

The Gospel of Genocide and the Good News of Jesus Christ: From Victim to Victor in First Nations Ministry

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Introduction: A Sleeping Giant— Problems and Possibilities

“The Native American has been like a sleeping giant. He is awakening. The original Americans could become the evangelists who will help win America for Christ! Remember these forgotten people!”

—Billy Graham^[1]

The purpose of this paper is to articulate reasons why the Native American is both sleeping and a giant. In order to explain why the Native American is sleeping, I will combat biblically and theologically some of the subtle and not so subtle theological causes for imperialism or cultural genocide in America’s history and missionary enterprise. In order to explain why the Native American is a giant, I will argue that pre-modern channels such as those found among the indigenous people of North America, when redeemed by Christ, provide strategic inroads for the Good News to penetrate the hearts and imaginations of post-modern culture.

The Indigenous Problem in the Whitewashed Church

The cry of Manifest Destiny was, “Kill the Indian and save the soul.” The unpacking of this statement goes a long way toward explaining why the Native American has largely been asleep. Beyond cultural factors, the theological underpinnings for this “Gospel of Genocide” involve whitewashing.

Now why, you may be asking, do I use the term “whitewashed” to refer to the Church when discussing its encounter with North America’s indigenous peoples? It is because the North American Church has been “whitewashed” in at least two ways: first, by denying the ethnic and cultural particularity of the Good News in view of (in favor of?) an *amorphous spirituality*; and

^[1]Billy Graham, “A Message from the Rev. Billy Graham,” *Mission Frontiers Bulletin*, May-June 1994, 13.

second, by adhering to a form of *moralistic righteousness*. Both items concern a theological rendition of cultural anthropology. We will begin by considering amorphous spirituality.

Amorphous Spirituality

In discussing amorphous spirituality, we have in mind a statement by Uchimura Kanzo, a leading Japanese Christian figure from the Meiji era. Many Western missionaries are skeptical of Kanzo to this day, in part because of his skepticism of Western missionary endeavors, and the theological anthropology that supports such practices. In his essay, “Japanese Christianity,” he writes,

A Japanese by becoming a Christian does not cease to be a Japanese. On the contrary, he becomes more Japanese by becoming a Christian. A Japanese who becomes an American or an Englishman, or an *amorphous* universal man, is neither a true Japanese nor a true Christian.^{2[2]}

Kanzo then proceeds to argue that the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther and John Knox “were not characterless universal men, but distinctly national, therefore distinctly human and distinctly Christian,” adding that Japanese saved as ““universal Christians’ may turn out to be no more than denationalized Japanese, whose universality is no more than Americanism or Anglicanism adopted to cover up their lost nationality.”^{3[3]}

The same mind-set Kanzo struggled against in the Meiji era is still alive and well today. Recently, I had the privilege to participate in a discussion with a few missiologists. In the course of our discussion, one of them said with great conviction something to the effect that the Church today must regain a passion for God and souls. While no Bible-believing Christian would disagree with what was said, a Bible-believing Christian should raise a flag over what was left unsaid. So, I said in response, “What about culture? Otherwise, you’re advocating a form of Gnostic Christianity.” Upon explanation, my friend assented, albeit slowly and hesitantly.

Now Gnosticism, simply defined, is the ancient heresy claiming that the spirit is good and matter is evil. Gnosticism appears in a Christological heresy known as Docetism, which teaches that Jesus only appeared to be human. My associate would in no way affirm such heresies. Nor does he lack appreciation for the need for cultural sensitivity in missionary endeavors. In fact, just the opposite! But there was a “Freudian” theological slip, expressing a sub-conscious roadblock in the back of his psyche that separates souls from the cultures in which they are embodied, and placing higher (eternal) value on souls than upon their cultural embodiment. Taken to an extreme along the line of such a trajectory, it would suggest the disembodiment of the soul—a gnostic or docetic anthropology.

