

Kingdom Kaleidoscope

The Unshakable Anchor in a Shakable Globalizing World

by Bruce Graham

Introductory Remarks

In preparing for a biblical reflection this morning, I did not have the advantage of hearing yesterday's full day of speakers. We have heard some pretty bold assertions about the role of globalization in frontier settings across the Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist worlds. Thinking about it all last night, I decided not to tinker much with what I had prepared. But by way of preface, there are some things specifically that I am going to hold on to from yesterday.

Dr. Tan, in his reflection on the Buddhist sphere yesterday, asked, "Is religion the next frontier?"¹ Then H. L. Richard came along and said, "There's no such thing as religion."² Think about what both of those men are saying. I think it pushes us into some pretty significant reflection. One emphasizes the surprising and unpredictable role of religion in people's lives amidst global secularization. The latter plays with our unexamined Western assumptions about religious categories, assumptions which have been too easily accepted across generations of Western thought. Both are suggesting that our presuppositions about the place of religion are being tested in the pace of globalization today. It's not my place to unpack globalization, but rather to give some initial thoughts on how we can maintain mission in these conditions. Specifically, I've been asked to give a biblical frame of reference for mission amidst globalization and all of its pressures.

I might suggest that we consider another discipline in our conversation here, and that's the whole field of aeronautics and astronautics. It's a field dedicated to its own mission, a mission I was personally involved in at MIT back in the early 1970's. One of the things that field has faced in the last few decades is the need to shift from a compass to an inertial guidance system. A compass worked fine with earthly reference, but you need a completely new reference point, an inertial guidance system, when you leave Earth and begin to travel in the stratosphere. I can't help but see similarities between this analogy and the impact globalization will have on our orientation in mission. We are going to feel the need for a new reference system. Another thing I want

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to hold on to in my reflection this morning is that dynamic we encounter when we move out of the whole field of academics, of books and libraries, and down to field realities as practitioners. This dynamic includes themes that I think Paul Otoko was bringing out last night in his plenary message.³ Paul is from a Micronesian background, he has grown up amidst the Christianity of those islands, and has begun to let Jesus revitalize his indigenous traditions. Thus, it was very significant how Paul expressed his new bond with us as North Americans. By taking a necklace that told the story of his people and placing it on Brad's neck (*the emcee of the meetings*), he drove us back to the practical ways we go about linking ourselves in Christ across a globalizing world. He took us out of the theoretical and into field praxis. Three things I am holding onto from what Paul said and did last night:

1. We dance our history.
2. We sing our story.
3. We link our people to you in God's story.

That little symbolic act of Paul taking off his necklace, that story of his people, and then putting it on Brad, and linking his people and their story with our story and our community, indicates one way of approaching what mission is all about. When the gospel comes in among a people, they *dance a new destiny* for their people. They *sing a new song*. But they also become *connected and linked* relationally to a great story that is reaching a glorious destiny. In Paul's action one sees both global reach and a freedom of cultural expression. It represented something solid and real amidst the pressures of globalization today. So, in my remarks this morning, I not only want to offer some biblical reflection, but move in Paul's direction to what really speaks to people. While we might begin with a theoretical grasp of globalization, I prefer to speak from the context of India where I worked with grass-root type mis-

sionaries and all of the dynamics that surround those indigenous efforts.

Globalization

The day came in the space program when we had to shift from a compass to an inertial guidance system because earthly reference was no longer adequate. Likewise, the plethora of publications on globalization indicates we have broken through an older atmosphere; mission must adjust. I have spent some time looking over the globalization papers issued for the upcoming Lausanne meetings



in Cape Town next month. I've economized and picked out just two things that I think are significant in summarizing globalization.

1. Global conscience tends to "relativize," and therefore to diminish, all absolute truth claims. The awareness of other religions and the worldviews that surround them erodes the possibility that any one of them could actually be true. That is a dynamic that takes place when you encounter various religions within a particular context, and the relationship that emerges around them.
2. The power of the world is unprecedented in its pressures and pervasiveness. The tendency is for the expressions of Christian faith and other religions to be pulled towards world-defying fundamentalism, or world-accommodating revisionism.

Now, both of these dynamics belong side by side. Just listen to the verbs: diminish, erode, pull, defy, accommodate. One catches a sense of the disruptive forces of globalization. I want to frame my thoughts today in response to these global conditions, in just three little stanzas.

