

## A Bigger--and Smaller--View of Mission

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God is not interested in saving merely human souls. He wants human beings, body and soul. Furthermore, he does not settle for saving human beings, but the whole earth.

**A**n anyone who is sent on a mission had better be clear about what is being asked of her and why. If she is not clear about the nature and rationale of the mission, she risks trying to do too much, or not enough, or the wrong thing entirely. She also risks trying to do the wrong thing for the right reason or the right thing in the wrong way.

Let's begin, then, with two ways in which our view of mission should expand. First, Christians typically have believed that those who have not heard the name of Jesus are simply lost and destined for hell. Much of the energy of the great 19th-century missionary movement among Westerners, and much of the impetus of missions work around the world to this day, has come from the horror of a Niagara of souls pouring into a lost eternity for want of an evangelist.

We also need to acknowledge, however, a corresponding horror in the hearts of many—including many missions-minded Christians—about a God who allows whole nations and generations to plunge into a lost eternity simply because no one happened to reach them with the gospel. Does faithfulness to the Bible mean we must retain this picture?

I don't think so. What we must retain is the Christian conviction that everyone needs salvation and that salvation comes only through the work of Jesus Christ. How the blessings of that work are applied by God to each person, however, is an issue on which Christians disagree. I would like to commend what is sometimes called an "inclusivist" position.

This position affirms that "without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6, NRSV). This assertion comes in the great chapter listing examples of faith from the whole sweep of the Bible. Thus it includes lots of people who apparently had never heard of Jesus Christ, but had encountered the true God, believing that he did exist and that he is trustworthy, that "he rewards those who seek him" with what they cannot do for themselves. This is the fundamental posture of faith, and from this passage, as from many others in the Bible, it is obvious that one does not have to know about Jesus to adopt this posture that results in salvation.

Does this mean that other religions are salvific? Certainly not. *No* religion is salvific: not Hinduism or Shinto or Islam, but also not Christianity. *God* is salvific. Practicing religion, however correct it is and however correctly one practices it, will not save you. That is basic Christian conviction. It is trusting God that will save you—that also is basic Christian conviction.

I am a professional theologian, so of course I think theology matters. Theology

can help us live better or worse, depending on its quality. But theological accuracy is not the heart of the gospel. Encountering God's Spirit and responding in faith to him in that encounter is what finally matters. And how God meets people, through whatever theology they might have, in whatever circumstances, is ultimately not visible to us.

Indeed, I believe that many people raised in non-Christian religions—such as *bhakti* (devotional) traditions in Hinduism in which they worship a single supreme God and trust him for their salvation (however badly understood this is from a Christian point of view), or Judaism or Islam, to pick examples closer to home—have a clearer and more authentic apprehension of God than many people raised in ostensibly Christian homes and churches in which a terrible distortion of God is taught and little access to the genuine gospel is available. To confine the scope of salvation to those who have heard certain facts about Jesus and who come to accept him on this basis, therefore, is not necessitated by the Bible, and in fact is not even the best way to understand the Bible.

Let me also affirm that the preaching of the Gospel is the *normal* way God uses to draw people to faith. So we must not sit back and say, "Oh, well. Since God might encounter people through other methods—dreams and visions, perhaps, or even a distorted monotheism of some non-Christian sort—then we don't have to go." No, we do have to go, because evangelism is obviously the New Testament's fundamental mode by which people encounter God. This is the main means God has ordained for us to use, and we are disobedient if we do not use it. And the environment of all but the most pathological Christian church is normally far better to cultivate discipleship than any other religious community—of course it is.

All I am arguing for here is that we do not confine salvation to this normal mode, shutting off any other possibilities and therefore implying, if we don't say so outright, that millions of people have been lost forever simply because they lived in Asia, or Europe, or Africa, or the Americas, or anywhere else before gospel preaching got there.

Furthermore, we must beware of a second problem that lies nearby. And that is the idea that missions is all about getting people saved, and particularly about rescuing their souls from hell so that they can go to heaven. Multiple theological errors, in fact, attend this view of salvation.

