

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

Colleagues,

Marie and I have been back for a week from our second stint this year in Southeast Asia. After our 4-month gig in Singapore March – June, this time was just one month, mostly in Malaysia. First week was the Eleventh Quadrennial Conference of the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS] in Port Dickson, Malaysia, just south of the capital Kuala Lumpur. Last week's posting, ThTh 324, was my contribution at the gathering. We were 200 folks from 40 countries. Second week was at Sabah Theological Seminary in Kota Kinabalu, East Malaysia, north end of the island of Borneo. There for a week I talked with pastors from 20-some Asian Lutheran churches. They'd come for a seminar on Mission and Evangelism sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation. After that came five days in Bangkok, Thailand, visiting former Crossings students and other friends, and finally 6 days in Seoul, Korea with two Presbyterian pastors—Keun Soo Hong and Soon Jin Choi—now Ph.D's, who'd been Seminex – Crossings students once upon a time in St. Louis. Preaching in Keun Soo's church on August 22 was part of the invitation.

Back to IAMS. IAMS is the worldwide “club” for mission scholars, mission managers, and some just plain missionaries. And nowadays—unknown to most of us—there are more missionaries from Asian & African churches to the West than vice versa. IAMS's organization and elected officers cycle around the triad of Roman Catholics, Mainline Protestants and Evangelical Independents.

I've now attended the last 7 IAMS get-togethers—beginning with Bangalore (1982), then Harare, Rome, Honolulu, Buenos Aires, and Johannesburg (2000). We're a fabulously friendly ecumenical bunch. But ecumenical bonhomie—at least our perception thereof—makes it difficult for us to get too deeply involved in fundamental disagreements. Hence today's title: An Elephant in the Living Room.

This is my retrospective just sent to the conference participants. Thought you might be interested. It's ten pages long, so I'll divvy it up into two parts for more modest ThTh posting—this Thursday and the next.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Some Thoughts about IAMS Eleven, Port Dickson, Malaysia, July 31 – August 7, 2004
AN ELEPHANT IN THE LIVING ROOM

“Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing the Witness of the Spirit.” That was the conference theme. But the middle term of that theme—the Light of the Gospel—got no serious attention. It was “an elephant in the living room.” That strange English expression may need definition. “An elephant in the living room” is a huge problem that everyone acknowledges, but no one seems able to talk about. Example: An alcoholic family member often becomes an elephant in the living room. All family members know “Papa’s an alcoholic,” but they maneuver around Papa’s problem in silence. Possibly out of fear or shame, no one ever addresses Papa directly. Nor do they

Speak to one another about it. No one ever says: "We ought to talk about this elephant—and do something about it."

Two conflicting claims about "the Gospel and its Light" was our elephant at Port Dickson.

This wasn't the first time in the history of IAMS meetings that we've had elephants. Christology was the "elephant in the living room" at IAMS Ten (A.D. 2000) in Pretoria. Alternate christological proposals, yes, antithetical christological proposals, surfaced in the major presentations. But we didn't talk about them. Seemed as though we couldn't talk about them.

That was true at Buenos Aires (1996) as well. IAMS president Michael Amalados' presidential address with its widely inclusive proposal for God's saving work in all religions stood alongside a "narrower" (?) proposal that God's work in Christ was distinct and different from that same God's word and work elsewhere in human history. In the second proposal "God was in Christ" doing something unique, something not done before by the same God anywhere on earth. Though granting the topic's fundamental significance, we didn't manage to talk about that either at Buenos Aires. Seems we just couldn't. Another elephant in the living room.

So it was really no surprise that "the Light of the Gospel" was the elephant this time. Alternate, yes, antithetical, proposals for "the light of the Gospel" popped up in the 8 plenary presentations. And equally unsurprising was that those differing Gospel proposals (basically two) had contours similar to the differing doublets we'd had at Pretoria and at Buenos Aires. But it was an elephant in the living room. We just could not address it directly, couldn't engage each other to talk about it.

THE TWO GOSPELS AT PORT DICKSON

Teresa Okure called that to our attention at the midpoint of our 8 major presentations. “‘Integrity of the Misison’ is given full attention in the 4 papers we have heard so far,” she said, “but no one yet has attended to ‘the light of the Gospel.’ What is that Gospel? What its Light?” And then she gave her own answer focused on Jesus’s life and work and, as I recall, in her view an event both “new” in God’s work in the world and “necessary ” for gospel to be Gospel – and for mission to have “integrity.” She was offering us her version of the Gospel, a version I’ll call Gospel B below. But that wasn’t the version we began with in the first of the 8 papers. Call that one Gospel A. Here are its contours.

