# Evangelical Missions and the Decentering of Conviction

*A major crises faces Western missions today. It is the decentering of conviction as the result of theological slippage, philosophical reorientation and contextual osmosis. Theology is important since the nature of one's beliefs affects the nature of conviction on all levels. The issues addressed here comprise "worldview stuff"—the least articulated reality that has shaped Christian mission in the past and will continue to do so in the future.*

by Irving A. Whitt

The central idea of this article came out of a recent MUD (Missions Under Discussion) forum where the issues of truth and absolutes were addressed. The debate centered around epistemological issues relating to missions and the Western pluralist context. When discussing Hiebert's view on critical realism and the apostle Paul's admission of "seeing through a glass darkly," (1 Corinthians 13:12) one of the participants asked, "How much uncertainty can you live with?" The statement tweaked my interest and sparked this question, "How much uncertainty (or agnosticism, if you will) can one live with but still hold 'conviction about' or 'motivation for' anything?"

Sociologists talk about dissonance, not the harmonic dissonance of sights or sound, but the inner discord caused by conflicting values or beliefs. Where practice and beliefs diverge, dissonance results and people live with inner tension. This was explained by Gerlach and Hine who wrote a very insightful essay on the reasons for the growth of movements.[1] They compared the Pentecostal movement with the Black Panthers, a rather interesting comparison indeed. One of the five reasons they discovered for the growth of a movement was the degree of certainty with which the adherents held their beliefs. The fact of belief was incidental to the strength of belief. Pentecostals held

their beliefs with a degree of certainty and so closed the ideal-real gap. What they claimed to believe they practiced.[2] Furthermore, Gerlach and Hine suggested, Pentecostals were convincing because they were convinced.

Over the past two centuries missions has been a major activity of evangelicals. There are both historical and theological explanations. Motivational issues are more difficult to discern. Motives arise out of a matrix of beliefs, contexts and worldviews. In this article I want to explore each of the three as they relate to missions motivation. I would suggest that in all three areas there is a decentering of conviction described by some as nothing short of a crisis.

## The Generational Challenge

It's no secret that each generation faces a "crisis of missions." Someone has noted that any movement is only a generation away from its own demise if proponents are not able to transfer their vision. This was expressed by Dana Robert in "The Crisis of Missions."[3] He explored reasons for the continuation of the evangelical missions force at the turn of the past century and concluded that "premillennial mission theory led to the development of separate evangelical missions because it argued that world evangeliza-

tion was immediately urgent." Out of the crisis a particular vision was cast and the movement revived.

Writing in 1938 Hendrik Kraemer stated, "Strictly speaking, one ought to say that the church is always in a state of crisis and that its greatest shortcoming is that it is only occasionally aware of it."[4] Bosch notes, "That there were so many centuries of crisis-free existence for the church was therefore an abnormality. Now, at long last, we are "back to normal" . . . and we know it!"[5] What is new about the present era is that Christian mission is attacked from without and within. Eminent church leader Max Warren reflected on what he considered the profound malaise in some missionary circles that was leading to "a terrible failure of nerve about the missionary enterprise."[6] For some, this seems like very strange language. For many it appears as business as usual. Bosch notes, "To even suggest that there is a fundamental crisis in mission would be tantamount to making concessions to 'liberal' theology and to doubting the abiding validity of the faith once handed down to us."[7]

Newbigin couches his concerns in terms of the "validity of the cross-cultural mission." While acknowledging the possibility of arrogance and tendency toward triumphalism in generations of missionaries gone by, Newbigin suggests that "If

there is a danger of arrogance in the call for the evangelization of the world in that generation, there is a greater danger of timidity and compromise when we lower our sights and allow the gospel to be domesticated within our culture, and the churches to become merely the domestic chaplains to the nation." Furthermore he warns, ". . . there are many voices in our culture that question the universality and validity of that call. The contemporary embarrassment about the missionary movement of the previous century is not, as we like to think, evidence that we have become more humble. It is, I fear, much more clearly evidence of a shift in belief. It is evidence that we are less ready to affirm the uniqueness, the centrality, the decisiveness of Jesus Christ as universal Lord and Savior."[8]

Both Newbigin and Bosch write in the context of the World Council of Churches and have been identified as ecumenical evangelicals. They write about conciliar churches, churches that have diminished their mission efforts. This is evidenced by the reduction of mission finances and declining mission recruits.

Their observations and warnings should not go unheeded in evangelical circles. Bosch's admonition could not be put forward any more clearly, "Our spiritual forebearers may perhaps be pardoned for not having been aware of the fact that they were facing a crisis. Present generations, however, can hardly be excused for their lack of awareness."[9]

We want to examine the issues affecting Christian mission within and without. Some of the issues which confront the evangelical movement within are theological and biblical. We examine these in Section I. Contextual forces are also critical. The Western post-modern context coupled with the kaleidoscope of ferment at this momentous time in history will have far reaching ramifications for the future of Western missions. We will briefly explore these contextual issues that result in the decentering of conviction and the future of Christian mission.

