

Platforms and Visas

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For Christians in missions, “visa platforms” are identities expats use in order to legally maintain a presence in a culture, for the purpose of sharing Christ. Visa platforms relate to one’s calling in missions, in that they position one as Christ was positioned in his culture: as a servant with an overarching purpose.

Although he was Deity, Jesus demonstrated wisdom in generally *not* revealing his full identity. For example, he never said, “Hey everyone, guess what ~ I’m God, in the flesh.” He did say it indirectly: ***“I am the bread that came down from heaven.” “Before Abraham was, I Am.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”***

But he never stood in the Temple or marketplace declaring publicly, “I am the Messiah.” He did say it privately to one Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:25-26), and he didn’t deny it when Jewish authorities demanded He declare whether or not He was (Mt. 26:63-64).

He almost never called himself a prophet (Mt. 13:56-58). And seldom called himself, “The Son of God” (Lk. 22:67-70; Jn. 5:25; 10:36; 11:4), even though others used that phrase (Mt. 14:32-33; 27:42-43; Lk. 8:28-29). Rather, he preferred calling himself ***“The Son of Man.”*** And there were times when he refused to prove his identity even when frontally challenged to do so (Mt. 4:3-6; 27:39-40; 39:41-43).

One can easily identify several reasons why he came at his “platform” of God-in-the-flesh circumspectly, sometimes almost tangentially. Indeed, he frequently forbade those who recognized his full identity, to tell anyone (Mt. 16:15-20; Mk. 8:29-30; Mk. 1:34; 3:11-12; Lk. 4:41; Mt. 12:15-16; 8:3-4; Mk. 5:42-43). Sometimes there are reasons for oblique approaches to forming a visa platform.

So did Jesus work under false pretenses? Did he sort of lie by not putting his true identity out there for all to see? Was he a bit sneaky in disguising who he was and what he came to do? Is a missionary lying, or at least a bit sneaky by saying, “I’m a coffee exporter,” or, “I teach ESL,” or, “I run an orphanage,” or whatever other identity may go into maintaining a visa platform? Or just being wise?

Let’s play with this: What if, at the very beginning of his ministry he’d gone to the Temple and loudly announced, ***“Excuse me, everybody – listen up. Just to be clear, I am God in the flesh and I have come to save the world from its sin.”*** Or what if, at the feast in Cana, he’d said, ***“Well, OK, since I am indeed God, just watch this!”*** (Poof!!! 120 gallons of great wine!!!) What impact might that approach have had upon his mission?

Seriously – think about it – what impact? What led people to trust and follow him? His claim to Deity? His power? Or was it something else?

What defined Christ's identity in his community? In his world's eyes, did his identity determine his platform, or did his platform determine his identity? Well, before he left heaven to become a human, one might say his identity determined his platform. The same could be said of a missionary – we leave “home” to go “afar” for a heavenly purpose. So our identity drives our platform.

However, once “on the field,” Christ positioned himself as a servant. This is to say, his platform now determined how he would be perceived. He knew this servant-posture was most effective in moving him toward eternal task fulfillment. He used the “platform” of being fully human, and at the “bottom rung of the ladder,” in order to demonstrate God's love and forgiveness, and to accomplish his work of salvation. So he did it all, start to finish, in the form of a servant.

One might call his divine nature, his “passport.” A passport tells where someone is from. Christ's passport would have been stamped, “From another galaxy.” From the moment of his conception, to his first miracle at the wedding in Cana, to his calming the sea, to the moments of healing the sick and casting out demons ~ it was obvious that Christ had a different passport than those around him. Sometimes one's passport can enhance one's mission; other times it can get in the way of friendship, as when a proud American adopts the posture, “Yes, I am a well-educated, cool American..” But Jesus was very careful about passport management -- his passport didn't change his identity, and it didn't get in the way of his mission as a servant.

If he'd had a visa, it would have been stamped, “servant.” It could have been stamped, “King of Kings,” or “Messiah,” or “Wonderful Counselor,” or “Prince of Peace.” Yet using the self-declared title of servant, Christ was able to accomplish his incredible mission.

Jesus' “visa-platform” served his purpose well. As servant, he hob-nobbed with uneducated fishermen, turncoat tax collectors, hookers, and dined with wealthy arrogant Pharisees. As servant he taught in the synagogue, and cut through fixed cultural mores as he forgave one woman caught in adultery, elevated the status of a party-crashing prostitute, and gave eternal life to a thief while being executed. He taught uneducated crowds through simple Parables, and drew theological swords with elite legal scholars.

Obviously the core of his being was found in his relationship with his Father. But his dominant platform, his “adopted identity” during the three decades of his tenure on earth was that of a servant. Regardless of whatever else he called himself, or was called by others, he exhibited wisdom in self-disclosure as he chose what he wished to reveal about himself depending on who he was with, and what the circumstances were. But he entered every situation and relationship as a servant – to the very end.

He said, **“Yes, I am the Messiah,”** but only said it in private to a five-time divorcee; not to the teachers of the Law. He prayed, **“...Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began,”** but prayed that prayer in a private room with his disciples just before heading to the crucifixion; not while riding into Jerusalem on a donkey amid adoring throngs, nor while publicly confronting Pharisees.

