

The Great Commission: The Global South Meeting the Global North

September 10, 2006

I Corinthians 12:12-13

Matthew 28:16-20

Three weeks from today, about right now, Cheri, Anjali and I will be landing in Chennai, India. As we move forward to that day, our heads are filled with the nuts and bolts of getting everything ready for departure. Occasionally, we will ask ourselves what it will be like when we get there, but most everything is in the here and now. Still, one set of questions has been increasingly creeping into my head. What kind of Christianity will we experience there? How comfortable will we be with it? What new perspectives on faithfulness will we gain? What new insights about the gospel will we learn? How might we be evangelized by our Indian sisters and brothers in the faith?

I remember when Mel and Charlotte Schmidt returned from Mennonite World Conference 2003 in Zimbabwe. On their first Sunday back, Mel told us that he witnessed a new dynamic being born, one in which Mennonites in the global South now outnumber Mennonites in the global North and that it may now be the South's turn to evangelize the North, that we in the North are now the ones needing to have missionaries sent to us by the South. Indeed, we have experienced some of that dynamic here at Hyattsville when Pastora Adelina Zuniga from our sister church in Colombia, Ricardo Esquivia, our brother Tony Brun and others have preached from our pulpit, gently but firmly challenging us from the perspective from the South.

Two thousand years after Jesus issued his Great Commission, spreading the good news of the gospel is still a great need. *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them... and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."* But it may be that now much of the teaching and making of disciples needs to come from the South to those of us in the North.

That may come as both welcome and disturbing news for many of us here at Hyattsville and elsewhere. Few of us would question that we need to be deeply challenged by our brothers and sisters in the South in many ways. One example is how our dependence upon financial and material security keeps us from deepening our dependence upon God. At the same time, how many Christians in the South relate to other matters dear to our hearts, like the place of gay and lesbian Christians in the faith community, can raise real concerns. We might understandably wonder if the explosion of faith in the global South is reactionary at its core.

Two recent articles I've read have helped me think through some of the questions surrounding this South/North dynamic and I want to share with you some of their wisdom this morning. I also want to encourage you to read these articles in their entirety—I think they are that good. If you want to do so, please e-mail me and I will send them electronically to you. The most recent one is from the July 11 issue of *The Christian Century* by Philip Jenkins entitled, "Liberating word: the power of the Bible in the global South." The other appeared in the February 2006 issue of *Sojourners* by Wes Granberg-Michaelson entitled, "Ready or Not: Christianity explodes across the globe." Jenkins is Professor of History and Religion at Pennsylvania State University and in a recent interview in *Atlantic Monthly* he made this startling statement: *"We stand at a historical turning point... that is as epochal for the Christian world as the original Reformation. Around the globe Christianity is growing and mutating in ways that observers in the West tend not to see. Tumultuous conflicts within Christianity will leave a mark deeper than Islam's on the century ahead."* Granberg-Michaelson is General Secretary of the Reformed Church of America, one of the founders of the Christian Churches Together movement and, in the spirit of full disclosure, a good friend of mine from the days in which he was managing editor of *Sojourners* in the late 1970s.

Jenkins begins his piece with an illustration of the tension between North and South Christianity. He writes:

"Gatherings of the worldwide Anglican Communion have been contentious events in recent years. On one occasion, two bishops were participating in a Bible study, one from Africa, the other from the U.S. As the hours went by, tempers frayed as the African expressed his confidence in the clear words of scripture, while the American stressed the need to interpret the Bible in the light of modern scholarship and contemporary mores. Eventually, the African bishop asked in exasperation, "If you don't believe the scripture, why did you bring it to us in the first place?"

I hear clear echoes of this same dynamic in our relationship with conference over our membership practice. Many of us at Hyattsville and elsewhere in the conference feel that complex theological and hermeneutical issues striking at the heart of how we interpret the Bible in the "light of modern scholarship and contemporary mores." Many others in the conference see the clear and unambiguous word of God judging our practice. And I've heard some voices essentially asking, "If you don't believe the clear word of God on this matter, why are you in this conference anyhow"?

Jenkins would not dispute that Christians in the South could benefit from understanding the more complex issues of scriptural interpretation. At the same time, he cautions those of us in the North from too easily writing off Christians in the global South as undereducated in theological matters and even reactionary or hopelessly conservative. To do so, Jenkins argues, would miss a very important dimension and experience of faith in the South from which Christians in the North have much to learn. And, he argues, with the center of gravity of the Christian world shifting further and further south, we had better listen.