1. When things begin to shake, hold on to the unshakable.
2. Unshakable things have foundations that are deep and wide.
3. Foundations that are deep and wide can hold up a lot of different kinds of people.

Reflection One: Hold on to the Unshakable

When things begin to shake, hold on to the unshakable. When I landed in India in 1978, I had a little book by E. Stanley Jones titled, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*.⁴ I began to read that book as I was beginning to interact with people in India. Over the years this book has really spoken to me, because I believe it is so relevant for our day. As you know, Dr. Jones had a very original way of ministering to various religious traditions, sitting around a round table, sharing personal experience to better understand "gospel" in the midst of that multi-cultural, multi-religious, and sometimes resistant context. Towards the end of his life, he wrote this book. I think he was 87 years old. In it he said, "How I wish I had come to this conclusion in my earlier years." The gospel is: "God's total answer to man's total need..." Now that's an awesome statement, isn't it? It's not flippantly said, but it's his profound conviction, birthed in the context of relating to various religious traditions all over India. And that *Kingdom* and that *Person* are inseparable; you cannot have one without the other.

The Unchanging Person

This theme of "shaking" and of "things unshakable" comes from the book of Hebrews. Of all the books of

Scripture, only one book is named after a people: Hebrews. It's a word referring to an ethnic grouping, to ethnicity and our focus at the ISFM this year. I've been reflecting on what is at the heart of this book. It addresses the Hebrew people, who are dispersed across a wide Greco-Roman territory. The book is written in a very high style of Greek. One wants to venture to fill in the details of that context in which it was written. It's always been debated who wrote it, and some scholars have discounted Paul as the author.

When you listen to the message, it's like a sermon. If you turn to Hebrews 1:1, we find an awesome opening to the message to the Hebrews: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers at many times and in various ways but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." And He put the whole message of God in the last days in that one phrase: "*His Son*." It's more than a message; it's a Person. It's a Person with a name: Jesus. And there's this intentional reference to seven things regarding this Person, an all-encompassing reference to who he is. He has been appointed:

1. Heir of all things.
2. The One through whom the universe was made.
3. The radiance of God's glory, the exact imprint of his image.
4. Sustaining all things by his powerful word.
5. Made purification for sins.
6. Sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.
7. Superior to the angels.

It seems the author is picking out things that are part of the great biblical story that surrounds this Son. In sustaining all things by his word, he is determining the course of history, and where he now sits is an image of authority, enthronement, and rulership. It's a magnificent statement regarding the Son. The ensuing chapters compare this Son to Moses,

I believe this provides a picture of some of the parameters of mission through which we need to envision the future.

to the Aaronic priesthood, to the one who enters the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle to make purification for sin. He is exalted and sits down at God's right hand. Through the entire book the author keeps saying, "Listen to this word. Listen to God's final message in his Son. Be careful how you listen."

This is the One whom E. Stanley Jones calls, "The Unchanging Person." When things are changing, when globalization is "shaking" so many things that have seemed unshakable, this is the Person you listen to. The author of Hebrews moves toward a final exhortation in chapter 12 at the foot of Mt. Sinai, again, as a point of reference in understanding the message now in his Son. "If God spoke to you in awesome power and might then, He is now speaking to you with far greater amplitude." Not different, but greater! As they listened then, are you listening now? You have come to something far greater: (1) to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God; (2) to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly; (3) to the church of the first born; (4) to God, the Judge of all men; (5) to the spirits of righteous men made perfect; (6) to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and (7) to the sprinkled blood that speaks greater than the blood of Abel (Heb 12:22-24). It's an amazing message, full of hope, couched in the context of the greater story of God redeeming a nation out of Egypt and taking them to Himself and a glorious future. Every *ethne* on earth is called by this last Word. God is longing to lead the peoples of Earth to a heavenly city, whose maker and builder is God. This is good news for the nations and kingdoms of this world.

A Global Shaking

Then comes the final exhortation in Hebrews, and this is where E. Stanley

Jones picks up the title of his book, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*:

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we if we turn away from him who warns us from Heaven. At that time his voice *shook the earth* but now he has promised once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of *what can be shaken*, that is created things, so that *what cannot be shaken* would remain. (Heb 12:26)

The author of Hebrews referenced these words from the book of Haggai. They are prophetic, given to the remnant that has come out of Babylon and that is returning to the land to rebuild the house (temple) and the city of Jerusalem. The word is spoken to Zerubbabel, ruler of Judah. The day is coming...!

