

IV. ENCOUNTERING THE WORLD

How can we bear bold witness in a pluralistic world to Christ as the only Savior and Lord? We are committed followers of Jesus Christ, and we believe he *is* the only way to salvation. We are also deeply influenced by the worlds in which we live. We will look briefly at four eras in western history to see the West has viewed 'others' and 'otherness,' and how this has shaped our view of missions, because mission is ministry to 'others.'

1. The Middle Ages:

In the Middle Ages the earth was seen by Christians in the West as an island (Orbis Terrarum), made up of Europe, Asia and Africa, with the Holy City of Jerusalem in the center and God in control. This sacred space was surrounded by a dark, inhuman, evil void of the deep waters. Europeans had many stories of *monsters*: giants, ogres and satyr, who were seen as the embodiments of evil forces or as "the descendants of Cain." Such creatures were to be killed. Europeans were also being attacked by Muslim armies who were invading Europe. To the Christians these Others were humans, but they were *infidels*. They had heard of the Christian God and rejected him, and therefore had to be killed. The result was the Crusades.

2. The Age of Exploration:

The picture changed radically at the end of the fifteenth century. European explorers discovered new lands and strange peoples not found on their maps. The age was one of redrawing mental and physical maps to include these hitherto unknown peoples. For the first time the world was seen as a uniform, continuous, secular space covered by continents and oceans. The question was, who were the human-like beings inhabiting these lands? Were they humans? Did they have souls that needed to be saved? Could they be enslaved or killed? These were profound questions not only of geography but also of economics, politics and theology.

The explorers brought back reports of many strange kinds of beings, but they concluded that these were all humans. However, in contrast to Europeans who were civilized, these were *barbarians*, *savages* and *idolaters*. The western commercial world saw the newly discovered Others as a source of labor, as *slaves*. Many argued that the Europeans were justified in acted as parents, educating and managing the savages for the savages own good.

For Christians these Others were not infidels who had rejected Christ. They had never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel. They were, however, potential Christians. The result was the modern mission movement.

3. The Age of Enlightenment and Modernity:

The Enlightenment gave birth to modernity. Four words capture the spirit of this age. The first was *civilization*. The West was seen as in the lead in cultural evolution, the rest of the world as uncivilized. Others were not savages but *primitive* human beings who had to be *civilized*. Others were no longer "pagans" who needed to be evangelized, but "unenlightened" children who needed to be enlightened. It was the duty, therefore, of the West to civilize the world through schools and hospitals. Evil was no longer sin, it was ignorance. Over time the Others also became "aboriginals," living fossils who failed to evolve.

The second word was *colonialism*. To civilize the world, the West had to rule it. Consequently it established colonies “for the people’s own good.” The third word was *science*, which was seen as a new kind of objective truth based on reason that would eventually displace religion and other prelogical beliefs. The rapid advance of science and technology was taken as evidence of the superiority of the West. The fourth word was *progress*. Change was seen as good, and programs of development were initiated to help other people to adopt western beliefs and practices.

The Enlightenment deeply affected Christian missions. Most missionaries rejected the theory of evolution, but the ideas of civilization and development which were part of the evolutionary Zeitgeist were absorbed with the air they breathed. Charles Taber notes, “The superiority of Western civilization as the culmination of human development, the attribution of that superiority to the prolonged dominance of Christianity, the duty of Christians to share civilization and the gospel with the ‘benighted heathen’--these were the chief intellectual currency of their lives.”

4. The Postmodern Era:

The West’s encounter with Others has forced it to see them as equally human. After 1930 westerners rejected the terms “primitive” and “aboriginal” were seen as demeaning of Others. The word “native” took its place. Natives are not primitive. They are humans and contemporaries, not fossil ancestors. However, they remain different from “us.” Similarly, the word civilization is now seen as ethnocentric and arrogant, and replaced by the word *cultures*. Cultures are seen as unique and *sui generis*. Each is discrete, bounded and self-contained, and functions to maintain a harmonious society. Cultures are also seen as morally neutral. For people in one culture to judge another is seen as ethnocentric and imperialist. Colonialism was seen as evil, and replaced by a spirit of *anti-colonialism*, and an emphasis on the right of all people to rule themselves. Grand narratives became suspect, and the *subjective experiences* of individuals and communities was valued. Faith in progress and development was questioned, and replaced by an emphasis on *preserving all cultures* and condemning change as evil.

