

Core Value No. 4:

Our need for others: We recognize the limits of a single cultural perspective and our need to listen to and learn from others.

As we encounter people of other cultures, we are transformed by God and better able to understand ourselves, our world and God's action in the world.

of the Church. As a child, I memorized the first question of the Westminster Confession.

QUESTION: What is the chief end of man?

ANSWER: the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

This might seem like a self-serving perspective except for the fact that we are meant to glorify God and enjoy him as we –

**“Sing to the Lord, all the earth,
Proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations
His marvelous deeds among
The peoples.” 1 Chronicles 16: 23-24**

And... take up Jesus' yoke to **“seek and to save what was lost.” Luke 19:10.**

The sheer scope of this moves us – the whole world, one salvation for all. By now, you get this picture. To speak of world mission is to speak of all human beings throughout the whole world and throughout all of its ages. When we begin to unpack the details of “all human beings throughout the whole world”, things quickly get very complicated and the task seems quite overwhelming. Not long ago, we put out a little book that is a collection of the kind of complexities that emerge when two near neighbor cultures intersect. It's called On Someone Else's Terms; A US/Mexico Journey in Mission Partnership by David Mark. It's short – just 94 pages long. It's available from the Covenant Resource Center or the Department of World Mission of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Here's an excerpt from the introduction.

“The world keeps changing. Some of the changes are new and very big. Other things have always been with us but they seem like changes because we didn't notice them before. They are just new to us.

The biggest change is what Phillip Jenkins describes in his book, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity. It is a very important book, one I recommend highly. In it, Jenkins documents and describes the way the center of gravity of Christianity has moved from North to South. There are far more Christian churches to the South of the United States and Europe than there are in the North. But it is not just about numbers of people. It's about godly

passion and spiritual leadership. You see, most people who go on mission trips – and many who want to become career missionaries – are still thinking upside down. We imagine that we are going to places that are far less Christian than our own homeland. We imagine that we have much more to give than to receive. We imagine that we are in charge. It is true that the South is far less wealthy in economic terms than the North. They have less education by Western standards. They are certainly far less powerful politically or militarily. (Note: But watch China!) But it would be a grave mistake to consider them less wealthy or powerful in spiritual terms. So, for Christians in the North to engage in mission in the South, it will involve new thinking. We will have to change from upside down to right side up.

We are going to have to think in a decentralized way about the expansion of the Kingdom of God. It will now have to mean “from here and there to everywhere”, rather than a single direction. We are going to have to drop our whole idea of “foreign mission fields” and return to Jesus’ more accurate description when he said, “the field is the world” – including our part of it. The day is gone when we can “parachute in” to virgin territory, unannounced and uninvited. We will have to learn to respect the resident churches in the South. We will need partnerships, companionships and coalitions. Most of all, and hardest for us to accept, we will need permission. This will be tough for us. We aren’t used to submitting to anyone. And the North, in politics and business, will be no help. We won’t be able to take our cues from our secular environment. We will have to steer clear from riding in on their coattails.

Missionaries and mission teams of all sorts from the North face a paradox. On the one hand, the world seems to be shrinking. When my family and I went to Madras, India in 1949, it took six months to get there on a Norwegian freighter. Now, we can pop in anywhere around the world in less than a day. All sorts of means of communication connect us around the world in an instant. We no longer have to wait for months for one of those awkward and impossibly thin air-fold letters. And we are constantly flooded with new knowledge and information – the Discovery Channel, run amuck.

On the other hand, our world seems to be expanding logarithmically. The more we know, the more we realize what we don’t know. The North and South are more in touch, and we seem far less able to understand each other than ever before.

The irony is that this paradox of a shrinking and expanding world is overwhelming us right about the time that thousands more U.S. and European Christians are poised for a great leap forward in international mission...” Pages x-xii.