According to Jenkins, several factors contribute to a more literal interpretation of scripture in the global South and how that guides their understanding of discipleship. For one thing, the Bible has found a congenial home among communities that identify with the social and economic realities the Bible portrays. Societies that identify with the biblical world feel at home

in the text. Conversely, Kenyan feminist theologian Musimbi Kanyoro gives a warning to the rest of us: "*Those cultures which are far removed from biblical culture risk reading the Bible as fiction.*"

Jenkins lists other factors as well. The average Christian in the world today is a poor person, very poor indeed by the standards of the white worlds of North America and Western Europe. Also different is the social and political status of African and Asian Christians, who are often minorities in countries dominated by other religions or secular ideologies. This historic social change cannot fail to affect attitudes toward the Bible. For many Americans and Europeans, not only are the societies in the Bible—in both testaments—distant in terms of time and place, but their everyday assumptions are all but incomprehensible. Yet exactly the issues that make the Bible a distant historical record for many Americans and Europeans keep it a living text in the churches of the global South.

For many such readers, the Bible is congenial because the world it describes is marked by such familiar pressing problems as famine and plague, poverty and exile, clientelism and corruption. A largely poor readership can readily identify with the New Testament society of peasants and small craftspeople dominated by powerful landlords and imperial forces, by networks of debt and credit. In such a context, the excruciating poverty of a Lazarus eating the crumbs beneath the rich man's table is not just an ancient curiosity.

Jenkins asks Northern Christians to stop reading scripture only from our perspective and try to hear it from the perspective of our sisters and brothers in the South, to try seeing the world and the gospel from their eyes. Read Ruth, for instance, and imagine what it has to say in a hungry society threatened by war and social disruption. Imagine a society terrorized by a dictatorial regime dedicated to suppressing the church. Then read Revelation and understand the core message that whatever evil the world may produce, God will triumph. Read Hebrews and think about how its doctrines of priesthood and atonement might be understood in a country with a living

tradition of animal sacrifice. Take John 10:10, in which Jesus promises abundant life, and think of its bewildering implications in a desperately poor society obviously lacking in any prospect of abundance, or indeed, of any certainty of life. This verse, Jenkins points out, may be the most quoted text in African Christianity, the "life verse" of an entire continent.

Now, he says, recognize that these kinds of readings, adapted to local circumstances, are quite characteristic for millions upon millions of Christians around the world. Arguably in terms of raw numbers, such readings represent the "normal" way for Christians to read the Bible in the early 21st century.

Jenkins then concludes with this: *"I understand...why some northern-world Christians might have concerns about the emerging patterns of global South Christianity, with its charismatic and traditional quality. But the prognosis is nowhere near as bad as [we might] imagine. As [has been] so often in the past, Christianity must be seen as a force for radical change rather than obscurantism, for unsettling hierarchies rather than preserving them."* This movement in the South may indeed be the beginning of shaking up and unsettling the traditional Christian institutions of the North. Are we ready?

Granberg-Michaelson article agrees with much of what Jenkins writes and points out that many evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the South embrace a holistic gospel and see to integrate evangelism and social activism around issues such as HIV/AIDS, poverty and the environment.

He also examines the dynamic of reverse mission by pointing to the Church of Pentecost in Ghana as one example of what is happening throughout the South. In Ghana, the church has 9,300 congregations with 1.3 million members. Just 700 full-time pastors are available to these churches, but 50,000 lay leaders provide the bulk of guidance to these churches. Our brother, Samuel Badasu, is a member of one of these dynamic and energetic churches near the capital of Accra. He told me that they begin worship on Sunday morning at 8 am and end around 6 pm. They

do not take time out to eat and many people walk two hours each way. But it is there, at worship, that they find the spiritual food and energy then need for survival. Ten churches are planted in Ghana each week and Samuel's father, through Mennonite Mission Network, is involved in planting some of those churches. But here's the kicker—the Ghanaian church now sends out missionaries to some sixty countries around the world. Many other countries throughout the world do the same.

Granberg-Michaelson quotes Todd Johnson in the *World Christian Encyclopedia*—“Christianity is steadily moving from this Caucasian, European dominated, modern way of life, even beyond Christianity as an institution...There's no central, unifying narrative.” Granberg-Michaelson then concludes his article by asking and answering this question—How can we ever hope to restore a “unifying narrative” if we aren't listening to each other? And, he reasons, that is exactly the place to begin. In some ways, Granberg-Michaelson reflects, we come back to the place where the ecumenical movement started, and always begins anew: engaging the wildly different and divergent stories of those who, in Paul's words, “were all made to drink from of one Spirit.”

Walter Brueggemann once wrote: “We would as soon wish God were always stable and reliable. What we find is God moving, always surprising us and coming at us from new directions.” Christianity in the global South is no longer dependent upon its sisters and brothers in the global North who have formerly brought the gospel to them. Now, the South is leading the way to a major new expression of global Christianity. To be a missional church, as our denomination encourages us to be, means to see where God is moving and to get on board. Well, God is moving in our sisters and brothers in the global South and those of us in the global North need to get on board and see where the ride is going to take us.

Cheri, Anjali and I go to India hoping we do have something to offer the church there. But much more so, we go to listen to their stories and to learn from our Indian sisters and brothers all that we can about following

Jesus. While we are away, I know Hyattsville Mennonite will continue its rich tradition of listening to voices from the global South, too, and to be evangelized by them.

"For just as the body is one and have many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free [and, I might add, North or South]—and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit."