

Editorial

“The Duty of Discrimination”

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The Lord said to Moses, ‘Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me. And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twisted linen, goats’ hair, tanned rams’ skins, goatskins, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones, and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece. And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it’ (Exodus 25:1-9).

And Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman in whose mind the Lord had put skill, everyone whose heart stirred him up to come to do the work. And they received from Moses all the contribution that the people of Israel had brought for doing the work on the sanctuary.... All the craftsmen who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary came, each from the task that he was doing.... And all the craftsmen among the workmen made the tabernacle.... (Exodus 36:2-3a, 4, 8a).

The construction of the tabernacle, its furnishings, and the priestly garments were monumental in the history of God’s people. Having recently escaped Egyptian bondage, Israel now had tangible assurance of God’s presence with them in the wilderness. Moreover, the tabernacle would end up matching the Egyptian sojourn in terms of longevity, serving as God’s visible residence among Israel until Solomon’s temple succeeded it in yet another covenantally pivotal event (I Chronicles 6:32). Of course, the tabernacle’s pointing to its anti-type—Jesus tabernacling among his people—was arguably its most central role within the historical drama of God’s worldwide redemption.

Several aspects of the tabernacle’s construction are instructive for understanding certain key dynamics of Christian mission—and of themes treated in this January issue’s various articles. One aspect is the set of impressions that the tabernacle, both in design and actual construction, must have made on the Israelites. The eye-popping colors, extensive variety and qualities of materials, and required skill of craftsmanship surely grabbed the Israelites’ attention and admiration. As for this issue of *Global Missiology - English*, I dare say that its contents will make an array of impressions on readers. Mission topics addressed range from missionary training to worldwide ecclesiastical tensions to analyzing movements to Christian theologizing about religious traditions. Books reviewed discuss primal peoples’ wisdom, Southeast Asian Christian missions, and cross-cultural gospel communication. Such a range of themes point to how simply recognizing various facets of Christian mission can inspire awe in the face of all that is involved.

Along with the tabernacle’s impressive design and appearance was the amazing manner in which the Israelites freely gave “more than enough” (Exodus 36:5) of the required materials. This overflowing, heartfelt, and willing response came on the heels of the Israelites having created the idolatrous golden calf while impatiently waiting on Moses to descend from Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32). Moses’s account stresses the Israelites’ heartfelt willingness to contribute materials, time, and

skills for the construction project: “Whoever is of a generous heart,” Moses appealed (Exodus 35:5); then, “Everyone whose heart stirred him, and everyone whose spirit moved him” contributed (Exodus 35:21); “All who were of a willing heart” (22) brought needed objects; “All the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill spun the goats' hair” (Exodus 35:26). In sum, “All the men and women, the people of Israel, whose heart moved them to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord” (Exodus 35:29).

It almost goes without saying that Christians’ heartfelt participation in missions is a vitally important matter. This issue’s two articles that deal with missionary preparation and training deal directly with the topic. Struggles within the worldwide Anglican Communion to serve together wholeheartedly in mission are examined in another article. How to relate wisely and from the heart with adherents of other religions is also taken up. Moreover, three articles address the why’s and how’s of understanding with integrity our attitudes toward movements. All of the authors no doubt hope that readers will come away serving in Christian mission enthusiastically.

Along with the tabernacle’s impressive design and construction, toward which God’s people willingly gave even more than what was needed, was the striking manner in which the Israelites had acquired the items they contributed for holy use. Just prior to the final plague, God commanded the Israelites to ask their Egyptian neighbors “for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing” upon their impending exodus—“and they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians” (Exodus 11:2, 12:35-36). As Origen and later Andrew Walls have pointed out, in the end “Materials that were being misused in the heathen world were thus used, thanks to the wisdom of God, for the worship and glorification of God.” Origen and Walls note as well how God’s people are all too easily influenced adversely from sinful environments. Even so, Christians are to learn “the duty of discrimination” (not racial discrimination, but religious discernment) from the Israelites’ example in using cultural tools provided within God’s providence (Origen 1911; Walls 2017, 32).

Just as the intermingling of Egyptian materials and Israel’s divinely designed tabernacle demonstrate, a central theme of Christian mission involves cross-cultural and interreligious encounters. In particular, such encounters include missionaries and recipients alike having to make decisions about the compatibility of current cultural realities and biblical standards. Evangelicals have wrestled with such decisions under the banner of “contextualization,” all the while warning against polluting, adulterating, changing, or otherwise adversely affecting the gospel by “syncretism.” Post-Vatican II Roman Catholics have approached gospel-culture interactions as “inculturation” or “accommodation” (John Paul II 1990; Phan 2016), while Orthodox missiologists have been slower “to make their missionary presentation of the Gospel and the Church as culturally relevant as possible” (Rommen 2018). Many of the increasing numbers of churches that do not fit into an “Orthodox-Catholic-Protestant” classification scheme have had to deal with the added burden of disentangling external traditions imposed on them as non-negotiable necessities. No matter the tradition or group, all Christians throughout the generations have in fact been discriminating gospel-cultural interactions in whatever contexts they have been living.

All of this issue’s articles, along with the books reviewed (and the reviews themselves), navigate in their own ways contextualization matters. For all of us as readers, missiologists, and mission participants, at least two related needs of Evangelicals are of central importance. One is the imperative to shift away from a seemingly ingrained focus on the human messenger (the

missionary) as the primary “contextualizer.” Instead, the primary agents are the Holy Spirit and followers of Jesus—with the messengers (especially expatriates) serving more as catalysts (Jennings 2003). Catalysts are necessary but of secondary importance in such processes as “contextualization.” Note as well that “followers of Jesus” include gospel messengers, all of whom have our/their own contextual traits in need of examination. The second need is coming to grips with the biblical reality that the good news, the “gospel,” is always and inherently situated contextually—not contextually relative, but contextually conveyed and understood. Evangelicals seem prone here as well to an instinct that clings to an elusive and imaginary “decontextualized” gospel. Thanks be to God for effectively communicating the gospel to actual people who are scattered throughout his world of manifold contexts.

The evangelical commitment to biblical faithfulness will especially resonate with a fourth important aspect of the tabernacle’s construction emphasized in God’s strict command to Moses, “Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it” (Exodus 25:9). From the items gathered to the design to the actual construction, Moses and the craftsmen were to follow not their own tastes or examples of religious structures in Egypt but specially revealed divine instructions—“Exactly as I show you.” Faithfulness to God’s design was paramount.

How does faithfulness in mission service connect to how Moses and the Israelites were to construct the tabernacle “exactly” as God instructed? How did “Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman in whose mind the Lord had put skill” exercise creative judgment as they actually made the tabernacle, its furnishings, and the priestly garments? What characterizes “faithful” mission service, and how does creative judgment come into play? Assuming Moses and the Israelites “faithfully” followed God’s command, including in how they gathered and used Egyptian materials, how does the “faithfulness” criterion pertain to missionary training, theologies of religion, ministering in contexts of confused and contested sexual identities, and current discussions about mission movements?

This issue’s contents help in considering such questions. However we might enthusiastically, creatively, and faithfully work through our particular avenues of mission service, may God continue to guide us in our necessary exercise of “the duty of discrimination.”

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