THE INCARNATIONAL WAY

The Christian College's Role and Responsibility in International Engagement and Evangelism

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Introduce Theme of this Symposium

This International Engagement Symposium has been designed for Christian colleges seeking to increase their interactions with cultures outside of the United States. Toward that end, this symposium will outline basic approaches to international engagement, in two ways:

1. Recruiting and providing support services for international students – students who *come* to our institutions.
2. Selecting and developing outstanding education abroad programs and creating the necessary services that enhance the preparation, cross-cultural learning, and post-program reflection and analysis necessary for developing intercultural communication skills and an expanded worldview for Christian global citizenship for our students who are *going* to other countries.

The first process involves *receiving* students; the second involves *sending* students. Our task this morning is to explore the unique role the Christian college and university has in international engagement and evangelism – and I would add the essential binding thread to these two tasks - intercultural education.

I first need to address a few points in regards to the title of this presentation in order to set the stage for my talk:

1. I think that the Christian college does indeed have a vital role and responsibility in both international engagement and intercultural education.
2. I think the Christian college also has both an important *educational* role and a sacred responsibility in evangelism… but perhaps not in they way that many Christians, particularly from the United States, may think. The term *evangelism* comes with a whole lot of baggage - mixed messages, unbiblical definitions,

ethnocentric communication, poor practices, and cross-cultural insensitivity… exactly the opposite meaning of the word and God's intentions. For these, and many other reasons, it is critical that I define evangelism as presented in Scripture. Evangelism comes from the Greek word *evagelion,* which means "Good News." Consequently, evangelism means the *act of sharing Good News*; not *bring* Good News, but rather *sharing* the Good News by *revealing* where Jesus is already at work in every culture (Woodley 2001:88).

3. I also think that the two parts of this title - international engagement and evangelism – *do not* automatically go together for the Christian college. Although I *do* think that the two *should* go together. For Christian colleges – Christ-centered institutions of higher education - international engagement and evangelism – sharing Good News - should be vitally, essentially, and necessarily connected… intertwined. BUT this connection should be done carefully, humbly, intentionally, thoughtfully, and responsibly…. For Christian colleges, if our international engagement doesn't share good news in both its message and practice it is not evangelism.

And this is where I will focus this presentation – on making this marriage between international engagement, intercultural education, and evangelism.

Introduction

The great anthropologist of the early 20th century, Bronislaw Malinowski wrote an article in 1929 entitled "Practical Anthropology" that challenged anthropology to move beyond the sterile confines of academia and enter the world where cultures were clashing with one another, and where colonialism was impacting indigenous cultures. I would like to

echo Malinoski's challenge with a twist by calling Christian colleges to move beyond the sterile confines of their isolated Christian academic communities – the "holy huddle" – and enter this world where cultures and religions clash with one another and where, sadly, neocolonialism in the form of U.S. cultural, economic, political, and military power is impacting people all over the globe. Perhaps now more than ever we need students, faculty, staff, and graduates who are willing to venture into the world in order to *learn* how to see where God's Spirit is already at work in the world; to *learn* how to partner with brothers and sisters from other countries and cultures, that is nurture reciprocal relationships for participating in God's on-going work in the world; and to *learn* how to more effectively and lovingly share the Gospel – the Good News – of Jesus.

My goal this morning is to remind us of the present need for the Christian college's engagement in the world, while at the same time exploring a paradigm for engagement that reflects the character of God. I contend that the incarnation, that is God "enfleshed" in the person of Jesus, is our model, in addition to our theological and missiological foundation for international engagement, intercultural education, and evangelism.

The Need for International Engagement by the Christian College

One of the most prominent features at the start of the 21st century is globalization, which has led to a greater sense of interdependence and interconnectedness than ever known before. While this has led to tremendous advances on many fronts, the prevalence of violence around the globe has also heightened people's awareness of their differences and the need to understand each other in order to overcome the great challenges which face everyone with regard to human oppression, poverty, racism, disease, malnutrition, illiteracy,

environmental degradation, and violence. In light of these international concerns, the need for the engagement of Christian colleges in educating students toward a global level of citizenship and intercultural competence is of critical importance.

In our day, the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. continue to ring true: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (1964:79). My colleagues at Augsburg College, Ann Lutterman-Aguilar and Orv Gingerich, remind us that over the past forty years, many educators throughout the world have tried to help people understand this interconnectedness and to help weave a garment of global awareness and mutuality by creating cross-cultural networks of understanding through the promotion of intercultural education so that people worldwide might work together for the creation of a more just and sustainable world (Gingerich and Lutterman-Aguilar 2002:41).

Evangelism in an Age of Globalization

In the hope of creating a more just and sustainable world, Christianity proclaims a unique and hope-filled message of Good News for people in every generation and in every culture. The meaning of the message is bound by neither time nor space. Intended to meet the needs of everyone, the Gospel proclaims a universal message of transformation - peace, justice, and abundant life for people in every culture. A problem develops, however, when we attempt to engage in evangelism, that is, communicate our understanding of the universal meaning of the Gospel, through cultural forms that are bound by time and space (Whiteman 1984:275).

Because all human beings are created in the image of God, and belong to the same species, there is significant human commonality for people everywhere - as they strive to meet their basic human needs for food, shelter, security and struggle to be affirmed and to belong. But we must also remember that this common root has generated an impressive diversity of cultural expressions and tongues.

"Good missionaries have always been good anthropologists," is the opening line of Eugene Nida's classic text, Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions, published nearly a half century ago (1954). I think Nida's comment is still profoundly true and gives us important insights into the role of the Christian college in cross-cultural evangelism in this age of globalization.

God's mission to the world in the present era of globalization takes on forms that are very different from yesterday's missionary activity. In fact, appropriate forms of mission and evangelism today are so different from yesterday that some people believe that because we are becoming a global village, we no longer need the insights and experiences from cross-cultural education that help us understand and appreciate cultural differences. Missiologist Darrell Whiteman says, "The erroneous assumption is that the world is quickly melding into a homogeneous global village with capitalism as its economic engine and English as its language of discourse. But this is not happening, at least not very quickly. Cultural diversity is heightened, not flattened" (Whiteman 2003:35). And so I will argue that this age of globalization needs the engagement of the Christian college in cross-cultural education and proclaiming the promise of the Gospel as much, if not more, than any previous time in history.

The Incarnational Way

I now come to what I call the "incarnational way" connecting international engagement, intercultural education, and evangelism. The Incarnation should be both our model and the theological foundation that informs our engagement in God's world. As a theological concept the Incarnation is about God becoming human, but in the mystery of the Incarnation God did not become a generic human being. God became Jesus the Jew, shaped and molded by first century Roman-occupied, Palestinian-Jewish culture. This meant that Jesus spoke Aramaic with the working class dialect spoken around Galilee. He avoided eating pork and other foods prohibited by the Torah. He believed the earth was flat and the center of the universe with the sun revolving around it. Jesus did not know that germs cause disease because germs would not be "discovered" for at least 1,870 years. In other words, Jesus was thoroughly shaped by his Jewish culture at that particular time and in that particular place. The God of the universe was revealed through Jesus who was embedded in a particular culture.

The Apostle Paul, a world learner and evangelist, writes in Philippians 2:6-8:

> Although he always had the nature of God, he did not think that by force he should try to remain or become equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had and took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death - his death on the cross.

Ogden Nash in his whimsical style once wrote, "How odd of God, to choose the Jews." One of my mentors-from-a-distance, Tony Campollo (a good Italian-American) from Eastern University has been known to ask, "Do you know why God chose the Jews and didn't become an Italian? Scripture tells us, 'He humbled himself!'"

But God did choose to humble himself and become a Jew at a particular point in time to reveal something about God's character. John Donne, in his Holy Sonnet has written,

“T'was much that man was made like God, long before. But that God should be made like man, much more.”