## Holistic Missions: A Biblical Focus

Missiological literature reflects a new focus. It is called 'holism.' This position was proposed by John Stott at Lausanne in 1974 and, as suggested in my previous article, is the thrust of evangelical missions today.[10] Holistic missions needs to be contrasted with what I call 'reductionistic' models. By reductionistic I am referring to single purpose motives that have been articulated by evangelicals at various times and places. Evangelism, church planting, church growth, obedience and social concerns, to name a few, when taken singly to represent the whole are reductionistic. What is called 'holistic' today refers basically to a blending of the evangelistic proclamational focus and social, relief and development ministries. It involves concerns for the whole person, the body as well as the soul.

## Motives Appraised

Today evangelicals reject reductionistic models.[11] We will briefly highlight the place of such models articulated by evangelicals in the past. At the turn of the century Gustav Warneck distinguished between the 'supernatural' and the 'natural' dimensions of mission.[12] He suggested that the supernatural dimensions were represented by: 1) the basis of missions founded on Scripture, especially the Great Commission (Matthew 18:18-20), and 2) the monotheistic nature of the Christian faith. If there is only one God, supreme over all, then everyone needs to hear about him and have opportunity to respond. Subsequently, the natural foundations were 1) the absoluteness and superiority of the Christian religion when compared with others; 2) the acceptability and adaptability of Christianity to all peoples and conditions; 3) the superior achievements of the Christian mission on the "mission fields"; and 4) the fact that Christianity has in past and present shown itself to be stronger than all other religions.[13] While the issues of superiority, ethnocentrism and civilization may sur-

prise us, as we reflect on mission literature of the past 100 years, this evaluation is not entirely invalid.

Bosch has collated the findings of missionary motivation from a number of sources. He classifies his findings into two categories, those referred to as 'impure motives' and those 'more adequate though often ambitious.' Those identified as impure are "1) the imperialist motive (turning "natives" into docile subjects of colonial authorities); 2) the cultural motive (mission as the transfer of the missionary's "superior" culture); 3) the romantic motive (the desire to go to far-away and exotic countries and peoples); and 4) the motive of ecclesiastical colonialism (the urge to export one's one confession and church."[14]

The other category of theologically adequate reasons are: "1) the motive of conversion, which emphasizes the value of personal decision and commitment - but tends to narrow the reign of God spiritualistically and individualistically to the sum total of saved souls; 2) the eschatological motive, which fixes people's eyes on the reign of God as a future reality but, in its eagerness to hasten the irruption of that final reign, has no interest in the exigencies of this life; 3) the motive of plantatio ecclesiae (church planting) which stresses the need for the gathering of a community of the committed but is inclined to identify the church with the kingdom of God; and 4) the philanthropic motive, through which the church is challenged to seek justice in the world but which easily equates God's reign with an improved society."[15]

Bosch has not only abbreviated the literature but has offered a pointed assessment. While he identifies these as adequate motives he suggests they are overly ambitious. He has summed up the motives central to evangelical missions fairly well.

Herbert Kane has reduced a complex array of evangelical activities to four methodological imperatives of missions. He suggests the four imperatives are

evangelistic missions, medical missions, educational missions and humanitarian service. Notice here his first imperative focuses on eternal realities, the last three, service to human kind.

## Reductionistic Foci

Five motives seem to stand out in evangelical missions throughout the centuries. They are the need for evangelization, an eschatological focus, obedience to a command, desire to glorify God, and the need for social involvement. Each presupposes biblical realities. Mankind without the Gospel is lost. Christ is going to return for His millennial reign, and his parousia is imminent. Obedience to the Great Commission and surrender of one's life went hand in hand. The desire to bring glory to God was also prevalent.

Evangelicals have been accused of focusing on saving souls without concern for the individual. History records, however, that social concern was normally a high priority although evangelism was considered primary. Motives were generally derived out of some biblical imperative but focused on a perceived immanent existential reality. While putting a very positive evaluation on what evangelicals have done, we do acknowledge less than perfect motives at times.

The first two decades of this century evangelicals remained unified in their motives for missions. Nineteenth century motivation seemed to concern "the promotion of the glory of God, love for Christ through obedience to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19,20), and an ardent desire to pluck brands from the burning."[16]

The Presbyterian Statement of 1920 represents one of the clearest goals of evangelical missions, stating, ". . . the supreme and controlling aim of foreign missions is to make Jesus Christ known to all men as their divine Savior and Lord and to persuade them to become His disciples—and to gather converts into self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating churches."[17] Church planting

was an urgent priority in missions, a working assumption of many in the missionary enterprise.

Harold Lindsell taught missions at Fuller Theological Seminary in the mid 1950s at which time he published A Christian Philosophy of Mission.[18] He represented somewhat the evangelical position, at the mid part of the century. Lindsell placed the context of mission within a crisis, a crisis precipitated by

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three stormy forces, secularism, modernism, and communism.[19] Mission could only be substantiated by an inerrant Bible and the message of salvation through the substitutionary atonement of Christ. The doctrine of hell required compassion and urgency. "Doing good, individually or socially, was clearly the secondary element which is the fruit that comes forth from conversion."[20]

