



WORLD MISSIONS DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Introduction

The urgency to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples of the earth remains the central focus and goal of many in the Christian faith. In fact, many hold that the task of saving the lost for Christ and the making of disciples stands as the principal task of the baptized Christian. The drive to do mission work around the world fuels numerous evangelism programs within the Church and para-church organizations. God's plan to perpetuate the Church until Christ returns is through evangelism and discipleship. The standard evangelical Christian model of evangelism holds that once a person accepts Christ and receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:8), he or she is to go everywhere and, in so doing, tell the whole world about Jesus and what God has provided through his death, burial, and resurrection (Matt 28:16-20; Mk 16:15).

Two important features of mission work should be considered. First, the idea that no people have ever received the Gospel except at the hands of an alien sets forth the important preliminary element of missions. In short, the fellowship of Christian believers is meant to be a diverse and complex body where aliens come together and form community. Second, the nature of the Christian message necessitates a push to bring this living breathing community of believers to fullness of life in Christ—here on earth as well as later in heaven. Therefore, recurring themes of liberation and redemption often set the tone for missionary work. Such themes indeed resonate with those who have experienced the ill effects of a lower socio-political position. In the end, the Body of Christ, with a myriad of racial and cultural differences, is compelled to praise together the God of their salvation (Psalm 67).

II. Historical Considerations

In 1862, Harriet Ware made a critical cultural observation as she witnessed a funeral attended by recently freed slaves. Ware, a white missionary, was astonished at the ceremonial contributions of her young black pupils at the burial site. As part of her missionary task, she offered reading and writing instruction for those who had long been prohibited from doing so. She stated that as she drew near the grave she “heard all the children singing their A, B, C, through and through again, as they stood waiting round the grave... Each child had his school-book or picture-book... in his hand—proof that they consider their lessons as some sort of religious exercise.” For Ware, the profundity of the slaves’ desire for learning impressed upon her the importance of her work and how, partly through her missionary labor, the social and religious destiny of a people may be changed. What Ware also took from this experience was that gaining the skill to read the Bible offered these former slaves the fullness of the Gospel message to all people.¹

Mission work of this sort places cultural contact at the forefront of our conception of the function of the Gospel in the lives of Christians. Compelled by the biblical imagery of Ethiopia stretching “out her hands to God” (Psalm 68:31), Ware and other missionaries believed that they witnessed a spiritual longing for God by those of African ancestry. For these former slaves, accepting Christ virtually redeems not just their souls to heaven, but it also restores their formerly mangled humanity.² Ware came to realize that the former slaves’ steadfast desire to come to an intimate understanding of the nature of God through acquiring the necessary skills to read the Bible would give them a language to tell their own human stories. Their religious stories and biblical reflection would create new spaces for the full intent of her missionary work—to help to create a Christian community on earth where all people, even those whom other had enslaved, could freely praise God.

III. Our Approach to World Missions

Much has been written on the damage done by likely well-meaning missionaries who left America to do mission work around the world. Such damage can be lessened if we approach world missions with a “servant” mentality. In other words, because of the love that God has shown for us, we are compelled to serve others around the world. According to James Pluedderman, a professor of intercultural studies, “Cross-cultural servanthood is needed more than ever in the history of missions. In today’s mission context, millions of short-term missionaries travel cross-culturally every year. Tens of thousands of non-Western missionaries serve in almost every country of the world. Many churches from the West are forming partnerships with churches from other countries. In all these scenarios, there is a tendency toward an attitude of superiority. The danger of ethnocentric arrogance is exploding.”³

In this regard, Jesus is our example as the ultimate servant who knew how to reach out to others beyond his ethnic clan and culture. First, Jesus was the type of servant who created other servants. Such was the impact of his service that others wanted to follow him and live as he lived. Second, he led by hands-on compassion. He not only prayed for people, as we are quick to do for those suffering around the world, he was their advocate, he healed and he fed. In other words, he understood that the suffering need tangible

assistance. Third, he is our example because he was a relationship builder. It is high time that we focus more on relationships to be created instead of tasks to be accomplished as we do global mission work. Remember, the practice of servanthood will vary in each culture. If our aim is to create relationships, then we will have to make learning about the people and cultures where we do mission work a priority, not something that may or may not happen. Finally, Jesus was willing to make great sacrifices for others even to the point of death. Most of us will not be asked to give our lives for others as we do global mission work. But, Jesus shows us that sacrifice is required at some level whether it is the sacrifice of leaving our country and culture of birth and traveling to foreign lands, partnering with people in foreign lands to help them build wells, or working to change policies that harm people around the world. Mission work is work. Not top down, lord it over, help those sad people, but cross-cultural, servant-driven work.

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Our ancestors faced daunting odds and associated social and political oppression. Knowing of “De Gospel Train” offered hope that they too could be seen by God as worthy passengers. This song reflects God’s capacity to bless all people, without showing partiality. The song “Psalms 117” and its emphasis on all people praising and in turn receiving enduring kindness from the Lord makes clear what should be the intent and goal of mission work. Finally, “God of All Nations” brings into focus that the work of world missions is to bring all peoples together in dignity at one altar in reverence to the God of all nations.

De Gospel Train (Get on Board, Little Children)

Get on board, little children
 Get on board, little children
 Get on board, little children
 There's room for many-a-more.

I hear the train a comin' I hear her close at hand
 I hear those car wheels rumblin' and rollin' through the land.
 Get on board, little children
 Get on board, little children
 Get on board, little children
 There's room for many-a-more.

The fare is cheap and all can go.
 The rich and poor are there
 No second class upon this train
 No difference in the fare.⁴

Psalms 117

O praise the LORD,
 All ye nations:

Praise him, all ye people.
 For his merciful kindness is great toward us:
 And the truth of the LORD *endureth* for ever.
 Praise ye the LORD.⁵

God of All Nations

God of all nations
 Lord of creation
 It's in the bonds of love we meet
 We come together at your feet

Equal in your sight
 Made one by your might
 You've called us to restore your lands
 And place them back within your hands

So tonight
 Be glorified
 Be magnified
 As every nation lifts you high
 Oh, Father, tonight
 It's our desire
 To see your kingdom shine
 On earth as in heaven tonight

God of all nations
 Lord of creation
 Your purpose is our hope, our bread
 All you've planned and all you've said

Lord of the heavens
 Lord of the ages
 The church you build shall never fail
 No gate or border will prevail

So tonight
 Be glorified
 Be magnified
 As every nation lifts you high
 Oh, Father, tonight
 It's our desire
 To see your kingdom shine
 On earth as in heaven tonight

Tonight
 Be glorified

Lifted up high
 It's our desire
 So tonight
 Be glorified
 Lifted up high
 It's our desire
 Oh, Father, tonight
 It's our desire
 You're magnified
 Lifted up high

So tonight
 Be glorified
 Be magnified
 As every nation lifts you high
 Oh, Father, tonight
 It's our desire
 To see your kingdom shine
 On earth as in heaven tonight

All be glorified.⁶

V. Prose and Poetic Reflections on World Missions

The Regeneration of Africa – Alexander Crummell

For the evangelization of any country, the main instrumentality to be set to work is that of men of like sentiments, feelings, blood and ancestry, with the people whose evangelization is desired. The faith, so to speak, must become incorporated with people's mental, moral, and even physical constitution.⁷

Evangelism as Community Building – Michael Joseph Brown

Suppose evangelism was understood as community building, rather than just “saving souls?” Delores Williams tells us that the goal of this community building is, of course, to establish a positive quality of life—economic, spiritual, and educational—for black women, men, and children. Imagine.⁸

A Prayer – Robert C. Lawson

O God, who has made man in thine own likeness, and who doth love all whom Thou has made, suffer us not because of difference of race, color, or condition to separate ourselves from others and thereby from Thee; but teach us the unity of Thy family and universality of Thy Love. As Thou Saviour, as a Son, was born of a Hebrew mother, who had the blood of many nations in her veins; and ministered first to Thy brethren of the Israelites, but rejoiced in the faith of a Syro-Phoenician woman and of a Roman soldier, and suffered your cross to be carried by an Ethiopian; teach us, also, while loving and serving our own, to enter into the communion of the whole family; and forbid that from pride of birth,

*color, achievement and hardness of heart, we should despise any for whom Christ died, or injure or grieve any in whom He lives. We pray in Jesus' precious name. AMEN.*⁹

Christianity Confronts Culture – Marvin K. Mayers

The gospel of Jesus Christ is tied to no one culture and allows the individual to transcend his own culture.¹⁰

Notes

1. Pearson, Elizabeth Ware, Ed. Letters from Port Royal, 1862–1868. New York, NY: Arno Press, 1969. p. 6.
2. Smith, Theophus H. Conjuring Culture: The Biblical Formations of Black America. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994. p. 188.
3. James E. Pludderman, Professor of Intercultural studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, made this statement in commenting on the book Cross-cultural Servanthood.
4. “De Gospel Train.” African American Spiritual
5. “Psalm 117” By Gary Oliver
6. “God of All Nations.” By Newsboys
7. Crummell, Alexander. “The Regeneration of Africa.” African American Religious History: a Documentary Witness. Milton C. Sernett, Ed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999. p. 283.
8. Brown, Michael Joseph. “Matthew.” True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary. Brian K. Blount, Ed. et al. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 117.
9. Lawson, Robert C. “Prayer of Freedom from Race Prejudice.” Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans. James Melvin Washington, Ed. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994. p. 143.
10. Mayers, Marvin K. Christianity Confronts Culture: A Strategy For Cross-Cultural Evangelism. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1987. p. xiii.