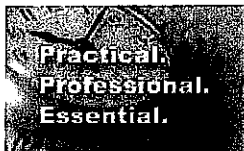


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Cultural Anthropology to Modern Missions

Anne Blythe

In addition to the Great Commission of Matthew 18:18-20, missionaries have repeatedly visited Matthew 13:1-23 in their efforts to communicate the purpose and plan of cross-cultural kingdom work. The so-called "Parable of the Sower" has most popularly been interpreted with emphasis placed on the "results of the sowing": those who do not respond to the sowing of the word (path); those who receive it with joy, but have no root (rocky places); those who receive it, but are choked out by the world (among the thorns); and those who receive the kingdom message and then bear fruit (good soil) (Barbieri 2004, 49).

Because the focus of the parable has been the soils and not the methods of the sower, the burden of responsibility placed on the missionary is simply to sow the seed—the message of God's kingdom—without necessarily being held accountable for the results of his or her sowing. The commitment level of the disciple is based on his or her own "soil quality" and is not dependent upon some fault in the sower's spread of the gospel.

However, a careful study of ancient and first-century Middle Eastern agricultural practices leads to a fresh understanding of this parable, thus altering its focus and that of the missionary. Combined with a working knowledge of prior missionary fruit and a deeper understanding of the effects of globalization, a fresh understanding shows us the importance of harnessing deep human culture study, or cross-cultural anthropology, in producing a qualitative revolution of the modern mission endeavor.

The Agriculturally Aware Sower

The agricultural consciousness of most of Jesus' audience would have been formed by hundreds of years of following the laws and wisdom of Old Testament teaching/praxis, as well as the geographic and climactic composition of Palestine. As Ellen F. Davis argues,

The need to serve and preserve the soil in its fertility was well known to the ancient Israelites, and if one looks at the land of Israel through a farmer's eyes, it is easy to see why that "garden ethos" is established already in the second chapter of the Bible. The highlands of Canaan (later Israel and Judah) are a fragile ecological zone, much of which is marginal for agriculture. Thin topsoil, periodic droughts, heavy winter rains, and strong winds meant that the upland farmers were always contending with the threats of erosion and desertification. Moreover, those mountain slopes and small valleys constitute one of the world's most varied agricultural landscapes. With patterns of wind, rain, and sun that change drastically over a small area, *each Israelite farm family had to know their own small plot of land intimately and, further, to perpetuate that particularized knowledge through the generations.* (Davis 2009, 113; emphasis mine)

Directives to care for one's land and till it in diligent and organized ways are found throughout the Old Testament. Proverbs 22:28 requires respect for "ancient boundary stones" that were set up to mark off personal property, including fields and vineyards. Careful attention to the needs of particular crops and the preparation of each field is found in Isaiah 28:24-25:

When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually? Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil? When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cumin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field?

Other scripture passages offer descriptions of farmers intimately involved in the soil's preparation for seed. For example, Isaiah's metaphor of the farmer and his vineyard gives us a glimpse of a farmer lovingly caring for his vineyard:

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes but it yielded only bad fruit. (Isa. 5:1-2)

God himself demonstrates concern for land as he commands the Israelites to let their fields rest for an entire year, every seventh year (Lev. 25:1-7). Indeed, a farmer who does not care for and prepare his land for the seed is condemned:

I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man. (Prov. 24:30-34)

Thorns, weeds, and broken-down walls are signs of foolishness and laziness. The farmer who does not invest significant amounts of time and energy into knowing, weeding, caring for, and organizing his or her soil is bound to reap poverty and scarcity.

With this understanding of biblical patterns of agriculture in mind, it is clear that the popular interpretation of Jesus' Parable of the Sower is flawed in the sense that it creates a dichotomy between sower/soil that would not have existed in the minds of Jesus' followers, most of whom had the land-consciousness of the Old Testament firmly imprinted on their minds.

The soil is not solely responsible for the harvest it produces—the sower must also be actively involved in knowing the soil and caring for it enough to know what it needs (weeding, tilling, plot organization, etc.).

Viewing the quality of the soils (instead of simply the sower and soils) as equally important to the sowing process has given rise to mission agencies, churches, and missionaries who use many strategies to sow the seed of the gospel. There has been a great desire to throw out as much seed as possible in as little time as possible to hopefully harvest anything that falls on good soil.

Historically and even today, missionary senders (organizations, churches) and missionaries have relied on familiar strategies to spread the gospel in diverse cultures around the world. Radio programs, booklets, education by extension, Internet chat rooms, revival meetings, medicine, and preaching are popular methods of sowing the message of the kingdom. But rarely do those involved ask why particular strategies are being used and what the results of those strategies will be; rarely do missionary senders engage in or require their missionaries to engage in extensive culture/human training with the kind of fervor that is accorded to Bible training before particular sowing strategies are employed.

Culture, if studied, is reduced to topics found only on the surface (i.e., physical gestures, foods, and generalized religious beliefs). As a result, huge numbers of people who call themselves "Christians"¹ do not intimately know Jesus Christ, nor do they follow him in ways appropriate to their respective cultures. This is because the missionaries did not truly understand what was beneath the surface of their culture(s).

Indeed, Jesus' parable focuses on the quality of the soils and on the farmer who haphazardly sowed his seed on soil that he did not know and had not prepared. Thus, the evangelical practice of missions must also have a dual focus. Rather than just getting the message out as quickly as possible to as many as possible, missionaries and their support systems must balance their passion for that message with the careful study of the soils—the people and cultures where the seed has not yet been sown.