God is not interested in saving merely human souls. He wants human *beings*, body and soul. Furthermore, he does not settle for saving human beings, but the whole earth. He made it in the first place, pronounced it "very good," and he wants it all back. So he is saving us, the lords he put over creation, as part of his global agenda to rescue, indeed, the globe.

What God rescues us *to*, furthermore, is the original agenda he set out for us in Genesis 1, namely, to "fill the earth and subdue it." He planted a garden for us to tend (Gen. 2) and commanded our first parents to raise up generations of gardeners to fan out across the earth to till the rest of it. This is what it means to bear the image of God. We, too, are to improve the situation, to cultivate what we encounter, to make *shalom* in every sector of life. And such work is our ultimate destiny as well, as we are to "reign with him" over the new earth he promises (2

Tim. 2:12). Thus we are not going *back* to Eden, nor *up* to a (spiritual) heaven, but *forward* to the New Jerusalem, which comes *down* from heaven to earth as our proper home (Rev. 21).

The Christian gospel therefore is not a narrowly spiritual one, but literally embraces everything, everywhere, at every moment. Every action that brings *shalom*—that preserves or enhances the flourishing of things, people, and relationships—is the primary will of God for humanity. Christians ought therefore to recognize and affirm anything our neighbors do to make peace, whether those neighbors intend to honor God or not. Indeed, we can cooperate with them in those ventures, since we see in them the divine agenda of *shalom*.

And our mission to the world extends far beyond evangelism. Yes, evangelism is the special work of the church, for only we Christians have been entrusted with the great good news at the center of God's redemptive plan, at the heart of which is the life and work of Jesus Christ. But our evangelism itself issues a call to "life abundant" that embraces everything good in the world, not just the spiritual. And as we work away at our generic human work alongside our neighbors, but in the light of the Bible's affirmation of such work, we demonstrate what it means to live in that light, which is the light of heaven now and also of the world to come.

We must see that hereby our evangelism itself is improved. We are living demonstrations of our message, and much more attractive and effective ones than if we are only constant talkers, interfering with God's original and abiding command to make *shalom* by trying to shove Jesus into every conversation at work or at home as if mission simply equals verbal evangelism.

Medicine, therefore, is part of God's mission, whether any patient or co-worker comes to faith or not. So is education and environmentalism, and cooking and cleaning, and farming and family life. God cares not only about eternity but about the welfare of his creation *now*. And he calls us to participate with him in that care as generic human beings, stewards of that creation, even as he calls Christian people also to our special work of witnessing to, exemplifying, and spreading his gospel light.

Whether we are inclusivist or not in our understanding of God's saving work among people of other beliefs and experiences, then, there is plenty of good missionary work to do! For we are called both to the original human mission of cultivating the world and to the distinctive Christian mission of bearing witness, and those vocations ought to direct every moment of every day.

In these ways, then, our view of mission must be properly large. At the same time, however, it may need reducing in some key respects. In particular, the virtue of humility would properly deflate several exaggerations of our missionary outlook.

In the first place, Christian missions typically have felt obliged to show the deficiencies of other religious options and the superiority of Christianity.

In the case in which there was a simple binary opposition—the extant tribal culture versus the gospel—this could sometimes plausibly be done: Christianity can explain the world better, Christianity can assuage guilt better, and so on. In mission to globalizing urban populations, however, there is no way the missionary can plausibly claim that her religion is better than everyone else's, and for several

reasons.

First, no one can complete the study necessary to claim expertise on each of the other options available. Second, it is psychologically impossible to experience each of those options from the inside, as a believer, to complement the "external" knowledge of the scholarly expert. And third, there is no obvious and universally-acknowledged standard by which one could stand above all religious options and evaluate their relative worth.

Since we cannot demonstrate that Christianity is better than all the other options, however, the happy conclusion is that we are not obliged to do so. Instead, we should follow the apostolic pattern. Do we really think that Jesus' early band undertook a comprehensive study of all of the religions available in the Roman world in the first century and then concluded that Christianity was the best option? No. "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1).