Millennial expectations figured significantly in the development of the missions movement for most of the "great century." Hopes were decidedly post-millennial, expecting the emergence of the kingdom of God through the spread of the Gospel and establishing social institutions to facilitate the coming reign of Christ. During the last two decades, a shift began to occur and pre-millennial teaching gained widespread popularity. This teaching held a pessimistic view of the human condition and the pervasiveness of sin. It anticipated and preached the

imminent return of Christ, which would precede a thousand years of divine reign on earth. Robert has suggested that "pre-millennial impatience fostered a single-issue mentality and a quick-result pragmatism."[21]

Millennial theologizing promoted a variety of responses at that time. "Prominent mission leaders such as A.T. Pierson, A.J. Gordon, A.B. Simpson and others felt that they were living during a 'crisis of missions': the Holy Spirit in the late nineteenth century was opening the world to Christianity in preparation for the second coming of Jesus Christ."[22] This was popularized by Pierson in his book, The Crisis of Missions: Or, The Voice out of the Cloud.[23] It indicated both "unprecedented opposition" and "unprecedented opportunity." The eschatological view that prompted and motivated many evangelicals was pre-millennial and dispensational.

Along with the desire to share Christ's love, the goal of obedience to Christ's command, and the desire to make one's life count in ultimate service, was the element of "personal consecration" propounded by those in the "higher life" movement.[24] This consecration and/or sanctification prepared one for service with no regard for personal comfort or individual concern.

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) has been viewed as the commanding order for decades. Obedience to the mandate has been a consistent theme. Harry Boer aptly illustrates this in *Pentecost and Missions*.[25] While making an historical observation, he acknowledges that such obedience falls short of the early church's motives—to move out in mission in obedience to the leading of the Spirit along with the political dispersion at the time.

Spiritual awakenings among Protestant churches in the late 18th century fueled mission efforts in succeeding centuries. Latourette has attributed this growth in Protestant missions work to evangelicalism, a movement resulting from Pietism, Moravianism, the Great

Awakenings, and the Wesleyan Revival in England.

This movement continued through the Prayer Revival in mid-19th century America and the Wesleyan Holiness Revival at the end of the 19th century. Noted revivalist D.L. Moody and church statesmen A.T. Pierson, A.J. Gordon, R.A. Torrey and A.B. Simpson contributed to the fervor of the growing missions movement. Revivalism acknowledging the work of the Spirit, sensing the need for empowering and tangible results, breathed new life into the mission vision. Lovelace noted the distinctive streams within evangelicalism, identifying a stream of unitive evangelicalism which he divided into two parts, one designated "renewal, nurture, evangelism, missions" and the second "ecumenism, social reform."[26]

Social concerns or social responsibility has not always taken priority but as was expressed by Lindsell, were seen as secondary goals of missions. In any case Kane aptly pointed out that the building of hospitals, educational facilities, and relief and development have always been hallmarks of evangelical missions, albeit as a fruit of mission efforts. Although Timothy Smith writes about "the great reversal" after the liberalizing effect of the social gospel,[27] Edwin Orr points out the vast social accomplishments of evangelical missions.[28]

## Motives in a Holistic Model

Several things need to be noted. Evangelical missions always claimed the Bible as their authoritative raison d'être. Within the confines of that story appeal was made to faithfulness to God, the purpose of incarnation, the lostness of man and the consequences of sin. While the purpose of the glory of God was not always articulated, secondary motives that exhibited focus and purpose captivated the imagination and channeled the energies. Eternal realities superseded temporal contingencies. The questions are these. Where is the evangelical theological focus for missions today? Can "holism" main-

tain its otherworldly, eschatological vision challenge the Christian, captivate the life and fuel the mission mandate? These biblical/theological issues that impinge on motivation must be considered. The considerations that follow are of a philosophical nature.

## A Philosophical Focus[29]

Hiebert asks, "If all knowledge has a subjective dimension to it where is truth? What foundations can we trust? Where are absolutes? The answers we give will depend largely on the epistemological stance we take in theology."[30]

I teach a course on the contextualization of theology and subscribe to a view that all theology is contextualized. While aware of the conciliar roots of contextualization,[31] I also recognize the enormity of the shift from "theology" to "theologies" implied in the contextualization debate. Once we start talking about the contextualization of theology (implying that the shape of theology will look different in different cultures) or that theology is historically and/or culturally conditioned, we have made a major epistemological shift. We concede that the way we theologize or the way we obtain knowledge has been nuanced. We acknowledge there are cultural and worldview issues that influence our interpretation of Scripture. No one has the whole truth. Hiebert suggests there is theology with a big "T," but we are all stuck with theology with a small "t" because of cultural and human limitations. There is something at the worldview level unconsciously implied that affects future theological outcomes. This is an epistemological issue.

The issues of pluralism and relativism must be addressed. At their root is an epistemological assumption that there is no coherent rationality, that absolutes are an absurdity, and effective communication is only marginal at best. This postmodern mind-set affects both science and theology. Science has usurped religion as the arbitrator of truth. Religion therefore

deals only with values, with the subjective and private. Here it is claimed relativism reigns. In the area of science, Western culture does not claim to be pluralistic. Hiebert notes that ". . . 'scientists, with a few exceptions, assumed that scientific theories were accurate descriptions of the world as it is in itself.' Scientific knowledge was seen as a photograph of reality, a complete and accurate picture of what was really real."[32]

Newbigin shows the error in the religious/scientific split and the fallacy of scientific certainty.[33] The old assumption, that scientific theories have a one-to-one correspondence with reality has been shattered. Scientists are beginning to acknowledge personal biases, the impossibility of total objectivity, and the need of metaphysical understanding. "Whatever it is," Hiebert notes, "science is not a photograph of reality."[34] This absolutistic thinking is a product of modernity - a system of rationalization and knowledge developed during the enlightenment. It smacks of idealism and naïve realism.

