

Missiology at the IAMS 2004 International Meeting – An Elephant in the Living Room, Part 2

Colleagues,

Today's posting is the second half of my retrospective of the Eleventh Quadrennial Conference in August of the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS] in Port Dickson, Malaysia, just south of the capital, Kuala Lumpur. If "Gospel A" and "Gospel B" seem confusing, refer to last week's posting of the first half. I'm currently in Barnes Hospital in St. Louis with some bug I may have picked up on our travels. No diagnosis yet. Prayers appreciated.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

BACK TO PORT DICKSON

Neither Gospel A nor Gospel B in the 8 presentations we heard gave focused attention to forgiveness, though Gospel B as we heard it from Tite and Chae Ok was close and could have done so with a little nudging—Tite in his personal confession of Romans 1:1-6 and Chae Ok with her plea for mission of emptiness, mission of comfort.

Gospel A has a different agenda. Philomena put it like this:

“The Good News is about transformation of cultures. When a people have the Good News and turn to God in Jesus Christ they express their response creatively in new way of community, structures, rituals and celebrations, reflection and spirituality.”

Linked to such gospel-grounded cultural transformation is the expectation that the Gospel A can assist in another agenda, nation-building. How so? Gospel A has “Gospel values.” Not so Gospel B, I’d say. It “merely” aims to get sinners liberated from their sins, itself an epochal task signalled by God’s self-investment—not self-revelation—in the project.

One list of Gospel A’s “values” was Philomena’s “promotion of life, justice, love and integrity (the opposite of corruption).” Philomena cited Newbigin for support. “[T]he most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order.” Philomena thought such new social order among Christians could become the order of a nation state. Newbigin, I think, did not expect that to happen. A remnant in any given society might join such a Body-of-Christ new social order, a new order of “love and forgiveness,” but Newbigin’s own Gospel B would not ground a new nation-state. It could not. It was a different Gospel. So it seems to me.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE LIGHT OF GOSPEL A

In the paradigm of Gospel A “Gospel values” are also often designated “kingdom values,” values generating words and actions that create the peace-and-justice society of a Gospel-transformed culture. Linked to Gospel A is a specific concept of the Reign-of-God, different, very different, from the Reign of God that comes with Gospel B. God’s reign (I think “regime” is a better term) in Gospel A is a program, God’s culture-

transformation program to transform a frazzled world and fractious human societies into something akin to the primal paradise.

God's regime in Gospel B is a promise, not a program. An offer, not a blueprint. It is the God-was-in-Christ promise of mercy and comfort to sinners—that's all of us—from here to eternity. This promise will prevail (so says the Promissor)—even if all programs fail to transform human cultures into some semblance of primal paradise. Gospel B anticipates that they will fail, if for no other reason than that Jesus said so in such places as Matt. 24:35 and elsewhere, explicitly so in the apocalypse pericopes in the synoptic gospels.

Leo Kleden gave considerable attention to the "Reign of God" in his paper. At the very outset he tells us: "The model used in this presentation is the paradigm of the Reign of God." Responding to misperceptions within his own Roman tradition, he "acknowledged that the Reign of God is greater than the Church." [Did he mean the Roman Church?] The church is not God's Reign, but "witnesses to the Reign of God . . . [which] embraces all humanity, i.e., all nations and cultures throughout history." Just as Leo "broadened" Gospel he also broadened God's Reign to include the "faith experience" of "the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Moslems, the Confucians, the followers of Tao, the adherents of cosmic religions, the humanists and others."

[I can't resist: Leo, why then did Jesus make such a broadside claim that "if you don't repent, you will never enter the Kingdom of God?" Do any of those whose "faith experience" you mention here enter God's Reign without repentance, some sort of 180-degree turn-around? If they can enter without such bridge-burning, why then was Jesus so hard on his fellow Jews? Whose notion of God's Reign should we believe?]

REIGN OF GOD AND GOSPEL

We heard A and B versions of both Gospel and the Reign of God at Port Dickson. But we didn't (couldn't?) talk about them. For an association eager to engage in dialogue with other world religions, why can't we dialogue about the differences, important differences, on fundamental theological topics within our own community? If we can't do it "in house," whence our chutzpah in promoting dialogue out in the world?

