

The Word for the Whole World¹

by

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In 1985 the historian of Christian doctrine, Jaroslav Pelikan, published a brilliant study of the place of Jesus in the history of culture with the title *Jesus through the Centuries*. The opening sentence claims that whatever anyone personally thinks or believes about him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries’.² Beginning with the original Jewish understanding of Jesus as a rabbi, Pelikan traces the changing perceptions of him through two thousand years of Christian growth, development, decline and recovery, before concluding with a chapter bearing the title, ‘The Man Who belongs to the World’. He observes that although Christ’s life and death took place in the Near East, ‘it was as a religion of Europe that his message came to the nations of the world’ – a religion of Europe, ‘both in the sense of a religion *from* Europe and, often, a religion *about* Europe as well’. However, the global spread of Christianity has resulted in a situation in which Jesus now belongs to the world in a new and deeper sense, making it possible ‘to appreciate more profoundly the full scope of the revelation of God wherever it has appeared in the history of the world, in the light of which, in turn, his own meaning acquired more profound significance’.³

¹ This article was first presented at the annual conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theological Society at the International Christian College, in Glasgow, on March 2014.

² Jaroslav Pelikan. *Jesus through the Centuries. His Place in the History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 1.

³ *Ibid*, 229.

On the final pages of this study Pelikan claims that as respect for the organized church has declined, ‘reverence for Jesus has grown’ and he concludes:

[T]here is more in him than is dreamt of in the philosophy and Christology of the theologians. Within the church, but also far beyond its walls, his person and message are, in a phrase of Augustine, a “beauty ever ancient, ever new”, and he now belongs to the world.⁴

In what follows we will attempt to explore the theme of the ‘Word for the Whole World’ by reflecting, first, on the biblical vision of the future of the nations and its development after Christ’s death and resurrection; second, on the transformation of this vision in the era of European Christendom, and the consequences of this momentous change for Christianity and its mission; and third, on the challenges which confront us in the present post-colonial, globalised world in which the lessons of history give rise to deep suspicions concerning the motives underlying any ideology or worldview which aims at universal spread and dominance.

The Bible and the Nations

The vision of a world redeemed, of the nations liberated and brought to worship Yahweh with joy and delight, is present very early in the Bible. The deepest foundations of this vision are to be found in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, a text which is unique in the ancient world, providing a survey of all known peoples and their locations across the world. Claus Westermann describes this as ‘the most forceful and heavily underscored statement of the Bible about God’s blessing, which extends over the whole earth and the whole of human history’. This unique, often overlooked, text means ‘that all people existing in

⁴ Ibid, 232-233.

the present, all of them, belong to the human race that God created... One thing only is said of them – all of them with all their differences go back to one common origin’. Westermann concludes with these words: ‘God’s history with his people went on through the centuries so that his action on Israel’s behalf was of positive significance for other peoples, for humanity’.⁵

The theological meaning of this remarkable Table is closely related to the chapters which follow, so that the reality of the rebellious and fallen condition of the nations, so graphically indicated in the following account of Babel, does not erase, but throws into even more wonderful relief, God’s purpose of grace for those same peoples. When we reach chapter twelve with its seminal description of the call of Abram and the promise that his faith and obedience will ultimately result in the blessing of ‘all peoples on earth’, *we already know who these peoples are!* Divine election is thus, from the very beginning, related to a purpose of universal blessing, and it retains its meaning only so long as those who are called by Yahweh fulfil that purpose by living in obedience to God in the full sight of the surrounding and watching nations.

James C. Scott has tracked the influence of the Table of Nations through the Old Testament and finds it to be pervasive. It is often present in the prayers of the psalmists, as when, in the context of a psalm of lament, the writer suddenly bursts out with the hope that ‘All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, *and all the families of the nations* will bow down before him’ (Psalm 22:27). A close study of the psalms with this theme in mind confirms Scott’s claim that the expectation of the salvation of the nations is pervasive, perhaps nowhere more strikingly than in the jubilant praise at the conclusion of Psalm 67:

May *the peoples* praise you O God;

⁵ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11 - A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984), 528-530.

