

## 5. Where to Go From “Here”: Following Jesus and His Disciples on the Global Road

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*“When the church is faithful to the Lord and to the Gospel in its nature and life, the global and the local meet in the new creation!”—Samuel Escobar*

In 1925, E. Stanley Jones wrote a widely read book entitled, *The Jesus of the Indian Road*. In this book, Jones provides one of the most moving and profound appeals for indigenizing the gospel ever written. In the Indian context, Jones argued, Jesus was to be understood in Indian terms, not terms imported and imposed from afar.<sup>22</sup> Jones articulated what many then and since have always known: the various gospels of Western Civilization, global capitalism, technological advance, democracy and now human rights are not the good news of Jesus Christ. The temptation today, of course, is to congratulate ourselves for believing we have learned this lesson. To be sure, calls to “contextualization” and “indigenization” are squarely on the agenda of most

missionaries. Though the sad truth is that we continue to confuse the true living gospel with the gospels of the world, there is another issue at stake: loosing sight how these indigenous Christianities fit together.

Our task today is to both affirm and multiply Jones' idea. We must affirm his basic insight that Jesus is found on many indigenous roads and we must take this insight further, to the place these many roads lead: to *Jesus on the global road*. What is this "global road?" Is it a one-size fits all, top-down imposition of one group's version of Christianity on all the others? To this we must say a collective and firm, "NO!" Rather, a global road suggests we take into account how indigenous "roads" are interconnected because of the processes we have been examining. (Recall our composite definition of globalization as "a set of complexly-related historical processes by which local situations throughout the world are increasingly interconnected within a single, but often conflicted, social space.") If this is true, the church must increasingly reconsider its mission in light of the fact that we are all on the same global road, even if we occupy different places, move by different modes of travel, or engage in different ways of life. Some of us go as "vagabonds," some as "pilgrims," and some as "tourists" — yet all go as followers of the risen Christ. This means that mission is not only possible, but essential from "above" and "below" in the sense of being faithful to where God has placed us in the world. Consequently, we must be diligent in identifying present "global road conditions," what we have referred to as the "scenes" in which we find ourselves confronting anew crucial missiological questions — "Where in the world are we and who is our neighbour?" "Who are we in relation to the world around us?" "What compels us to act?" We historically neglected these questions because they seemed selfapparent, because we believed we inhabited a world whose contours were given and that we could take both our starting points and our local contexts for mission at face value. In light of *Sans Frontieres, Pluralism & Fundamentalism*, and *Empire & Power Shift* we find ourselves increasingly unable to take such things for granted.

We have seen, furthermore, that to answer these questions depends on a fundamental, pre-missiological question — "whose story of the world do we tell?" It is the answer to this question that properly orients us individually and

collectively and allows us to make sense of our world and our mission in it. This question also alerts us to how we may have misunderstood or misrepresented this story and confused both ourselves and the world as to our true mission, our true calling. Rethinking mission in light of our past and in terms of the tensions that confront us today begins at the feet of the One who is the author and sustainer of our story.

Very well. Story-telling is fine and good, but how will it inform the hard, practical questions confronting missionaries and pastors and the church? How will it help the Brazilian pastor who is asked by a congregant if he should take part in an anti-globalization rally? How will it help Korean missionaries be more effective in reaching “unreached peoples” in the “10-40 window?” How will it aid the American missionary trying to determine whether her missionary agency should transition from a sending organization to a support organization for indigenous missionaries? How will it assist Indian missionaries to plant churches in rural villages among people who have never heard the word “globalization?” It would be presumptuous for anyone to provide universal answers to such questions and we will not attempt to do so here. Even if we desired to do so, we simply have no global formula to offer our not-so-hypothetical brothers and sisters. What we can do is suggest humbly where they (and we) can begin the process of corporate discernment necessary to answer these practical questions of daily ministry. The first step is the hard work of *understanding*, a work barely begun here. The second step is *discipleship*, for by living the true gospel story in symbol and word, in sacrament and community, in worship and work, we are not simply “informed” but actually “formed” for mission. It is to this second step we now turn by way of conclusion.

### **Back to basics: Mission and Discipleship**

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If globalization describes a situation in which we are all in one respect or another cosmopolitans, that is, citizens of a globalizing world, but also citizens of God’s Kingdom — then the church finds itself with the task of forming its members to be biblically-grounded cosmopolitans. Happily, the full depth of the gospel story possesses the necessary resources for this task, and we have been given God’s Spirit to aid us in our effort.