^{2[2]}Kanzo Uchimura, “Japanese Christianity,” in *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. 2, ed. Ryusaku Tsunoda, Wm. Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958); reprint, H. Byron Earhart, ed. *Religion in the Japanese Experience: Sources and Interpretations*, The Religious Life of Man Series, ed. Frederick J. Streng (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1974), 113 (italics added).

^{3[3]}*Ibid.*, 113-114.

“What’s the big deal?” you may be asking. Is this not just another instance of a theologian splitting hairs and speculating *ad infinitum* about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Not at all. If Kanzo’s point is to be taken on board (and I hope you do take it on board), one will be even more sensitive to the danger of imposing one’s own cultural form on the people of another culture. Without wishing to embrace any possible nationalistic sentiment resident in Kanzo’s claim, one must recognize the importance of the inseparable relation of soul to culture. There is no such thing as an unenculturated soul, just as there is no such thing, ultimately speaking, as a disembodied soul.

The theological problem does not end there. In fact, the cultural-anthropological underpinnings for this problem may themselves be girded by larger systems of thought, namely, dispensational and covenant theological programs respectively. The reader need not fear that what he is about to encounter is an insert of ten pages of highly detailed dispensational charts! I will try to keep it simple.

In their book, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, Craig Blaising and Darrel Bock argue that more classic forms of Dispensationalism may have engendered cultural imperialism in missionary practices by claiming that the Church is a totally new people, neither Jewish nor Gentile, but a third entity. Such lines of demarcation, when employed in missions, leads to Kanzo’s amorphous Christianity, which inadvertently leads to the imposing of one’s own not so innocuous or amorphous Christianity upon that of another. For what it is worth, the authors contend that what is required is a dispensational model that sees greater continuity between Jewish believers of the various dispensations, and by extension, Gentile believers, too.^{4[4]}

One might think such attention given to Dispensationalism would suggest that Covenant Theology is off the hook. Hardly. If the problem for Dispensational theology historically is *division*, the problem for Covenant theology is *displacement*. In his book, *Church and Israel After Christendom: the Politics of Election*, Scott Bader-Saye speaks out against the supersessionist view of the Church replacing Israel. I associate this move with a particular Covenant theological orientation. In what follows, I will simply refer to it as Israel’s displacement. Such displacement has left its mark, not only in terms of Israel at the hands of the Nazis, but also in terms of Native Americans at the hands of those who championed the American version of Nazism—Manifest Destiny.^{5[5]}

Bader-Saye proposes that the best way to guard against supersessionism is to emphasize corporate election, which includes Israel.^{6[6]} While affirming the corporate aspect of election and Israel’s place in it, I would go further and argue that the solution to the problem surrounding division as well as displacement is ultimately Christological. Greater emphasis must be given to

^{4[4]}Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: A BridgePoint Book, 1993), 50-51.

^{5[5]}See Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom: the Politics of Election*, *Radical Traditions: Theology in a Postcritical Key* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 67, 74, 76.

^{6[6]}*Ibid.*, 75-76.

the particularity of the Word made flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. It is only as this man that He is Lord and King.

Now my claim might not appear to be obvious at first sight. But when is the last time you saw a picture of Jesus hanging on a wall, where he looked something like a Taliban soldier instead of Brad Pitt in a toga with exceptionally long hair? One of my friends believes that Jesus looked a lot more like a Taliban soldier, missing a tooth or two. Over the past few years another friend of mine has given my family Nativity sets as gifts for Christmas—one from Peru, the other from Indonesia. I can hardly wait to get the one from Haiti!

How does the preceding discussion relate to the point I am making about viewing Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and King? Only by viewing our Lord first as a Jew (Mt. 1:1), and first for the Jews (Rom. 1:16), can we truly see him as Lord of Gentiles—all Gentiles (Rom. 1:14). However, because we have not done so, we tend to equate the Christ with our own cultural form, and in turn impose that form on other peoples. What kind of Nativity set will you put up next Christmas?

