

From Jerusalem to Antioch

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"Now in the church at Antioch . . ." (Acts 13:1). Antioch? What happened to Jerusalem: Jerusalem where the church began, where the elders met, where the first missionary movement began? These words in Act 13 mark a quiet, almost unnoticed shift of the center of Christian outreach from Jerusalem to Antioch. It was from Antioch that Paul and Barnabas began their tours to Asia Minor and Europe, and started the second great missionary movement. The rest of Acts is the story of Antioch.

I would like to point out some parallels between what happened in the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch, and what is happening in the churches in the west and nonwest today. From the comparison I would like to draw some lessons in missions for us in the west.

Jerusalem: The Modern Mission Movement

"Now in Jerusalem. . . (Acts 1 - 12)." When Jesus left, he told his disciples to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the promise of the Father. There they waited in prayer, and there the Holy Spirit came upon them, and began the church.

Jerusalem was the center of the first mission movement. After the death of Stephen, the disciples were scattered. Where they went, they preached the Word of the Lord (Acts 8:4). Philip went to Samaria, and witnessed to the Ethiopian. Ananias led the work in Damascus (Acts 9). Stephen went to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (Acts 11:19).

In our day, Europe and North America have been Jerusalems. They sent missionaries around the world proclaiming the good news of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. These were remarkably successful. Today churches exist in most countries, testimonies to those who gave their lives that all might hear the Gospel.

Their very success in planting churches in new lands forced both Jerusalem and the west to deal with two critical issues that threatened to paralyze their mission outreach. The first had to do with culture, the second with power.

Christianity: Gospel is Culture

As the church spread beyond Jerusalem, the question arose: what should the church do with converts from the Gentiles, the goyim? Could they become Christians (Acts 10), and, if so, must they live like the Jewish Christians (Acts 15)?

Many Jewish Christians answered yes to both questions. They were willing to accept Gentiles if they were circumcised and adopted Jewish ways. Others, notably Paul and Barnabas, argued that the goyim could become Christians, but that they did not need to adopt Jewish ways. The first major conference was called to give theological answers to an important missiological question: is the Gospel tied to a particular people and culture? If not, what is it, and how should it find expression in other contexts?¹

¹ The question was not simply one of Gospel and culture. Circumcision was not simply a Jewish custom. It had been given by God to his people as a sign. This illustrates the fact that we cannot make a sharp distinction between the Gospel and human cultures, and deal with them separately. The Gospel is universal, but it must always be expressed with in specific human contexts. Even Christ's incarnation took place in a particular time and human setting.

The modern mission movement faced the same question. As people in other cultures became Christian, questions arose about what they should believe and how they should live. In the nineteenth century most Christians equated Christianity with their culture. Other cultures were seen as pagan. Most missionaries, therefore, expected Christian converts to adopt western ways. Wilbert Shenk writes (1980, 35),

[E]arly in their missionary experience [the] New Englanders concluded that Indian converts could only be Christians if they were "civilized." The model by which they measured their converts was English Puritan civilization.

In 1890, Rev. T. W. Pearce pointed out that merely introducing Christianity to China was not enough. Western civilization, in its entirety, had to "overcome" Chinese civilization (Chao 1987, 12).

Like the Jerusalem church, we from the west have had our own "circumcisions" which we sought to impose on the new converts - western ways which we equated with the Gospel, and which kept it from taking root in new soils? On the surface, these included such things as wearing clothes, singing translated hymns, and going to school. On a deeper level, they were our church polity and worship styles.

On the deepest level, we brought with us a modern worldview rooted in the assumptions of the Enlightenment. Among these was a veneration of rational empiricism. We often treated science and theology as 'positive' knowledge, as objective truth standing outside historical and cultural contexts. We divorced them from feelings and morality because these thought to be 'subjective.' Consequently, the Gospel often becomes an idea to believe, not a new allegiance that excites passions and transforms lives. Our acultural and ahistorical view of Christianity kept us from contextualizing the schools, hospitals, churches and theologies which we bring with us.

Another assumption of the enlightenment was a dualism that separated spirit from matter, supernatural realities from natural ones. This led us in missions to deny the reality of spirits and witchcraft, and to divorce ministry to earthly needs from ministry to heavenly needs.

