

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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e-Current 061115

This is Part IV of the essay on our mission context inspired by the 2006 GRR Mission Conference (e-Current 060125 was Part I, e-Current 060221 was Part II, e-Current 060523 was Part III). In this essay I will address "Beyond Geography." I apologize for getting so far behind.

Beyond Geography. Energized by the Great Commission, the modern missionary movement was fused with the attraction of "going over there" for the sake of Christ. In other words, proper "mission work" was defined by geography—that is, a place not close to my existing church. Even the "home mission" movement was predicated on taking a trip. Every denomination organized its mission efforts around geography.

There is no need to belittle (or romanticize) the work that was done under that paradigm. But it is clear that the simplistic definition of missions as something done "over there" is crumbling. As early as 1958, Lesslie Newbigin wrote: *Livingstone's picture of the smoke of a thousand villages which had never heard the Gospel, provided that symbol in an age when the world was being opened up by the white man [sic] ... It does not now correspond to the realities of the world we live in ... there are no more unknown areas of the world's surface. (One Body, One Gospel, One World, 1958)* Perhaps an exaggeration, but I have Google Earth at my fingertips.

Nevertheless, the romantic tug of exotic places remains a strong undercurrent in the missionary movement. None of us is above it. I confess that my own "buttons" were pushed by mission work in Haiti in the 70's, Russia right after the collapse of the communist government, and more recently Costa Rica. For most of our churches the only "real missionaries" remain those that go to impoverished, disease-ridden, uneducated, "uncivilized" places—places coincidentally (!?) populated by people of color who are the children of colonialism.

The purpose the critique is not to denigrate the faithful efforts of true heroes and heroines who toiled, sacrificed and even died for the sake of the Gospel in places far from their homes. The purpose is to escape the bonds of geography; to enlarge the missionary endeavor to which God has called us; to actualize the cosmic dimensions of God's love in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:14-21).

*The geographical frontier can have meaning and evocative power for missionary obedience if it is understood as a symbol—a symbol of the total mission of the one church to the one world. The present task is to draw out the implications of the symbol in such a way that the whole church, wherever it is locally manifested, becomes aware that it is the mission field and that it has the missionary task of carrying the Gospel to any and all frontiers. (Keith Bridston **Mission Myth and Reality**, 1965)*

If we are compelled by the expansive love of Christ, geography is only one of the frontiers that confront a missionary church. What are some of the others?

Immigration has created an environment in which those same persons whose ethnicity/culture/language led us to identify them with “over there” are right now in our own backyards. How is it possible to care about Thais in Thailand, but not those Thais that live across the street from the church?

Secularization has stripped bare the spiritual poverty of our own country. It is not irrelevant that a career missionary (Lesslie Newbigin) returned to his homeland after nearly 40 years and noticed that the cultural changes in the West had become so great that the West had become a mission field. (**Foolishness of the Greeks**, 1986.) We live in a world of competing stories. And some of those stories are dangerous, even deadly. Yet we are reluctant to tell the story of One who has the “words of life” to those right around us.

Ethnic diversity is shaping America like no other place on this earth. Yet we remain segregated in our personal friendships and our faith communities.

Cultural differences in America boggle the mind. We have white collar, blue collar, no collar lifestyles. We have educated elite and illiterate rejects. We have hard rockers, classicists, rappers and country music enthusiasts. We have Socialists, Libertines, Republicans, and Democrats. We have hawks and doves. Does the Gospel have anything to offer “them?”

Economics has created its own world. It seems evident that God has a special concern for the down, out, and forgot about. But does that mean the middle class and the wealthy have no need of the Gospel?

Truly, the United States of America is the third largest mission field in the world. It is a mission field that is growing daily. Churches must become missionary regardless of their size, age, ethnicity, worship style or location. Mission is fundamental to the nature of the church and it is not bounded by geography, either literally or figuratively.



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