Instead of sowing without care for and/or knowledge of the soils, missionaries must painstakingly study the soil, prepare it, till it, and then lovingly and purposefully plant the seed of the gospel. To do otherwise would ignore the agricultural principles and practices described by the Old Testament, performed by farmers in Jesus' day, and storied by Jesus in his parable.

Painstaking study is even more crucial in the twenty-first century, given the dramatic effects of globalization around the world. For example, moving to France to share the gospel is no longer the straightforward task of moving into French culture, learning French, and trying to build relationships with French people. Millions of immigrants—many Muslim—live in France; some estimate the Muslim immigrant population to be twenty million (Pryce-Jones 2004, 31).

The French people are experiencing somewhat of an identity crisis as they try to decide what it even means to be French. It is common to hear Arabic and see religious garb on the streets. Your grocer and favorite restaurant owner may be Algerian. Now that France and dozens of other countries are the crossroads of millions of other-culture people, how will the missionary begin to navigate the bewildering variety of soils located within even one field? To sow without intimate knowledge of the soils is quantitatively successful at best and completely ineffective and foolish at worst.

Cultural Anthropology's Contribution

It is here that cultural anthropology can and should be harnessed as a necessary and practical aid for the task of knowing the soils of individual people within cultures and sub-cultures. For the purposes of this article, the following definition from Bruce Kapferer will be used:

Anthropologists are concerned with the exploration of human action or practice and the attitudes and interpretations emergent within or apparently relevant to these within what may be described as their overall life-worlds. *This holistic or totalising stance is condensed in the general anthropological definition of the subject as being concerned with the cultural and social formations and processes of human action.* The concepts of culture and society are, in effect, shorthand terms (usually overlapping) for the heterogeneous domains of belief, meaning, interpretational significance, etc. (culture), and the formations, interactions, relations, structures, systems, or processes of practice (society, the social, sociality) within which anthropological understanding develops. (Kapferer 2007, 79; emphasis mine)

For many years, cultural anthropologists have been developing thorough methods to arrive at comprehensive understandings of other cultures. There is no need for evangelicals to reinvent the proverbial wheel; let us use what anthropologists have tested time and again in their efforts to record and study the internal structures of various groups around the world.

Many cultural anthropologists, including Harry F. Wolcott and George D. Spindler, have spent years observing other cultures before interpreting their observations and drawing conclusions about them. Their methods and insight are invaluable to the evangelical community; a grasp of even just a few of the methods would go miles in preparing and loving the fields to which we are called.

One of the most valuable is “good ethnography,” developed by George and Louise Spindler. Good ethnography has as its primary goal the understanding of cultural transmission—that is, how culture is passed down from one person to another, from generation to generation. The Spindlers describe the composition of good ethnography in this way:

We search for clues to the relationship between forms and levels of cultural knowledge and observable behaviors as the dialogue of intervention and response takes place. The search must follow the clues wherever they lead and cannot be predetermined by a schedule of categories of observation or rating scales. Ethnographic study requires *direct observation, it requires being immersed in the field situation, and it requires constant interviewing in all degrees of formality and casualness.* From this interviewing, backed by observation, one is able to collect and elicit the native view(s) of reality and the native ascription of meaning to events, intentions, and consequences (Spindler and Spindler 1997, 46; italics added).

Practicing good ethnography—direct observation, complete immersion on the field, and constant interviewing of people within the host culture—is one of the best ways to start digging deep to understand what the culture needs in order to become good soil and then produce fruit beyond our wildest imagination.

It is within the practice of good ethnography that the missionary can begin to go beyond the surface of his or her culture and into the heart of a culture and its people. Good ethnography takes time; discipline to persevere and record hundreds of observations/interviews; and courage to move out of comfort zones that, for the missionary, become enmeshed even far away from home.

Even though good ethnography is just the beginning of what cultural anthropology has to offer, it is a valuable way to begin holding the missionary accountable for the results of the sowing he or she is doing. If we understand that Jesus' parable focuses just as much on the careless work of the sower as on the quality of

the soils, then we can begin to rework the structures of our mission frameworks and see a qualitative change in the harvest of souls devoted to him.

Conclusion

Christian history has seen many missionaries pass through ports, fly across oceans, and ride side-saddle on motorbikes in an effort to take literally Jesus' commission to go, teach, and baptize. For the most part, sincere missionaries have a significant motivation: their compassion for the lost and their love for the only One they are convinced can save. Their methods and plans have been creative; their passion for the holy word of God unmatched.

But twenty-first-century missionaries cannot simply follow blindly the status quo of previous generations. New global realities and a fresh look at Christ's words make it imperative that we lead the way in studying and truly understanding people in addition to understanding God and his word.

If our first priority is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our second priority is to love our neighbors as ourselves, then it is our first priority to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbors as themselves while studying what love looks like to our neighbors and how the neighbors will receive love.

Neighbors will not be passively learned—they must be actively studied, researched, and interviewed. Here is where cultural anthropology and current missions must meet: in the waiting room of careful methodology where the missionary actively and methodically learns more about his or her neighbor before rushing into blind or uninformed decisions about loving him or her. Only then will the neighbor understand and (even better!) firmly grasp that love.

Other key questions remain to be answered in the largely exclusive fields of cultural anthropology and Christian missions. Even so, the conclusion remains the same: the sower who knows not only his or her seed, but his or her soil and how to take care of it is a kingdom force to be reckoned with, indeed.

Endnote

1. Philip Jenkins estimates that there will be 2.6 billion people who call themselves Christians in the world by 2025 (Jenkins 2002, 2-3).

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Anne Blythe (pseudonym) is associate director of an organization working within Muslim contexts. She is a graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Cedarville University and has lived, worked, and/or studied in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

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