When Chae Ok was in the chair on the second day and the two Latin Americans had made their presentations, she tried to make this happen in her own cultural way. As I recall it came like this: "I as a Korean was very modest in my response to Leo Kleden after each of us had made our presentation in yesterday's morning session. We disagreed, but I did not pursue that with Leo. This morning we have had papers from two Latin Americans (Tito Paredes and Eleazar Lopez.—one Methodist, one Roman Catholic). We can surely expect some lively interaction from Latin Americans." But it didn't happen.

Why not? Both said they were in basic agreement with each other. And indeed they were. From what I heard they agreed on mission's integrity because they were in basic agreement about the Kingdom of God (a program) and about the Gospel (a revelationist model). As a Methodist Tito might have challenged Eleazar's love affair with logoi spermatikoi, if for no other reason than that his Wesleyan tradition wouldn't find it congruent with Christ's Good News.

THE FUNDAMENTAL AXIOM OF GOSPEL A

The fundamental axiom of Gospel A is the classical medieval mantra "gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit" God's grace does not conflict with (diminish or remove) nature, but brings it to fullness. That axiom also functions as the hermeneutic

for classical Roman Catholic reading of the scriptures and for reading the world. God's grace is transformative of what is already there. Christ does not initiate any radically new enterprise, but brings to fullness what God has already invested in his created world of nature. Christ fills full all the other "logoi spermatikoi" (e.g., in other world religions) where God has been carrying out a similar Christ-like operation.

Real surprise was that some of the Protestant speakers—all of them in the "Reformed" tradition (though at various places on the spectrum of evangelical and mainline Protestant) but no Lutheran voice among them— saw their gospel in the same nature/grace paradigm. Not all. Not so Chae Ok. Her Gospel's key terms were emptiness and comfort drawn from the NT text of Phil. 2, the ancient hymn of Christ's self-emptying and the Good News of comfort flowing from that. That's not grace perfecting nature, filling full a glass that is only half full. The glass is empty. Christ's mercy/comfort fills it.

Tite Tienou also gave us an alternative to the nature/grace axiom when he was presentor. In his response to Teresa's plea on the previous day, he cited Romans 1:1-6 as his wording for Gospel. Gospel is God fulfilling his promises in Jesus Christ. That's what "grace" is all about. Grace does not fill-full partially filled vessels of our human nature. It's a relational reality, God being merciful to sinners.

AN INTERIM CONCLUSION

I expect that not all IAMS participants will be convinced by this analysis of two different Gospels at IAMS Eleven. I know there are fellow American IAMS colleagues who aren't convinced. They tweak me good-naturedly about my "Lutheran hangup" with forgiveness of sins regularly at the annual meetings of our

American Society of Missiology. One of them had a new publication at the Orbis book table. Continuing the banter from the ASM, he tweaked me: "Ed, you won't find forgiveness of sins even listed in the index." I smiled, but I wasn't cheered. Why the NT forgiveness texts cited above don't convince him amazes me—though I think I know why. We have different hermeneutics, different eyeglasses, for reading the Scriptures. So we get different messages. My lenses are ground according to the law/promise axiom of the Lutheran Reformation, his by the nature/grace axiom of classic Roman Catholicism. So forgiveness of sins does not HAVE TO show up in his book because there are many other grace channels. A Lutheran, however, couldn't avoid it in writing a book on mission.

But I digress. Back to Gospel A and Gospel B

PRAXIS – THE FINAL TEST FOR ANY GOSPEL

Final test case for the difference, and the significance of the difference, between these two Gospels came already with the first two of the 8 plenary papers—from Leo and Chae Ok. Leo presented first. He concluded with a story that left all of us speechless. He told of an Advent gathering in 1997 during the horror of East Timor. It was Adina's story—parents murdered by Indonesian soldiers, surviving elder brother tortured to death, she herself tortured and raped. And now Leo's final sentences:

"At this point Adina could not continue her story. Tears filled our eyes. There was a long silence in the chapel . . . it seemed like ages. Then Adina gathered all her strength, she looked at me and said in a faint voice: 'Father, where is that salvation promised by the Lord?' Again there was silence. I could not answer her question. Tears flowed. Slowly I raised my eyes and saw a wooden cross on the wall. I saw it and understood the solidarity of the Crucified One,

but I could not utter a single word. Adina needed my solidarity, not my word. For several years I have been living with her question."Leo's concluding two sentences followed: "There are millions of stories like this in Asia and many parts of the world. May the Spirit of the Lord help the disciples of Jesus in Asia to weave the narratives of Jesus with the living stories of people in Asia and thus transform the 'Asian Drama' into the Good News of Salvation."