A third presupposition was a deep faith in human control, and in technique to achieve this (Ellul 1964). This had a profound effect on missions. Increasingly we turned to strategies, formulas, and the social sciences to determine our ministries.²

Closely tied to this was a belief in progress achieved through competition and the success of the fittest. Success, therefore, was the highest goal, and pragmatism the judge of our actions. In modern missions these have increasingly become the values by which we operate. We value results over relationships, and programs over people.

Finally, modernity stresses individualism. In missions we emphasized individual conversions, and said little about the Kingdom of God, or God's judgment of corporate human sin.

These and other modern 'circumcisions' have kept us from freeing the Gospel to take root and flourish in other cultures.

² Jacque Ellul (1964), and Peter Berger (1974) show how deeply we in the west believe in a mechanistic world which we can control if we know the laws and use the right techniques. The result is a fascination with means rather than ends. We see this in the many 'How To...' books and seminars in the west.

In recent years Evangelicals have also bought into 'technique' as a view of life in their adoption of 'management-by-objective' leadership styles, and of some theories of Church Growth. In missions we often focus more on contextualization and our methods of communication than on the message of the Gospel.

Christendom: Church and State

The west is like the Jerusalem church in a second important way. Both began by equating the Kingdom of God with an earthly nation. The early believers expected Jesus to reestablish the kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:6). They failed to understand the nature of Kingdom of God which Jesus preached throughout his ministry.

The modern mission movement has also struggled with the relationship of Christ's kingdom to earthly states. After Constantine, the church was wedded to the Roman government, and gave birth to the Holy Roman Empire, and a faith in Christendom - the belief that Christianity should establish earthly kingdoms whose rulers are devoted to maintaining and propagating the Christian faith (Cochrane 1957, 209).

The modern mission movement has been deeply shaped by the idea of Christendom. The church often worked in partnership with western colonial governments to extend 'Christianity,' 'civilization,' and 'commerce' to 'pagan' countries ruled by 'heathen' kings.

This collaboration was true not only of missionaries associated with state churches, but also those from 'believer's churches,' who sought the assistance of western colonial rulers, even when they were not citizens of those governments.³ It should not surprise us that the people often equated Christianity with political conquest and colonial rule.

³ See Torbin Christensen and William R. Hutchison, eds. Missionary Ideologies in the Imperial Era 1880 -1920 (Aarhus, Denmark: Aros, 1982); John K. Fairbank, ed., Christianity in China (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974); and Max Warren, The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History (London: SCM Press, 1965). For a good survey of how their home cultures influenced missionaries see Charles R. Taber, The World is Too Much With Us (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1991).

Missions: West to Non-west

Our faith in western Christianity and Christendom profoundly shaped how we did missions. We often saw missions as a movement from the western Christian world, to the nonwestern pagan world. We tied Christianity to notions of civilization, western superiority, and triumphalism. The apparent superiority of western science was seen as evidence of the truthfulness of the Gospel. We took little note of the many Christian communities already existing in other parts of the world.

Our attitudes of superiority led to a two-tier Christianity of missionaries and nationals, mission fellowships and native churches. Too often we treated the people like children. This found its most deadly expression in Africa where, even today, African believers are told that they are descendants of Ham, and therefore under the curse of God.⁴

We felt little need to study local cultures, because we wanted to displace them with modern Christian ways.⁵ Consequently, we were often ignorant of what was happening in the minds of new converts. Charles Taber writes,

[N]onliterate people did often accept Christianity wholesale, but they did so within their own frame of reference and for their own reasons. As pragmatists concerned with coping with "the powers" in relation to everyday life, they often adopted Jesus as an additional power, one of great utility, to help them deal with life, especially the new situation created by the presence and power of Westerners (1991, 180).

⁴ See Nzash Lumea, dissertation. School of World Mission. Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena CA. 1989.

⁵ There are many exceptions to this broad generalization. Notably the early missionaries, from Ziegenbalg through Carey and Judson, were often profound scholars of the languages and cultures in which they worked. Many of them wrote literature in these languages that is still recognized to be of the highest order. Others of them translated native texts into English and French so that western churches would understand the people they served.

We were surprised, therefore, to discover that amulets, magic, witchcraft and divination often continued in Christian churches, but secretly so as to avoid our condemnation.

Today we are like Jerusalem in Acts 15. We are excited by the rapid spread of the Gospel, in which we played a major role. But we are confused by the bewildering problems raised by cultural differences, and by the question of the relationship of the Gospel to culture.

Antioch: A New Center

"Now in Antioch . . ." Antioch, founded about 300 B.C. by Seleucus Nicator, was a trade city where people from around the known world hawking their wares. Here Christians who fled the persecutions in Jerusalem proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ, alongside preachers of other religions, and prophets of new mystery cults. Here emerged a Christian community of Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men and women - a vital, missionary church that would bring the Gospel to Asia Minor and Europe.

Christianity: The Gospel divorced from Culture

One of the remarkable facts of our time is the birth of Christianity around the world - the fruit of the earlier mission movement. Christianity is rapidly becoming a non-Western phenomenon. Over sixty percent who call themselves Christian now living outside Europe and North America. This massive shift has happened only very recently, in fact only since about 1960.

Many of the young churches show signs of great spiritual vitality. In Africa some 70,000 people become Christians (in the broadest sense) each week. Three thousand five hundred

churches are planted each week. Similar stories of growth are reported in Latin America, Korea, Philippines, Northeast India and coastal China.

The vitality of these nonwestern churches is evident in more than numbers. Many of the young churches are writing their own hymns, creating their own worship forms, and formulating their own theologies based on their own study of Scripture. This leads to living Christianity, and the danger of syncretism and Christo-paganism. It also leads to the fragmentation of Christianity. The number of Christian denominations increase from a global total of 1,900 in the year 1900 to over 18,000 in 1970. By 1980, there were close to 21,000, which amounts to a net increase of 270 new denominations a year, or five every week (Barrett 1982). The picture is one of promise and concern.

The emergence of the nonwestern church, and the secularization and pluralization of the west is breaking Christianity's captivity to western culture. Western Christians are increasingly aware of cultural differences, and therefore of culture, as they meet Hindus at work and see Mosques in their neighborhoods. Western theologians are beginning to wrestle with the emergence of contextualized theologies around the world.

This awareness raises questions about the relationship of Christianity to culture. We can no longer equate it with any of our human systems. It is divine revelation from above. But how can we preach this Gospel in a pluralistic world? How can we affirm absolute truth amidst cultural relativism?

Christendom: The Church Set Free

A second major fact of our time is the collapse of colonialism and Christendom. It took a

century to build up the colonial empire. It took two decades to dismantle it. In twenty years more than one hundred twenty new nations were born, many of them opposing Christianity. The colonial-Christian synthesis has disintegrated.

The collapse of Christendom is due also to the fact that the majority of Christians live in Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist countries where they are often a persecuted minority. Moreover, Christians in the west live in countries that can no longer be called "Christian nations."

The collapse of Christendom means that the Church must no longer look to the state for assistance. We should not turn to western governments to maintain peace and open doors in India, Africa or China, or to defend our missionaries abroad. We must enter Muslim and Hindu states not by the power of governments, but by the power of God. Opposition, unstable governments, and ethnic and ideological wars will make mission work costly, but this is a price we must be willing to pay.

The collapse of Christendom frees the Church to be itself. It must now define itself apart from earthly political realities. We proclaim a Kingdom that is not tied to any human nation.

Missions in the West and nonWest

In the last two decades young churches around the world have caught the vision of missions. In 1980 Asian churches sent out about five thousand missionaries, many to other peoples in their country, but some to other parts of the world.⁶ By 1990 the figure exceeded 20,000. Latin America, Africa and the Pacific Islands are becoming increasingly involved in

⁶ See Larry Pate, 1986. Asian missions: Growth, problems and partnership. Bridging Peoples 5 (October): 1-8.

outreach. By the end of this century, the number of missionaries sent by the two-third's world churches will probably equal or exceed those sent by the West.

This bold proclamation of the Gospel by two-third's world missions contrasts with the self-doubt that has struck our western missions. In view of the rising spirit of anti-colonialism sweeping the world, we are asked, "What right do we have to seek to convert people to Christianity? Is this not colonialism under a new guise?"

Beneath our western malaise lies a deeper question: how should we as Christians respond to cultural pluralism? How do we avoid an attitude of colonial superiority on the one hand, and, on the other, a pragmatic relativism that destroys the Gospel? Many call us to join other religions in worshipping God (undefined). The uniqueness of Christ and the Gospel is sacrificed for the sake of world harmony.⁷

There are hopeful signs in the West. Local churches are discovering immigrant ethnic communities around them and reaching out to them. This should not, however, divert our attention from the crisis of will in the west. We lack the vision, passion and sacrifice that drove our forbearers to give their lives at the ends of the earth.

Antioch and Jerusalem: Global Missions

Does the western church have a role in world missions in the twenty-first century (if the Lord tarries)? One thing is clear, when Jerusalem lost its mission vision, God raised up an

⁷ A good discussion of recent books on Christianity and non-Christian religions is found in Religious Studies Review, 15, July 1989. Of twelve books reviewed, only S. Mark Heim's affirms the uniqueness of Christ and the Gospel.

Antioch to do his work. And when Antioch was caught up in materialism, God raised up Alexandria and Ephesus (2-3 cents.) as centers of missionary outreach. Later Constantinople (4-6 cents.), Rome (7-11), France (12-14 cents.), Germany (15 cent.), Spain and Portugal (16-17 cents.), and the Europe and North America (18-20 cents.) became the centers of mission outreach, and as each lost its vision, God found a new church to proclaim the Gospel. The question is not whether God will carry out his mission. The question is whether we will be central to that task.

Christianity: The Gospel to all Cultures

How can we remain useful laborers in the fields of our Lord? First, we must reexamine the nature of the Gospel and its relationship to human cultures. In the past we stressed the uniformity of the church. We planted churches around the world that looked like us. We translated our hymns into local languages and taught the people to worship as we do.

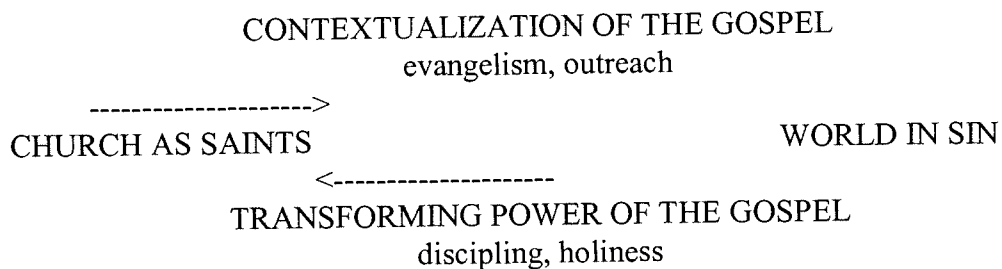
Today young churches are reaffirming their own cultures. They are writing indigenous songs, and incorporating their own styles in their worship services. They are developing their own theologies.

It is clear that if we, like Jerusalem, demand that Christians everywhere become like us, we will end up talking to ourselves, and miss the exciting thing God is doing around the world in our day. We must recognize the right of young churches to read the Gospel in their own contexts, to develop their own forms of worship, and write their own theologies. If we reject contextualization we close the door to effective evangelism.

But we must also reaffirm that the Gospel, now freed from western culture, is indeed God revealing himself to us, and showing us our true condition. We must move beyond the relativism and pragmatism that now plaguing the west, and boldly proclaim the truths of Scripture.

In doing so we must also move beyond contextualization to transformation (figure 1).⁸ The Gospel is not simply a message to be understood. It is a call to be obeyed. Contextualization without transformation leads to Christo-paganism. Transformation without contextualization lacks evangelistic outreach.

Figure 1
Contextualization and Transformation



When we recognize that the Gospel is God's word to us, not our word to others, we can affirm its absolute authority, and translate it into every language. When we follow one Lord

⁸ Many are now using the term 'inculturation' to refer to the authentic penetration of the Gospel into a new culture, and of the church into a society. The term is based on the analogy of the incarnation: just as Jesus was incarnate as a human being without losing his full divinity, so the gospel today and its human messengers need to become humanly incarnate in all specific cultures where missions is carried out. The term was first used in French in the 1930s with reference to Catholic mission work in Japan. Since the 1970s the term has found wide acceptance in mission circles. For a good discussion of the term see W. F. Aylward Shorter, Toward a Theology of Incarnation. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

Jesus Christ and are members of one body, we can sing in different languages, enjoy different worship forms, and learn from each other's theological insights, and celebrate our cultural differences.

We must also hear God's prophetic word to us, calling us to new lives, transformed societies and mission. We in the west, in particular, need to challenge our own cultural accommodation more.⁹ We need to reexamine the impact of modernity, and materialism on our spiritual lives.

Kingdom of God:

If we can no longer ally ourselves with earthly powers, what is our political identity as Christians? This is a critical question for Christians who live in Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist nations. It is equally crucial for us in America who are still tempted to make God our tribal god.

Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God as a new dominion invading the earth. We as Christians should be obedient subjects to the nations in which we live, within the limits of our conscience, whether these be Hindu, Muslim or secular states. We must also create communities of the Kingdom invading the earth, in which Christ's rule is manifested in the lives of his people. What implications does this have for missions?

What implications does this have for missions? It means we must break our dependence on power and wealth, and learn to witness from positions of powerlessness and poverty. Too long

⁹ There is a growing movement in North America and Europe known as the "Gospel in Our Culture" movement. This is concerned with the western churches accommodation to western culture. For an introduction to the movement see Hugh Montefiore, ed. The Gospel and Contemporary Culture. London: Mowbray, 1992; and The Gospel and Our Culture Newsletter.

we in the west have operated from a position of dominance. But how do we do missions from the margins?

We can learn from the young churches who are boldly proclaiming the Gospel as poor, persecuted minorities. This will free us from the arrogance and colonialism that comes with power. It also frees us from putting our reliance on money and planning, rather than on God.

To whom do we go? Certainly we must bear witness to the affluent and educated, because we understand their ways. But should we not give much greater consideration to the poor and oppressed. They are most of the people, and they are most responsive.¹⁰ Moreover, Christ focused his attention on them. We can send teams of highly committed young people to live among the poor to plant churches among them. We can build bridges of sharing between rich and poor churches, and learn much from our poor brothers and sisters about living by simple trust in God.

What do we preach? We need to proclaim the fullness of the Gospel. It is salvation. It is new communities of fellowship that break down the barriers of ethnicity, class and sex. It is God's concern for this world as well as the world to come. We need to break down the division between spiritual and material ministries. We need by every means at our disposal to invite people to follow Jesus Christ, our Lord.

¹⁰ The world population will grow from 5 billion in 1987 a.d. to 6.4 billion in 2000 a.d. Ninety percent of the growth will occur in the poorest countries. The result will be a great increase in poverty. For example, in Latin America the real earnings in none countries have dropped during the 1980s to levels below that of 1970. The greatest drop has been for the poor, elderly, women and children (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, Progreso Economico y Social en America Latina: Informe 1990. Washington D.C. 1-29).

Mission: from Church to the World

In view of the collapse of Christendom and western Christianity, what is the role of the western church in missions?

In the first place, we must realize anew that the world is still lost without Christ. There are more people today who have not heard the Gospel than when William Carey set sail for India - more than two billion of them. We in the west must move beyond the fear of being called colonial, and again preach the Gospel with boldness. We must do so with humility and cultural sensitivity, but without apology.

We must recognize that the west, too, is a mission field. Migrations are transforming western cities into polyethnic communities. Pastors in Oslo, London, and Chicago now face the issues of ethnic and cultural difference, and struggle with questions of contextualized theologies, homogeneous vs. multiethnic churches, and multiethnic denominational organization.

This shift blurs the line between home and foreign missions. Local churches in the west are increasingly aware that missions means reaching both the Thai in Thailand, and those down the street. Mission agencies must broaden their vision to not only send missionaries abroad, but also to help local churches reach their neighbors.

There is the danger, however, of a new parochialism. With our growing preoccupation with new peoples in our neighborhoods, we in the west are losing our vision for reaching the billions of lost who live in India, China, Inner Asia, and the Muslim world. We must not forget the world in our excitement to evangelize our new neighbors.

In the second place, we must recognize that the church, too, is now global, and we must work in partnership with Christians in other countries. We must move beyond stressing the

independence of national churches, and recognize that the task is too great for us to work alone. Most young churches around the world cannot effectively evangelize their own countries. We must find ways of working together that respects each one's dignity, and enables us to work at difficult tasks together. In so doing we demonstrate to the world that the Gospel belongs to no nation or culture, and that the Gospel breaks down the barriers of ethnicity, class and gender that are destroying the world.

We with our resources must learn how to work with young churches and their vision to reach out again to a lost world. We must do so without creating dependencies, or restricting each church's God given mission. We must go as servants, seeking to build others in Christ even at the expense of our own advancement. We need to be a new kind of missionary for the new era in missions.

Is there a future for western missions? If we in the west continue in our old ways, we will find ourselves on the margin of global missions. If we work with and learn from the young Antioch's that God is raising up in our day, we will enter into a new exciting era in missions.

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