common interests and common understandings. Education is the intellectual equivalent of climbing a mountain. That is its chief value. The more education you receive, the broader your horizon and the greater your potential for influence on others in this world. You become able to communicate particular thoughts in a variety of forms and expressions. What counts is not the particular form you choose but whether the hearer clearly understands your intended meaning.

A major purpose of this book is to broaden the reader's horizon to include an understanding of the cultural horizon or worldview of secular people. In dealing with the secular environment, Adventists face a problem similar to that of the missionary couple in New Guinea. In interacting with secular people, we often encounter ideas so distinct from ours that there is little or no meaningful interaction. What must take place at such times in order for communication to happen? At least one of the two individuals seeking to communicate must broaden his horizon to include the other.

Whose responsibility should it be to broaden horizons in a witnessing context? "Lessons must be given to humanity in the language of humanity," Ellen White wrote. If this statement is true, some Adventists, at least, need to learn how to speak to secular people. Who are secular people? What will it take to reach them? In the last decade, things have become even more complicated. There are now two distinct forms of secularism in today's world. What works with one type of secular person may not work with the other.