In the preface to Jesuit John Haughey's book, The Conspiracy of God: The Holy Spirit in Us we read:

> With justification, the author points out that in the past we have given in to the tendency to present the mystery of Jesus in terms of a Divine Theophany - God coming to us under human appearance rather than from *among* us in the mystery of the Incarnation. We must meet the authentic Jesus, a man among men, conditioned by the relativity of time and space as men always are (Haughey 1973:7).

The Incarnation tells us something important about God. God chose an imperfect culture with its limitations for making known God's supreme Revelation. From the beginning of humanity God has been reaching out to human beings embedded in their different cultures. And God's plan for the salvation of the world has been to use ordinary human beings, like us, to reach others who are immersed in a culture different from our own. *The Incarnation tells us that God is not afraid of using culture to communicate with us.*

S. D. Gordon once said, "Jesus is God spelled out in language human beings can understand." This language that human beings can understand is the language of human culture. In this way, the Incarnation shows us that God has taken both humanity and culture seriously. Just as the Incarnation tells us something about God's character, it also becomes our model for international engagement and cross-cultural evangelism in our own time. In the same way that God entered Jewish culture in the person of Jesus, we must be willing to humbly enter the culture of the people among whom we will live, learn, and serve; speaking their language – the key to unlocking their values and perspectives, and adjusting our lifestyle to theirs… in order to understand their worldview and religious values, and to work, laugh and weep with them.

But how do we do that in cultures that are so different from our own? We cannot go back into the womb and be born again in another culture! This is where the powerful living and learning experiences and insights from intercultural education come to bear on our educational paradigms and Christian evangelism. I submit that without the living and learning experiences and insights of well-planned international and intercultural education that helps us understand and appreciate cultural differences, we will automatically revert to our ethnocentric mode of interpretation and behavior, both in our international encounters and our Christian evangelism. We will continue to fall into the cultural trap of assuming that what works well in our own culture will also work well in a different culture, although it seldom does. We will tend to assume erroneously that all human beings see the world essentially the same as we do, although they seldom do. We will likely believe that cultural differences are not that significant since we are all human beings created in God's image, although nothing could be further from the truth.

Cultural differences are significant, very significant, for theological reasons as much as practical ones. The various cultures of the world are gifts of God's grace. (Let me repeat that point for clarity: The various cultures of the world are gifts of God's grace… to us all!) We get this picture of the importance of cultural diversity in Revelation 7:9. St. John writes:

> I looked… and there was an enormous crowd - no one could count all the people! They were from every culture, tribe, nation, and language. And they stood in front of the throne and of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding branches in their hands (Revelation 7:9).

One may ask, how did John get this vision? How did he draw his conclusion that this crowd around the throne of God was so incredibly diverse? He must have seen the many cultural and linguistic differences apparent among the people. So… and this is an important point, *the image we get here is one of cultural diversity, not cultural uniformity*. People from

every ethno-linguistic group will surround the throne of God, worshipping God, not in English, or even English as a second language, but in their own language shaped by their own worldview and culture. The view we get of the Kingdom of God is a multicultural view, not one of ethnic uniformity. Cultural diversity around the throne of God is united in praise to God as the Lord of Life, but it is expressed through a diversity of languages, cultures, and worldviews. And we can count on hearing about 6,809 languages around that throne! (Grimes 2000). One of the things we should admire most about the Gospel is its ability to speak within the worldview of every culture on earth. And this to me is the empirical proof of the Gospel's authenticity!

The same process of Incarnation, of God becoming a human being, occurs every time the Gospel crosses a new cultural, linguistic, or religious frontier. If the mission of God – God's engagement in the world - was achieved by the Incarnation of Jesus, and Jesus in turn said to his disciples and to us, "As the Father has sent me into the world so send I you into the world" (John 20:21), then *what does this mean for a model of intercultural education, international engagement, and cross-cultural evangelism?*

I think we can assume that we are bound to work within the limitations of the cultural forms of the people to whom we are sent. This is not rigid or static because cultures change, but it means we start with the confines and limitations, as well as opportunities, imposed by other cultures. We start with where people are, embedded in their culture, because this is where God started with us in order to transform us into what God wants us to become. And when we take the Incarnation seriously as a model for international engagement, intercultural education and evangelism it will frequently mean downward mobility. Incarnation for Jesus led to humbling himself, even to death by crucifixion; and this means that we need to prepare

students, faculty, and staff with a spirit of humility and the reality that there will be many things in our lives that we will have to die to - our biases and prejudices, our lifestyle, our agenda of what we want to do for God, and maybe for some of us even our physical life. When we take the Incarnation seriously in Christian education it means we bow at the cross in humility before we wave the flag of patriotism and the parchment of higher learning. The Incarnation as a model for international engagement and evangelism means we must give up our own cultural compulsives and preferences, our own ways of doing education, and we must not insist that the cultural expression of the Gospel in another culture be the same as it is in our own.

So as Christian intercultural educators, what resources do we provide and attitudes do we cultivate in our students – including our faculty and staff – to assist them in understanding what it means to be Incarnational in their approach to cross-cultural engagement? It frequently involves at least the following eight essential ingredients:

1. We approach the people of other cultures as learners, anxious to see the world from their perspective. In becoming learners, we open ourselves to be changed by others in some way.
2. We practice humility, for in their world of culture we have not yet learned the acquired knowledge to interpret experience and generate social behavior, nor share the Gospel.
3. We take cultures seriously, for this is the context in which life has meaning for everyone.
4. We must lay aside our own cultural ethnocentrism – the wall of hostility that divides us (Ephesians 2:14), particularly that which comes with our positions of prestige,

privilege, and power. This is particularly important because we are Christ's ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20).

5. We become vulnerable. Our defenses will have to go, and we'll have to rely more on the Holy Spirit than our own knowledge and experience.
6. In our engagement, we make every effort to identify with people by intentionally immersing ourselves in their culture - living among them, loving them, and learning from them.
7. In sharing the Gospel, we start with people where they are, embedded in their culture. And this point connects with the previous ingredients for it frequently requires the humility and vulnerability of "downward mobility," that is, letting go of our privilege and power, particularly that which comes with formal higher education.
8. We discover, from the inside, how Jesus is the Answer to the questions they ask, and to their felt needs… so that we better know *what* the *evangelion* – the Good News – is we should share.

Conclusion

In summary and conclusion, we have explored the implications for an incarnational approach to international engagement, intercultural education, and evangelism. And I have advocated that the Incarnation must shape both the role and responsibility of the Christian college. The Incarnation is a model that helps us make the important connections between cross-cultural learning and evangelism. Without engagement and education rooted in cross-cultural understanding and reciprocity – the incarnational approach - we will miss the richness of other cultures, for one who knows only one culture, knows no culture

(Augsburger 1986:18). In this regard, Alan Cornes goes so far as to state that the greatest value of intercultural education "is not what we learn about exotic cultures that are different from our own, but rather, what we discover about ourselves" (2006).

There is a wonderful Kikuyu proverb from Kenya that captures the blinding ethnocentrism that comes from knowing only one culture, of not knowing our cultural selves. It says, "He who does not travel, believes his mother is the world's best cook." With proper intercultural education we can overcome our ethnocentrism and feast on a smorgasbord of cross-cultural experiences prepared by many good cooks.

I want to close this presentation on the Christian college's role and responsibility in international engagement, intercultural education, and evangelism with an ancient Chinese poem that captures the essence of the Incarnation.

Go to the people,

Live among them,

Learn from them,

Love them.

Start with what they know,

Build on what they have.

This is the incarnational way of international engagement, intercultural education, and evangelism – the way of doing and being in God's world. But we need the insights of theologically and missiologically Christ-centered higher education, the humility of Jesus, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, in order to share the Good News of Jesus in this way.

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