Tell Zerubbabel that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers, horses and their drivers will fall each by the sword of his brother. (Hag 2:21,22).

This shaking will occur in the context of kingdom encounter. It leads to the building of a house (kingdom community) and a city, which will be far more glorious than anything presently existing (Hag 2:9).

Now, I believe this provides a picture of some of the parameters of mission through which we need to envision the future. It is framed in kingdom perspective, at the heart of which is the *church of the firstborn*. The firstborn is multi-ethnic, from every language, nation, and people. What a destiny of hope for the nations of the world! We (the firstborn) are *receiving* a kingdom that is unshakable. Hold on to this which is unshakable in these last days, when all seems

to be shaking. I think globalization will accelerate the magnitude of this shaking. Everything created that is shakable is going to be shaken until what is unshaken finally stands.

So what are we going to hold on to? How are we going to live in response to this shaking? What will anchor people's souls in a shaking world? I think E. Stanley Jones would answer, "Jesus on the Global Road" or "Jesus and the Kingdom on the Global Road." Remember the title to one of his books, *Christ on the Indian Road*, back in the 1920's. Today we might rephrase it "Jesus on the Global Road." Are we following Him on the road toward the heavenly city?

The Church needs nothing so much as it needs a rediscovery of the absolute, the absolute of the Kingdom, that would bring life back into unity, point it to new goals, individual, and collective, discover new power, the power of the Spirit, to move on to those goals, and give it nerve to face a hesitating and confused world with, Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.⁵

Reflection Two: Unshakable Foundations

Unshakable things have foundations that are broad and deep. Those seven propositional statements in Hebrews regarding the identity and message of Jesus are not to be interpreted apart from the greater biblical story. That story undergirds these propositions and makes them a more sure foundation. Without this greater story, two things easily happen. (1) We end up taking our Western propositional statements and formulas of gospel to another people. (2) They, in response, will quite naturally interpret the meaning in terms of their own "religious" traditions. Sometimes their interpretations come across as "another" religion, or a reductionist understanding of salvation. This so easily and quite naturally happens. But note that Scripture does not articulate a propositional gospel apart from the gospel stories of Jesus (the four Gospels). And these Gospels are framed by the Old Testament (OT)

story of God's work with Israel among the nations. It is this greater story that undergirds the meaning of those propositional statements from Hebrews of God's final message to us in his Son.

This fuller biblical frame of the gospel really grew in importance for me in the context of India. I found many people who have heard something about Jesus, or been given a gospel tract with propositional truth, or a formula for salvation, but their conclusions as to who Jesus is derive more from their own cultural context, not the full biblical story. They have



simply interpreted him in the light of their own cultural tradition. He is just another "religious" leader of "Western religion," like other religious leaders among their own people.

But, in training Indian mission candidates, I discovered the impact that comes from rooting people in the foundations of the whole biblical story as a way of understanding the gospel of Jesus. Revelation of the gospel begins far back in the history of mankind, addresses the worldviews of nations and peoples, giving good news to nations, and a whole new perspective and purpose for life.

It's vital that we get people into the story of Scripture and give them the tools by which they can discover and interpret who Jesus is in light of the whole biblical story. This prevents us from imposing our own explanations. For example, they need to be led into an inductive discovery of the meaning

of those seven propositional statements regarding the Son (in Hebrews) in light of the greater biblical story. It really begins to "turn on the lights" in the hearts and minds of people when we give them encouragement to discover these things for themselves. The Gospels, when understood in the context of the whole OT story, root people in good news for nations. It's a revelation that is deep, broad, and an unshakable foundation. It's good news for people living in an increasingly shakable, globalizing world.

I believe that any paradigm of mission for these times should derive from the gospel. Each Gospel discloses a paradigm of mission that reveals Jesus' mission, which was bringing the God-ordained destiny of Israel to its fulfillment. I've been challenged to think through just how we might follow, and enable others to follow, these paradigms of mission. They are a picture of "Jesus on the Global Road," making his way toward a city whose maker and builder is God. All nations are called to follow Him in this Way, and play their part in bringing to fulfillment the culmination of his story.

