

Appendix F- (Lecture 9, topic 18)

Read the following article by Dale T. Irvin and answer the following question: "What does Dr. Jennings like/dislike about the Dale T. Irvin article, 'The Gift of Mission'?"

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/9te/9te058.html>

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The Gift of Mission

By Dale T. Irvin

The act of translating and enculturating the Gospel has been Christianity's greatest contribution to human civilization.

Early in the ninth century an anonymous poem known as the Heiland ("Savior") began to circulate among the Saxons of northern Europe. Two or three generations earlier these same Saxons had been brutally conquered by the Franks under Charlemagne. Forced to undergo baptism at the point of the sword, they hardly had experienced authentic evangelization. This was where the Heiland came in, for it translated the story of Christ into the Saxon language and cultural world. According to this poem, Jesus was the most powerful Chieftain ever born. The words Jesus used to teach and perform his mighty deeds of "magic" were called "God's Spell" (or gospel). His 12 companion foot soldiers, or thanes, came from among the sons of Saxony, and Jesus conducted his ministry throughout their lands. For instance, the wedding at Fort Cana was held in a Saxon drinking hall, and the liquor drawn from the stone vats was the best apple wine. No one hearing the poem could miss its point: Jesus Christ, who was mightier than Woden, Thor, and the rest of the ancient gods, was alone the true Saxon Savior.

Around the time the Saxons were first coming into contact with Jesus, a small Christian community on the other side of the world in the imperial capital of China was translating the message of Jesus Christ into the Chinese language and cultural idioms. A monument erected in 781 in their monastery in the city told how Christians from the Persian Empire had first brought the "Luminous Religion" to the imperial capital more than a century before. There they had been welcomed by the Chinese emperor, who invited them to translate their Scriptures in the imperial library. Among their early efforts were a series of evangelistic texts written in Chinese in the style of Buddhist sutras. One of these, the Jesus-Messiah Sutra, actually uses the term "Buddha" to translate "God." Another employs the term "Shih-tsun," or "Lord of the Universe," as a Christological title—a term for one of the most important bodhisattvas, or historical savior figures, of the Buddhist religion. This monument included the basic tenets of orthodox Christian faith, making it clear that Christian teachings stood apart from other religions. As if to leave no doubt about the relationship of Christ to other faiths, at the top of the monument was the cross, standing over symbols of Chinese religion.

Both the Saxon Heiland and the Chinese monument are examples of Christianity translating the message of Jesus Christ into new languages and contexts. In the first instance, the Christian religion was already well on its way toward providing a new political and cultural synthesis that was soon to be called "Christendom" in the European north. In the second it was able to achieve only the most marginal of effects upon Chinese cultural life at the time, and the Christian community in China was soon to be eclipsed altogether by imperial edict.

Today we might refer to these historical moments as "enculturations" of the Gospel. Through this ongoing process, the salvation that Jesus Christ in his historical incarnation embodied for the women and men around him has continued to be brought close to others in new times and places on earth. Without a doubt the act of translating and enculturating the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been Christianity's greatest contribution to human civilization over these past two millennia. Enculturation does two things. Translating the Gospel message affirms and preserves the cultural world of those who

have received the Gospel. At the same time, enculturation makes new believers aware that they belong to a wider community of faith, thereby relativizing their own language and culture.

Examples of this relativizing aspect appear very early in the life of the Christian movement. Many educated people in the Greco-Roman world knew that there were other civilizations beyond their own, but for the most part considered those civilizations merely "barbarian." This was especially the case when the foreigners could not speak Greek. The early Christians in the Greco-Roman world uniquely sought community even with the "barbarian" nations of the earth. The Gospel has within it an inherent boundary-breaking impulse that contradicts the tribalistic tendency of cultures. The effect has been to challenge each civilization's sense of absoluteness.

According to the "Letter to Diognetus," written by an unknown author in the second or third century: "Christians are distinguished from other people neither by land, nor language, nor customs; for they do not inhabit cities of their own, nor use a particular language, nor lead a life that is unusual. But inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according to each person's lot...they display to us their wonderful and admittedly paradoxical way of life. They inhabit their home lands, but as strangers."

