

Indian Missions

Revisionists of history want us to believe that missionaries should not have gone to America. Critics seem to suggest that if only missionaries had stayed at home primitive people would have been left undisturbed to fulfill the myth of Rousseau's "noble savage." But missionaries didn't find another Garden of Eden in America. The aboriginals were hardly out of the stone age. Their existence was hard, brutish and brief. They too suffered from Adam's fall.

Speaking of the Indian way of life generally, Pierre Duchaussois (1878-1940) was very critical: "The moral state of the pagan Indians was very low." He pointed to the prominence of the trait of cruelty, especially towards women. "Woman," he claimed, "was a slave; beaten, exchanged, lent, sold, cast off, mutilated, killed, as men might choose." He reported on the Roman Catholic Emile Grouard's (1840-1931) perplexity over the absence of a nose on many of the women among the Slaves in the Mackenzie district, and his discovery that this was the result of their husbands' displeasure with them. By way of punishment their husbands had cut off their wives' noses. Duchaussois commented, "Religion has been a great boon to womankind in particular in the North."

Slavery was accepted as normal under the Northwest coast tribal system of social ranking. Slaves were usually women and children taken captive in wars or raids on other tribes. In some tribes, slaves numbered as high as 20% of the population.

In obedience to our Lord's Great Commission, missionaries did go to America. They made mistakes. They did not teach the Indians their responsibility to God to evangelize among their own people, and they had little sensitivity to Indian culture. Early missionaries had no training in anthropology. In fact, many of the early missionaries believed that if the native Indians were ever to become Christians, they first must become "civilized." This meant of course the adoption of the white man's culture. Today, largely because Indians have become outspoken about their cultural heritage, missionaries are almost universally dismissed "as unwitting destroyers of a culture they seldom took the trouble to understand."

Don Richardson, who did pioneer work for Regions Beyond Missionary Union among the tribe of Irian Jaya, points out that missionaries have been guilty of acting "in a culture-destroying manner. Whether through misinterpreting the Great Commission, pride, culture shock, or simply inability to comprehend the values of others." But he also states that world-wide natives face the destruction of culture through secular forces as well. He notes that naive academics in ivy-covered towers may protest that the world's remaining cultures should be left undisturbed, but farmers, lumbermen, land speculators, miners, hunters, military leaders, road builders, art collectors, tourists, and drug peddlers aren't listening. "They are going in anyway," says Richardson. "Often to destroy, cheat, exploit, victimize and corrupt. Taking, and giving little other than diseases for which primitives have no immunity or medicine." Hindsight is always better than foresight. From our modern perspective we can point fingers and explain how it should have been done. But despite mistakes made, many Indians have come to the

Saviour, lives have been changed, and churches have been planted. Most of the early missionaries suffered severe hardship and deprivation in their effort to bring the Gospel to those who had never heard it before. One sample will suffice. After the first baptisms of Inuit converts in the fall of 1909, the Anglican Bishop I.O. Stronger of Yukon was caught by snow and fog and lost the trail back to Fort McPherson. Before they were rescued by a group of friendly Indians, he and his one companion had been reduced to eating their boots. They were made of raw sealskin and found it to be "very nourishing."

Negative criticism has led many to forget the positive benefits of missionary work. Many aboriginals were impressed favorably by those who came to them in the name of the Lord. They appreciated the various educational and medical programs which vastly improved their lot, especially in northern Canada. Missionary contribution in the area of literacy and translation has been phenomenal. After James Evans was sent in 1840 by the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Conference in Norway House, he invented the Cree syllabic system. Admiring Crees said that Evans "made birchbark talk." As early as 1861 the British and Foreign Bible Society published a complete Cree syllabic Bible. However, Evans was not the first translator for Canada's native people. In 1805 the Gospel of John was published in the Mohawk language.

When native people become Christians, must they turn their backs on being native and integrate into white culture? Can they be 100% followers of Jesus Christ and yet be very effective in their own culture? How can we combine cultural sensitivity with Christian orthodoxy? I believe that we must begin by confessing that human beings from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" mentioned in Rev. 5:9, including Native North Americans, are precious in the sight of God. Furthermore, the Bible also teaches that mission outreach is much more than snatching souls like branches from a flaming fire. The Gospel message does insist on more than personal salvation. It proclaims the centrality of God and His Kingdom. The Great Commission requires that missionaries call all people to observe all that Christ has commanded. In each culture there are customs and traditions which conflict with the Word of God. Therefore, John Calvin insisted, believers must work to bring culture under the Lordship of Christ to give Christians maximum opportunity to live their faith. As J.H. Bavinck put it, the Christian life takes possession of pagan forms of life and thereby makes them new.

"Within the framework of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old in essence has passed away and the new has come. Christ takes the life of a people in his hands, he renews and re-establishes the distorted and deteriorated, he fills each thing, each word, and each practice and gives it a new direction. "

A convert, who has come out of his bondage, is a new creature in Christ. His conversion leads to a new attitude and a new approach to life. The Gospel is radical by nature. As an Indian woman testified at an evangelistic meeting, "I've been set free from the old

pagan ways. The Lord saved me, and when he did, He shook all the feathers right out of me."

A missionary must separate the Gospel from his own culture, yet he must express it in terms of the culture to which he is sent. The people may sit on the floor, sing songs to native rhythms and melodies. The Bible does not say anything about such things as type of building or pulpits which elevate the minister above the congregation. These are cultural patterns. A missionary must wrestle with the question of how to preserve the meaning of the Gospel even if it is expressed in a culturally sensitive way. This is called indigenization. This process may involve reinterpreting a native symbol. The depiction of scenes from Christ's life with Indian clothing might be an instance of indigenization.

In our Western tradition there have also been Christianized pagan practices. For example, bridesmaids, now associated with weddings, were originally used by our non-Christian ancestors to confuse the demons who, they thought, had come to carry off the bride.

NAIM (formerly North American Indian Mission) located in British Columbia, has developed a strategy of asking new native believers to examine the Scriptures and decide what the church should look like in their culture. They want to be faithful to the Gospel and sensitive to native tradition.

George McPeck, general director and president of Intertribal Christian communions, observes that any spiritual belief or practice measured against the standard of the whole counsel of God and found wanting, should be unworthy of the child of God and should be discarded, regardless of ethnic or cultural background.

Missionaries, faithful to Scripture, are conscious of the dangers of syncretism. They are aware that in their desire to be creative and sensitive, they are tempted to accommodate the Gospel. For example, they can be so taken up by native spirituality, native traditions and their integration with Christianity that the result is a hybrid faith - neither Christian nor native.

Dr. David Hopkins, who served with InterAct ministries, formerly Arctic Missions, for 18 years, points to the dangers of syncretism and Indian awareness of it. He writes about Indian believers in the All Tribes Fellowship established in the fall of 1990. He notes that these believers know that the spirits in the sweat lodge, sun-dance, vision quests and other ceremonies will lead them to a spiritual experience, but not to the true worship of the one Great Spirit and Creator. Hopkins observes that they believe or are coming to believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to spiritual purification and eternal life.

Do we still need missionaries, both native and from other cultures, among Canada's native people? Yes. These people have tremendous physical and spiritual needs. They are the most imprisoned people in the world, comprising 85% of some provincial prisons, though they are less than 3% of the general population. Unemployment on the typical reservation is well over 50%. their culture has not escaped Adam's fall. They too

need Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. For the glory of God we must bring them the Gospel.

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