This view of others as natives and culture as morally neutral has deeply influenced western Christian missions. The preservation of cultures is of intrinsic value and missionaries should contextualize the Gospel fully in local cultures. Some argue that missionaries should not bring an outside Gospel, but discover the ‘gospel’ that is to be found in all religions. Their mission should be to dialogue with local religious leaders, learn from them, and seek areas of common agreement. Mission in the sense of converting others to Christianity as the only way of salvation is seen as arrogant, and a legacy of the colonial era.

Post modernity, however, is as imperialistic and arrogant as modernity for it dictates that others should not change, and does not empower them to choose whether they want to change or not. Moreover, it presents its views as universally true and moral, and condemns those who disagree with it. It offers no answers to the great evils of the world such as poverty, oppression, and violence. Above all, it provides no salvation to those who are spiritually lost, and so denies them the redemption offered them by Christ.

6. The Global Era:

Post modernity is a reaction to modernity, but it offers no answers to the human dilemma. What lies beyond it? Even as postmodernity is sweeping the West, it is being overrun by the forces of globalism. The shape of this new world is not clear, but some worldview themes are emerging. First, the world is no longer divide between the West and the nonWest, but between global people and systems, and local people and systems.

How do we as Christians and missionaries live in an increasingly global world? As Christians we must begin by examining how we view Others and Otherness. The Scriptures leads us to a startling conclusion: *at the deepest level of our identity as humans, there are no others, there is only us*. On the surface we are males and females, blacks and whites, rich and poor, but beneath this we are one humanity. Our oneness of humanity is declared in the creation account (Gen. 1:26), and affirmed by the universalism implicit in the Old Testament (Ps 148:11-13, Is 45:22, Micah 4:1-2). If we at the deepest level we view some people as Other, our attempts to build bridges of reconciliation between "us" and "them" will fail. Beneath all the bridges we build, we know that there is still the chasm of Otherness which will separate us when things go bad. If we begin with the fact of our one humanity, we can celebrate our differences because they are secondary.

In affirming the oneness of humanity, we do not deny the great difficulty in understanding people in other cultures. Far too often we claim to know what others are thinking and feeling, when, in fact, we are totally wrong. The more we study cultural differences the more we realize how difficult true cross-cultural communication really is. Learning to understand people in other cultures in a fallen world is a long and difficult process, but by listening and learning we can learn to know them not just as objects of our analysis, but as humans like ourselves.

The Scriptures leads us to a second startling conclusion: *in the church there are no others, there are only us--members of the one body of Christ*. Peter's amazement at what was taking place can be detected in his words in the house of Cornelius, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality(Acts 10:34)!" The unity of the church is not a product of the Good News, it is an essential part of that Gospel.

What implications does this shift in seeing others have for missions in the twenty-first century? First, we recognize that the cultures of this world contain good because God gave humans the ability to create, and evil because sin has affected all of human activities, both individual and corporate. We recognize that all cultures are part of this world and its age [*eon, archeon*] and will come to an end when the Kingdom of God comes in its fullness at the end of time. They are all relativized by the Kingdom. We must seek a critical contextualization of the Gospel that affirms what is good and challenges and transforms what is evil. Second, we would reject colonial rule and self rule, and call for submission to the reign of God in our lives and in our communities. Finally, we would not proclaim the Gospel from a position of arrogance and power, nor equate it with human religions. We would bear bold witness to what we know and have experienced. Witness is not arrogant, but authentic and real. As E. Stanley Jones notes, we are not God's lawyers, we are his witnesses. But witnesses must speak out of a living reality in their lives.