

Journeying with Jesus towards the Indivisible Gospel:

Evangelism and Social Justice Entwined

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I have been living in cross-cultural ministry situations for most of my adult life, close to thirty years now. During this period there have been many issues that practitioners and armchair critics and scholars alike have argued about. Some seem inconsequential and others deeply affect the Kingdom of God. Perhaps the most significant tension has been in what is usually categorized as “evangelistic gospel” versus “social gospel,” with attempts to harmonize them “holistically.” It seems to me that the debate has largely waned while the reality of differences among practitioners has remained.

I write this essay from the perspective of having started as “evangelistic” and now struggling to be “holistic.” Without downplaying the significant differences in how Christ followers understand what our Master calls us to, I recognize that all these terms have a wide range of meaning to their users, and some of our difficulties are often semantic.

I also write this essay as a musing more than as an argument or defense. I have been blessed to be around many types of missionaries, of cultures, and of worldviews. I have grown. I am less sure of some things and even more certain about others. I value further learning and want to dialogue and partner with other practitioners from across the spectrum of Kingdom workers. So when I tell the following story and some of its outworking, it is more to invite reciprocal stories from people engaged in cross-cultural ministry than to argue with them.

Anne and I, in the early nineties, were living among the Mixtecs of southern Mexico in the isolated Sierra Madre Mountains, when we had an encounter with another young Canadian couple. We met them in the large market town one passed through to get to Yuvinani, the village we called home. They

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worked with one of the most respected Mennonite agencies that does “social justice ministry.” They were from Ontario (my province), they were our age, and it seemed like we could become friends, especially as we were involved in similar work. This is not an area of Mexico that attracts outsiders, and even fewer yet that care to make the effort to work with the indigenous people. After the first few minutes of excited greetings and inquiries of origin, talk naturally turned to what each of us was doing in southern Mexico (they were engaging a different group). They explained about helping to build latrines, teaching to boil water and researching ways to store cattle feed for the long dry winters. Then we described living in Yuvinani, learning the difficult tonal language, and sharing stories from God’s Word.

In just seconds this couple’s demeanor changed drastically, and the wife’s face turned deep red, and she angrily spit out: “How dare you try to change these people’s ancient spirituality!” After a very uncomfortable minute we were able to talk a bit about the issue, but it was clear we were no longer welcome, and we excused ourselves and walked away, puzzled and feeling a sense of loss.

We have returned to this conversation and its implications, time and again, during the past years as experience and thought have matured us.

Anne and I met in Honduras in the late eighties, both preparing to live cross-culturally among unreached peoples (distinct ethnic groups with no Christians). We agreed that we wanted to proclaim the Gospel. We understood that to mean: good news that God has come among us, he is good, he loves us, he wants a relationship with us, he is not the one putting up barriers to a relationship, and he is providing the means to restore relationships. We wanted to talk about how Jesus reveals his father in unique ways that are meant to be rest for the weary and burdened.

We knew how much this truth mattered in our own lives, and how God was changing and growing us as we walked with him. We enjoyed living among people different than the cultures we grew up in, and we seemed to be reasonably capable of undertaking this life-long endeavor.

We are both from movements that are clearly evangelical. Anne had the advantage of growing up in the middle of a “church planting movement” in Honduras. Her father pioneered the training of mature men in their own homes in ways that they could easily pass on to others. I had the blessing of being discipled, over a three-year apprenticeship in Honduras, through bi-vocational leadership training. My mentor trained local church leaders both as pastor/elders and as tradesmen. He taught guitar building, and I introduced artisan wood-turning for the tourist shops.

During this time neither of us had much direct contact with “social justice

ministries.” Coming from a Mennonite Brethren background, I would have described us as “Evangelical Anabaptists.”

Of course we were aware of Christian agencies with goals other than or beyond sharing the gospel. Anne had graduated from Wheaton College, and I had been around Mennonite Central Committee, and other groups. Honduras certainly had its share of such NGOs.

And we had witnessed the practical outworking of the gospel message. We had seen people’s lives change for the better in physical ways we hadn’t directly addressed. We had helped many people with their physical needs, and even devoted time and finances when it seemed appropriate. It’s just that we saw that as an outworking of the first; a lesser, or younger, sister to evangelism. I think back then we thought of our efforts as a means to gain trust so that we could get to the “real” work. And if we had to choose, of course we preferred proclaiming. The term “holistic” was starting to be popular in the eighties, and we embraced some aspects of the idea, but we still had few other ways to think about this.

In 1992 we arrived in Mexico, looking for an unreached people group among the indigenous of the southern regions. There were hundreds of groups, with millions of people among them. We ended up living among the Metlatonoc Mixtec people of Guerrero (a group that in the late nineties was deemed to be the poorest of all Mexico), spending our first years concentrating on language learning and acculturation. We were hosted for a couple years by the only evangelical church in the entire area of eighty thousand people. However, we also migrated for five years back and forth to the agriculture fields of Sinaloa in northwest Mexico, where the Mixtecs worked seasonally to gain much desired hard cash.