Again recall the gospel mediation outlined at the start of the paper: From the beginning of *Genesis*, we are told that God created the heavens and the earth and humankind to be its stewards. All this was created originally good. To humans God gave the kingly mandate to go into all the earth and to fill it and to have dominion over it (a command echoed in Matthew 28: 19-20 and John 20: 21-23 in a fresh way). This calling quickly became distorted, as did all of creation, by our rebellion and fall. In the early chapters of Scripture the episodes of our rebellion are repeated over and over again and each time we see the further alienation of humans from God, from creation, from each other and from themselves. The archetypal symbol of this endless rebellion is found in the Tower of Babel. The consequence of our then global assertion of independence from God's intentions was a confusion of tongues and the dispersal of the human race, a consequence whose effects were made manifest in the story of Israel (God's covenant people) and is still felt today; humanity, like creation, continues to groan under the weight of Adam's curse, awaiting the end of exile and captivity.

Here is the good news. Through Christ humanity and creation are both reconciled and will one day be fully restored. So we see hints of the coming restoration in Pentecost, in the first struggles between Jews and Gentiles at Antioch and in the visions of John where all nations and tongues are gathered to give praise to the creator and redeemer God. We are sent his Holy Spirit to guide our efforts and to encourage our calling to be for the world what Jesus was for Israel —Kingdom announcers and cross-bearers. Although we have no abiding city, we are told not only to go into all the world, but also to serve the city we are in.

Taken together, these brief allusions to the full gospel story remind us of our calling. We are, after all, to be a kingdom of priests, a royal priesthood for the whole earth. Such a calling, it is essential to note, is not a new program, formula, paradigm, or action plan for world missions — whether universally advised “from above” or more radically injected “from below.” It is rather a disposition, an attitude, or posture towards the world; it is, fundamentally, a mark of a certain kind of discipleship, which can only come from being formed

within a specific community of faith that has at its heart the story of Jesus Christ and the radical hope of reconciliation. It is, then, a response of genuine incarnational Christianity to the global situation in which all of us increasingly find ourselves. The mark of this kind of discipleship is responding to Christ's call to follow him into the very heart of the world's darkness and pain as a sign of his inaugurated reconciliation.

As we have seen, globalization is an exceedingly complex and highly contested reality which often eludes our attempts to understand it. We have also seen that it is full of unavoidable tensions: rich and poor, West and non-West, unity and diversity, individual and community, freedom and authority, the universal and the particular, domination and resistance, exile and homecoming and, (in eschatological terms) the beginning of the End of times and the end of the End of times. These are the tensions and paradoxes we all inhabit just by being human, no matter who we are or where we live. Globalization intensifies these tensions that plague our human condition, adding to them the additional strain of the global with the local.

Caught as we are in the middle of these tensions, we are tempted to take sides, as the powers of the world push us to one side or the other and we are confronted with an imperative to be for or against globalization. In this paper, we suggest that the spirit of a Christian response to globalization is to decline this imperative, choosing instead the way of reconciliation, the way that calls us to live at the heart of the tensions. No doubt this is a way that must begin with repentance, with groaning in the Spirit and lament, but also with a blessed hope. We begin where we are, in our particular moment in time and our peculiar location in space, but we also begin where we are with respect to our own societies (our class, ethnicity, gender, etc.). Christians are called to embody the true Israel, the true Humanity found only in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this new Humanity there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor freeman, male nor female, only the full, complete, Body of Christ in its glorious diversity, one in the Spirit of God. This is the Christ-centred imperative behind a biblically-grounded cosmopolitanism.

We have already raised three missiological questions that we believe will help

Christians fulfil their mission to live as reconcilers amidst the tensions of the globalizing world around them. Let us raise two more. To the questions “Where in the world are we and who is our neighbour?” “Who are we in relationship to the world around us? and “What compels us to act?” we add “*Who* should do what in the world?” and “*Where* in the world do we begin?”

The first new question — “Who should do what?” is a vocational question. Having all-encompassing and inclusive mottos such as “The Whole Church, Taking the Whole Gospel, to the Whole World” is a fine sentiment, but unhelpful as a strategy for mission. In fact, what is at issue may not actually be a question of mission per se, but a question of *commission*. This is to say, that just as there are many members in the Body of Christ, so there are many gifts and talents which are meant to serve the Body. Raising this question makes us reflect how we should be forming and encouraging one another with regard to our unique gifts and talents, roles and offices. It also raises important questions about collaboration and partnership.

In the language of Jeremiah 28:4-7, raising this question is in essence a call to “serve the city.” This is a call that challenges the over-reliance (at least in the West) on professional missionaries, where 2% of Christians are commissioned to do 80% of the work. The church must reaffirm the role of the laity, equipping all Christians not simply for workplace evangelism but to work out what Jesus’ lordship means in every realm of human existence. It happens that most of the non-Western missionary movement today consists of lay people who are on the move — of women and children, labourers, refugees, students and diasporic communities. As many are right to remind us, the book of Acts continues to be lived out in nearly every city on the planet.