GOSPEL A

Gospel A (articulated crisply by Leo Kleden, and thereafter by Eliezar Lopez and Philomena Mwaura) was a clear alternative to Teresa’s. Most clearly it was a clear alternative to the Gospel we heard in Chun Chae Ok’s paper.

To us a technical term from systematic theology, Gospel A is fundamentally “revelationist.” In revelationist theologies God uncovers for the benefit of humankind aspects of Gospel that otherwise would not be known, not be available, to us apart from these acts of God’s self-disclosure. In most revelationist theologies all of these self-disclosures are acts of God’s grace. They are fundamentally Good News. For Christian revelationists the highpoint of God’s self-revelation came, of course, in Jesus the Christ. But this Christic Good News is not so distinctive (or so scandalous!) that it cannot be “broadened” [Leo’s own term] to include God’s self-disclosure in manifold venues—not only to a long list of OT heroes of faith that Leo offered us, but finally also to “God’s self-revelation in many other religions and cultures.”

Eliezar's essay offered us that same Gospel A, a self-disclosure of divine grace also permeating Mesoamerican indigenous religions—not at all different, but rather congruent with God's self-unveiling in Christ.

Philomena did not use revelation as a major term. Her focus was on the "Gospel values" made known in God's self-revelation "promotion of life, justice, love and integrity in proclamation and service." They arise from Gospel A's paradigm. These she then spelled out in her final 4 pages "A New Vision for the Church in Africa."

Gospel A is a revelationist Gospel, Good News made known to humanity in many and various ways throughout history. And all of it Good News basically congruent with the same grace of God revealed in Christ.

Leo Kleden's paper spelled out Gospel A in some detail. Its first section ["Listening to the Word of God"] articulated that Gospel. "According to Christian faith, the most original existential Word of God is Jesus Christ. . . so original and so transparent that in him and through him the presence of God is fully manifested." Again "Jesus is the most transparent and full manifestation of God's love for humanity." Significant in this Gospel version is a quantitative uniqueness for Christ ["most original. . . most transparent" . . . "full manifestation"], but not so "original" as to make God-in-Christ qualitatively different from all other "self-revelations of God"—both throughout the Old Testament and then, as Leo proposed, "broadened" to "acknowledge" the revelation of that same Gospel "in other religions and cultures." God's self-revelation in Christ, though a "full manifestation," is not something brand new. God was in Christ not doing anything substantively different from God's self-disclosures everywhere.

Eliezar offered us this Gospel A in his paper on the light of the Gospel in Latin America. He appropriated the notion of "logoi spermatikoi" from the ancient church to show us that the same "seed" that flourished in Christ's revelation was alive and well in Mesoamerican indigenous religions. He gave many illustrations to support that claim.

GOSPEL B IS DIFFERENT. HOW DIFFERENT?

Gospel B was "on camera" and "on mike" with several speakers. Although the three proponents for Gospel A cited above were Roman Catholics, there were also Roman Catholic voices for Gospel B. One such voice came in Teresa's intervention mentioned above. Gospel B was also the center of the sermon by local Roman Catholic bishop Paul Tan Chee Ing, S.J., at our opening liturgy Saturday afternoon. I have no copy of his sermon text, but the Gospel he proclaimed was model B, not A. Orbis Books honcho Bill Burrows noted the same thing as we discussed the bishop's sermon later on. The elephant is not a classic Catholic vs. Protestant standoff.

>From the 8 plenary speakers we also heard Gospel B explicitly from Chun Chae Ok and Tite Tienou. Not quite so clear to my ears were Tito Paredes and Parush Paruchev in their promotion of Gospel B. To my knowledge all four of these colleagues are evangelical Protestants from the Reformed tradition. And way at the end in our final conference session Anglican Andrew Kirk's brief comment pointed toward Gospel B once more, I thought.

THE SUBSTANCE OF GOSPEL B

I'll try to sketch the contours of Gospel B from Chun Chae Ok's presentation. In her first two pages we heard this: "The light of the Gospel [is] the life and work of Jesus Christ." "The nature of mission [is] to hold on to Jesus Christ." "Evangelism is the core, heart, and center in mission . . . Evangelism is

testifying Jesus Christ just as he is testified in the Bible. Central task in mission in the light of the Gospel is to reveal and to witness Jesus Christ who is still hidden to many eyes of Asian traditions, cultures and ideologies." "Justification of mission is in seeking to help people to encounter ...Jesus who is the truth, the way and the life in this suffering world, death-prevailing world, and fear-prevailing world."