Naïve idealism/realism asserts that the external world is real and "the mind can know it exactly, exhaustively and without bias." This view holds that science is a photograph of reality... "Because knowledge is exact and potentially exhaustive, there can be only one unified theory. Various theories must be reduced to one."[35] The umpire, noted Hiebert, calls it the way it is. There is no distinction between his view and the reality. This has been the view of theologians for centuries as well as missionaries. In this regard theology was viewed as absolute and all religious knowledge had to be reduced to a single theological system. Such a system produced certainty in establishing laws and truth claims.

Hiebert notes, "Naïve realist approaches are becoming untenable in missions, not only because they are no longer intellectually credible, but also because they fail to resolve the problem of

theological pluralism that resulted from missions."[36] Two forces have raised questions about this approach. They are the use of the behavioral sciences, particularly cultural anthropology, and secondly the impact of the culture on theological development, generally referred to as contextualization.

## Shifts in Philosophy and Missiology

Some definitions are crucial here. Hiebert identifies six positions, which can be reduced to four: idealism, realism, pragmatism (instrumentalism) and determinism. Absolute and critical idealism disavows reality or uniformity in the external world and suggests that reality is what exists in the mind. Order is imposed by our sense experiences. Instrumentalism or pragmatism acknowledges the reality of the external world, but claims one cannot make propositional or truth claims, only establish models, or paradigms that have some degree of truth because they work (obviously a view held by many in Western culture today). Determinism acknowledges the external world, but suggests one is totally controlled by it and thus cannot stand outside of it in any way to determine truth claims or any form of metaphysical knowledge. We need not explore the implications of these four views any further. The issues of naïve idealism/realism and critical realism are the ones which have direct bearing on current shifts in science and also theology. We have already introduced the concept of naïve realism and will deal a little more fully with the position of critical realism.

Hiebert's assertions are noted at this point. "Clearly, in a post-modern world we need to reexamine our epistemological foundations to see how they affect our relationships to other people, cultures, theologies, and religions in a pluralistic world. I am convinced that critical realism is a biblical approach to knowledge (1 Cor. 13:12). I am also convinced it is the approach we must take in a post-colonial

era in missions. We must deal with cultural, religious and theological truth, but without arrogance and paternalism."[37]

Critical realism acknowledges the reality of the external world but insists that the knowledge is partial but can be

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true. Science is a map (not a photograph) or a model, made up of successive paradigms that bring us closer to approximations of reality.[38] Hiebert compares these maps to blueprints of a house—no one blueprint describes the complete reality, but put together they portray a fairly accurate picture.

Critical realists are not perceptivists or propositionalists. They fall somewhere between the extremes of strict absolutism and relativism. Critical realist evangelicals must affirm the uniqueness of Christianity and fidelity to biblical revelation. Religious relativism is rejected and truth and absolutes are acknowledged. Conversion is still the message of the Church and the need of the lost. However, "Conversion itself is not a change in propositional or factual knowledge. It is a change in the overall configuration or gestalt in which these are seen; it is a change of allegiance in which Christ is accepted as Lord and the center of one's life."[39]

Critical realist theology as with critical realist science acknowledges partial understanding. Yet we still speak of truth in an absolute sense, and understand the broad strokes of God's revelation—creation, fall and redemption. Scripture does reveal the nature of God, unpacks His plan for creation and leads to faith and discipleship. Hiebert declares, "Critical realists hold to objective truth, but recognize that [it] is understood by humans in their contexts. There is, therefore, an element of faith, a personal commitment in the knowledge of truth... Mission to non-Christians, then, begins in witness - declaring what God has done in the Christian's life through Jesus Christ. It begins with 'I believe...' and shares with others a good news personally experienced (Acts 26:16; 2 Tim 1:12)."[40]

## Missiological Implications

We must now look at the implications of epistemological understanding for Christian missions. Recognizing that missions focuses on the dimension of the cross-cultural communication of the Gospel, cultural pluralism affects the way we communicate. Hiebert suggests, by no way denigrating the monumental work of earlier missionaries, that they were by and large naïve realists and idealists. The problem was that they did not distinguish between their own cultural conditioning and their presentation of the Gospel, with the result that many times what was presented as the Gospel was an extension of Western culture, affected by nineteenth-century ideas of progress. Such an approach failed to recognize any good in local cultures and less likely local religions. Christianity was presented not only as an answer to local dysfunction and cultural weaknesses but as a complete theological system, a package that was a coherent whole, with little attention to local culture or history. Hiebert notes, "Deviation from the missionary's theology was often branded as heresy. To young, nationalistically minded leaders

this was theological colonialism.[41] Young nationals have gone on to contextualize the Gospel. It is a continuing reality of the missionary enterprise.

