

Responses to Mission in Global Perspective

Jan Bender Shetler

When I was asked to be a respondent for this conference I was somewhat reticent since my expertise is in African social history and world history rather than theology or missiology. Having worked with African Mennonite Churches and missionaries in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya and the Congo, the subject is important to me but not one in which I have done academic work. So imagine my surprise when I read Shenk's paper prior to these meetings and found that he was discussing alternative views of world history in relation to European expansion. This is material that I teach at Goshen College, even assigning one of the books that he cites as required reading for a class in Global Poverty. I therefore appreciate the fact that a missiologist is using material that world historians are currently debating in his thinking about God's mission to redeem creation. The recent historical work that Shenk cites, makes it clear that Europeans were not any smarter or better equipped than others to conquer the world, that trade and cultural interactions connected the world for more than two thousand years, and the western version is not the first globalizing system.

But, having said that, the point I want to raise for discussion is to question the wisdom of claiming that the gospel is an alternate form of globalization that precedes the current one. Do we really want to equate God's will for the universe with the current system of globalization? Don't all the universal religions, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, etc, claim a universal application and goal? Islam itself, in fact, was an earlier form of globalization encompassing a worldwide trading system that was based on religious, not secular development. The earlier global system of a polycentric world that Shenk refers to was one based on interlinking trading zones and overlapping cultures without any central control. The kind of globalization we are up against now is a very different kind of beast both in its scope and its power to enforce a centralizing hegemonic dominance.

Perhaps my problem is in part with the implied definition of globalization as simply something that is global in scope. The concept of globalization is much more systematic. According to world system's theory, globalization divides the world into a center which controls the extraction of resources, and a periphery which provides resources and labor for the benefit of the center. Whether you subscribe to this theory or not we are talking about an interconnected, interdependent system of power rather than the sum of relationships that span the globe. In this way the Silk Road or the Indian Ocean trading system in the 3rd century BCE connected people and products from Rome to Han China but it did not create dependencies and systematic relationships until Islam created a unified culture of trade and political interaction by about 1000 CE. This did not take in the scope of the whole world

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but was systematic in nature.

It seems that in Shenk's description, the Great Commission as a kind of globalization, if you can call it that, does not impose a hegemonic cultural, economic or political system. Instead the gospel is inculturated into a variety of diverse societies. The story of Babel might also mean that God delights in the diversity of cultures and languages and that the gospel is equally at home in each. We are commissioned to take the ministry to all peoples everywhere but not to impose a hegemonic world system when we do that, and to work within the world's diversity. The reign or kingdom of God does not take the form of a particular political system but is incarnate in all kinds of systems. Shenk calls this the *original* globalization but I wonder if it is in fact anti-globalization because it works against the homogenizing of culture. As Shenk himself says, "the Holy Spirit legitimates all cultures and cultural-linguistic diversity." If we apply Shenk's message, Christianity has been allied with empires and in the recent past with European imperialism around the world, making it our task now to uncouple this unholy alliance and return the gospel to its counter-cultural roots. So while I applaud his use of the new world history in combating the myths of progress and Western exceptionalism, I do not think it advances our cause to call the Christian mission to bring in God's new order amidst and within the diversity of the world's peoples the original globalization or any globalization at all.

Darrell Whiteman

Thank you Wilbert for this excellent paper. It is quintessential Shenk - in a brief treatment we get a comprehensive view of mission and a historical understanding of globalization. I found myself lamenting: "Why doesn't the mission world understand this stuff?" If more people had this historical understanding and theological perspective, we would have far less triumphalism and much more humility in our understanding and practice of mission. I will focus my response in three areas: 1) diversity and unity, 2) mission and empire, 3) humility and triumphalism.

Shenk stated that "the Creator's design has an unmistakable unity of purpose." It is to redeem creation and restore it to its original purpose. This is the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. God's creation is full of diversity, both ecological and human - there are over 7,000 languages and over 13,000 people groups. The diversity of cultures are gifts of God's grace. Often the cultural and linguistic diversity that resulted in the story of Babel is interpreted as a curse. But the sin of Babel was arrogance and idolatry - "Let us make a name for ourselves". Ethnocentrism starts early in the Bible and runs throughout. The Gospel is always counter to ethnocentrism. Let us make a name for ourselves, as nations, as denominations. We still have this penchant. Babel is a blessing, not a curse. Diversity is a good thing, not a bad thing in the Kingdom of God. Further Babel is redeemed in Pentecost. Then in Rev. 7:9 comes the culmination of the Babel picture around the throne of God - every people group, culture, worldview is worshipping God.

One lesson of Scripture is that unity does not require uniformity of culture. According to Acts 15 one can follow Christ without having to become culturally a Jew. Christianity is the ultimate universal/local religion. There is a unity of purpose with a diversity of expression.

Then secondly, on the theme of mission and empire, Shenk's paper brilliantly traces what happens when mission becomes aligned with empire. Jacques Ellul in his provocative book, *The Subversion of Christianity* noted that for Christianity to remain vital, Christians must remain in the minority. It seems to me that you Anabaptists are particularly gifted at being minorities. I have often wondered why the best missiological anthropology has come from Mennonites - Don Jacobs, Paul Hiebert, Jacob Loewen, Robert Ramseyer - they're all Mennonites. It has something to do with the fact that you are a minority. So you are far more in touch with the role of culture than those who tend to be in the majority.