Chae Ok concluded by incarnating Gospel B in "women's approaches in mission as from the poor to the poor." Her own double-label for this was a mission of emptiness and a mission of comfort. In fleshing out these two terms she did not capitalize on the clear Christo-centricity of the paragraph above. But she could have. With her word "emptiness," she was patently drawing on the ancient Christ-hymn of Philippians 2. Not that she ignored the explicit Christ-connection of emptiness and comfort, but she took us on a different path, a women's path—to finally get back to the self-emptying Christ ["kenosis" is the technical term] at the end. She led us 1) into "the hidden faces of women who have precious mission stories" regularly ignored by church historians. 2) into the plain arithmetic of Korean church life where 75% of the members are women, women who carry the bulk of "church work" on their own shoulders "witness[ing] with the Gospel to the world . . . in weakness and selflessness." 3) into Dana Robert's jarring words: ". . . that statistically speaking, world Christianity is a women's movement."

In Chae Ok's portrayal of these women it became clear that their self-emptying service arises from an alien fullness bestowed on them by Someone Else's emptying his life into them. Re-enter the Kenosis Christ of Phil. 2.

The Kenosis Christ and the Holy Spirit that keeps this Christ operative in our "groaning ...afflicted ...suffering ...broken" world

are the grounds for Chae Ok's final section on "Mission of Comforting." Along the way she critiques theologies of glory [might that be Gospel A?] that have overshadowed the "emptiness/comfort" Gospel of the theology of the cross in "much of Protestant mission in Asia." The main defect of such mission is the bottom line that it has little to say to the "groaning ...afflicted...suffering...broken" world. That broken world sets our agenda. It is an agony agenda: "There is longing for comfort from God." Chae Ok's Gospel B claims to have a Good-News word for that agony agenda. She re-worded Phil. 2. It amounts to rewording Jesus' own "Come unto me . . ." of Matthew 11:28ff.

Summary: Gospel B is not revelationist. What comes in Christ is not something already present in the cosmos, needing only to be brought to our attention, un-covered (the literal meaning of re-velation "take away the veil"). Nor is Gospel B the quantitative filling-full of other revelation not yet 100% complete. Gospel B is performative. Before it was done, it did not exist. In Christ God is doing something that God has not previously done. Where else in creation history has God ever done this: "die for sinners?" But now once done, that Good News is available and in this sense unveiled and "revealed." But before this performative action it was non-existent. In Christ God is not taking off the veil covering something that was already there, but merely unknown. God's action in Christ is brand new. As God's performative action in the first creation was brand new, so God's performative action in Christ is a second "brand new." Call it God's new creation. Revelationist categories cannot describe it—unless like St. Paul (after Damascus) you specify TWO revelations from God, wrath and righteousness (Romans 1). In no way is the second one congruent with the first.

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS AS "THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL"—NOT ON THE

AGENDA AT PORT DICKSON

The 8 major speakers at Port Dickson came from the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Protestant traditions. Had the Lutheran tradition been represented we'd have heard another voice in the direction of Gospel B, but articulated with Gospel-substance hard to find in any of the 8 major papers including the Gospel B proposals. Here's a cardinal Lutheran axiom for wording Gospel B: If you have to articulate the Gospel in only three words it's "forgiveness of sins." Significant by its general absence all week long in our discussion was the forgiveness of sins. Even Gospel B presenters gave it scant attention.

The heritage of the Lutheran Reformation hears scripture hyping the forgiveness of sins as the center, the nuclear substance, of mission, the generator of the Gospel's light and the post-Easter agenda of the Holy Spirit. To bypass the forgiveness of sins, and to focus on other centers for Mission, for Gospel and for the Witness of the Holy Spirit is to sacrifice not only mission's integrity [our BIG word for this conference], but also to sacrifice the Gospel, and along with it to sacrifice the Witness of the Holy Spirit. [One colleague told me at the closing session: Ed, the Roman Catholics and the Calvinists have carried the day.]

In the 7 IAMS gatherings that I've attended—from Bangalore 1982 onward— forgiveness of sins has received little serious discussion. Some IAMS colleagues have "comforted" me saying, "Oh, we take that for granted and now we want to move on to mission agendas." But to take the center for granted (and therefore unattended) when focusing on mission's "integrity" rings hollow. I've been around long enough to know that not all agree that forgiveness of sins is center stage for mission. Gospel A theologians have told me that more than once. Even

from the Gospel B proponents at Port Dickson forgiveness of sins got scant attention. So why should it? Thought you'd never ask.