Missiological literature can fill many books with hermeneutical insights, critical development and new contextualized theologies. Contextualization assumes a critical realist view of reality, a view widely accepted by evangelicals today. I would suggest that biblical critical realism, while acknowledging truth and absolutes, espouses a more tentative philosophical perspective. The question before us is this, "How much will this approach impact the future motivation for missions?" How much conviction can contingency handle?

Theological and philosophical issues are buttressed by the unique context in which they are found. The Western context out of which we write gives us further pause for reflection.

Christians believe in the power of the Gospel to change lives. Conviction is challenged and nuanced through life's experiences. Confidence in one's own abilities, knowledge and skills soon get sifted in the exigencies of life. Experience shapes one's resilience and existential realities modulate one's convictions and temper commitment and motivation. I would offer five contextual factors that affect missions here in the west. They are: 1) civility - the reigning plausibility structure, 2) pluralism, 3) multi-culturalism, 4) domestication, and 5) anti-colonialism.

## Civility

The great century of Protestant missions coincided with the ascension of British colonialism which witnessed the worldwide explosion of European commerce and culture. Christian missions profited from this expansion and were among the main carriers of Enlightenment ideology. At the mid point of this century imperialism had run its course and the Enlightenment project began to flounder.[42] The inevitable result according to

Newbigin is that "the collapse of confidence in the great project of the Enlightenment should carry with it a collapse of confidence in the validity of the church's worldwide missionary enterprise."[43] With great insight he dissects the religious implications of such cultural shifts.

The erosion of confidence in the Gospel is part of a critical tide rippling through Western culture. Multiculturalism, civility and tolerance seep into the collective mentality, the essence of which the church is not immune. Newbigin warns, "It is not easy to resist the contemporary tide of thinking and feeling which seems to sweep us irresistibly in the direction of an acceptance of religious pluralism, and away from any confident affirmation of the absolute sovereignty of Jesus Christ. It is not easy to challenge the reigning plausibility structure."[44] Sociologist Peter Berger referred to the social conditioning of belief as "plausibility structures"—in essence the patterns of belief and practice accepted by the society at large. The Christian Gospel enunciates a particular view of history and a particular plausibility structure, which these days is becoming less and less congruent with prevailing norms and social sensibilities. Recent years has witnessed mega shifts in Western culture shaping a new post-Constantinian, post-Enlightenment, post-Christendom context.

Newbigin speaks most negatively of the possible receptivity of the modern context to the Gospel and the ability of the Gospel to penetrate its frontiers. He refers to the "acids of modernity," the retreat of the Church in the West and asks, "Can there be a more challenging frontier for the Church than this?"[45]

## Pluralism

Many sociologists describe Western culture as pluralistic. This simply refers to a society's orientation toward the accommodation of many ideologies, whether they be religious, cultural, civil, political or social. Democracy epitomizes the idea of pluralism, vise a vis totalitarian, des-

potic or fascists regimes that squelch freedom, deny human rights and exude intolerance. In recent years the full blown implications of organizing a political pluralist society have been displayed in arguments around assimilation and/or multiculturalism.

We need to distinguish between the fact of plurality and the ideology of pluralism. The ideology of pluralism presupposes its own plausibility structure, where civility and tolerance reigns and values are personalized (thus privatized) and truth claims are relativized. Christians should not have a problem with cultural pluralism.[46] The problem however is that religious pluralism[47] becomes co-opted in the context of cultural pluralism. Such ideology does not leave room for Christian exclusivism, truth claims or judgments of right or wrong. It billows a smothering smoke filling the air for Christians or other exclusive religionists causing them to reevaluate their convictions or face the possibility of ridicule for adhering to their beliefs.

Such "intolerant" tolerance, however, denies the nature of religion. Truth, by its self-definition, is not just personal. It presupposes a transcendent standard. It is not an optional luxury. It implies a universal message. Newbigin expresses this most succinctly. He says. "When I say 'I believe,' I am not merely describing an inward feeling or experience: I am affirming what I believe to be true, and therefore what is true for everyone. The test of my commitment to this belief will be that I am ready to publish it, to share it with others, and to invite their judgments and if necessary—correction. If I refrain from this exercise, if I try to keep my belief as a private matter, it is not belief in the truth."[48]

The point is this. A pluralist society cannot tolerate exclusivist positions or exclusivist beliefs. Christians have to decide between God and mammon. Unfortunately Christians have been protected by mammon so long they have difficulty being rejected by the culture and difficulty in distinguishing between Chris-

tian absolutes and worldly values.

## Multi-culturalism

Multi-culturalism is one of the corner stones of pluralism which celebrates cultural diversity. While multi-culturalism is the official policy of Canada, one writer refers to it as "Mosaic Madness,"[49] a proliferation of autonomous cultural societies, each vying for a share of goods, services and ownership with no overarching system of values. Newbigin notes, "When this ideology takes over, value judgments claiming to discriminate between different cultural traditions in terms of their intrinsic worth are ruled out of order. Cultural diversity is an unqualified good; judgments of good or bad with respect to different cultures are condemned as cultural imperialism.[50]

Multi-culturalism espouses a multi-faith ideology. Multi-faith does not just imply the co-existence of many faiths but rather idealization of the mutual edification of each. No one faith can be viewed as superior or right. The multi-cultural principle supersedes the right to exclusivist religious belief. Culture judges religion and leaves the critical faculties in abeyance relative to matters of faith. When cultures and faiths multiply, conversion and conviction are thwarted.

Newbigin's own story illustrates this situation most powerfully. He writes:

> *When I was a young missionary I used to spend one evening each week in the monastery of the Ramakrishna Mission in the town where I lived, sitting on the floor with the monks and studying with them the Upanishads and the Gospels. In the great hall of the monastery, as in all the premises of the Ramakrishna Mission, there is a gallery of portraits of the great religious teachers of humankind. Among them, of course, is a portrait of Jesus. Each year on Christmas Day worship was offered before this picture. Jesus was honored, worshipped, as one of the many manifestations of deity in the course of human history. To me, as a foreign missionary, it was obvious that this was not a step toward the conver-*

> *sion of India. It was the co-option of Jesus into the Hindu worldview. Jesus had become just one figure in the endless cycle of karma and sumsara, the wheel of being in which we are all caught up. He had been domesticated into the Hindu worldview. That view remained unchallenged. It was only slowly, through many experiences, that I began to see that something of this domestication had taken place in my own Christianity, that I too had been more ready to seek a "reasonable Christianity," a Christianity that could be defended on the terms of my whole intellectual formation as a twentieth-century Englishman, rather than something which placed my whole intellectual formation under a new and critical light. I, too, had been guilty of domesticating the gospel.[51]*

Newbigin illustrates the danger of co-opting the Gospel into one's own cultural schema. This was the problem with the Pharisees. It was the problem with the Jews. The problem is equating one's own formulation of the Gospel as being the only correct perception. There is the danger of making the Gospel solely a 'white' gospel, an 'Indian' gospel or an 'African' or 'black' gospel. The Gospel is bigger than any cultural container. When we equate the Gospel with culture we have domesticated its power, reduced its claims and made it suspect.

A national gospel is a domesticated Gospel. As such it has the right to be rejected by another, for to be Christian is to be ? (you put in the nationality). A Thai Christian brother illustrated this situation pointedly when he stated to me that to be Thai meant to be Buddhist. The Thai have co-opted a religion to make it exclusively their own. They have domesticated Buddhism. For a Thai to become a Christian then means not only to change religious allegiance but also to betray one's nationality. The domestication of faith means the localization of religion. A domesticated religion is not a missionary religion. A domesticated Christianity is not a missionary Christianity. Newbigin again has a cautious word here. He states, "Every church is tempted to do this to its own culture, tempted to become the domestic

chaplain to the nation instead of being the troublesome, prophetic missionary voice of the nation—challenging all syncretistic entanglements."[52]

The Gospel is transcultural (Galatians 3). We have not yet fully understood its transcultural dimensions. Domestication mitigates against the missionary dimension of the Gospel. The Scripture is very clear that the Gospel is universal. When we domesticate it, make it exclusively our own, we have betrayed its trust.

## Anti-colonialism

The colonial era is well known. It is also known that colonialism facilitated missions, whether Catholic missions in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, or Protestant missions during the nineteenth to twentieth. Granted, imperial powers were not always the friend of missions, but they did orchestrate global forces that paved the way for Christian missions.

With the decline of colonialism and the proliferation of independent nations at the mid part of this century, nationalism exposed imperialism and colonialism as power-hungry, globalizing structures that today are deemed unacceptable. Freedom, autonomy and self-determination have shaken off the shackles of imperialism.

We live in an anti-colonial era where not only do new nations decry injustices of the past, but European and Western societies themselves fiercely expose their own ethnocentrism and superior tendencies. To think in colonial or imperial terms anymore is wrong. To use universal or triumphalistic language is wrong. To idealize the past is unacceptable. Anti-colonial rhetoric crescendos around us.

It is in this atmosphere that we still have to talk about a universal Gospel—an exclusive message for the whole world. The anti-colonial ferment has not done missions a favor. Granted, missions did buy into the colonial mind-set, used triumphalistic language, at times opted to "civilize in order to Christianize." Colonial slogans of forays for "God, gold and glory" did not help the missionary cause.

Christian mission idealized the culture of their origins and at times failed to separate the Gospel and culture. After all, was it not the Gospel that made their culture superior?