God redeems the world by becoming one with the powerless.

The realization that others from beyond one's own cultural or national horizon are now included within the horizon of divine redemption has often brought with it an openness and desire for fellowship with them. At their best moments Christians have experienced a commonality that cuts across the frontiers of natural human affiliation.

An early testimony to this is found in an inscription on a tombstone from the late second century at the ancient city of Hieropolis (in modern Turkey). The epitaph is written in partially veiled terms because Christianity was still an illegal religion under Roman law at the time. The tombstone belongs to one who was named Avircius Marcellus. In his life, the inscription says, he had travelled to Rome to meet the emperor, and to the plains of Syria all the way to the city of Nisibis, east of the Euphrates. Everywhere he had gone the faith had preceded him, and he had found persons with whom he could converse (a reference to Christian fellowship). In each place people had set before him the "fish," an early Christian symbol, and they had shared the bread and wine.

This Christian openness to other classes, cultures, and peoples lies at the very foundation of many of our deepest sentiments regarding the worth of all humanity. More importantly, Christianity has insisted upon the dignity and worth especially of those whom the rest of society oppresses, despises, or rejects. Israel insisted that the God who created heaven and earth sides in history with a lowly slave people who suffered abject oppression at the hands of the Egyptians. Christians universalized this insight by proclaiming that Jesus Christ, who was born, lived, and died as a marginal person, is the Lord over all the earth. The message of the New Testament is clear: God does not redeem the world through the operations of human power, but redeems it by becoming one with the powerless in our midst. Christianity's contribution to human civilization is the witness that salvation comes from the margins of society and not from its center.

This is evident today in the explosive growth of Christianity in the so-called Two-Thirds World. The greatest vitality of Christian faith is being experienced in the continents and civilizations whose peoples have been rendered marginal by the modern global political system: in Asian churches, where Jesus is often numbered foremost among the ancient sages; in African churches, where Jesus is often considered chief among the ancestors; or in Latin American churches, where Jesus is often seen as being first among the poor—in each case the message of Christian faith is receiving new inspiration and expression.

Today, many in the churches have a healthy missionary consciousness of the need to cross cultural boundaries at a distance, but fail to match that with a similar consciousness about cultural boundaries close to home. The segregated and culturally isolated churches of American society threaten

to betray the central message of the Gospel that "all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). When we accommodate ourselves to the dominant patterns of racial and cultural separation in this nation, we fail to be fully converted to Christ and thus to make our own contribution to our civilization today. Still, that there are so many grassroots groups now working for reconciliation and justice tells me that the Gospel is still at work transforming our culture.

Most global-minded Christians today are properly cautious about uncritically extolling the civilizing values of Christian mission apart from a more self-critical appraisal. Many of us who celebrate the value of "contextualizing the faith" in other parts of the world are uneasy about aspects of the contextualizations going on at home. The cultural accommodation of many Western churches looks to some of us to be nothing short of a sign of their bankruptcy. But then the Christian church has always stood on the edge of its own bankruptcy. Christians do not proclaim their own churches as the source of salvation. Rather, they proclaim Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead. The power of the Christian Gospel is found when we embrace our own death in order to experience the life of resurrection given to us in Jesus Christ. The death of Jesus Christ points us toward the edges of civilization, on the margins of our society, outside the gates of the city where we must journey if we are to join him (Heb. 13:12-13). But his resurrection assures us that the stone the builders of human cities have rejected is still the chief cornerstone of God's new civilization that is yet to come.

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See also Christianity Today articles discussing Christianity's gifts to civilization, "The Gift of Literacy", "The Gift of Science", and "The Gift of Dignity".

In a related news story, Christianity Today reported, "Scholars Uncovering Church's Hidden History" (July 13, 1998).

For more on church history, what the church has given to civilization, and the history of missions, check out our sister publication, *Christian History*.

For a heady discussion of theological education, see Irvin's "Open-Ended Pedagogy in a Multicultural Classroom: The Case for Theological Education," published in the February 1996 issue of *Spotlight on Teaching*, from the American Academy of Religion.