The Good News is always to be viewed as first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles. Otherwise, we turn the Good News of Jesus Christ into the Gospel of Genocide. The Good News is not simply *for all peoples*. It is also the Good News *of each people*. Seeing the fundamental cultural particularity of the Good News from its inception helps guard against universalizing it in some amorphous manner and imposing our own cultural form in view of the resulting cultural vacuum.

The universal—the eternal Word of John’s Gospel—always takes particular form (See Jn. 1:1, 14). However, such an emphasis on Christ’s particularity should not be taken to suggest that only Jewish particularity is kosher. Because the Word became particular in one culture through the Spirit, as expressed in the virgin birth (Lk. 1:35), He can become particular in any culture through the same Spirit, as the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2 suggests. “Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?’” (Ac. 2:7-8). Through the Spirit at Pentecost, God revokes the curse imposed at Babel.

The Spirit particularizes Christ’s universality. Nonetheless, we must always see Jesus as first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles, and because of the Jews, then for the Gentiles—all Gentiles. If we do not see matters in this way, but rather promote the Gospel of amorphous spirituality, there is a greater likelihood that white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males such as myself will continue to impose our own particular Gentile versions of the Good News on the originally chosen people of our country—the First Nations people.

Adherence to Moralistic Righteousness

In addition to the problem of amorphous spirituality, another key factor to consider in the oppressing of First Nations people—suppressing them to sleep—is the dominant Christian culture’s adherence to moralistic righteousness. Moralistic righteousness is behavioral in scope, emphasizing external conduct according to prescribed forms rather than the transformation of the heart.

The problem of moralistic righteousness is endemic to Judaizers throughout the centuries. One need only think of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 where certain Jews sought to impose circumcision on Gentile believers as the seal of salvation (Ac. 15:1). Certainly such a move would have gone far beyond the theological splitting of hairs! Think, too, of Acts 10 where the kosher Peter is told to eat a ham sandwich. Peter refuses to obey God due to his desire to be a good Jew (Ac. 10:14). While affirming the Jewishness of Jesus, we must guard against the Judaizing impulse to impose a cultural form of righteousness upon people rather than highlight the circumcision of the heart. It is the circumcision of the heart, not the flesh, that makes one truly Jewish, and truly a believer (Rom. 2:28-29).

Peter had been a religious and cultural bigot (See Ac. 10:9-17). And we are told in Galatians that he would struggle with this problem at least once more (Gal. 2:11-12). Such religious and cultural bigotry is still very much present today. While wishing to guard against syncretism, we must also guard against separatism. Richard Twiss argues against such separatism in his book, *One Church, Many Tribes: Following Jesus the Way God Made You*. He writes,

Because we are all so prone to be culturally egocentric, the temptation is to consider our worldview the biblical and correct one, shunning all others as unbiblical and wrong. Worse yet is our habit of judging cultural ways—songs, dances, rituals, etc.—to be sinful when there is no clear violation of Scripture.^{7[7]}

Native drum songs filled with new meaning and intent not only can but do bring glory to God. “Because music is flexible and able to be reinterpreted, old Indian music styles can become sacred, or Christian, not by reason of form but through context and meaning.”^{8[8]}

Certainly this was the view of Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, who borrowed from a popular secular musical form known as a bar tune to write “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” On another occasion, he commandeered a dance tune used for tavern celebrations at Christmas time for the hymn, “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.” No doubt it was related in some way to how he perceived theological anthropology. Behaviors do not shape the heart. The heart shapes behaviors.^{9[9]}

In view of the preceding remarks, I can only wonder if some of the consternation expressed by certain First Nations Christian groups regarding the use of drums in Christian worship is the

^{7[7]}Richard Twiss, *One Church, Many Tribes: Following Jesus the Way God Made You* (Ventura: Regal Books, 2000), 113.

^{8[8]}*Ibid.*, 125.

