

This Common Missionary Model Is Completely Unbiblical

Ever since Jesus told His disciples to disciple nations (Matt. 28:19), many nations have been framed with a Judeo-Christian world and life view.

By “disciple a nation,” I am speaking about utilizing the Bible as a framework to not only teach individual people about Christ, but to use the laws, precepts, values and commandments of Scripture as the foundation for the values, ethics and laws of a nation. (Read my book *Understanding the Wineskin of the Kingdom* for more on this.)

In church history, we see that after the Roman Empire collapsed, the bishops were the only ones left to administrate the cities, hence the church went from merely evangelizing to also civilizing the Barbarian hordes who made residence in the Empire (thus fulfilling the Matt. 28:19 mandate). These included the Germanic tribes who were all converted and baptized in the third and fourth centuries and the barbarian tribes of Western Europe who were reached through the missionary methods of St. Patrick who preached the gospel, educated and civilized them. Even the Medieval church influenced empires in the East and West, and the Protestant Reformation affected the politics and economies of modern nations (including the founding documents of the USA).

There is a rich history of using the values, ethics, principles and laws of Scripture as the foundation for societies. This is something we are still called to do as Christ-followers, according to the cultural mandate found in Genesis 1:28 and Matthew 28:19. That being said, there have been some huge mistakes and unbiblical practices, especially in the past several hundred years, regarding the methodology and motivation of reaching nations for Christ.

The nations of Western Europe (Portugal, Spain, England and France included) would go to the people groups of Latin America and Africa with the "Three C's of Christianity," which were "Christianity, commerce and civilization." That is to say, the missionaries were often not only ambassadors for Jesus but emissaries of the nation they were representing. Hence, they had colonialist political and economic goals that were equal and/or exceeded the goals they had for the spread of the gospel.

It was so bad that in some nations, if people did not convert, they had to agree to be servants (some can argue a form of slavery) under the guise that they had to be held in trust under a family until they were civilized and converted. Furthermore, the Catholic Church would allow secular nations that were colonizing other nations to appoint their own bishops and priests, because they saw it as a way of spreading the gospel under the banner of a sympathetic nation. Although many of the missionaries had good intentions, many of the nations used the missionaries as a veil to hide their goals of conquering peoples so those peoples would be subservient to the colonizing nation, which intended to seize and harness their vast natural resources.

Here's a case in point:

The Catholic Church during the Age of Discovery inaugurated a major effort to spread Christianity in the New World and to convert the Native Americans and other indigenous people. The evangelical effort was a major part of, and a justification for the military conquests of European powers such as Spain, France and Portugal. Christian Missions to the indigenous peoples ran hand-in-hand with the colonial efforts of Catholic nations."

Also:

In the 16th century, priests of different religious orders

set out to evangelize the Americas, bringing Christianity to indigenous communities. The colonial governments and missionaries agreed on the strategy of gathering the often-nomadic indigenous populations in larger communities called reductions in order to more effectively govern, tax, and Christianize them. Reductions generally were also construed as an instrument to make the Indians adopt European lifestyles and values.

John Philip of the (Protestant) London Missionary society once wrote this about mission stations " Missionary stations are the most efficient agents which can be employed to promote the internal strength of our colonies and the cheapest and best military posts that a wise government can employ to defend its frontier against the predatory incursion of savage tribes."

Harvie Conn said "Colonialism was often seen by these early missionaries as the handmaid of the process of civilizing. And it could easily be defined as the grand movement of Europe that promoted the cause of rational behavior in the face of barbarous superstition."

Consequently, much of the times, the spread of the gospel from Western Europe had a mixture of western culture and Christianity. The colonists' goal was to export Western culture and values to "civilize the indigenous peoples instead of teaching indigenous people to think biblically, evangelize and multiply churches in the context of their own culture.

However, all was not bad. Many did get converted; a form of Christianity did get established and numerous hospitals and schools were built. However, as already noted, this was often done with a methodology that included the imposition of Western values and culture upon people groups.

In retrospect, when we think about reaching a nation, we need to discern the difference between the biblical gospel and the

culture of the nation we are representing. In every culture and nation there are good things and bad things—things that can be assimilated easily into the life style of the indigenous church without compromising the message of Christ and things that have to be repented of. (that is, we do not want to import into the church the practice of Sati—which is a Hindu practice of burning widows to death on their husband's funeral pyre—or the practice of polygamy, in which many African tribal men have had more than one wife, resulting in mixed families.)

When we minister in a nation, we need to sense what God has already been doing in their culture that will be the bridge between them and the gospel —the key to open their heart to the gospel—and we need to be careful not to equate our nationalistic cultural values on an equal plane as the gospel of Jesus. (See *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* by Lesslie Newbigin and *Eternity in Their Hearts* by Don Richardson.)

We need to apply the biblical worldview when it comes to principles in politics, economics, families, values and ethics, but allow biblical teachings to be applied in the context of every indigenous culture.

Speaking of myself, when I teach in other nations, when I write books, when I write articles and when I read Scripture, I have to always discern if I am reading, writing and preaching through an American lens or through a biblical lens, if I am imposing my nationalistic values on Scripture or I am allowing the God-breathed Word to penetrate my American soul. I need to preach a gospel of the kingdom that is trans-cultural, trans-historical, multi-generational and relevant to the challenges of today—based on my target audience and the nation to which I am ministering. (Although I believe the USA is the greatest nation in the history of Western civilization, there are cultural values, both subtle and overt, that are unbiblical that I must identify and resist in my Christian worldview.)

Finally, the greatest thing I believe we can do to disciple a nation is to teach indigenous people groups how to think biblically and how to apply the gospel of the kingdom to their own culture, so they can reach and disciple their own nation. I don't believe God is going to call me to reach a nation where the gospel is already established. I want to honor those already serving God in every nation and culture and help them reach their own people.