

BARRED POPULATIONS AND MISSIONARIES

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Many populations in every continent are barred against receiving the Gospel from their Christian neighbours. They are the very ones from whom they cannot or will not receive it. Sometimes the bars are linguistic. Sometimes they are ethnic, or economic, or cultural. But they are there. Hundreds of millions are thus prevented from ever sitting down to the Lord's Supper, being baptized, becoming followers of the Way, and applying the Christian ethic to their social, economic or political structures. The following three theses explore what these multitudes mean for the church as she seeks to obey her Lord and Saviour.



Thesis One

Many churches find it difficult if not impossible to communicate the faith to those with whom they are in daily contact. Or to put it the other way around, many populations of non-Christians steadfastly refuse to receive the Gospel from the Christians in their localities.

Examples of this situation lie all about us. Protestant marginals, for example, in Northern Ireland will not receive the Gospel from Roman Catholic evangelists — and vice versa. Muslims in the Gaza strip are highly unlikely to receive the Gospel from Christian Jews. Upper caste Hindus in India consider it unthinkable that they should receive the Gospel from depressed class Christians. Secular business and professional men in American cities cannot hear the Gospel when presented by Christians belonging to plumbers' unions. White pagan Alabamans are unlikely, to say the least, to receive the Gospel from black Christians there. In Bombay, marginal Syrian Christians (Orthodox, Roman, and Mar Thoma) are effectively barred from receiving the Gospel from practicing Christians of Mahar background.

Bars are especially strong because receiving the Gospel almost always means joining a fellowship. The invitation to become a follower of Christ, usually means "become a follower *along with us*". The decision to become a Christian is therefore not merely a religious decision but also a social decision. It is therefore clear that, as long as they have to depend on getting it from their neighbours, huge populations are barred from the Gospel. Their neighbours

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are precisely the ones from whom they will not receive it, whose fellowship they will not join.

Even in populations barred against receiving the Gospel from a given group of Christians, an occasional convert may be won. Peculiar circumstances enable him to become a Christian. Perhaps he has been rejected or severely disciplined by his comrades. Perhaps he has fallen in love with a member of the church. Perhaps some luminous act of a Christian has persuaded him that everything he counted valuable is, indeed, refuse. He becomes a Christian consciously rejecting his family and kinfolk, his culture and his society and can, therefore, influence his society only slightly. But this fact does not justify a view that "becoming a Christian" is exactly this rare process of finding a way around the social locks and bars. For the great majority of converts, following Christ has not meant rejecting culture and family. It did not mean this for any of the apostles, though all of them, no doubt, came so greatly to love the Lord that they would have rejected culture and family had that been necessary. The church must not define conversion as joining another culture or another economic, educational, or political unit. That on occasion conversion does mean this is regrettable, not required.

The inability of non-Christians to receive the Gospel from the Christians they know does not, of course, excuse Christians from making every effort gently to remove the bars and open the locks. This is their clear duty and high privilege. Roman Catholic Christians in Ulster, for example, should make every effort to become so loving, so humanly acceptable to Protestant marginals that these latter would gladly receive Christ and become Christians in the Church of Rome. Possibly the Roman Catholics would renounce their political goals and their distinctive Catholic culture (all parts of it not required by their Church as essential Christianity) in an effort to make themselves effective channels of the grace of God.

Thesis one maintains therefore that a normal part of the human situation, found in all ages and appearing in all cultures and levels of society is an inability or a deep seated unwillingness to accept the Gospel from segments of the population who have become Christian.

Though the power of Christ does break through on occasion to a few individuals, though the convert should love Christ so supremely that he would be willing (if necessary) to renounce his culture and his family, and though existing Christians should never use this inability as an excuse for no evangelism, *the inability remains a major feature of the human landscape. It blights hundreds of millions of men and women.*

Thesis Two

Since many populations are locked and barred to receiving the Gospel from the Christians in their neighbourhoods and cultures, it is God's will for Christians and churches from *other* neighbourhoods and cultures to send Gospel-proclaiming, church-multiplying missionaries to them.