Gospel Rooted in Biblical Story *Matthew*

Suppose I were leading Indian students into discovering the Gospel according to Matthew. I have too little time to develop the process of discovering the organization of each Gospel account, but suffice it to say, the structure of each Gospel indicates how rooted these writers were in the OT story. Matthew seems to be structured around five teaching sections (5:1-7:28; 10:1-11:1; 13:1-53; 18:1-19:1; 23:1-26:1), each dealing with an aspect of God's kingdom (i.e., its foundations, its mission, its nature, its community values, and its future destiny). It begins with a genealogical list that highlights Davidic kingship, exile, the birth of a Davidic Son, acknowledgement by Gentile wise men, taken into exile in Egypt, all setting the stage for a new exodus. The five teaching sections are encased in Jesus going up on a mountain. During

the first, he sits down and begins to teach a “renewed” law of the kingdom. After the end, Jesus returns to yet another mountain, where Jesus commissions his disciples to disciple the nations. A whole new exodus for the nations of the earth awaits those willing to come under the authority (kingdom) of this “new” Moses. This structure to Matthew’s Gospel surely derives from the greater story of the Pentateuch. God’s kingdom will be announced, taught, and incarnated among all nations. What a paradigm for discipling the nations!

Luke

In handling Luke, students would discover a very different pattern. Luke’s eyewitness accounts of Jesus are put together in a pattern that opens our eyes to recognize who this Jesus is and what his mission would accomplish. It’s a very different pattern from Matthew. It references a different part of the OT story. The accounts are often organized in groups of three. The first account highlights testimony from heaven—angelic announcement, heaven opens, etc. The second is a testimony from men—two prophets in the temple, a genealogical list of Jesus’ descendants, on the way he opens the Scriptures, etc. Thirdly, there’s testimony out of the mouth of the one through whom God is working—Elizabeth, Mary, Jesus, etc. Luke’s document is a *witness* document, confirming his introductory words to Theophilus, “so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Two or three witnesses confirm the truth of these things.

Furthermore, the triads are often organized in a chiasmic structure to focus our attention on the identity and mission of Jesus at its center (7:1-35; 13:22-35; Lk 22). He’s fulfilling in Himself the prophetic word of Isaiah (4:18f), as good news to the poor, the captive, the oppressed, and the blind. The day of Jubilee is at hand. And, like Elijah and Elisha, he will be rejected by his own people, but the Gentiles receive him.

God’s kingdom will be announced, taught, and incarnated among all nations. What a paradigm for discipling the nations!

As Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, along the way he calls people to follow him, to enter into the discipleship of the kingdom, to pray the prayer of the kingdom, to enter the conflict of the kingdom, understanding the nature of the kingdom, its coming, and its mission (9:51-13:21). At the center of the chiasmically structured triads is a disclosure of Jesus’ identity and mission in response to a question that arises along the way, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” (Lk 13:22-35). Jesus’ answer pictures prophetically a house with a very narrow door. Inside the house (synonymous with the word “kingdom”) are people from east and west, north and south, taking their seats at a banquet. Outside the house is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Those first have become last, and the last first!

Eventually Jesus arrives on the outskirts of city and weeps over it. Israel had not recognized the day of God’s coming to them (visitation). Jesus enters the city, and echoing the prophet Jeremiah, pronounces judgment disclosed during his first entry on a corrupt house that is no longer a house of prayer for all nations. It’s a house/city that has failed to recognize the visitation of the Prince of Peace. Judgment is coming.

He then enters the city a second time; this time as servant, to sit at a table in a house where the bread is broken, the cup of judgment is taken, and the pronounced judgment taken upon himself. The third journey into the city culminates in his the judgment—death and resurrection on the 3rd day. Three triads of testimony surround both his death and resurrection—testimony from heaven (three hours of darkness and angelic witness inside an empty tomb), testimony among men (a torn curtain of judgment at the temple entrance; opened Scriptures on the road to Emmaus) and a cry of testimony from the lips of Jesus himself

(“into your hands I commit my spirit” and “he showed them his hands and side”...”) opened their minds to the Scriptures and said...” (Lk 24)

So, what is the paradigm of mission disclosed in Luke? Again, I believe it’s rooted in the greater OT story, specifically in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. During the days of the corrupt priesthood of Eli and his sons, God brings to birth through a barren woman a son—Samuel. This Samuel grows up to become a *prophet* who anoints kingship/kingdom in Israel (1 Sam 3:20). This kingship will be validated in the building of a house, but not a physical building, rather a house in David’s son. And this son will be given a kingdom that will endure forever (2 Samuel 7).