Again, that little book is merely a small introduction to the complex world of mission engagement across the borders of geography, language, culture and history. It is about people from two neighboring countries who share a lot of common history and whose cultures, languages and religions are relatively similar. Yet the point to the book is that it takes a lot of effort to achieve mutual understanding even when the two are very close as compared with much of the rest of the world.

Jargon:

John 1: 14 says, “**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling with us.**” The theological word that describes “the Word became flesh” is “incarnation.” The Eternal Son of God became a human being and lived authentically as Jesus; a first century Jewish man, fully integrated into that culture. In mission theory, the practice of missionaries of trying to live wholly integrated into their host culture and trying to serve in its context is often called **Incarnational ministry.**

The uneasy conscience of the wealthy missionary

Key Verse:

“How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God.” Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus replied, “What is impossible with human beings is possible with God.”
Luke 18: 24-27

While wealthy people often easily agree that the poor need them, they may miss the fact that the wealthy need the poor for their own salvation. Culture, language, our view of “reality”, economic and social positions are as invisible to us as the water in which a fish swims is to the fish. To understand ourselves, we need to see ourselves as we are seen by others who live outside of our typical frame of reference. We believe that this is universally true and defines the widest context for the meaning of community. It is a theological conviction based on the fact of our common creation. Our bond as fellow human beings is logically prior to any and all of the inequities and divisions that have since emerged.

We wealthy missionaries have a tough time reading and understanding a lot of the Bible. We want to model our life and ministry on Jesus, but he is a problem for us. Jesus’ historical, social and economic “location” places him at some distance from us. He was not modern, well positioned (by human standards) or wealthy. Jesus came from a place, Galilee - that was not politically or socially significant in his time. People from Jerusalem thought of Galileans as unlettered and rustic – rather “country bumpkins.” Jesus was born into a family of the “working poor.” In addition, even in his own environment, Jesus lived with the reputation of questionable parentage. (Do you really think everyone in town believed that story about his conception by the Holy Spirit?) To make matters worse for us, Jesus didn’t have much good to say about the rich, the influential and the powerful – and he seemed to show a clear preference for preaching “Good News to the poor.” (Matthew 11: 5 and elsewhere) Right from the gate, wealthy missionaries are at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding Jesus’ point of view. This can be seen rather obviously in the way we sometimes go to fantastic lengths to “get around” or “spiritualize” rather clear Biblical teaching about social position, power and money.

Wealthy missionaries, then, need the perspective of those who live more closely to Jesus’ social and economic condition to understand his perspective on the Gospel and on salvation.

There are some theories held by many wealthy people that damage their ability to serve those who have less material wealth. The first comes from psychologist Abraham Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs.” Maslow developed a theory of personality and behavior in 1945 that placed human needs in a kind of

pyramid. In it, the “lower needs” were physiological and safety needs; food, water, shelter, security of employment and the like. At the top of the pyramid, the “higher needs” were self-actualization and esteem; confidence, respect for self and others, morality, lack of prejudice and the like. In his model, people can only address “higher level” needs once “lower level” needs are met.

We think this view of people has “leached” into a lot of American thinking and is just plain wrong. It leads directly to the belief that materially better-off people are morally superior and that materially poor people do immoral things simply because they are poor. From a biblical point of view, this is nonsense. The Bible is clear that all, rich and poor alike, are created as God’s image and likeness and that all have sinned for essentially the same reasons. Yet some wealthy people ignore their own immorality as insignificant while others justify the immorality of some poor people as the inevitable result of poverty itself. We have seen this view “lived into” when wealthy Christians hope to produce improvements in the morality and spirituality of others by the exclusive means of improving social conditions. We have also seen wealthy Christians deeply surprised when they encounter intelligence, morality and spirituality among the poor and not formally educated.

