

An Upside-Down World

Distinguishing between home and mission field no longer makes sense.

Christopher J. H. Wright | posted 1/18/2007 08:45AM

*In 2007, CT and our sister magazines will be tackling a new "big question" with the Christian Vision Project, our ongoing series exploring major issues facing the church in the 21st century. In 2006, we focused on the church and culture. Now we turn our attention to mission and to the question, **What must we learn, and unlearn, to be agents of God's mission in the world?***

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The map of global Christianity that our grandparents knew has been turned upside down. At the start of the 20th century, only ten percent of the world's Christians lived in the continents of the south and east. Ninety percent lived in North America and Europe, along with Australia and New Zealand. But at the start of the 21st century, at least 70 percent of the world's Christians live in the non-Western world—more appropriately called the majority world.

More Christians worship in Anglican churches in Nigeria each week than in all the Episcopal and Anglican churches of Britain, Europe, and North America combined. There are more Baptists in Congo than in Britain. More people in church every Sunday in communist China than in all of Western Europe. Ten times more Assemblies of God members in Latin America than in the U.S.

The old peripheries are now the center. The old centers are now on the periphery. Philip Jenkins brought this shift to popular attention in *The Next Christendom*. Yet many Christian leaders of the global South resent the implication in Jenkins's title. They have no desire to be another "Christendom"—wielding monolithic territorial and political power. Nor do they wish to be any kind of threat to the West, but rather to help Western Christians in the struggle to shift from survival mode to mission mode—in their own lands.

Can the West be re-evangelized? Only if we unlearn our default ethnocentric assumptions about "real" Christianity (our own) and unlearn our blindness to the ways

Western Christianity is infected by cultural idolatry. It may be more blessed to give than to receive, but it is often harder to receive than to give. That reverses the polarity of patron and client and makes us uncomfortably aware that what Jesus said to the Laodicean church might apply to us in the West: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17).

Normal Christianity

Most of the learning and unlearning we must do in this new era is no more than relearning the original nature of biblical Christianity, which very quickly became polycentric. Acts 1:8 can give the impression that the early church spread out in ripples, from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth. But in fact, Acts tells a more complicated story. Antioch was where followers of Jesus were first called Christians, and it became the center of westward-oriented missionary work. Paul saw Thessalonica as a radiating center for the message in Macedonia and Achaia. Ephesus clearly became a key metropolis for Christian witness in Asia Minor. Paul was eager to make Rome a base for planned work further to the west in Spain. Jerusalem was simply one center among many.

Christianity has never had a territorial center. Our center is the person of Christ, and wherever he is known, there is another potential center of faith and witness. So, as mission historian Andrew Walls has said, the emergence of genuine world Christianity and the ending of Western assumptions of heartland hegemony simply marks a return to normal Christianity, which looks much more like the New Testament than Christendom ever did.

Multidirectional Mission

With the growth of the multinational church, mission is becoming multidirectional. The U.S. remains the largest single contributor of Protestant cross-cultural missionaries. But which country is the second largest? Not a Western nation, but India. And it is possible that India has overtaken the States in the number of those involved in truly cross-cultural mission—both within and beyond India. There are many more Korean missionaries than British, and some Nigerian evangelical mission organizations are larger in personnel than most Western ones (while operating on budgets that are a fraction of their Western counterparts'). Already, 50 percent of all Protestant missionaries in the world come from non-Western countries, and the proportion is increasing annually. So you are as likely to meet a Brazilian missionary in North Africa as a British missionary in Brazil. Indeed, the ratio of Indian missionaries to Western missionaries in India today is probably 100 to 1. Mission today is from everywhere, to everywhere.

So another piece of unlearning we must do is breaking the habit of using the term *mission field* to refer to everywhere else in the world except our home country in the

West. The language of *home* and *mission field* is still used by many churches and agencies, but it fundamentally misrepresents reality. Not only does it perpetuate a patronizing view of the rest of the world as always being on the receiving end of our missionary largesse, but it also fails to recognize the maturity of churches in many other lands.

Christianity probably reached India before it reached Britain. There was a flourishing church in Ethiopia a century before Patrick evangelized Ireland. There were churches in Eastern Europe centuries before Europeans reached the shores of North America. There have been large Christian communities in the Middle East for 2,000 years.

So it is discourteous (at best) and damaging (at worst) when Western mission activity ignores all such ancient expressions of the Christian tradition and lumps all lands abroad as the "mission field," in comfortable neglect of the fact that the rest of the world church sees the West as one of the toughest mission fields in the world today.

This is not, of course, to suggest that countries of ancient Christian churches need no evangelism, any more than we would exclude nominal Western Christians from the need to hear the true gospel. But the real mission boundary is not between "Christian countries" and "the mission field," but between faith and unbelief, and that is a boundary that runs through every land and, indeed, through every local street.