Who among us has not been left speechless by cries from the depths? But now that Leo has given us this narrative from hell and Adina's cry for salvation, it is a datum of our own experience. And we can reflect on it. If we were using Leo's story as a case study in a missiology seminar [wasn't that what IAMS Eleven was supposed to be?], would these reflections be fitting?

- 1. That Leo was speechless for the moment is no surprise. That he's still speechless after "several years," still has no Good News word for Adina, that is another tragedy, Leo's own tragedy in the face of Adina's tragedy. And it will not let him go.*
- 2. But it is finally not a surprise. The reason lies in Gospel A. Gospel A failed Leo, failed Adina. Gospel A is speechless before such horror. It has nothing to say. Leo needs a better Gospel in his own priestly tool-box to be able to answer Adina's question.*
- 3. "After several years" he has yet to find such a better Gospel. And he agonizes about it. Might that signal priestly failure? Sounds like Leo himself needs Good News. He's still "living with her question," apparently still bereft of an "answer"— in the light of the Gospel in Asia. Perhaps there is none.*
- 4. In any case he found none in Gospel A. Had it been*

“broadened” to be a mile wide, but only one inch deep? I think so. Thus Gospel A is unable to reach Adina with her call from the utter depths of agony. No word for her own “My God, my God, why?” No Good News for Adina in Gospel A. It is patently too small. From its resources Leo could not carry out his own desired agenda to “weave the narrative of Jesus” into Adina’s own lifestory.

- 5. And “there are millions of stories like this in Asia and many parts of the world,” Leo reminds us. That is terrifying if Gospel A is the only Gospel there is, speechless in the face of these stories with no threads of Good News to “weave” into the lives of the God-forsaken in Asia—or anywhere else in the world.*
- 6. In any other context of human affairs a resource so impotent would be called bankrupt.*
- 7. Not so Gospel B. Its grounding in Christ’s own self-emptying is a brand of Good News that does have an answer to Adina’s question, an answer of comfort for Adina—and her millions of siblings in Asia and throughout the world.*
- 8. In our table discussion after Leo’s and Chae Ok’s papers someone quickly gave the caveat: “The last thing Adina needs is for someone to preach to her. Silence was the right response.” Nonsense. Maybe not nonsense if Gospel A is the only option. But nonsense for sure in the light of Gospel B.*
- 9. Implicit in that colleague’s caveat was the notion that “preaching” would amount to “giving Adina moral prescriptions, telling her what to do.” Proclaiming the Gospel as Gospel B is nothing of the sort. It’s not a program, but a promise, a proposal for “weaving” Christ’s self-emptying into Adina’s empty life so the end result is comfort for Adina.*
- 10. Proclaiming Gospel B is offering that promise. No*

prescription, no program, it is an invitation. Tailor-made for the God-forsaken. In Jesus' own words: "Come to me, all you who are weak and crushed by burdens . . . and you will find comfort." If that's true [aye, there's the rub: is it true?] then that's Good News for Adina.

11. Which is precisely what she is asking for: "Father, where is that salvation promised by the Lord?" She is asking the God-question. Her relationship with that God is her agenda, her agonizing agenda. Is that Lord for me or against me? Silence in response to that plea is deadly silence. Mortifying. Lethal. It's a stone when the child asks for bread. Stony silence is no bread for the hungry.
12. Silence fails Leo's own agenda about weaving "Jesus narratives" into "the living stories of people in Asia," case in point, Adina's story. You cannot weave stories without words. Story-weaving is verbal business. Silence is not a weaver. Without words it is impossible to "transform" Adina's story "into the Good news of Salvation." The hardly veiled agony of Leo's own "several years living with her question" still unanswered is a call for the same Good News for Leo. It's there in Gospel B—both for Adina and for Leo.
13. Missionaries living their own lives under the rubrics of Gospel B have resources to respond to cries from the pits. Granted, they too may be jolted for the moment by Adina's agony, but they are not permanently tongue-tied when she asks for "the salvation promised by the Lord." And she's even using the language of promise to give voice to her plea!
14. It's the Lord's promise you ask for, Adina? There is such a promise. Its format is Gospel B, custom-designed for Adinas for such a time as this.
15. Leo was close to that promise at the time. In his own words: "Slowly I raised my eyes and saw a wooden cross on