However, David’s son Solomon eventually becomes corrupt. His kingship/kingdom is divided. The northern kingdom of Israel becomes so corrupt, God raises up the prophets Elijah and Elisha, who confront and eventually pronounce judgment on the wicked house of Ahab. In the midst of this historic loss the Davidic promise is not forgotten, the lamp of David has not been snuffed out. Could all this be the paradigm of mission inherent in Luke’s Gospel? I believe there is a kingdom mission theme at the very heart of Luke’s Gospel. You discover it in the overarching story disclosed in the carefully arranged sequence of eyewitness accounts.

Mark

Very briefly, consider the Gospel of Mark. It also is intentionally organized to disclose its primary meaning. It seems to be framed as an apocalyptic document that discloses the identity and mission of Jesus as the kingdom’s presence coming near. But it is veiled. Do you recognize him? Do you perceive its presence?

In this Gospel Jesus comes out of the wilderness as Jesus the Nazarene. He calls disciples to follow him and see the evidence of the kingdom's presence (1:16-3:12). He then chooses the Twelve, that they might be with him, and be taught the nature of the kingdom's presence. They are eventually sent out to participate with Jesus in his mission (6:7-8:30). But do they see? Do they hear? Do they understand? All this discloses the veiled identity and mission of Jesus reaching a climactic point in Peter's confession, "You are the Christ." But even this is not fully grasped. The word "Christ," or "Messiah," had many different and often misleading meanings in those days. Even Peter's understanding did not have the depth or breadth of what this truly meant. It's interesting that Jesus never uses that designation for himself following Peter's confession. Rather he begins to refer to himself as the Son of Man—a title with heavenly origins (Dan 7:13,14). This heavenly figure, as Jesus began to teach, would suffer and be rejected, and eventually rise again on the 3rd day (Mk 8:31, 9:31; 10:32). These statements were the clue to a deeper understanding of the veiled identity and mission of the kingdom coming in Jesus.

Eventually Jesus' title transitions from Son of Man to Son of David as he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. As Son of David, he becomes Servant of all in taking upon himself suffering, rejection, and eventual crucifixion. A Gentile centurion, standing at the foot of Jesus' cross, witnessing how Jesus dies, cries out with a climactic unveiling of Jesus' true identity: "Surely this man was the Son of God." So, what is the paradigm of mission in Mark? The kingdom is coming. A new day of comfort for Israel (exile from Babylon) is at hand (Mk 1:2,3). It comes through a man of Nazareth, veiled in human weakness and suffering servanthood. Do you recognize him? What a glorious victory his servanthood brings, overcoming the kingdoms of this

world. Is this not how the gospel of the kingdom penetrates and infiltrates the cultural and religious systems, the powers of this dark, alienated world?

There's no time to go on to the Gospel of John. But you get my point. The revelation of Jesus and his mission (the gospel of the kingdom) is encased in the Gospel stories which are encased in the whole OT story. John's Gospel is rooted all the way back in the very beginning of the story, "in the beginning..." (Genesis 1:1). *How awesome, deep, and wide is our gospel!* When we draw people into



discovering this, they really begin to understand the gospel of Jesus in ways their traditions can never fully interpret, nor can our propositional proof texts ever adequately explain. It requires rooting people in the whole biblical story.

Here is a great statement by Chaturvedi Badrinath, a Hindu scholar of world religions who recently died. He is widely known and respected in India. He said,

I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion—and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don't need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing

else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.⁶

Isn't that an amazing statement? Note that this guy is not a believer. Yet, he's caught something of the profound story of the Bible that has a destiny (hope) and a message (good news) for all of humanity. This history is what helps the peoples of our world really understand who they are and the part Jesus has for them in his Great Story being fulfilled among the nations.

So, this good news of the kingdom in Jesus, this unshakable *Kingdom* and unchanging *Person*, these different paradigms of mission disclosed in each Gospel, provide a foundation for mission that is broad and deep. As Jesus walked the road to Emmaus with those so confused about the meaning of the events in Jerusalem, what did he do with those disciples? I think what he did in opening all the Scriptures to the revelation of Himself is something we need to do for the peoples of the world, for them to really get hold of the good news of Jesus and his kingdom.