One of the most desperately needed aspects of this call to serve the city is the commissioning of Christian professionals (by definition, elites) who will work out the implications of the whole gospel story in realms of economics, politics, science and engineering, the arts, medicine, and the like. It is a fact of our world-historical moment that humanity increasingly relies on such powers in the ordering of its affairs. It is also a fact that these powers have become the reigning idols of the age. Part of the church’s task in serving the city is surely to

work for the redemption of these powers, but in the process this will likely mean reminding the world that Jesus is Lord — neither Mammon nor Caesar nor Nature are Lord. Again, this will mean being able to live in the tensions of the world, where the world is in exile. Formation and discipleship at the level of the local church is in this way fundamental to the church's mission in the world. Its job is to form people, in the words of N. T. Wright, into the kind of Christians capable of holding in one hand the love of God and in the other the pain of the world. The shape of reconciliation is always cross-shaped — whether we are professional missionaries or businessmen, engineers or pastors, wage-labourers or CEOs.

The second question — “Where in the world do we begin?” is a question of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity is perhaps less familiar to us than vocation, but just as important. To put it simply, subsidiarity refers to the levels at which decisions are made. At issue is the question of authority: who gets to decide what counts as orthodox Christianity? In a world characterized by globalization — of *Pluralism and Fundamentalism, of Empire & Power Shift*, debates on authority are complex. We are seeing this in terms of the explosion of non-Western Christianity and the implications that explosion has for who gets to tell the authorized story of Christianity. In a more direct way, subsidiarity also refers to responsibility. None of us is responsible for the entire world, but we are responsible for being faithful to our calling wherever God has put us. In this sense, mission begins wherever God has placed you and wherever vocation takes you. We are to serve the city *we are in*. Indeed, globalization challenges the long-standing captivity of the idea that missions is something that happens somewhere else in the world, an idea still constrained by Western notions of geography (especially geography divided artificially by the modern nation-state system).

As globalization liberates us from this captivity we find that the emphasis of the question shifts to “*Where* in the world do we begin?” (and back to the question of “who” should do what). The “we” question brings us against one of the most significant issues of the day: the issue of unity. This is what many missiologists are struggling to come to terms with when they write so passionately about “partnership” and “internationalization.” Indeed, globalization adds rocket fuel to

a fire that has always burned in the history of the church. This fire refers to the ever-present tension between unity and diversity. In its global dimensions, this tension points to the central paradox of Christian faith — in Andrew Walls words, *“the utter Jewishness of Jesus and the wonderful universality of the son of God. There is one Church (and thus, one authentic humanity) and yet the church is incredibly diverse (and thus, so is humanity.) Only in Christ can this paradox be reconciled.”*<sup>23</sup> Here emphasis on the local church with unity on essentials, liberty on non-essentials and in all things charity is a helpful guide. In the end, our unity-diversity will be the witness the world longs for, just as it will be our disunity that will be cause for the light of the gospel to be hid as it were under a bushel.

Let us return to the Hindu fable with which we began and consider again the question we set out to address: what is the impact of globalization on the gospel? The blind men and the elephant analogy captures the diversity of experience and perception that describes the contemporary church. We each come from particular places in the world, from different cultures, languages, histories and so on. None of us, therefore, has the complete picture of globalization. With important qualifications, what is true of globalization can also be said of the gospel. As Lamin Sanneh puts it, *“Christianity is not a garment made to specifications of a bygone golden age, nor is it an add-on whimsical patchwork rigged up without regard to the overall design. Rather, Christianity is a multicoloured fabric where each new thread, chosen and refined at the Designer’s hand, adds lustre and strength to the whole.”*<sup>24</sup> We need to listen and learn from one another in order to piece it all together, to get a fuller understanding of the story we all know, but which can only be contemplated in its full glory within the context of the whole church. As we have seen, globalization presents us an opportunity for getting all proverbial blind men into the same room (ultimately a throne room) to share what they perceive and to work out together what the larger reality is and what it means for the church’s mission. Indeed, this is nothing short of the promise of both Pentecost and Revelation and it is being made possible by contemporary globalization. This is the sense in which we need to rethink missions — globalization not only provides the opportunity to do so, it demands it.

If we are correct, we find ourselves following Jesus, each at different places on what amounts to a single, global road. Along with us on the road is the rest of humanity, desperately trying to determine where in the world the road is leading them. It is our great mission in the world to announce the answer which is found in the gospel message we carry: all roads lead to the cross and then on to “Zion!” The church, local and global, gathered and dispersed, Western and Non-Western, rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile is to be a living parable, a human icon reflecting the light of this gospel. We are to bear the good news that the global road leads to that final vision in *Revelation* where the kings of the earth bring their glory to the new Jerusalem and there, together, every tongue and nation will unite before the throne of God in worship and adoration.