

LETTER TO NEWLY ARRIVED MISSIONARY COUPLE

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BACKGROUND

Response to newly fielded worker in an emerging country where they face daily poverty and preventable suffering, from someone who had gone before.

QUESTION

How can a powerful, loving and just God allow poverty and suffering?

ANSWER

Regardless of one's theology, the facts remain the same: people and animals suffer disease, injustice, cruelty and death through no apparent cause of their own. Something seems wrong with this state of affairs, for all desire life, health, wealth and kindness.

At the same time, it may surprise us that so many enjoy relatively good health, advantages, and long life, regardless of their behaviour towards others, their environment, beasts and other peoples.

Part of the emotional struggle of Western Christians over human and natural evil derives from Western cultural values not widely shared round the globe:

- a) Individualism.** We feel that individuals deserve justice and that "innocent" individuals should enjoy long lives. Most of the world views individuals as integral parts of groups who should endure hardship along with others. [Your chosen people] tend towards the latter view. According to the NT, in Adam all die (without individual guilt) and in Christ all are made alive (even though they do not deserve it).
- b) Low power distance.** We demand that our leaders provide for the common good and obey our wishes. Most of the world, including [your chosen people], feels that certain families deserve to rule because of their spiritual *baraka*, deserve more wealth and should enjoy unlimited prestige despite their failings.
- c) Unlimited good.** We believe that there is plenty for everybody, that we can create more wealth as needed, and that everybody should have enough along with some to spare. Most of the world believes in limited good, that there is not enough to go round, requiring that wiser folks distribute to the others their fair share.
- d) Pursuit of happiness.** We believe that the purpose of life on earth is to become happy, prosperous and fulfilled. Every hindrance to fulfilling that purpose becomes, by definition, evil. When God seems to deny us what we want, then he seems unjust or inexplicably capricious. Most of the world sees that the purpose of life is more of a pursuit of harmony with the prevailing powers.

Christians who have embraced the cross of Jesus adjust both their beliefs and cultural values:

- We weep over tragedy, delight in mercy, seek peace with all, pray constantly for those in authority, and offer to all God's free gift of forgiveness and of His Spirit, along with hope for a renewed heaven and earth yet to come.
- We are born into a rebellious race that is suffering temporal and eternal consequences. Each individual suffers both corporate and personal consequences, and we accept to suffer along with our fallen race.

- Our Lord is the Just and Good God who hates this state of affairs yet condescended to become one of us, living in poverty showing compassion towards all, suffering an unjust death. So we accept to do likewise.
- We accept to suffer misfortune and injustice as what we humans brought upon ourselves, while seeking to demonstrate the power and love of God by our zeal for good works and by effecting local change through Christian spirituality and social betterment projects.
- We reject the church doctrine of hell as a place of roasting unbaptised babies over the flame pits of hell and affirm that God is entirely just and will always do what is right in the case of every individual. "Will not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?"
- We reject the Islamic doctrine of heaven as a place of carnal delights for religiously devout males and affirm that entrance into the coming Kingdom remains entirely undeserved, reserved for all who repent and trust King Jesus.
- We reject the Jewish doctrine of a God who be unable or unwilling to alleviate the suffering of his creatures. We advocate for a God who remains just while freely offering his love without infringing on his creatures' "right" to refuse his love.
- We reject the rule of gods and demons, binding them and sending them into darkness, thereby freeing up individuals, families and communities to pursue social justice and betterment projects that demonstrate the power of God to intervene in the affairs of men and of beasts.
- We reject fatalism by seeking and sharing insight, knowledge and training that enables repentant humans to transform their societies and environment through an intimate relationship with God and with his world, awaiting the final renewal of everything.
- We reject universalism which changes nothing while compromising both the justice of God, who should forgive without human repentance, and the love of God, who should have done nothing to change things.

REFLECTION

In [your target group of ministry], the evangelicals really have to become more Christian in their theology and in their practice. We must accept to feel the misery of sin, disease, injustice, poverty and death, while demonstrating a life of sufficient joy and holiness, holding forth the Word of Life in the Good News, demonstrating God's interest in folks' needs by our good works and social projects.

Whilst staying at an abandoned mission station in [another country] twenty-some years ago, my children and I went for a walk round the place. Out behind some of the now-empty houses we found them. The graves...of the missionaries' own children. They had died at under ten years of age of illnesses that would not have occurred back home.

The missionaries did not quit, did not grow angry towards God, did not reject the Bible, did not stop praying. They stayed on, grieving for years, pleading for souls, tending to the sick, and preaching the Good News. They grew old, retired, and returned home... to die — in hope of being reunited with their children and with their beloved [people], awaiting the resurrection of the dead.