

Bold Witness in a Pluralistic World

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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.'

The biblical model that will inform our historical analysis is the early Jewish church's encounter with Others--with Gentiles. The encounter begins in Acts 10 when Peter is led by the Spirit to witness to Cornelius, a God-seeking Gentile. In the process, Peter underwent a unsettling shift in the way he viewed Gentiles. The next step was a corporate paradigm shift as groups of unnamed Jewish believers witnessed to Gentile friends. The result was a church in Antioch made up of Jews and Gentiles meeting together (Acts 11 - 13). This precipitated a crisis, and a church council was called to resolve the relationship between Jews and these Others. The decision was that Gentiles were not Others but Christians just like the Jewish Christians.

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.

The Age of Exploration

The picture changed radically at the end of the fifteenth century. European explorers, seeking new routes to the spices of India, discovered new lands and strange peoples not found on their maps. The age was one of exploration, and of redrawing mental and physical maps to include these hitherto unknown peoples. Now, 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*. It was Europeans who explored the world, and named and studied these people. The western commercial world saw the newly discovered Others as a source of labor, as *slaves*. Many argued that these Others were like children, so Europeans were justified in acted as parents, educating and managing the savages for the savages own good.

Christians saw these new people as truly humans, but it was clear they were not Christian heretics, nor Muslim infidels who had rejected Christ. They had never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel. They were, however, potential Christians. The result was the organization of the modern mission movement, first by the Catholics, and later by the Protestants.

The Age of Enlightenment

The definition of the Other changed with the coming of the Enlightenment. The shift is epitomized in the experiences of Robinson Crusoe, the quintessential Enlightenment man--solitary individual, Cartesian rationalist, and technological inventor. After almost eighteen years alone on an island Crusoe comes across the charred human bones on the beach. Cannibals! From the depth of his European body and soul he vomits (McGrane 1989, 44). His initial reaction was that these others were "savages," "beasts," "evil,"--a response that fits the Age of Exploration. By contrast, he is "civilized," "refined," and "good." When Crusoe rescues one of the cannibals, he exercises the sovereign right of the Explorer and names him--he is "Friday," and he will address Crusoe as "master." Thereby Crusoe transforms the stranger from a nameless *savage* who exists beyond the boundaries of humanity and civilization, into Friday, a *primitive human being* who is a member in Crusoe's world. Crusoe teaches Friday English and gives him a place to live half way between Crusoe's house and the forest inhabited by beasts and cannibals. Friday is awestruck by Crusoe's gun and wants to worship it. Crusoe teaches him that it is not miraculous, but can be explained in natural terms. In their daily encounters, Crusoe is increasingly forced to recognize Friday's full humanity. How, then, can Crusoe account for the differences between them. His answer is that Friday is unenlightened, therefore naked, primitive and non-Christian, while he is Enlightened, clothed and Christian. But Friday can be taught, and saved through Crusoe's efforts.

Three fundamental shifts in the view of the Other mark this change from the Age of Exploration to the Enlightenment in the western worldview. First, Others were no longer "pagans" who needed to be evangelized, but "unenlightened" children who needed to be enlightened. Evil was no longer sin, it was ignorance. The earlier distinction between refined-

Christian vs. idolatrous-savage was replaced by the *civilized*-European vs. the superstitious-ignorant-*primitive*. Second, over time the Others also became “aboriginals.” They were living fossils who failed to evolve, and still lived in the Stone Age. Third, they were equated with the West’s ancestors. Joseph Conrad captures this view in his description of his trip in Africa,

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. . . . But suddenly as we struggled around a bend, there would be a glimpse of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands, clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying. . . . It was unearthly, and the men were--No, they were not inhuman. . . . They howled and leaped . . . but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your remote kinship (1950, 105)

The Modern Worldview

The Enlightenment gave birth to modernity, which is built on a positivist epistemology and a mechanistic view of the world. 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. It was the duty, therefore,

of the West to civilize the world through schools and hospitals. The second was *colonialism*. To civilize the world, the West had to rule it. Consequently the western nations divided the world into colonies “for the people’s own good.” Imperialism was

Modern Enlightenment Worldview	
<u>In Public</u>	CIVILIZATION IMPERIALISM, COLONIALISM SCIENCE CIVILIZE AND DEVELOP
<u>In Missions</u>	CHRISTIANITY<->CIVILIZATION WESTERN CONTROL GOSPEL AS OBJECTIVE TRUTH PROCLAIM TRUTH FROM ABOVE

seen as a blessing, not a curse. 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. This knowledge gave rise to technology and human control of the material world. 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.

Modern Missions

The Enlightenment had a deep effect on 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 (1991, 71).

Modern Christian missions often gave expression to the four themes of modernity. Many missionaries equated Christianity with Civilization. They planted churches to win the lost, and started schools and hospitals to civilize them. Many nations adopted the schools and hospitals brought by the missionaries, but rejected the gospel. Missionaries generally exercised control over the institutions and churches they began. Only in the mid-twentieth century was self-governing extended widely to young churches. Christian theology was seen as a kind of objective science, and proclaimed as acultural and ahistorical truth that needed no contextualization for it was seen as unchanging and universal. Finally, for many missionaries progress was an intrinsic part of the gospel. Christian relief and developed agencies emerged alongside mission agencies.

The Age of Post-Enlightenment

Just as Crusoe, in his encounter with 'Friday', came to see him increasingly as a full person, so the West's encounter with Others forced it to see them as equally human. This raised new questions. How could the Others be equal to the West and yet be Other? New paradigms emerged to answer this.

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."

The Postmodern Worldview

This shift in the view of the Other gave rise to new views of the world in the West. The word civilization was 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. Similarly, 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 scientific

Post Modern Worldview	
<u>In Public</u>	<p>CULTURE ANTI-COLONIAL SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE PRESERVE CULTURES</p>
<u>In Missions</u>	<p>GOSPEL IN ALL RELIGIONS INDIGENIZATION UNCRITICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION DIALOGUE, LEARN, LOVE</p>

theories based on objective knowledge 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.

Post Modern Missions

This view of others as natives and culture as morally neutral has deeply influenced western Christian missions. Cultures are now seen as integrated wholes that should not be changed. Their preservation is of intrinsic value. From this point of view churches should be autonomous and indigenous, and exercise self rule. Missionary should contextualize the Gospel fully in local cultures. Some argue that missionaries should not bring in 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.

The Global Era

Post modernity is a reaction to modernity, but it offers no answers to the human dilemma. What lies beyond it? What is the new paradigm that will organize our understandings of the world and its peoples, and enable us to address the evils of our age? Many scholars see this to be the Global Era now spreading around the world. While recognizing the continuation of local communities and cultures, they point out that the world is now being united by webs of information and communication, and by macro economic systems and political alliances. We increasingly live in one world in which all are affected by global forces.

The Global Worldview

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 The forces

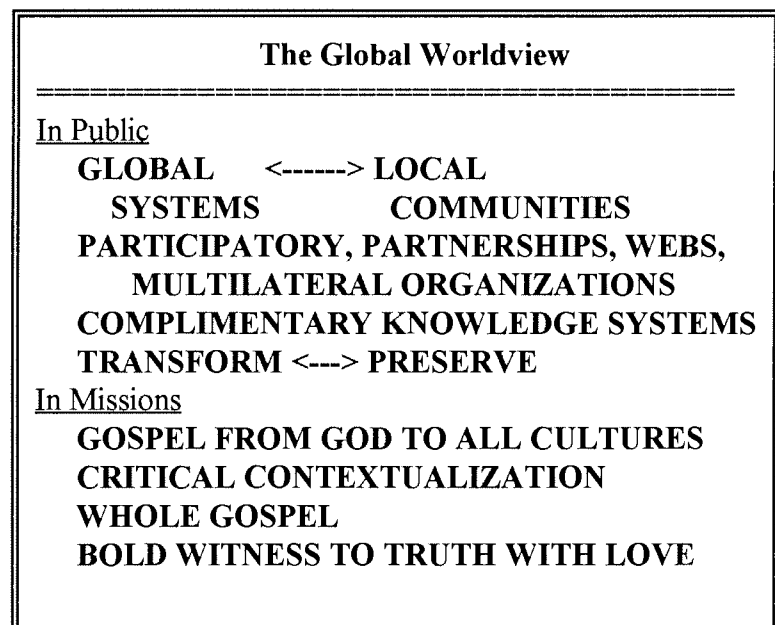
pulling people into a single

economic and cultural system

(MacWorld and MicroGlobe) are

countered by people seeking to

preserve their cultural and



religious identities. The result is a tension between transformation and preservation of human systems. The move to information as a key resource, and the democratization of that information through the world wide web empowers those with access to the computer world, and undermines the power of the state and a privileged knowledge elite. The result is the emergence of networking, partnership and multinational organizations in which people around the world work together. On the other hand, the concentration of economic resources in the hands of a few countries and individuals gives them greater power to control the world.

Global Missions

How do we as Christians and missionaries live in an increasingly global world? What paradigm should we proclaim to challenge the world to righteousness and salvation?

Globalization is not new to the church. It was the first to have a global vision, and to try to implement a global church through bureaucratic organization (Papacy, World Council of Churches) or networking (Global denominational organization, World Evangelical Fellowship, Lausanne Movement). The danger is that the church become captive to globalization as this is defined in the world.

As Christians we must begin by examining how we view Others and Otherness. In the light of Scriptures, we must affirm the humanity of all people. 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). In Christ and the New Testament the implications of our common humanity are fully worked out. When a Pharisee asked, "Who is my neighbor?"--in other words, who is one of us?, Jesus turns the question on its head and asks, "If your Other, a Samaritan, is a neighbor to your brother, a suffering Jew, who are you?" The Pharisee was forced to admit either that he was indeed a neighbor to the Samaritan, or that he had cut himself off from his fellow Jew. Jesus taught, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matt. 5:43-44 NRSV)." War demands that we hate our enemies and brand them as Other. Jesus says, our enemies are Us, therefore we must love them.

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. The Apostle Paul writes, "[Christ] tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. . . Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everyone. (Eph. 2:14-15 Peterson 1993, 404). It should come as no surprise that in the churches Paul planted Jews, Greeks, barbarians, Thracians, Egyptians, and Romans were able to feel at home. This mutual acceptance of Jews and Gentiles in the church was itself a testimony to the world of the transforming power of the Gospel. In Christ we *are* one body (Eph 4:4). This unity of a shared new life in Christ bridges the human distinctions of ethnicity (Gal 2:11-21), class (1 Cor 10: - 11:) and gender (Gal 3:28, Acts 2:44f, 4:32).

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 call for a critical contextualization of the Gospel that affirms what is good and challenges and transforms what is evil. 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. 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. To be a Christian is to make Christ the Lord of our lives. 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. E. Stanley Jones captures this approach to evangelism when he writes, "When

I was called to the ministry, I had a vague notion that I was to be God's lawyer--I was to argue his case for him and put it up brilliantly." After describing his failure in this approach, he continues,

This was the beginning of my ministry, I thought--a tragic failure. As I was about to leave a pulpit a Voice seemed to say to me, "Haven't I done anything for you?" "Yes," I replied, "You have done everything for me." "Well," answered the Voice, "couldn't you tell that?" "Yes, I suppose I could," I eagerly replied. So . . . [I] said, "Friends, I see I cannot preach, but I love Jesus Christ. You know what my life was in this community--that of a wild reckless young man--and you know what it now is." . . . I got the lesson never to be forgotten: in my ministry I was to be, not God's lawyer, but his witness. That would mean that there would have to be living communion with Christ so that there would always be something to pass on. Since that day I have tried to witness before high and low what Christ has been to an unworthy life (1925, 141).

Our call to witness in an age of pluralism and relativism is not to change to Gospel. No matter what we believe, Scripture makes it clear that people without Christ are lost and in great need of salvation. Christ still calls us to boldly proclaim that truth and make disciples of all peoples, but we must do so in love.

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Figure 1
HISTORY OF WESTERN WORLDVIEWS

	<i>MEDIEVAL</i>	<i>EXPLORATION</i>	<i>MODERN</i>	<i>POSTMODERN</i>	<i>GLOBAL</i>
<u>IN THE WEST</u>					
OTHER:	Infidel, Monster	Savage, Barbarian, Pagan, Slave	Primitive Aborigine, Heathen	Native	Global/Local
CUSTOMS:			Civilization	Cultures: <i>sui generis</i> , good, equal, autonomous	Global culture/ local cultures combine good and evil
RULE:	Church and Feudal State	Nation State	Colonialism, Imperialism	Nationalism Anti-colonialism	Global systems and local cultures, networks, partnerships
KNOWLEDGE:	Tradition , Religion		Objective truth, Science Outside, etic observ.	Subjective experience New spirituality Inside emic participation	Objective truth subjectively appropriated
CHANGE:			Progress, change is good	Preserve all cultures, change is bad	Change happens, some is good, some bad. Work for good change
<u>IN CHRISTIAN MISSIONS</u>					
GOSPEL:			Christianity<--> Civilization	Gospel in all religions and persons	Gospel from outside to all cultures and humans
POWER:			Mission rule	Self rule, indigenization	Partnership moving to global webs of activity
CONTEXT- UALIZATION			No need to contextualize	Uncritical contextualization	Critical contextualization
CHANGE			Make churches like the West	Don't change, preserve traditional ways	Transform all cultures into the likeness of the Kingdom while preserving the good in them
CHRISTIAN WITNESS			Proclamation of objective truth from a position of super- iority--God's lawyer. Speak the truth.	Learn from other religions, dialogue to find a common ground. Speak in love.	Bear bold witness to what we know, give others the ability to make their own choices. Speak the truth in love.