^{9[9]}In his work, *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, Luther maintains that “We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds. This in opposition to the philosophers.” Martin Luther, *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, foreword by Jaroslav Pelikan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 16. For Luther, “having been made righteous” is primarily participational and secondarily positional. Such participation results from the love of God being poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. See no. 84 of the *Disputation* on page 19.

result of cultural conditioning at the hands of past missionaries rather than the result of the Holy Spirit's convicting work in the hearts of indigenous people in the present. Regardless though of how First Nations people view such matters as the use of Native drums in Christian worship, pre-modern channels such as those found among the indigenous people of this country are of strategic importance in reaching *post-modern* Americans for Christ. This leads us to the next section.

Inroads into the Post-Modern Spirit Through Pre-Modern Channels

Having spoken of reasons why the Native American is sleeping, it is now time to consider why he is a giant, reflecting upon the importance of the indigenous perspective for present day culture. As stated at the outset of the article, here I will contend that pre-modern thought forms such as those found among the indigenous people of North America, when redeemed by Christ, provide strategic inroads for the Good News to penetrate the hearts and imaginations of post-modern culture. I will consider three such inroads.

First, the pre-modern channel of First Nations people provides an inroad into post-modern culture through its triumph on the trail of tears. A characteristic trait of post-modern culture is suspicion of the established Church—Christendom. Christendom abused power. Those abused by Christendom or “Churchianity”—and now redeemed by Christ—offer the greatest apologetic for the power of Christ's transforming love in an age of suspicion by responding to victimization and hate with the victorious love of Christ. Moreover, those victimized yet victorious give us a window into Christ's own triumphant life.

It would be so much easier to face the past if those guilty of genocide in the West did not include believers. Regretfully, Christians did take part. Countering the claim that those guilty of genocide against indigenous people were not Christians, Vine Deloria, Jr. argues,

They really were Christians. In their day they enjoyed all the benefits and prestige Christendom could confer. They were cheered as heroes of the faith, enduring hardships that a Christian society might be built on the ruins of pagan villages. They were featured in Sunday school lessons as saints of the Christian church. Cities, rivers, mountains, and seas were named after them.^{10[10]}

Is it any wonder then that Deloria perceives the cross—that ancient symbol of liberation—in the following way? “Where the cross goes, there is never life more abundantly—only death, destruction, and ultimately betrayal.”^{11[11]}

While not wishing to evade responsibility and foster passivity and fatalism—all characteristics of Christendom^{12[12]}—it is an amazing thing to find those victimized by the Church responding in a spirit of forgiveness, reflecting the true power of the cross: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34). This Spirit, modeled by Jesus Christ (who, by the way,

^{10[10]}Vine Deloria, Jr., *God Is Red* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), 261-262.

^{11[11]}*Ibid.*, 261.

^{12[12]}See Deloria's discussion of Christianity on p. 262.

was also victimized by the religious authorities of His day^{13[13]}) and His followers in the First Nations community, can only come from the Spirit of Christ, bearing witness to Him.

Going further, the Spirit must also be evident among Anglo Christians if we are to avoid passivity and fatalism in the present. How so? Not only is the Spirit one of grace and forgiveness, but also the Spirit is one of truth and courage. Anglo Christians must side with their indigenous brothers in fighting against global capitalism and exploitation. For as Deloria argues, “At this point in the clash between Western industrialism and the planet’s aboriginal peoples we find little or no voice coming from the true Christians to prevent continued exploitation.”^{14[14]} Anglo believers must stand up and partner with indigenous people in the face of Manifest Destiny’s current advance if our own cries for forgiveness are to move beyond sheer rhetoric. We now turn to consider the next strategic inroad.

Second, the pre-modern channel of First Nations people provides an inroad into post-modern culture by way of being woven into the tapestry of Christ’s Church. Another characteristic trait of post-modernism is an eclectic emphasis on beauty and creativity. According to the Bible, culture is a gift from God to bear witness to God, expressing God’s creativity and manifold glory. What is required is a multitude of cultures to reflect its radiance (See Rev. 4-5).