Reflection Three: Cultural Traditions

Foundations that are broad and deep have capacity to uphold many different cultural traditions and kinds of people. When Jesus is interpreted in light of the whole OT story, we have illustration after illustration in these narratives of many different kinds of people who exercised biblical faith and entered the kingdom of God. The whole biblical story carries this capacity for understanding biblical faith in various cultural traditions.

We might consider how we in the West understand and respond to God's call in the midst of this story. American culture and its value system colors and filters our response to the biblical gospel. We individualize, we privatize, we secularize, we dichotomize, we commercialize, we atomize, and we "religiousize"—have you heard of that word before? I just made it up after reflecting on H. L. Richard's

challenge to us yesterday. We take biblical faith and turn it into a competing religion in relationship to other religions. But in its essence, is biblical faith a religion, or a relationship? So what do we tend to do with the revelation of Jesus disclosed in this great grand story? We tend to filter it through these values of our culture, and end up with a very truncated gospel. We take our “westernized gospel” to non-Western peoples. Do we realize how easily we do this?

I’ve been increasingly moved by these words of E. Stanley Jones, who saw just how we had lost the gospel of the kingdom.

Many took the gospel of the kingdom in a modified form as a personal, spiritual refuge in which they could run and be safe now or as a place of reward in heaven. They didn’t reject it, they reduced it. And in reducing it they rendered it innocuous now. It wasn’t God’s total plan and program for life, now, but a reward thrown in at the end.⁷

When did he say this? In 1972. From his perspective, the understanding of the gospel of the kingdom was lost even back then.

He went on,

The greatest loss that has ever come to the Christian movement in its long course in history was this loss of the Kingdom. For the thing that Jesus called the Good News, the Gospel, has been lost. Not silenced, but lost as the directive of the movement. The Christian movement went riding off in all directions without goal and without power to move on to that goal. The substitutes became the goal. The Church became the Kingdom, the Church with all its manufactured claims to infallibility. The reaction to this claim of infallibility was that the Kingdom was made to retreat within, and Christian experience became the refuge, the citadel to hold against the world. A crippled Christianity went across the Western World, leaving a crippled result. A vacuum was created in the soul of Christendom, the Kingdom of God became an individual experi-

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ence now and a collective experience in heaven.⁸

I’ve been reading through the recent book, *Mission Shift*, that David Hesselgrave and Ed Stetzer have edited. Here is a statement on page 55 by Darrell Guder:

The tendency to individualize God’s gift of salvation, to separate it from God’s healing purposes for the world, must be rejected as unbiblical. D[avid] Bosch’s excellent exposition of the ecumenical paradigm of evangelism stresses that if the author of individual salvation gets center-stage attention in our evangelism, the gospel is degraded to a consumer product. It has to be emphasized, therefore, that personal enjoyment of salvation never becomes a central theme in biblical conversion stories. Where Christians perceive themselves as those enjoying an indescribably magnificent private good fortune, Christ is easily reduced to little more than the disposer and distributor of special blessings, and evangelism to an enterprise that fosters the purpose of pious self-centeredness. Not that the enjoyment of salvation is wrong, unimportant or unbiblical, even so, it is almost incidental and secondary. It is not simply to receive life that the people we are called to belong to become Christians, but rather to give life.

I have elsewhere used the term “reductionism” in reference to this focus on the individual benefits of salvation to the exclusion of the missionary duty that accompanies the calling to follow Christ and I regard it as the pervasive problem of Western Christianity.⁹

Isn’t that an amazing statement? This really is how we so easily promote Western Christianity all over the world. Our reductionist Western gospel is being transported all across the globe. Are we merely expanding Christendom? Or, are we planting the

gospel of a kingdom, which has tremendous capacity to realign, infiltrate, transform, and uphold a multitude of cultural expressions of biblical faith among many traditions, languages, and peoples?

Strawberry Plants and Biblical Faith

I was captured by an image on the internet the other day. It’s the picture of a strawberry plant and how it grows. I believe it resonates with a biblical understanding of how the biblical faith expands and grows within various cultures. Strawberry plants, I understand, really can grow white strawberries and red strawberries out of the same plant! The same DNA is in each plant, but different colored strawberries grow out of different branches as they take root in different soils. Is this not like biblical faith? Biblical faith can take root in various cultural traditions, and produce different-looking kinds of fruit. The whole biblical story itself illustrates this fact.

Dr. Andrew Walls, to whom Todd Johnson referred a couple of nights ago in his presentation, describes two principles by which biblical faith has been transmitted down through human history. One is the *indigenizing* principle; the other is a *pilgrim* principle.

This *indigenizing* principle basically affirms that when people in differing cultural traditions enter into biblical faith and become part of God’s story, they are like a wild olive branch grafted into the story and faith of Israel. They do not take on the cultural expressions of the faith of Israel, but their cultural expression has the same DNA as that of Israel.

Biblical faith, in essence, is not bound absolutely to any one cultural tradition. Dr. Sam Kamaleson, one of my mentors over the years in India, would have talked about this if he had been

here. He would say there is only one “absolute-absolute” and that is Jesus Christ and his kingdom. Culture is a “relative-absolute.” Becoming a citizen of God’s kingdom frees us, detaches us, from being bound to any one culture.

Biblical faith in the heart of a person brings one to a point of absolute surrender to the One and Only—Jesus Christ. As E. Stanley Jones would say, we become a *crucified* person, a person detached from cultural and religious traditions that once bound us absolutely. Cultural traditions no longer grasp us as tightly as before, for we have a new identity in Christ. We have a new capacity to be who we truly are in terms of our humanity, ethnic identity, and cultural ways. We are no longer bound absolutely by them. This then, leads to Dr. Walls’ second principle of gospel expansion, the *pilgrim* principle.

The pilgrim principle *unbinds* and *unifies* people in Christ. It upholds and affirms the beauty of ethnic diversity. It affirms biblical faith as something translatable, and transplantable. The degree to which biblical faith grows deep (the indigenous principle) is the degree to which it gains capacity to expand horizontally into other cultural traditions (the pilgrim principle).

I offer one illustration from the book of Acts. You remember the story of Stephen, and the accusation against Stephen (Acts 6:13,14). He was accused of speaking against the Temple, the house of religious worship, against the Law and the customs of Moses. And what does Stephen say, to answer those so bound to their religious traditions? He does what I have been suggesting in these reflections today. He goes back through the whole biblical story, all the way back to Abraham, to one who was called and entered into a faith relationship with God *outside the promised land*. He went on to describe the faith of Joseph, the faith of Moses, men whose faith

was not bound to place, custom, or tradition. It was exercised and found outside the land and culture of the Jews. These men’s faith modeled and disclosed the identity of the righteous one, the “Jesus of the Global Road,” that Unchanging Person, who was now about to write another chapter in the story in the culture of the Greeks. Stephen, a Hellenized Jew, understood it. Do we recognize and affirm it in other cultures?

One of things I learned early from my mentors, men like Paul Hiebert, is that for us to distinguish culture



from revelation we must compare biblical faith in two or more cultures. This is why it is often revitalizing to go into another cultural context and see biblical faith expressed in another cultural tradition. In doing so we begin to recognize what is common to both. This is why biblical narrative that encapsulates truth in many varied cultural forms helps us understand revelation outside and above our own tradition. We get a new reference point beyond our culture.

By drawing people into the biblical story, one can escape much of our own cultural overhang in transmitting the gospel. By asking very simple inductive questions of the people about what they observe, what it means to them, and how it applies in their own cultural context, we begin to bypass our own packaging of the gospel.¹⁰ One begins to draw people instead into the biblical story and give them the tools by

which they can interpret who Jesus is and the good news that his kingdom is for them as a people. This should be our orientation in mission, in drawing people to the gospel, so that we avoid transmitting our own cultural baggage so easily.

A New Kind of Evangelism

In 1974 I was working with Dr. Ralph Winter on some of the final graphics he was going to use in his plenary address at the Lausanne Congress that year. I recently re-read his presentation. There was this new awareness growing with greater conviction and greater depth in his own mind. But it was not so much an awareness of the existence of unreached peoples (“unreached peoples” was actually not the term used at that time), as it was an awareness that a new kind of evangelism was needed to reach those large blocs of unreached (hidden or by-passed peoples) of previous eras of mission. Large blocs of humanity still lay *beyond the reach* of existing believers if standard evangelistic practices were to continue. His call was for *a new kind of evangelism* to reach huge blocs of peoples in Asia and Africa. If we continue to do normal church evangelism, attracting new believers into existing congregations, we will never see gospel breakthrough (incarnated) among these unreached peoples. We will continue to expect people to enter into the expression of biblical faith in a foreign cultural tradition. It is never going to have the dynamic that those people truly need for biblical faith to grow deep within their own cultural traditions.

Listen to how N.T. Wright says it:

Wherever we find the ultimate concerns of human beings, we find worldviews. Worldviews provide the stories through which human beings view reality. Narrative is the most characteristic expression of worldview, going deeper than the isolated observation or fragmented remark. From these stories one can in principle discover how to answer the basic questions that determine

The most fundamental transforming question we might ever ask might then be, Whose story of the world do we tell?

human existence: who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution? All cultures cherish deep-rooted beliefs which can in principle be called up to answer these questions. All cultures (this is) have a sense of identity, of environment, of a problem with the way the world is, and of a way forward—a redemptive eschatology, to be more precise—which will, or may, lead out of that problem.¹¹

The most fundamental transforming question we might ever ask might then be, Whose story of the world do we tell? What story has the greatest capacity to answer these fundamental questions? Is it not the biblical story, which answers these fundamental worldview questions with a solution rooted in history, within differing cultural traditions, in a person and kingdom that is drawing all nations into a glorious future destiny?

Paul Otoko made a symbolic statement of destiny last night when he put that necklace of his people on Brad. He was saying, “I now link my people to your people. Your God will be my God.” Will Paul become less Micronesian in doing this? No. His people have a whole new hope and destiny and they will bring all the glory of Micronesian culture redeemed in Christ into this stream of humanity on the global road of Jesus and his kingdom leading to that great heavenly city. This picture of the biblical story has the capacity for every nation to find their God-ordained destiny on earth. It holds tremendous capacity.

I just ran across a statement from the Lausanne Occasional Papers that captures the fundamental role of “embodied story” in our mission:

If it is anything, the church is a community whose way of life tells a particular story about reality. It is

this story that answers life’s most fundamental questions: “What does it mean to be human?” “Why is there suffering and evil?” “What is the meaning of history?” “What comes after death?” Like Israel, the church is a people whose primary identity is to embody this story—the story of creation and fall, of covenant and redemption of life and death, life after death, new heavens and earth. We exist to embody and implement redemption by participating in the story which centres on Jesus Christ.

Storytelling has profoundly formative power. The story of the church embodies, shapes the listeners, namely the world as well as the tellers. The story we live has the power (and authority) to structure the entirety of individual and communal life. Embodying this story impels us to mission and therefore how we embody (and have embodied) the story has a tremendous impact on the world, for better or for worse. Has the church been faithful in speaking and acting the story in the manner of Christ—as kingdom announcers and cross-bearers?¹²

When things begin to shake, root people in the unshakable kingdom and the unchanging person. The unshakable kingdom has foundations that are broad and deep, so we must root people in that gospel of the kingdom, the whole biblical story. That whole biblical story carries tremendous capacity for stimulating biblical faith among the nations.

The good news of Jesus and his kingdom will be an unshakable reality determining the course of nations in the years ahead. May we be deeply rooted in it, holding tightly to it, following Jesus on the global road to its destiny, in an increasingly shakable, globalizing world. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Tan, Kang-San, “The Religious Dimension: The Christian-Buddhist Encounter,” an unpublished talk on the theme of “Ethnicity, Globalization and the Kingdom of God” at the ISFM meetings in 2010.

² Richard, H. L., unpublished talk, “Hinduism in Colonial Perspective,” ISFM 2010.

³ Otoko, Paul, unpublished talk, “An Indigenous Perspective: The Migration of a People,” ISFM 2010.

⁴ Jones, E. Stanley, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person*, Abingdon Press, 1972.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶ Bartholomew, Craig and Michael Goheen, *Story and Biblical Theology in Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, 2004.

⁷ Jones, *Unshakable Kingdom*, p. 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁹ Hesselgrave, David and Ed Stetzer, *MissionShift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, B&H Academic, 2010.

¹⁰ This breakdown of observation, interpretation and application is drawn from Avery Willis’ response to Paul Heibert’s ideas of contextualization in Hesselgrave and Stetzer, *MissionShift*, p. 150.

¹⁰ Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 122, 123.

¹¹ Clayton, David, ed. *A New Vision, A New Heart, A Renewed Call: Lausanne Occasional Papers from the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization*, vol 1., Issue Group 1, Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 30, “Globalization and the Gospel: Rethinking Mission in the Contemporary World,” Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005, p. 38.