When Christianity becomes the majority religion it loses its prophetic witness and therefore it loses its power. This is exactly what happened when Christendom took over and swelled its power and consumed the gospel. The power of the gospel was simply swallowed up by culture. Shenk says, "the great commission can be carried out faithfully only by rejecting all attempts to ally God with a particular nation, class, or economic political power." Now as soon as missions, in the plural, which I see as our activity, becomes dependent on social, political, economic power it is doomed to failure. That is just counterintuitive, isn't it? So let me repeat it. As soon as missions becomes dependent on social, economic, political power, it is doomed for failure. Christendom may spread, but Christian faith will not spread, it will die on the vine because that is antithetical to what it stands for. The mission of the early church functioned effectively without that power. In some ways the Constantinian decision, as I call it, was the kiss of death, for vital transforming Christian faith. True mission, that is, participating in the *Missio Dei*, and empire building are simply antithetical. Shenk has shown that to be the case throughout his paper.

Well, if that is the case, why have we for so long and so often been seduced into thinking that empire will facilitate mission, 'if we can only get our man into the White House', we have often prayed. Why have we been tempted to practice the politics of empire building rather than the politics of Jesus? Now by empire I mean much more than just the empires of nation states. I mean the empires of multinational corporations and other expressions of neocolonialism. By empire I mean our denominational empire, or of evangelicals pitting themselves against mainline Protestants in order to gain a greater market share in the religious marketplace. By empire building I mean professors building empires with their students, I mean pastors building empires with their congregations. We are all prone to empire building. We are tempted to connect mission with the empire because we think we will be more effective. Much of the church growth movement is along that line. We think we will be more influential, we think we will have greater success and less failure.

The problem is that we have forgotten the One who said, “he who would be first, must be last”. That is not empire talk. The incarnation is about downward mobility, not upward mobility and empire building.

Now to the third theme - humility and triumphalism. Shenk’s paper demonstrates that globalization is not a new thing, despite the plethora of books that may lead us to believe that it is. What is new, I believe, is the pace at which globalization is accelerating but it is not a new phenomenon. The world, prior to the rise of the West, was a polycentric world, and both the previous respondent and Shenk’s paper clearly showed that. The accomplishments and the systems of trade should help us have a far more chastened and much more sober view of the West in world history. We don’t have that chastened sober view. We have a bellicose, a triumphal worldview. The rest of the world was not sitting twiddling its thumbs waiting for the West to arrive. Yet the myth of Western superiority has reinforced this notion. We talk about America being discovered. A year ago in my anthropology class we had some wonderful Native Americans who are now doing their Ph.D.’s with us at Asbury, and I raised a question. I said that colonialism has died, right? Of course I was thinking about political colonialism and was getting ready to move to economic colonialism when Terry Lablanc, a first Nations man, said with a loud voice: “you’re still here!” That was a teachable moment. It was just powerful.

The spirit of triumphalism has infected us more than we realize. This led to early theories of mission that said we must civilize pagans before we can Christianize them. Now we don’t use such politically incorrect terms, our language is much more sophisticated, much more nuanced, but in fact we often practice the same form of mission, we just use nicer words. How can we regain a spirit of humility, how can we regain a spirit of humility in mission? I want to tell you the story of Ubolwan and Nantachai from Thailand. They were two of my doctoral students, the first husband and wife team ever to come to Asbury for their doctoral degrees. As they got into anthropology courses and started looking at Thai culture, they said, ‘what is it in Thai culture that has made it so resistant to the Gospel? The Christian presence has been there for 150 years, and yet less than .3 of 1% of the Thai population is Christian. Why so much resistance?’ So they started doing an evaluation of Thai values. The leading Thai value is the value of meekness. What is meekness to us Americans? Well meekness is wishy-washy, not standing up for your own rights. But in Thais, meekness is a positive value. What they discovered is that Christianity was perceived by Thais to be aggressive, very aggressive, to be dominant. In fact Ubolwan, a Buddhist who was a university professor, who was led to faith by an aggressive Korean, reported that her mother once said to her: “before you became a Christian you were so much more gentle, so much more loving, so much more kind. What has happened to you now that you have become a Christian?” What had happened to her was that her understanding of evangelization was this whole notion of power. So instead of being meek, she thought she had to be persuasive. Well, both Ubolwan and Nantachai wrote their dissertations on the

power of meekness in evangelization, and I think this has been the greatest breakthrough in the understanding of evangelization in Thailand. They travel across the country, giving seminars on the model of meekness in evangelization.

We need to combine a strong confidence in the Gospel with epistemological humility. We need big doses of both. Often we are not very confident in the Gospel yet epistemologically we are arrogant. When we see missions as our activity for God, then it is easy to become triumphalistic. But when we see mission as joining God's mission, as joining God in God's mission, then the only posture that is appropriate is one of humility. There is no room for triumphalism. So I see three themes that Shenk throws really valuable light on: diversity with unity of purpose, mission without empire building, and humility without triumphalism in our understanding and practice of mission.