This concentration on language learning, understanding worldview and adapting our lives to flourish among them helped us avoid some common pitfalls such as imposing our leadership or starting programs that created dependency. Looking back, I am very thankful that our evangelical mentors understood Christ’s incarnation deeply enough to encourage us to take significant time to live among the Mixtecs before getting to the “real” work. In fact, we had been trained to think of this whole period as just as much proclamation as any subsequent part might be. The Brewsters, in their LAMP (Language Acquisition Made Practical) approach, talk about “Language Learning as Ministry”, and “Community is My Classroom.” They helped many evangelicals take their first steps towards “holistic” ministry, without most of them realizing it.

During this beginning period of intense learning, we were predisposed to withhold judgment about Mixtec life and worldview, realizing that we would

only have done so with far too little understanding for our assessments to be either correct or helpful. Of course, we wrestled with this, struggling to sort out what from our own background was real, true, and necessary for other cultures. Physical or comfort aspects of our culture were relatively easy to hold lightly, but ideas, especially spiritual ones, were harder to let go.

We were raised, as evangelicals, to think of Truth as immutable, applicable for all people at all times. Evangelicals also had a hard time distinguishing between Truth and our perception of truth. Later, we came to see the application of this idea as a product of the modern era rather than as anything inherently Biblical. But for those first years of adapting, this was perhaps the most significant life-changing part of our journey. At some points, as we examined previously unassailable tenets of our worldview, it seemed that we had been raised in a “house of cards” whose shaky foundations now seemed in danger of bringing down everything with them.

Among our new Mixtec friends, where so much was different from what we were used to, we had the opportunity to ponder and pray about what truth they needed to hear, and how we might be the bearers of it. We processed together what really mattered here, for people who had no Bible (in their own language), no Judeo-Christian underpinnings, and no sweep of history leading to great blessings of power and wealth.

We learned that the few believers had come to faith through a message so astoundingly simple that it made all the typical fine-tuned pre-packaged Gospel presentations irrelevant. We saw that they made decisions as a group, and we wondered how our “privatized” Gospel could fit that quality. We quickly realized that the distinctions between physical and spiritual were so blurry for them that our prayers and pills were insufficient in times of sickness and calamity. How do you ask “why” questions about a Bible story when your listeners have no practice holding intellectual discussions? What is “quiet time” and “devotions” for people who almost never do anything alone and have no written message from God (and can’t read anyway)? How do you have an orderly prayer time when there is no such thing as “thinking quietly in your head”?

As part of our language and culture learning, in our second year among them (when we had enough of the language to even undertake such a thing), we spent a few weeks interviewing all the believers, asking them what difference it made to them now that they were on the Jesus path. In addition to repeated comments about the men not beating their wives and daughters, they also were adamant that they no longer lived in fear of the spirits.

Mixtecs are what Westerners refer to as animists: people who entwine spiritual and physical forces such that everything that is tangible is rooted in the

unseen. These forces (what we would call "spiritual forces") can range from benign to evil, discreet to generic, personal to simple energy, etc. The Mixtecs' cosmology has numerous spirits, with the Rain God dominating. All of them are at the best, capricious, and at worst, malevolent. The Mixtecs understand the hardships of their world as direct actions of these gods, and any small favor they have received is only due to the strict observance of whatever ritual or sacrifice they think will placate the gods' wrath.

So the Mixtecs live in continuous fear. This is probably the greatest influence on their entire life. A snake slithers across a perilous path, and they are sure that soon someone will get sick. An owl hoots twice as it flies near a particular tree, and everyone wonders who will die next. After thousands of years of living this way, the ill omens and the talismans to counteract them are endless. And fear is pervasive.

Knowing this gave great weight to the new believers' testimony that now they don't fear the spirits. Why not? Because, simply, Jesus is bigger than any of the others. They didn't come to this conclusion through in-depth studies of the triune God, or his omnipotence, or perusing the Bible. They hadn't gone to a place of dis-believing in the spirits; they just knew that Jesus would protect them. They believed the simple stories they'd heard about Jesus calming the seas and driving out the demons. When they turned to Jesus, he changed both their physical lives and their spiritual lives, because to them, there is no difference.

I highlight this because it sheds light on my conversation with the Canadian couple, and leads to the question I muse about now.

I remember asking the woman, "Do you know any indigenous people? Have you spent time getting to know what they really feel and think?" From what I could gather, the couple had only ever made contact with indigenous people in the market town, and in Spanish. They didn't understand the most basic felt-needs and spiritual reality that the people lived with constantly. They had little awareness of the indigenous people's spiritual need.

Over the decades I have sometimes wondered where this couple ended up, and if their understanding of God's truth had changed. Were they, too, on a journey, undoing western assumptions that had kept them from coming closer to the indigenous people? Did they ever get to the place of feeling their indigenous friends' great fear of the spirit world? Did they grow into any perception that Jesus was the answer to the Mixtecs deepest needs, spiritual as well as physical?

I think that back then we—both couples—ignored parts of the reality of the human condition, each bound by different aspects of our Western tradition.

I haven't had enough opportunities to dialogue with others who started out differently—to hear their story. I hope that some will respond.

I am grateful to our Mixtec hosts for walking with us on our journey toward understanding what is real and what matters to God. While acknowledging how much we still don't get, and how easy it remains to be prejudiced, I know that alongside them we have grown, and we now recognize that Jesus is beyond our divisions. He affects our lives in both physical and spiritual ways, and, really, there is no line between the two, but as the Mixtecs believe, they are entwined.