THE CASE FOR FORGIVENESS AS "THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL"

Here's my feisty claim: Forgiveness of sins is at the center of all, yes ALL, of the major mission mandates in the New Testament—including the overworked (and overburdened?) Matthew 28.

Start with Luke 24:49: Jesus's parting words: "That repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations."

John 20:21-23. Jesus on Easter afternoon: "As the Father sent me, so send I you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you don't do it, it won't happen."

Paul in Acts 13:38f. "Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you . . . [sins] from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses."

Paul's own words in the classic 2 Cor. 5 that he is an ambassador (missionary) for God's reconciliation project, reconciliation that came when God in Christ was "not counting our trespasses against us," but getting rid of our sins "by making Him to be sin for us." How does that forgiveness get to places where it's unknown? "God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." Reconciliation is God forgiving sinners.

Finally the warhorse text Matt. 28. But "forgiveness of sins" is not mentioned there, you say. Maybe—but then again maybe not. Check out Matthew's cardinal term "authority" which often

gets passed over lightly in “Great Commission” discussions. Jesus’ “authority” is a BIG word, a conflicted word, in Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew’s mission mandate begins: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” That is authority now “given” (Mt. 28:18) by virtue of Jesus’ Good Friday and Easter.

And what is that “authority?” Go back to Matthew 9:1-8. It’s his “authority on earth to forgive sins.” Such authority was already signalled in chapter 1 where “the angel of the Lord” signals to Joseph that “you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.”

In Matt. 9 Jesus exercises his sin-forgiving authority for the paralytic proleptically – a before-the-event action ratified by something later. Had he not gone to the cross and been raised by the Father, his critics in Matthew 9 would have been right in calling his bluff. But after Good Friday/Easter his authority is no bluff. It’s now “given” and it’s worldwide.

Already in Matthew 9 the evangelist does another prolepsis to be ratified post-Easter. He expands Christ’s sin-forgiving authority (v.8) to “anthropois”– Greek for “human beings plural!” Christ finally passes sin-forgiving authority on to his disciples. [Perhaps that was not always clear to the first hearers of Matthew’s Gospel. Might it then be that John in his Gospel makes it “perfectly clear” with his mission mandate from the mouth of Jesus: “You have my authority. The assignment is forgiveness of sins. That’s it! If you don’t do it, it won’t happen.”]

Forgiveness of sins is also at the center of Matth. 18, triggered by Peter’s common sense question: How about a 7-time limit on forgiveness? Equally explicit in Matthew is “forgiveness of sins” in the pericope of the Last Supper. That

authority to forgive sinners is the authority Jesus is talking about in Matthew's Great Commission text. How else do you "make Jesus-disciples" of all nations if not by getting their sins forgiven? Sinners whose "God-problem" is not healed are not Jesus' disciples. Forgiveness of sins heals the problem. The touchstone for God's forgiveness is Christ. "Forgiven sinner" and "Christ's disciple" are synonyms. What else is it that Jesus wants his disciples (past, present, or future) to "observe?" What else is it that he "has commanded?" What but forgiveness of sins is the gift that Trinitarian baptism bestows?

CHRIST'S OWN MISSION AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINNERS

Christ is "sent" (a mission term) to get sinners forgiven. Forgiveness of sins signals that a sinner's root problem is a God-problem. Sin is not bad action. It's a broken God-relationship that precedes the bad ethics. In the language of the Lutheran tradition the dilemma is this: sinners "don't fear God, don't trust in God, and are turned into themselves." Christ's cross and resurrection constitute the mechanics whereby he "fixes" the sinner's God-problem. Call it the forgiveness of sinners. God wills that all sinners should "have" it. Therefore Christ's mission mandate. As the Father sent him to carry out the fixing, so he sends his disciples to keep the project going. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you don't do it, it doesn't happen."

The mission mandate could not be more clear. If forgiveness of sinners is not on the agenda at a mission study conference, then Christ's mission is not on the agenda. There were "other" gospels already in the time of the apostles. Some elicited an apostolic anathema. "Other" gospels bring with them "other" missions. The conclusion is inescapable: if forgiveness is not on the mission agenda, then some "other" mission must be.

To talk about “integrity of mission,” while ignoring forgiveness of sins, is akin to filibustering. If the project does not focus on “fixing” sinners’ God-problem, it’s not Christ’s mission. It’s somebody else’s.

[Part II, d.v., follows next Thursday]