Hiebert suggests, "The anticolonial reaction was a necessary corrective. It called into question Western cultural arrogance, and it forced Western Christians to differentiate between the gospel and their culture."[53] The problem however is that anti-colonialism can lead to theological relativism. Paul Knitter wrote that in the "contemporary world, in which we are aware of the presence of others and the absence of absolutes, Christian theology, to be truly Christian, can no longer be only Christian. This leads us to deny the uniqueness of Christ and his salvation, and destroys the foundations of Christianity itself."[54]
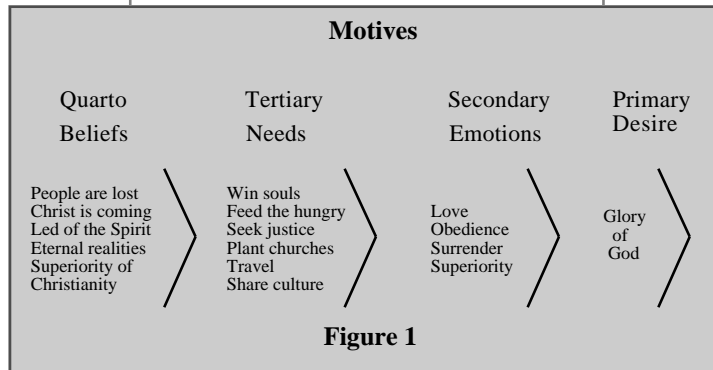
When Western cultural superiority is questioned, the superiority of Christianity is also questioned. Christians are called to readjust their thinking. The Gospel, however, has universal intent albeit the need exists to shed superior ethnocentric categories. Confidence once again has to be restored in the Gospel. Newbigin recognizes the challenge. He states, "Finally, I want to argue the need for a certain boldness that was evidently a characteristic mark of the first apostles... What I am pleading for is the courage to hold and proclaim a belief that cannot be proved to be true in terms of the accepted axioms of our society, that can be doubted by rational minds, but that we nevertheless hold as the truth."[55]

Such boldness flies in the face of cultural correctness. It has caused the Church to evaluate its approach and adjust its relationship to the world. But has it caused the Church to also doubt its message and reconsider its mission? Has society impacted the Church more than the Church the society? If so, how do we address the "failure of nerve" and in hum-

ble obedience regain a global eschatological vision?

Mead's assessment is not entirely encouraging. He says, "We face a significant problem: Our need for a clear con-



**Motives**

| Quarto Beliefs | Tertiary Needs | Secondary Emotions | Primary Desire |
|---|---|---|---|
| People are lost Christ is coming Led of the Spirit Eternal realities Superiority of Christianity | Win souls Feed the hungry Seek justice Plant churches Travel Share culture | Love Obedience Surrender Superiority | Glory of God |

**Figure 1**

sensus on mission from which we can construct the forms of a new Church is no guarantee that we can find it. There is no certainty that we shall be led to a sense of mission as compelling as the one that drove previous generations."[56] Mead suggests that the Church has gone through two significant paradigms, the Apostolic Paradigm and the Christendom Paradigm. Presently the Church is in the Time between Paradigms where the issues of the apostolic context do not apply and the Christendom Paradigm has also vanished. In light of this, what are the principles to guide us in mission?

## MISSION MOTIVES IN A POST-CHRISTIAN ERA

The purpose of this article was to expose the nature of a major crises facing Western missions. While the decentering of conviction has been explained as the result of theological slippage, philosophical reorientation and contextual osmosis, it is recognized that these forces do not act in isolation. Each impacts or influences the other.

It is my fear that evangelicals will view the crisis as part of the ecumenical problem only. Theological slippage in the ecumenical circles has affected mission outcomes there. McGavran warned of this more than twenty-five years ago in *Eye of*

*the Storm.*[57] Are we beginning to witness theological slippage in the evangelical camp today? Theology is important because the nature of one's beliefs affects the nature of conviction. In that regard, we must not confuse the means and the ends. I agree with Newbigin that the chief end of man is to glorify God. However mission is never an end—missions is only a means. It is a means to generate action that will result in the extension of God's Kingdom and ultimately His glory. McQuilkin sums this up best. He writes:

*"Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever," the Westminster Shorter Catechism assures us. As a summary of a human being's proper view of reality, this statement is illuminating and authentic. But how does man fulfill this chief end? Surely by adoring and worshipping his Creator; certainly by obedience, as one is recreated by the Spirit after the moral pattern of God Himself; indeed through the building up of God's church. But the human event that brings greatest glory to God and satisfaction to His heart occurs when a prodigal returns home, when one immigrates out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear son. Human redemption is the focal point of God's purpose in this world.*[58]

The appeal therefore is that we not confuse the issue of means and ends. While the goal represents the ends, motivation generally is engaged at the level of means. Obviously, the issues of motivation and conviction are not easily discerned. A case can be made that the factors impinging on motivation can be categorized from quarto to primary issues. Figure 1 above suggests that the primary goal of mission is the glory of God. Secondary and tertiary motives or reasons (listed in the diagram) for engaging in mission, are not claimed to be exhaustive but the order is intentional.

The ultimate aim of mission is the glory of God. While most Christians

would agree with this the motives that send them out into witness and missions fall somewhere between the quarto and secondary categories. The issues addressed in this article, however, stand outside this model. I would suggest that such issues have ramifications for all levels. They comprise the "worldview stuff," the least articulated realities that have shaped Christian mission in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

Particular formulations of the doctrine of God and of His revelation affect one's approach to mission. Furthermore, one's view of knowledge is critical to worldview assumptions. Last but not least, the biblical story must not remain a detached objective fact for the Christian. It is the story of which he/she is a part and indwelling the story requires faithfulness to the Author.

These issues have implications for mission as well as ramifications for congregational life. Maybe Mead expressed this best when he said, "Our present confusion about mission hides the fact that we are facing a fundamental change in how we understand the mission of the Church. Beneath the confusion we are being stretched between a great vision of the past and a new vision that is not yet fully formed."[59] It is just this context that precipitates the crisis. It is precisely in this context that God requires continued faithfulness!