Jesus called us to be his witnesses, not his experts in comparative religion. We cannot prove that Jesus is the world's one Savior and Lord, or that the Bible is alone the Word of God written. Only the Holy Spirit of God can do that. What we can and must do is what Christians can uniquely do: Testify to our experience and conviction that Jesus is indeed Savior and Lord and that the Bible is the Word of God written, and invite men and women to consider those startling propositions for themselves on the way to encountering Jesus himself. No other religion in the world places Jesus Christ where he belongs: in the center. That is our uniqueness, by the grace of God, and therefore our responsibility, by the command of God. That is all we must do—and we must do it.

A second place for humility is in considering that Christian missions typically have presented the gospel in binary terms: "lost/saved," "darkness/light," "paganism/Christianity," and so on. There is some great gospel truth here, of course. "You must be born again" (John 3), and we each must be "rescued from the realm of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13).

Excessive binary thinking, however, has frequently led Christian missionaries to attempt to raze extant cultures to the ground—sometimes literally—and to substitute *holus bolus* a Christian civilization that is, always, simply a version of the missionaries' own. Perhaps a few trappings of the national culture are retained, but with little deep contact with their categories and meanings.

To be sure, some cultures are so dark that there is not much for the nascent church to commend and keep. And the rehabilitation of categories and symbols of pre-Christian cultures is a process fraught with the dangers of sentimentality and syncretism, so that the light of the gospel never penetrates below the surface to truly convert the whole heart and mind of a people. Many medieval Europeans continued to practice magic, despite the churches in their area and their profession of Christian faith, much as many do today in the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Missions must help people root out every evil idea and practice and bring everything into submission to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

Yet God has not confined his goodness to Christian cultures. He has sent not only

his rain on the just and the unjust, but his law, a sense of himself, and the institutions of human civilization to all peoples, however much those gifts have been repressed, confused, adulterated, or corrupted (Rom. 1). There is beauty, goodness, and truth almost everywhere we look in other religions and civilizations, however much we must also question or even condemn therein.

As Solzhenitsyn reminds us, furthermore, the dividing line between good and evil runs right through our own Christian hearts. And as recent events remind us (as recent events always do), we are individually *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and yet sinners) and our own churches and cultures have plenty of lostness, darkness, and paganism in evidence.

We need to appreciate, therefore, that not everything about their culture is bad and not everything we would erect in its place would be good. And the "them" implied here are not only those who live far away, but our neighbors, too, not to mention our own teenagers with their apparently inscrutable folkways and tastes! What, then, can we learn from them? What should they retain from the light God has already shed on them that can be taken up into the fulfillment that is Christ? What must they modify or discard in the light of the gospel? How can we foster a truly indigenized Christianity that will bring distinctive fruit from this culture, as Christianity has previously blossomed in the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Europe, and the New World? And what does this encounter tell us that we ourselves must modify or discard in the light of the gospel? These are the humble questions we must ask in authentic mission, as the apostles themselves did.

There is at least one more place for humility. Christian missions typically have been quick to adopt new techniques, to advance on all fronts, to use any means necessary. Such openness to innovation has resulted often in great advances for the gospel, from Paul's appropriation of pagan concepts, poetry, and even statuary on Mars Hill to Billy Graham's skillful use of mass media and major events.

We have to unlearn, however, our tendency to rely on technical skill and relentless pressure, as if we can manufacture conversions by dint of expertise and enthusiasm. We especially have to discard the dangerous dictum, "Pray as if it all depended upon God, and work as if it all depended on you." That is simply nonsense—or, much worse, a recipe for arrogance, burnout, frustration, and finally hatred of both missions and the neighbors we are supposed to love when they do not yield to our benevolent barrage.

Conversion is the hardest work in the world, since fundamentally it means to change someone's loves. (Have you ever tried to change your child's values? Have you ever tried to change your own?) Such change is literally a miracle of transformation each time, and thus the special province of the Holy Spirit. Yes, let us marshal all the tools and skills and energy we can, but let us use them not anxiously nor proudly, but in the humble confidence that comes from doing God's work in league with God's Spirit, under his direction and in his own good time, in his truly global mission.