the wall. I saw it and understood the solidarity of the Crucified One, but I could not utter a single word. Adina needed my solidarity, not my word."

16. *Not so, Leo, she was asking for a Word from you, not silence. Better said, she was asking for THE Word that wove the crucified one from that cross on the wall into the life-story she'd offered you from the floor. And it wasn't YOUR solidarity she needed, but solidarity with the one on the cross. Your solidarity with Adina isn't Good News enough when she's staring into hell. Yet your words could have supplied that. From that cross on the wall. You apparently got some solace from looking at the cross. Had you woven that into Adina's story, she might have too. It might have taken more than a "single word," but not too many. "He's for you" is only three words. Or you might have just repeated his words to the thief crucified next to him. That thief was asking for salvation. Jesus had such a word for him. "Today. You with me. Paradise. Right here in your God-forsakenness."*
17. *Christ's words for Adina are the same words.*

FINALLY . . .

Our keynote address at the very beginning in Port Dickson by Hwa Yung was grounded in Gospel B. He drew his human data from Asian ground, the grass roots of Asian Christians. "What draws people to Christ?" he asked. His answers centered on the power of Christ in people's own experience, what he called "the gospel's power to change individual and personal circumstances." When he got specific he spoke of "millions [who] have found meaning, hope, healing from disease, deliverance from bondage to and fear of the powers of darkness . . . and ultimately forgiveness of sins [Yes, he said it!] and eternal life."

A SUGGESTION FOR IAMS TWELVE IN BUDAPEST

Keep the same conference theme: "Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing Witness to the Spirit." This time specify that the Gospel B will be the touchstone. If for no other reason than that Gospel A has been center stage at all the previous seven IAMS conferences I've attended. Call it fairness. And all the more so if/since Gospel A didn't deliver Good News to the Adinas of the world.

[And for ecumenical equity put someone on the program who consciously uses Lutheran lenses for reading the scriptures and for reading the world. Call that fairness too. She need not even have a Lutheran label. Could be an evangelical, could be Roman Catholic. As we saw among the Gospel A, Gospel B proponents at Post Dickson, denominational labels nowadays do not identify hermeneutical lenses. You may have to ask the speakers what glasses they are wearing. It's possible that they may not even know.]

Budapest could pick up with Adina's story and move to stories of Eastern Europe, doing our own Gospel-weaving with that raw material. Better yet would be to have the local missionaries themselves tell us how they do that weaving—their successes, yes, and their failures.

Some of us from IAMS eleven, of course, will be present at IAMS 12 only as our names roll across the screen "in memoriam." Not to worry. Christ's promise still pertains—in Adina's words, the "salvation promised by the Lord."

And how might IAMS 12 get the forgiveness of sins on the agenda? Simple answer: Just do it. In the mission mandates from the New Testament cited above, that is the Gospel answer to Adina's cry, "the salvation promised by the Lord." If no one else is available, ask Hwa Yung to get us started. He claimed

forgiveness was "ultimate." [I know at least three younger missiologists who could do likewise.] My real druthers would be to have "forgiveness of sins" itself be the theme at Budapest. Possibly something like this: "Forgiveness of Sins in Missiology Today—Ultimate (so Hwa Yung) or Not Mentioned (so the new Orbis book)." Ask proponents of each viewpoint to show-and-tell us why they've come to these opposite conclusions.

Starting the Budapest Assembly that way might also make our elephant happy. She's been standing in our living room for a long time and now finally we'd be giving her some attention.

*Peace & joy!
Ed Schroeder*