## END NOTES

1. Luther P. Gerlach and Virgina H. Hine, "Five Factors Crucial to the Growth and Spread of a Modern Religious Movement," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 7 (1968): 23-40.
2. This was also the finding of Dean Kelly in Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in the Sociology of Religion, (New York, Harper & Row, 1972). The churches that grew were those that maintained social strength.
3. Dana L. Robert, "The Crisis of Missions: Premillennial Mission Theory and the Origins of Independent Evangelical Missions," in Earthen Vessels, Joel A. Carpenter and Wilbert R. Shenk, eds., (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990), 29.
4. Hendrik Kraemer, The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World (London, Edinburgh House Press, 1947, first published in 1938), 24.
5. David Bosch, Transforming Mission, (New York, Orbis Books, 1991), 6.
6. Ibid., 7.
7. Ibid., 7
8. Lesslie Newbigin, The Enduring Validity of Cross-Cultural Mission, paper presented at the Overseas Study Center, (New Haven, September 1987), 2.
9. Bosch, 7.
10. Charles E. Van Engen, "A Broadening Vision: Forty Years of Evangelical Theology of Mission," in Earthen Vessels, Joel A. Carpenter and Wilbert R. Shenk, eds., (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990), 220.
11. See Church Growth and the Whole Gospel by Peter Wagner, (New York, Harper & Row, 1981).
12. Bosch, 4.
13. Ibid., 5.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Gary B. McGee, This Gospel Shall Be Preached (Springfield, MO, Gospel Publishing House, 1986), 25.
17. James Alan Patterson, "The Loss of a Protestant Missionary Consensus: Foreign Missions and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Conflict," in Earthen Vessels, Joel A. Carpenter and Wilbert R. Shenk, eds. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990), 74.
18. Harold Lindsell, A Christian Philosophy of Missions, (Wheaton, Van Kampen, 1949)
19. Richard Pierard, "Pax Americana and the Evangelical Missionary Advance," in Earthen Vessels, Joel A. Carpenter and Wilbert R. Shenk, eds. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990), 161, 162.
20. Ibid
21. Robert 1990, 32.
22. Ibid., 31.
23. Arthur T. Pierson, The Crisis of Missions: Or, The Voice Out of the Cloud (New York, Baker and Taylor, 1886).
24. Carpenter 1990, 121.
25. Harry Boer, Pentecost and Missions (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1961).
26. Richard F. Lovelace, Dynamic of the Spiritual Life (Downers Grove, IL, Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 321.
27. Timothy Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, reprint 1980).
28. See J. Edwin Orr's works such as The Second Evangelical Awakening (Fort Washington, PA, Christian Literature Crusade, 1946); The Flaming Tongue: The Impact of Twentieth Century Revivals (Chicago, Moody Press, 1973); Evangelical Awakenings 1900 - Worldwide (Chicago, Moody Press, 1975).
29. I have quoted Hiebert extensively in this section. Issues of epistemology in philosophy have a wide literature. Hiebert seems to be very aware of the literature and while acknowledging his strengths in anthropology and secondary interest in philosophy, he is the best example we have of a contemporary missiologist grappling with this most significant issue.
30. Paul G. Hiebert, Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1994), 27. Note also his recent work, Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts (Trinity Press, Harrisburg, PA, 1999).
31. The term contextualization originated in the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches in 1971 when the then director Shoki Coe wrote about context and contextuality. Because of origins and implications evangelicals were slower in adapting the term and then modifying its implications.
32. Hiebert 1994, 21.
33. Lesslie Newbigin, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989).
34. Hiebert 1994, 21.
35. Ibid. 23
36. Ibid. 47
37. Hiebert 1994, 51.
38. Ibid., 23.
39. Ibid., 49.
40. Ibid., 50.
41. Ibid., 46.
42. The "modern" or Enlightenment era began in the seventeenth century. Bosch suggests that two scientific approaches characterized the Enlightenment, the Empiricism of Bacon and the Rationalism of Descartes. Both approaches operated on premise that human reason had a degree of autonomy. Newbigin notes that "the central conviction of the enlightenment was that human reason, once liberated from the shackles of tradition, superstition and religion, was capable of coming to the knowledge of the truth." No Proper Confidence 1995, 68.
43. Newbigin 1995, 33.
44. Newbigin, 1989, 169.
45. Newbigin, 1994, 67.
46. Newbigin defines cultural pluralism as "the attitude which welcomes the variety of different cultures and life-styles within one society and believes that this is an enrichment of human life," 1995, 14.
47. Religious pluralism is defined as "the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions of the one truth. . .Religious belief is a private matter," 1995, 14.
48. Ibid. 22
49. Reginald Bibby, Mosaic Madness (Toronto, Stoddart Publishing Co., 1990).
50. Newbigin 1995, 33.
51. Newbigin 1989, 3.
52. Newbigin 1994, 30.
53. Hiebert 1994, 63.
54. Ibid
55. Newbigin 1994, 78.
56. Loren B. Mead, The Once and Future Church (New York, The Alban Institute, 1994), 6.
57. Donald McGavran, Eye of the Storm (Waco, TX, Word Books, 1972).
58. Robertson McQuilkin, The Great Omission (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1984), 28, 29.
59. Mead 1994, 5.

Photo here of Irving Whitt

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