May *all the peoples* praise you.
May *the nations* be glad and sing for joy,
For you rule *the peoples* justly
And guide *the nations of the earth*.⁶

Scott discusses the influence of the geographical vision of Genesis 10 in texts in Ezekiel, Daniel and Isaiah and, perhaps more surprisingly, in the historical books where the Chronicler is aware of this tradition and can assume that his readers were acquainted with it (1 Chronicles 1:1-2:2). Scott concludes that the Table of Nations shaped Jewish perceptions of the world and its peoples down to the very end of Old Testament times, so that it ‘remained a fundamental point of orientation for thinking about world geography and ethnography, particularly about Israel and her place among the nations’.⁷ Which is to say that the Bible is, from its very first pages, a *word for the world*.

When we turn to the New Testament it is no surprise to discover that a tradition concerning the nations which was so deeply embedded within Israel’s scriptures is no less important to Jesus and his followers. At the climactic point of his ministry Jesus challenges the ethnocentricity and narrow nationalism which had distorted the worship of the Jerusalem temple with words cited from Isaiah and Jeremiah which clearly hark back to the Table of Nations tradition:

⁶ See Psalms 8:1; 9:6; 22:27; 33:8, 13-16; 46:10; 57:9; 65, 2, 5, 8; 66:7-8; 67:4-7; 87:4, 16; 96: 7, 13; 145: 13, 17; 150:6.

⁷ James C. Scott, *Paul and the Nations. The Old Testament and Jewish background of Paul’s Mission to the Nations with Special reference to the Destination of Galatians* (Tubingen: J C M Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1995), 9-10. Richard Bauckham comments, ‘Biblical scholars who usually take history seriously have rarely taken geography equally seriously, but literal and theological geography forms a very significant aspect of the biblical narrative’. See his *Bible and Mission. Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 14.

My house shall be called a house of prayer
For all nations
But you have made it “a den of robbers” (Mk.11:17)

When the risen Jesus commissions his followers with the charge to ‘go and make disciples of all nations’ he again echoes both the ancient promise to Abraham and the geography and ethnography implicit within the description of those nations in Genesis 10. In other words, the mission inaugurated with the resurrection of Christ is no haphazard attempt to win random individuals to faith, but extends to the nations of the earth and anticipates their entrance into the kingdom of God.

The deep conviction that the Word made flesh was of significance for every nation on earth is clearly evident in Paul’s understanding of his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles. Once again, the Table of Nations tradition looms large and the apostle’s missionary strategy to bring in the ‘full number of the nations’ clearly echoes the Old Testament vision of a redeemed world and ‘is influenced by regional geography and ethnography in the Table-of-Nations tradition’.⁸ Nowhere is this more evident than in Romans 15 where Paul repeatedly cites texts indicating God’s purpose to bring the nations to know and worship him, before springing on the Jesus movement in the imperial capital the surprising announcement of his intention to reach Spain with their help and support (15:23-24). Robert Jewett has shown that the letter to the Romans is from first to last ‘a missionary document’ in which Paul seeks to ensure the support of believers in Rome for his bold plan to reach the ‘Barbarians’ at the end of the earth, a mission ‘which would only be credible if the churches in Rome ceased their imperialistic competition with one another under the premise that the

⁸ Scott, *Paul and the Nations*, 135.

gospel of impartial grace shatters all claims of superior status or theology'.⁹

It is important to note that the Bible's vision of the destiny of the peoples of the world is developed and articulated *over against other visions* with which it is inevitably in conflict. Walter Brueggemann has described Israel's faith as existing 'always in the shadow of empire', and that shadow deepens and becomes ever more menacing with the rise to world power of the Romans and their explicitly political and religious claims to be the agents of salvation for all nations. The controversial nature of a gospel centred on a crucified messiah is particularly clear in John's Apocalypse, where the Table of Nations tradition resurfaces for the final time, challenging the ideology of an empire which claimed to have brought peace and justice to the world and anticipating nothing less than the conversion of the nations, resulting in a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language', worshipping the Lamb and proclaiming loudly: 'Salvation belongs to our God' (Rev. 7:9-11).

The Age of Expanding Europe

The pervasive presence of the vision of the salvation of the nations within the Bible has been a key factor in the missionary character of Christianity and has resulted in the continual resurfacing of a passionate sense of obligation to identify and cross new geographical, cultural and social frontiers with the message of the gospel. For example, in the fifth century we discover Patrick connecting his extraordinary visions in which Irish pagans plead with him to return and 'walk again among us', with biblical texts related to the Table of Nations tradition. In his *Confessio* Patrick writes:

God 'granted me such grace that through me *many peoples* should be reborn in God . . . which the Lord chose from the ends

⁹ Robert Jewett, *Romans A Commentary* [Hermeneia] (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), xv.

of the earth, as he had promised of old through the prophets: . . .
“I have put you as a light among the nations, to be a means of salvation *to the ends of the earth*”.¹⁰

What we discover here is a parallel to the Pauline vocation to reach the furthest limits of humankind, although the geographical location of the Barbarians has now shifted to the new *terra incognita* which in Patrick’s time lay beyond the limits of the ‘civilized’ world. It is no longer Spain but Ireland that marks the extreme limits of the known world. Historian Richard Fletcher quotes Patrick describing himself as ‘a slave in Christ to a foreign people’ and praying that God should ‘never allow me to be separated from His people whom He has won *in the ends of the earth*’. Fletcher says that Patrick was ‘the first person in Christian history to take the scriptural injunctions literally: to grasp that teaching all nations meant teaching even Barbarians who lived beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire’.¹¹

In the following centuries other frontiers within Europe were crossed and the gospel was communicated and translated into new cultural and linguistic contexts until, by the end of the fifteenth century the entire continent had become Christian. Andrew Walls describes how, following the Muslim rise to dominance in the East, a distinctively Western form of Christianity became the primary representation of the faith and was then spread across the surface of the globe in the era of ‘expanding Europe’. Walls observes that while the Protestant Reformation stressed the local, contextual character of the encounter of people with the Word of God, the Catholic reform laid emphasis on its universal character, ‘but unconsciously established its universality on the basis of features which belonged essentially to Western social history’. Thus, despite their significant theological and ecclesiological differences, *both* European forms of the faith, Protestant and Catholic,

¹⁰ Quoted in Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion. From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 85.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 86.

‘belonged unmistakably to Western Europe’.¹² We are back here with Pelikan’s statement that ‘it was as a religion of Europe that [Christ’s] message came to the nations of the world’.

The Christianity which missions carried to the New World during and after the epic voyages of Christopher Columbus was thus internally divided and seriously compromised by its alliance with political powers bent on conquest and enrichment. As Jean Comby says, ‘We cannot isolate the apostolic zeal of the evangelizers from the lure of profit for the navigators’.¹³ Christopher Columbus himself illustrates the strange intermixing of the quest for gold with a conviction that his voyages fulfilled biblical prophecy concerning the evangelization of the world and the end of the age. There is even a hint of the Table of Nations tradition in his belief, expressed during his third voyage in 1498, that the Word of God spoke clearly ‘of these lands’ at the ends of the earth, and that Isaiah had identified Spain as the base from which ‘God’s Holy Name’ would be made known across the world. By this time the widening horizons exposed by the Iberian expeditions meant that the ‘ends of the earth’ had been relocated outside Europe and mission to the nations was becoming inter-continental and global.

There is, of course, a striking contrast between the European missionary movements, both Catholic and Protestant, and that of the early church in that while the latter moved from the periphery of power and glory to the imperial centre, the former accompanied the agents of new empires and inevitably became associated with them. As Walls says, Christianity remained the ‘active religion’ of the nations of Europe during the period of the continent’s political and economic expansion, ‘until by the twentieth century people of European origin occupied, possessed, or dominated the greater part of the globe’.¹⁴ That

¹² Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 20-21.

¹³ Jean Comby, *How To Understand The History of Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 56.