Missionaries by definition are not only Gospel-proclaimers, but messengers who deculturize themselves and deliberately plant congregations *of the other culture*. These congregations speak that language, live on that economic scale, cherish those values, practise those customs, go forward under their own leaders, and spread their kind of churches in their own kith and kin.

Missionaries are supported from the home base for years or decades. They are not dependent on non-existent or recently established congregations. They can continue to advocate the Christian faith during the periods in which a new cultural form of the church is being born. This new form (which must be both truly biblical and harmonious with the new culture) frequently takes a long time to develop. During these years propagation of the Gospel is assured by missionaries. With them, work can go forward systematically. New Christians can be grafted into new units of the Body of Christ while remaining authentically themselves. Years of support of missionaries are of the essence of the task of the church toward non-Christian populations.

Missionaries are of every colour, race, and land. They are in no sense emissaries of the West, though in the last two hundred years they have come predominantly from the West. Missionaries are being sent from many lands. They are of many levels of education and economic power. What makes them missionaries is precisely that they go to plant churches of other languages and cultures, precisely that they deculturize themselves, precisely that they have been called by God to the difficult task of developing a new variety of Christian, who speaks another language, practises another set of customs, holds another scale of values, transmits another pattern of life, and creates within each culture a more Christian social order.

The Anglican Consultative Council in 1971 in its report on Mission and Evangelism was referring to missionaries meeting these barred populations when it wrote,

The work of bringing men into personal commitment to Christ proceeds in two ways. There is the way in which the church grows by the steady influence and attraction of its presence upon the members of the human community in which it is set. And there is also the deliberate going beyond to *those who are not, or cannot be touched by the church as it is. Such people can be touched only by those who are willing to risk losing themselves in another and alien community.* [italics mine]

Missionaries are not sent across frontiers merely to aid unfortunates on that side, to help create more humane living conditions, to mediate the best of their civilization to other civilizations, or to promote world friendship and a juster social order. All these good ends to be sure, will be achieved, some intentionally and some unintentionally. As the divine life flows into ten thousand new cells of Christ's Body, especially if good outcomes are consciously sought, all sorts of good outcomes may confidently be expected. Missionaries are sent to establish cells of reborn men and women, men and women who have been saved by grace and that not of themselves, lest anyone

should boast. But these cells will be distinctively of *that* people. They will not be pale imitations of the cells of the sending church — be that Korean, Congolese, Mexican or Scandinavian.

Missionaries are not necessarily welcomed. The fact that they deculturize themselves, learn the language of their land thoroughly, master the intricacies of the culture, and consciously seek to establish indigenous congregations helps secure them a welcome; but it does not guarantee it. They carry on their work of making Christ known, loved, and obeyed, whether they are welcomed or not. The hundreds of millions who are unable to receive the Gospel from their neighbours — if they are to hear the Gospel at all — will have to hear it from advocates whose message sounds strange and even threatening. Missionaries must be prepared to share in the obloquy of St Paul who was so frequently stoned and driven out of town.

Missionaries will normally work in happy fellowship with existing denominations in the country to which they go. They are not preaching some other Christ. They serve a common Master. They love the same Redeemer. They are parts of the same Body. These truths bear on the church as well as on the missionary. If God sends some missionary from Japan, let us say, to Pasadena where I live and where at least half the people are not affiliated with any denomination, I and my church should welcome him and aid him in his work. It may be that God will call him to work with existing Christians and through them reach non-Christians. It may be that God will direct him to work with some segment of the non-Christian population which existing Christians are not reaching and cannot reach! In either case it is normal for him to receive the approval, blessing and fellowship of the existing denomination or congregation.

Yet, common sense must rule here too. Suppose, for instance, that my denomination is the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States and the missionary is a Filipino belonging to the Foursquare Pentecostal Church of the Philippines. Or (to shift the scene to Zaïre) suppose that the existing church is the Kimbanguist and the missionary belongs to Jehova Shammah, the denomination established by Bakht Singh of India. In these cases, the amount of approval, blessing, and fellowship the missionary will receive will be small. Should he therefore cease proclaiming Christ and go home? The Indian to India, and the Filipino to the Philippines? Obviously the answer is "No". The tremendous number of men and women who have not heard the Gospel, the thousands of segments of populations who never see a Christian combine to make it unthinkable that only missionaries who work through existing churches be encouraged to keep on with their God-given task. Working through existing churches is one good way, but only one. It often does not reach the locked and barred populations.