A similar and pervasive theory of human behavior can be found in the concept of a “culture of poverty.” Anthropologist Oscar Lewis coined the phrase and supported the idea in a wretched book called, The Children of Sanchez. In general, the theory argues that poverty has its own culture marked by early experience with sex, widespread illegitimacy, wife abandonment and a host of other morally reprehensible behaviors. Academic arguments rage about whether poverty causes this “immoral culture” or is caused by it. Either way, the poor are judged as morally, intellectually and spiritually deficient and “not up to the standards” of the better off. So the rich must be, by turns, protected from the poor and benignly inspired to help them become better people by increasing their capacity to acquire more material possessions.

On the flip side of these theories are alternative ideas espousing the “inherent nobility of the poor.” In these views, poverty naturally produces noble suffering, sacrificial generosity and profound spirituality. This can result in movements for the “protection of indigenous cultures” in which poverty need not be addressed because of its ennobling qualities. It is one thing to try to preserve indigenous cultures and their values. It is quite another to “make sure they stay on the reservation.” (One writer suggested that, in America, Native Americans are treated functionally as “scenery” and migrant farm workers as “machinery.”)

In contrast, the two biblical themes that address poverty are far removed from these theories. They are, quite simply, justice and compassion. Justice comes into play because the world and all of its systems are not fair. Compassion comes into play because poverty causes human suffering. Both are supported by the fact that we are all one family by virtue of creation and all sought after by a loving God who seeks our redemption and well being.

Stories and such:

As a young missionary, I held a strong, ideological conviction about “incarnational ministry.” I wanted to live, as much as possible, in precisely the same condition as those whom I served. I wanted to avoid even the appearance of “American privilege.” Not long after I arrived in Mexico City, one of our daughters was discovered to have a genetic condition that required a complex and expensive thoracic surgery. Did I endeavor to live according to the limitations of most in my adopted community? No. I grabbed the “golden parachute” of US missionary health insurance and benefits with both hands. We contracted the leading US surgeon for the procedure and had it done in the best children’s hospital in the US that we could find.

Before we did so, however, I wrestled deeply with my conscience. What had happened to my “radical identification with the poor?” What had become of my convictions about incarnational ministry? Over the years, I have since watched many “living as the poor” missionaries react in similar ways to personal crises of various kinds – and suffer with their conscience as a result.

Wisdom in this process came to me from a woman in our church in Mexico. She was not wealthy and likely would have qualified as “poor” by US standards. She had a remarkable gift for miraculous healing. I asked her if she would pray for our daughter’s healing. As was her practice, she said that she would first seek the Lord’s direction in the matter. After about a week of prayer, she reported that the Lord had not directed her to ask for healing for our daughter. She said, “The Lord has provided you with other resources that you should use to correct this condition.”

As a wealthy missionary seeking to live with integrity, I needed the guidance of a non-wealthy sister in Christ to discern God’s direction for my actions. I could not be saved from confusion without her help.

Going Deeper:

Jonathan J. Bonk has written an excellent book entitled, Missions and Money; Affluence as a Missionary Problem...Revisited, Orbis Books, 2006. It is a much expanded and revised edition of his earlier book with the same title (minus ...Revisited) published in 1991. The revision and expansion are very welcome as the earlier text described the problem well but did not suggest ways to address it effectively. The genius of the revised edition is in its discussion of what the author refers to as “The Righteous Rich.” In it, Bonk looks at biblical models and instructions for how the rich believer can live and act with integrity. The solutions are suggestive rather than comprehensive, but must reading for US and Northern Europeans who seek to engage in international mission among people of more limited material resources.

Going Deeper:

InterVarsity Press published a book in 2004 by historian Meic Pearse called, Why the Rest Hates the West: Understanding the Roots of Global Rage. Pearse wrote for a back-cover note, “Those in the Third World have the sensation that everything they hold dear and sacred is being rolled over by an economic and cultural juggernaut that doesn’t even know it’s doing it...and wouldn’t understand why what it’s destroying is important or of value.” The book is penetrating and provocative – and not comfortable reading. It is worth the effort to wrestle with the perspective that he presents, even if one is not convinced of all its details.