When early persecution threatened to kill him (Lk. 4:29), he didn't call in a legion of angels to intimidate the would-be murderers. Rather, slipped away quietly and went elsewhere. This wasn't a renunciation of his calling. It was a means of unobtrusively maintaining his clear ministry focus.

In his 33 years on earth neither his identity nor his purpose wavered ~ he was the Son of God, full member of the Trinity; and he maintained his task focus of being the Savior. Yet he accomplished it via the “visa-platform” of a servant. “Hello, ma'am, may I give you Living Water?”

Let's now change the venue and consider the role of a hypothetical Christ-follower who wishes to lead others to Christ, and perhaps plant church movements. Does this person identify himself or herself as a church-planting Christian missionary? Probably not. When people enter relationships wearing their faith like chevrons on a sleeve, they are usually seen to be more interested in their agenda, than in the people they came to reach. This is why Christian workers now seek People of Peace, visiting their homes, and using Discovery methodology, rather than soap boxes or button-holing. We've learned to replace “evangelistic technique” with the gentler approach taught by Christ when commissioning the 72. “Hello, my name's Chris. May I share a story with you?”

Let's now apply these thoughts to the world of modern missions, and to the meaning of passports and visas. A passport identifies one's nation of origin. A visa is a temporary permit to reside or travel in a politically defined geographical area. A visa is a legal means of identifying one's purpose for being in a specific nation, although these definitions can be often be broadly interpreted.

Most of the world no longer gives visas to expats strictly for religious evangelization. This is actually a good thing, since to be identified in a foreign culture as a religious worker tends to create cultural suspicion and relational distance rather than trust and interest.

Whatever we may do on the field – i.e., grow coffee beans, teach ESL, rescue orphans – we are primarily servants. This identity models our Master and accomplishes two things: **1)** it enhances our platform for teaching about our Master; and **2)** it expands the potential universe of People of Peace. Servanthood models the essence of our purpose in being..., anywhere ~ it is our true identity ~ not the notion of being professional religious workers, and certainly not the one or two word statement found on our visa.

If we honestly see ourselves and our purposes as being like Christ, and demonstrating his love, he ***“Who...made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant....”*** then whatever else the visa may say is also true in its own limited sphere, even though it may not frontally incorporate the platform of “servant.” Jesus never said, “I came to be a servant so that I could prove to everyone that I am God.” He just did the work of a servant, and let the rest follow.

So why are we there as expats in any country? We are there to serve Christ, and to invite others to ***“copy us as we copy Christ”*** (1 Cor. 11:1). And why do we serve by growing coffee, teaching ESL, or caring for orphans? So that others may see Christ in us. Quite simply, we are there to ***“...make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything (Jesus) commanded.”***

Christ actually shed his initial identity-passport as God, and became a man. He probably added his step-dad’s skills of a carpenter to his earthly visa-platform. He wasn’t a leader in the Sanhedrin, like Nicodemus or Gamaliel; or in a synagogue, like Jairus. He had no lauded position in society. He didn’t own a house, to wit he said ***“the son of man has no place to rest his head.”*** He had no peg on which to hang his identity within the culture of his day, whether Jewish, Samaritan, or Roman, other than one given him by the little people – they called him “Rabbi,” or “teacher,” a moniker given to one who was respected by, again, the little people.

He was never endorsed by a particular synagogue, nor given credentials as a teacher by any institution or sect of his day. Rather, he demonstrated the power of God Incarnate, and accomplished the tasks of The Messiah, from the ministry platform of..., a servant. His purpose statement was ***“...to seek and to save that which was lost....”***

A visa may say, “Student,” “Tourist,” “Teacher” or any number of other things, but the uber-platform of “servant” opens a door to a far more extensive purpose than any official designation. Paul had several official designations, none of which even began to approach the full extent of his calling in Christ. To some he was a tentmaker. To others, a Jew. To yet others, a Roman. To the Sanhedrin he was at least initially seen as an intellectual, student of Gamaliel and hater-of-Christ-followers. But what platform did he use? ***“I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some”*** (1 Cor. 9:22, NIV).

What’s on one’s visa is a platform, a legal statement. It basically scratches the surface when asked, “Why are you here?” Saying, “I’m here to export coffee,” or “I’m here to help orphaned children,” is an honest response. Sometime later, in a deeper conversation such as the one Jesus had with the woman at the well, that question may be answered, “I’m a servant of Jesus Christ, here to serve others in the name of Jesus, as I use my life as a witness to his Resurrection, lead others to faith in Him, and plant

churches in his name.” So the first part of the response, about growing coffee or helping kids, is really just the first step in saying, “I’m a servant.”

It’s a “visa platform.”

Discussion Questions:

1. How is selecting an appropriate visa platform, a demonstration of wisdom?
2. How should a person develop their identity and visa platform?
3. Is a visa platform an honest tool, or is it deceptive?
4. How is any visa platform an expression of servanthood?
5. How the identity of a servant take a person beyond the limitations of a visa platform?