In contrast to the Church Growth movement’s modern, pragmatic emphasis on homogeneity as key to the multiplication of members—which Ray Bakke refers to as the Churchly equivalent of Apartheid—what is needed today are multi-ethnic ministries imaging the mosaic of God’s multi-faceted beauty. The emergence of the indigenous people movement worldwide in the Church enhances such multi-cultural radiance as a reflection of the Kingdom.

Moreover, the First Nations people’s affirmation of multi-generational relations serves as a corrective to focusing exclusively on particular generations such as Gen-X and Gen-Y (a carry-over from the Church Growth movement’s emphasis on the Boomer generation). Multi-generational convictions as well as multi-culturalism will assist the Church in deconstructing the compartmentalization of life, which so many post-moderns disdain. This leads us to the last point.

Third, the pre-modern channel of First Nations people provides an inroad into post-modern culture through its holistic approach to life. Yet another characteristic trait of post-modernity is its distaste for modernity’s compartmentalization of the sacred and secular spheres. The Gnostic

^{13[13]}In view of Deloria’s claim, it is important to distinguish followers of Christ from Christians. Indeed, Deloria is correct to assert that Christians, those deemed to be orthodox at the time of colonial expansion, were guilty of genocide. But they still were not true followers of Christ. As Dostoyevsky portrays so vividly in the tale of “The Grand Inquisitor” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Christian Church was itself guilty of victimizing Christ at the time of the Spanish Inquisition, a time when both Muslim and Jew were tortured and killed in His name. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor,” in *The Brothers Karamazov: a Novel in Four Parts with Epilogue* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 252-260.

^{14[14]}Deloria, 262.

fragmentation of our culture—modernity’s offspring— expresses itself in many forms. Many post-moderns are longing for wholeness—to live in community, to be one with the cosmos, and to reconnect the sacred and secular within culture.

Evangelicalism offers little hope for a bridge between these respective spheres. For as Twiss claims, “Most Evangelical Christians, whether they realize it or not, have compartmentalized worldviews, whereas most Indian people have *integrated* worldviews.” He goes on to say, “Western culture tends to compartmentalize life. Religious activity is often kept separate from all other areas, making religion just one segment of life. For Native people religion is a way of life.”^{15[15]} This Native perspective is much closer to the biblical or Hebrew concept of religion.

First Nations perspectives on the integration of spirituality and the secular sphere can serve as a catalyst for the Evangelical Western Church to reexamine its worldview and reigning presuppositions against the backdrop of the Hebrew Scriptures. Such reflection is vital for missions, that is, if the Church is as desperate as it claims to be about breaking down barriers to the post-modern world, if it is as desperate as post-moderns are in their longing to move beyond compartmentalization in all areas of life. The holistic, Hebraic conception of life, which pre-modern indigenous people more readily share, when redeemed by Christ, addresses this post-modern longing in a Christ-honoring way.

In Retrospect

Due to Christendom’s failures—including genocide—and the resulting cynicism, suspicion and fragmentation, the Anglo has lost his voice to speak, even at times to his own. He can no longer go forward alone, but must go forth by networking. The Anglo Christian and his community must enter into covenant with the tribes in order to survive in the wasteland of religion in the current social milieu. To engage a post-modern world sickened by the whitewashed Church but sensitive to the words and ways of those so long suppressed—indigenous people, the Anglo Christian and his community must make a new treaty. This time, if he breaks it, he will be the one who dies.

Far from seeing First Nations witnesses to Christ to be in need of my help, I am burdened by the sense that I as an Anglo follower of Christ am in need of their help in speaking out to other Anglos who are suspicious of Christianity. When redeemed and transformed by Christ from the inside out, pre-modern cultures such as those of First Nations people can provide access into the imaginations and hearts of post-modern lives. Indeed, the Native American is a sleeping giant.

^{15[15]}Twiss, 92.