Normal Mission

In this, too, we will be relearning the multidirectional nature of mission in the Book of Acts. Our preoccupation with concentric circles has obscured the more complex pattern of mission and movement that Luke shows us in Acts.

For example:

- Philip goes from Jerusalem to Samaria, to Gaza, to Azotus, and to Caesarea (Acts 8).
- Peter goes to Lydda and Joppa (Acts 9:32-43).
- People from Cyprus go to Antioch and initiate a multiethnic church there (Acts 11:19-21).
- Barnabas goes from Antioch to Tarsus to get Saul (Acts 11:22-26).
- Timothy goes from Lystra to Ephesus, while Titus ends up in Crete (Acts 16, 1 Timothy, Titus).
- Priscilla and Aquila come from Italy and end up in Corinth (Acts 18).
- Apollos comes from Alexandria to Ephesus, then ends up in Corinth (Acts 18-19).

What held together these crisscrossing lines of missionary movement all over the international Mediterranean world? Carefully tended relationships of trust. That is what lies behind the letters of recommendation and the exhortations in 3 John to treat traveling church planters and teachers "in a manner worthy of God" and to respect their self-sacrificing for the name of Christ. Indeed, 3 John is a much-neglected missional tract for our times. We need to recapture this relational, partnering, reciprocal style of missional interchange.

God with a Mission

Perhaps what we most need to learn, since we so easily forget it, is that mission is and always has been God's before it becomes ours. The whole Bible presents a God of missional activity, from his purposeful, goal-oriented act of Creation to the completion of his cosmic mission in the redemption of the whole of Creation—a new heaven and a new earth. The Bible also presents to us *humanity with a mission* (to rule and care for the earth); *Israel with a mission* (to be the agent of God's blessing to all nations); *Jesus with a mission* (to embody and fulfill the mission of Israel, bringing blessing to the nations through bearing our sin on the Cross and anticipating the new Creation in his Resurrection); and *the church with a mission* (to participate with God in the ingathering of the nations in fulfillment of Old Testament Scriptures).

But behind all this stands *God with a mission* (the redemption of his whole Creation from the wreckage of human and Satanic evil). The mission of God is what fills the Bible from the brokenness of the nations in Genesis 11 to the healing of the nations in Revelation 21-22. So any mission activity to which we are called must be seen as humble participation in this vast sweep of the historical mission of God. All mission or missions that we initiate, or into which we invest our vocation, gifts, and energies, flows from the prior mission of God. *God* is on mission, and we, in that wonderful phrase of Paul, are "co-workers with God."

This God-centered refocusing of mission turns inside-out our obsession with mission plans, agendas, goals, strategies, and grand schemes.

We ask, "Where does God fit into the story of my life?" when the real question is, "Where does my little life fit into the great story of God's mission?"

We want to be driven by a purpose tailored for our individual lives, when we should be seeing the purpose of all life, including our own, wrapped up in the great mission of God for the whole of creation.

We wrestle to "make the gospel relevant to the world." But God is about the mission of transforming the world to fit the shape of the gospel.

We argue about what can legitimately be included in the mission God expects from the church, when we should ask what kind of church God expects for his mission in all its comprehensive fullness.

I may wonder what kind of mission God has for me, when I should ask what kind of me God wants for his mission.

We invite God's blessing on our human-centered mission strategies, but the only concept of mission into which God fits is the one of which he is the beginning and the end.

Relearning the Cross

Most of all, we need to go back to the Cross and relearn its comprehensive glory. For if we persist in a narrow, individualistic view of the Cross as a personal exit strategy to heaven, we fall short of its biblical connection to the mission purpose of God for the whole of creation (Col. 1:20) and thereby lose the Cross-centered core of holistic mission. It is vital that we see the Cross as central to every aspect of holistic, biblical mission—that is, of all we do in the name of the crucified and risen Jesus. It is a mistake, in my view, to think that while our evangelism must be centered on the Cross (as of course it has to be), our social engagement has some other theological foundation or justification.

Why is the Cross just as important across the whole field of mission? Because in all forms of Christian mission, we are confronting the powers of evil and the kingdom of Satan—with all their dismal effects on human life and the wider creation. If we are to proclaim and demonstrate the reality of the kingdom of God and his justice, then we will be in direct conflict with the usurped reign of the evil one. In all such work, social or evangelistic, we confront the reality of sin and Satan. In all such work, we challenge the darkness of the world with the light and Good News of Jesus Christ and the reign of God through him.

By what authority can we do so? On what basis dare we challenge the chains of Satan, in word and deed, in people's spiritual, moral, physical, and social lives? Only the Cross. The Cross must be as central to our social engagement as it is to our evangelism. There is no other power, no other resource, no other name through which we can offer the whole gospel to the whole person and the whole world than Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

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