REDEMPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

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Redemptive Analogy

In 1975 Don Richardson published his book Peace Child, the story of his missionary efforts among the Sawi people of Irian Jaya. In the book, he first presented his hypothesis that within each culture exists a "redemptive analogy," that is, a story, ritual or tradition that helps to illustrate the redemptive message of Jesus Christ.

As a college missions major in the mid 1970's, I read Richardson's book from cover to cover several times. The idea that God had in His sovereignty and wisdom provided within each culture a key by which one could unlock and communicate the mysteries of the gospel was awe inspiring. Now, as I look back over the period of 30 years, I recognize that I was only one of many captivated by the concept. By 2003 the book had sold more than 500,000 copies and had been printed in more than 26 languages. Even today, decades after its first printing, a paperback edition published in 2005 remains in the top 10% of books sold on Amazon.com, attesting to its continuing popularity within the Christian community.

I recently revisited the idea of redemptive analogies after a conversation with a colleague who had just returned from a missions visit to the city of Yei, in southern Sudan. We had all been concerned for her safety. We all knew that Sudan, the largest nation geographically in Africa, has been the subject of horrific news/reports for literally decades. Since their civil war began afresh in 1983, more than 4 million men, women, and children have been displaced from there homes, and, by some accounts, more than 2 million have died[2]. As my friend later told the story of her trip, the devastating impact of such events upon the lives of individuals and families took on a new dimension. It was a sobering reflection on the poverty, disease and despair that were the constant companions of the Sudanese people.

From "Redemptive Analogy" to "Redemptive Technology" ?

One thing stood out, however. Evan as she would walk amidst the poverty each day, she would hear the widespread, unmistakable and persistent ringing of *mobile phones*.

Mobile phones? How could those who have so little to call their own possess in significant numbers what many consider to be the modern symbol of Western decadence? A visit later to the internet revealed the fact that despite the pervasive poverty in war-torn Sudan, mobile phones which were introduced there as late as 1996 now outnumber traditional land-lines by 3:1. Counter-intuitively, the nation's phone system is growing

rapidly by African standards, with the largest and fastest-growing sector being the mobile phone industry.

My own experience in the late 1970s was similar. During the desperate Haitian famine that resulted in literally thousands of deaths in that decade, I was a member of a missions relief and ministry team that brought hundreds of tons of food and supplies to the tiny Caribbean island nation. The poverty even in that day was overwhelming; the toll of years of repression and graft, staggering. On one occasion, I remember, our team split, with one half leaving to do ministry in the more remote areas north of Gonaives, and the other remaining in the region surrounding Port-Au-Prince. There we were scheduled to sing, in Creole, on a local radio program that we believed would be heard only in the immediate area of the capitol.

When the team reunited days later, however, we were astonished to learn that while our colleagues were working in a remote northern village that had been devastated by famine, a child had walked by with a portable transistor radio to her ear. She was listening to our team in Port-Au-Prince singing of the redeeming power of Jesus Christ.

We had not really noticed until then that portable transistor radios were virtually everywhere. Little children, their parents and grandparents, the well-to-do, and the very poor...all, it seemed, had access to a portable radio. AM-band radio, a format largely dying at the time in the United States, was for those in Haiti a lifeline.

And so a question began to form in my mind: Has God, in His infinite wisdom, also provided for each generation, if not for each culture, one or more "redemptive technologies" that are vehicles intended *principally* for gospel proclamation? Have there been present by design throughout the years since Christ's earthly ministry, the technology-enabled/facilitated means to extend the message of hope from Jerusalem, to all Judea and Samaria, and to the outermost parts of the earth? For example:

- Did the epistolary ministry of Paul in the first century not rely upon a technology-produced medium to carry the message of Christ throughout the then-known world?
- Was the invention of the Guttenberg press not a critical antecedent of the mass distribution and popularization of the Scriptures?
- Has radio not provided a way for the gospel message to be heard in far-distant locations – such as Haiti – even as populations explode and in the growing absence of a local church or a pastor?
- Can we even hope to assess the impact upon the proclamation and presentation of the gospel since the advent of television, the computer, cell phones, and, of course, the internet?

It would be unfortunate for anyone to stretch this simple idea beyond its breaking point, as has sometimes been the fate of the concept of redemptive analogy. The spread of the gospel depends clearly upon men and women who are willing to invest their lives in service to the King. The gospel is not technology dependent, nor is its proclamation.

Still, could it not be true that the advances of technology across history have not been intended to provide a faster, more comfortable ride, a convenient way to talk to mom in Toledo on Mother's Day, or an evening's family-room entertainment, but rather to carry the message of redemption to every person everywhere? I raise it simply for the purpose of beginning a conversation.

Ministry Implications

Nevertheless, if we accept even in part the premise that we, in our generation, have indeed been entrusted by God with redemptive technologies in order to make the gospel known, we must also accept and bear an enormous responsibility. I would suggest that as a consequence we must:

1. Banish the assumption that those in other parts of the world do not have access to the technologies that are common in our North American experience. At best, the assumption is unwisely limiting; at worst it borders on hegemony.

2. Revisit the tools currently available to us and ask the question "How might they be used for gospel ministry?" If mobile phones, for instance, can now be used for text messaging and as MP3 and video players for downloadable media, could an enterprising soul not provide a modularized curriculum that is formatted and freely available for cell phone users in other cultures? If providers can make toll-free calling and minutes available for individuals to report traffic conditions to a local radio station, could we as believers not find funding sufficient to shift the burden of program costs off of the end user, at least in target areas of the globe?

3. Package our teaching and ministry resources creatively to piggy-back on other technologies. For example, if millions of laptop computers are now being prepared for distribution by secular interests to poor children internationally (and they are), have we as members of the Body of Christ prepared software and other media to take advantage of those hardware systems and of their distribution channels? And if flash drives and portable media will be used, have we prepared gospel materials that could be pre-loaded for use in other parts of the world?

4. Create new technologies especially intended to communicate the gospel in obedience to the Great Commission. The resources of the North American church, both in personnel and finances, are surely sufficient to explore and engineer new systems. This is our opportunity to take the lead, to pioneer new technologies that are specifically designed for the needs of the global church. We may find that they are also financially profitable in a secular application, thereby ensuring their long-term viability. It certainly would be nice for once to lead rather than follow the trends.

While the concept is a simple one, its adoption within the church could be meaningful. Technologies are not the enemy of the gospel as some have come to believe.

They need not side track us from our mission by creating a state of digital dependence, or by de-humanizing the evangelistic method, or by forcing the roles of prayer, faith and individual commitment to the periphery of mission. The growing technological saturation of our society is not a burden for the Church to bear, a state that we might yet redeem by Christian application, but rather a God-prepared opportunity for evangelism intended from the foundations of the earth especially for the Church. It is our challenge to return the "redemptive" element to God's redemptive technologies.