¹⁴ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 21.

same century witnessed the erosion of confidence in the superiority of modern culture, the beginning of a massive recession from Christianity in Europe, and the first signs of a radical rethinking of the relationship between the gospel and modern civilization. At the same time there was an unanticipated and remarkable growth of new forms of Christianity among the peoples who had been the recipients of mission from the West.

The emergence of Christianity across the Global South owed much to the repeated translation of the Bible into vernacular languages, a process which enabled peoples everywhere to hear God speaking in their own tongues, and in the process provided them with an authoritative basis on which to evaluate the form and content in which missionary Christianity had been expressed. An incident described by Lamin Sanneh was replicated again and again wherever the gospel was taken among the nations of the world. An African convert held in his hand a newly translated Bible and confessed that he had previously imagined this book to be a charm with which white people warded off sickness. He had now come to a radically new understanding and, raising the Bible above his head, declared: ‘Now we not only hear with our ears, we see with our eyes, we read it, our children read it... It speaks and will speak to the whole world’.¹⁵

The Gospel in a Globalized World

As we have seen, the geographical horizons of the mission inspired by the biblical vision of the destiny of the nations have repeatedly expanded as the world has opened up. Today we confront the latest challenge posed by the ever-shifting frontiers of knowledge as we seek to relate the gospel to a situation in which we have become aware of the full extent of the one world which all peoples share together on

¹⁵ Lamin Sanneh, ‘Post-Western Wine, Post-Christian Wineskins? The Bible and the Third Wave Awakening’. In William Burrows and Mark Gornik (eds), *Understanding World Christianity. The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 101-102

our beautiful, but fragile, planet. The question which confronts us at this point is precisely how the ancient text of the Bible might speak in the context of a world which appears to be increasingly united by narratives and ideologies which run counter to the biblical vision of the future of the nations.

The answer to that question cannot be discovered by Christians in the northern hemisphere wrestling with the current challenges within the limits of the resources provided by their own, regional and historical traditions. On the contrary, theology and mission must take full account of the 'shift in the centre of gravity' of world Christianity, since as Andrew Walls has observed, perspectives on the Bible and theology emerging from the Global South, often from contexts of poverty on the underside of the process of globalisation, 'are becoming the dominant forms of the faith'. As a result of this we witness 'the appearance of new themes and priorities undreamt of by ourselves or earlier Christian ages'.¹⁶ In other words, as the vision of the Bible and the hope this engenders has spread across the world, penetrating a multitude of cultures and sub-cultures, entirely fresh light has been shed on its meaning as long-familiar texts explode with previously unrecognised power and significance. This process correlates of course with the rise of global Pentecostalism, a religious phenomenon of massive proportions, the significance of which is today recognised by scholars in the secular academy.

There are, I suggest, two critical issues which demand the attention of Christian theology and mission in our globalised world. First, we need to ask how amid all the variety of contextually relevant expressions of the faith, we might (re)discover the coherence, authenticity and unity within a worldwide Christian movement which would enable us to confess together our belief in 'one holy, catholic and apostolic church'? William Burrows expresses this concern with 'catholicity' in a passage worth quoting at length:

¹⁶ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 24.

Studies in “world” Christianity are spreading throughout the academy, and I applaud that. Nevertheless, if these studies do not go deeper into an examination of the catholicity of these churches and promote communion among the world’s churches, they are historical and sociological *religious* studies, not *theological* or *missiological* studies properly so called. And to the extent that catholicity and apostolicity of the church are important, world Christian churches need to be in a dialogical process that revolves around the authenticity of church life, for theology and ecclesiology cannot avoid the responsibility of judging what is genuine and what is spurious.¹⁷

It will not come as a surprise that the author of this passage is a Roman Catholic, but what is perhaps surprising, and certainly significant, is the *manner* in which he defines ‘catholicity’. After quoting Karl Rahner as saying that mission is not ‘the overseas marketing arm of European and American churches seeking “to impose the bourgeois morality of the West on people of different cultures”’, Burrows says that mission deserves a bad press if it is merely ‘the expansion of a given church’s franchise to another place’. Then comes this evangelical-sounding statement: a church ‘rises to the level of a truly catholic member of the world Christian movement and attains the stature of the fullness of church *only when conversion leads to an authentic dynamic of incarnating the spirit and person of Christ*’.¹⁸

¹⁷ William R. Burrows, ‘Conversion: Individual and Cultural’ in William Burrows and others [eds], *Understanding World Christianity. The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, [emphasis added]. Elsewhere another Catholic theologian has identified a *redefined* concept of catholicity as crucial to Christian mission in a globalised world. Robert Schreiter writes, ‘It seems to me that a renewed and expanded concept of catholicity may well serve as a theological response to the challenge of globalization. It can provide a theological framework out of which the Church might understand itself and its mission under changed circumstances’. Robert J. Schreiter, *The New*

This concern with authenticity and catholicity has obvious significance in relation to the burgeoning Christian movement across the Global South, but it applies equally to ‘emerging’ churches in the northern hemisphere where the commendable passion for relevant forms of witness among postmodern people deeply alienated from traditional expressions of faith must be accompanied by an equal concern for authenticity and faithfulness to the traditions of the gospel. *Which is to say that catholicity as defined by Burrows must be a primary concern for world Christianity as a whole in the era of globalisation.*¹⁹

The second area of critical concern relates to the articulation and practice of the gospel in our globalised world. In 1998 the late Kenneth Cragg published a small book with the title *The Secular Experience of God* in which he observed that the received model of mission among European churches had been in crisis for at least fifty years. He suggested that the ‘irreducible “thereness” of plural religions in the life and story of the world gives pause to the old ambition to Christianize the whole’. This statement should not be understood as implying a retreat from mission, but rather as proposing that the practice of *proselytising*, of seeking to make other people Christians in the sense that we are Christians, requiring of them not only conversion to Christ, but painful forms of cultural circumcision involving radical changes of identity and the abandoning of their previous sense of community and tradition, a Christianization in *that* sense, has no place in today’s world. That this is Cragg’s meaning is confirmed by the following arresting sentence: “‘Go ye into all the world’ means more than a travel agency. It means going into the heart of cultures and the depths of creeds and codes as well as into the width of the world’.²⁰ In other words, mission to the nations cannot be restricted to geographical movement, but must

Catholicity. Theology Between the Global and the Local (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 127.

²⁰ Kenneth Cragg, *The Secular Experience of God* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 63.

also involve the critical engagement of the gospel with the great world religions, and a serious theological analysis and critique of the ideology of market economics which now drives the process of globalisation. There are, I suggest, important parallels between the emerging agenda of mission in this century and the vision and practice of the apostle Paul in the context of the Roman Empire in the first century. Then as now, the good news of Christ was announced in language which made clear the challenge it posed to a powerful and dominant ideology, and then as now, those bearing faithful witness to this radically alternative ‘gospel’ expected to face fierce resistance and even violent opposition. The full extent of this challenge is yet to be discovered in the post-Christendom West.

Which brings me to a final comment. There are particular challenges confronting those of us who confess Christ in situations of economic security and material abundance at a time when vast numbers of human beings (including millions of our brothers and sisters in Christ) struggle to obtain the basic necessities required for human existence and dignity. At the end of a brilliant study of the Bible and mission, Richard Bauckham asks this penetrating question:

Can Christianity sufficiently detach itself from its own undoubted collusions with the oppressive metanarratives of western imperialism to remain, between modern grand narrative and postmodern relativism, something else?

It may well be that, only if Christianity in the west becomes a movement of resistance to such evils as consumerism, excessive individualism and the exploitation of the global periphery, can Christianity in many other parts of the world be distinguished

from the west's economic and cultural oppression of other cultures and peoples.²¹

The word written and the Word incarnate remain the hope for the salvation of the whole world and perhaps the era of globalisation presents us with a providential *kairos* in which to display the healing and reconciling power of the grace of God, so becoming a light to the nations and a model of an alternative way of being a human family.

²¹ Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission. Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 97-98. As indicated above, this book contains a careful study of biblical, or sacred, geography.