The key consideration is not that missionaries work in harmony with existing churches — though that desirable end will often be achieved. The key consideration is that Christ be proclaimed to those who have not known him and

that new cells of living Christians be established across all frontiers. As soon as possible there should be a church in each community (in each thousand of earth's population?) in all the world. Many will still reject the Lord; but everyone will have the opportunity to hear the Gospel effectively from his own kind of people, in his own tongue, from his intimates. This is the great goal to which missionary effort is directed.



Thesis Three

The strategy of missions recently popular with some Christians is inadequate and should be supplemented. It vaguely senses that many populations are locked and barred against accepting the Gospel from their neighbours and proposes that in correct missions, local churches remove the bars and locks by emphasizing solidarity with non-Christian neighbours, quiet Christian presence, and cooperative working at common humane goals. This recently popular strategy hopes that as this is done, polarization will be avoided, channels of communications will be opened, and men will — entirely outside of formal acceptance of Christ — find themselves joined together by a common humanity. Then, maybe, they will listen to the Gospel from their neighbours whom they have come to know and love. With some populations, only this strategy of missions is possible. Then it is correct. In those populations it should be employed.

Furthermore with all populations, this strategy may be used under some circumstances and with some individuals. Even in the midst of a people movement to Christ, the Christian advocate seeks solidarity with those who have yet to believe and to work with them at common tasks.

With truly barred populations, what this strategy usually achieves, however, is only cordial relationships. Hearers do not accept Jesus Christ. They are not baptized and incorporated in congregations. The very occasional converts are added to *existing* churches. These, be it remembered, are sealed off congregations. When the convert joins them, he does not open his people to the Gospel. Rather he drives his people farther away. They think of Christians as those who "snatch away our loved ones."

Christians practising this strategy should realize its limited nature. They should see that it cannot effectively reach great masses of men and women in every continent. They should therefore *supplement it to the barred populations*. For example about 12,000 non-Christian Chinese a year come into California. These, partly by language and partly by economic condition and culture, are beyond the reach of existing American congregations. Even when

such congregations are made up of third and fourth generation Chinese (who worship in English and are highly educated and reasonably wealthy), the social distance between them and the immigrants is great. The strong Chinese congregations in Asia are sending missionaries to disciple the immigrants. Their missionaries, while they cross the ocean, work among people of their own culture. Paul was such a missionary. Thousands more can be and should be commissioned and sent today.

On occasion, missionaries will be sent across geographical boundaries to reach a people of a different culture. For example, if the Chinese Presbyterians on Taiwan wanted to, they could commission one of their members and send him to the United States to plant Caucasian Presbyterian congregations. He would have to learn English well, and live in such a fashion that Caucasians would hear what he was saying. Furthermore, he would be careful to plant indigenous American churches and raise up American ministers, turn over to them, and go on to plant other Caucasian congregations. It has not been done, but it could be in today's climate. Hindus are planting Hindu congregations. Christians could plant Christian churches.

The barred populations of mankind comprise all those multitudes who because of language, distance, culture, racial enmity, economic status, ethnic jealousies, or other causes cannot receive the Gospel from nearby churches and Christians. Barred populations exist on every continent and in every country and total at least a quarter of all mankind. The church as she seeks to obey her Lord must find ways to make Christ known behind the bars. There too the power of God to salvation, to righteousness, and to eternal life will bring joy and justice and peace to the sons of men.

The obvious messengers to the barred populations of mankind are missionaries from all races and denominations. Just as in the old days missionaries went to populations which were prevented from hearing the Gospel because of distance, oceans, deserts, mountain ranges or unknown tongues, exactly so in these days missionaries must be sent to populations which are prevented from hearing the Gospel by more intangible but even more effective factors.