

Beyond Solid Lines: Mission in the 21st Century

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Preamble:

As our series on Missions and Evangelism continues this month, I want to affirm what has already been said. What I have largely heard is a call to love as Jesus loved. To be accepting of people who are not like us. To live a mission lifestyle that takes in your family and community.

One morning this week Ruth and I read a section of Luke's Gospel beginning in chapter 15. It summarizes much of what I have heard.

By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends."

Perhaps its as simple as that! If we could learn simply to open our lives to others, or to allow unbelievers to hang around with us, we will have discovered the primary key to mission. But make no mistake – if we do begin to emulate Jesus in this way, there will be opposition from modern day Pharisees.

Introductory Comments: True Stories

I want to begin by telling a few true stories.

1. Dan began attending church with my son, Brett, in high school. One summer, Dan went on vacation with our family. Brett, Dan and I were driving somewhere in the car, and I asked him, "Where are you these days in your relationship with God?"

Dan replied, "Mr. McLaren, coming to church has really helped me. All I really want now is to learn the ways of Christ."

I remember thinking: "Ways of Christ" ... "that's a good way of saying it."

Then he continued: "But one thing: I hope I never become a born-again." I asked him why that was, and he answered, "A friend of ours at school became a born again. She used to be a really nice person, but now she's always judging everybody and she's pushed away all her friends. It's like either you have to convert or she doesn't want them as a friend. So I want to keep learning the ways of Christ but I don't want to be a born-again."

...Most ironically, to Dan, being “born again” sounded like becoming what in Jesus’ day was known as a Pharisee...and oddly enough it was with a Pharisee that Jesus originally used the “born again” language, suggesting that to be born again was the opposite of being a Pharisee.

(More Ready than You realize, Brian McLaren, 36)

2. Jesus told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people: “Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax man. The Pharisee posed and prayed like this: ‘Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, crooks, adulterers, or even, heaven forbid, like this tax man. I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.’”

“Meanwhile the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, ‘God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.’”

Jesus commented, “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God. If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

(Luke 18:9-14)

3. A fellow named Jeff began attending my church, and after about six months he told me that while he liked my sermons and had learned a lot from them, he didn’t believe in God.

“Why don’t you believe in God? I asked him.

Jeff answered, “It’s my brother. He became a Christian and now nobody can stand him.”

I asked, “So you’re afraid that if you start believing in God, you’ll become an arrogant hypocrite, or something like that?”

“Exactly.”

So I said, “Well, maybe someday you will find a way to believe in God and become a better person instead of a worse one.”

(More Ready than you Realize, Brian McLaren, 37)

4. Passing along, Jesus saw a man at his work collecting taxes. His name was Matthew. Jesus said, “Come along with me.” Matthew stood up and followed him.

Later when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew's house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus' followers. "What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and riffraff?"

Jesus, overhearing, shot back, "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure what the Scripture means: "I 'm after mercy, not religion.' I'm here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders."

(Matt. 9: -13)

My Journey Into the World

This is *my* story. Your's will likely be different. But I can only speak from what I know to be true for me! Some of you have been and continue to be my mentors in this journey into the world.

One of my first warnings I got after committing my life to Christ at age sixteen was that I would have to give up all my old friends. If I didn't, they would drag me back down into the world. "What fellowship hath light with darkness?" "Come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord!" You now belong to the inside circle – your old friends are on the outside. Your contact with them should be limited to the times when you witness to them about Jesus. (One door and only one, and yet it's sides are two. I'm on the inside, on which side are you?) I was to be permanently separated from unbelievers except for the occasional charge into enemy territory to witness for Christ.

So gradually my contacts with "the world" began to diminish as I cultivated Christian friendships. And this was a good experience. I felt like I belonged on the inside of a cozy circle. And some of my Christian friends had a great influence on me. But always I trembled inside when it was suggested that this inside group should mount a crusade to charge into the world to see if we could snatch someone else to bring inside our circle.

This meant getting your Bible verses memorized in order, keeping your pockets full of gospel tracts, and button-holing individuals - challenging them to accept Christ. It was said that this was everyone's responsibility, but I noticed that there were only a few, Type A personality people who were able to, and actually enjoyed, pulling this off. To be sure, there will have been some converts through such crusades, but the pickins were pretty thin. And furthermore, I noticed that whenever this crusading rhetoric was brought into the open how many Christians tightened up.

And there was a lot of guilt to go around too, because most of the Christians I knew simply could not be cajoled into becoming "peddlers of the gospel" – hawking their product with the smooth memorized lines common to vacuum cleaner salesmen (Cor. 2:17). The final question to be asked, if all else failed was, "Is there any reason you can think of why you would not want to accept Christ?" (I only later came to understand how this felt from the other side when one day I sent a vacuum cleaner

salesman packing after pushing this question down my throat. I will admit I was angry!)

To make a long story short, by the time I had finished Bible School, and had been a teacher in mostly pagan settings for five years, I had very few non-Christian friends. And many years later, after spending time on the mission field, going to seminary, and becoming settled in Bible College as a professor, I had even fewer non-Christian friends.

When it was suggested on one prayer day that we should think of a non-Christian friend and pray for him or her, I wracked my brain to think who such a person might be. (I was on the inside – busy with Christian service – but not in touch with the non-Christian world.)

Something was wrong and I knew it. One reason I became a member at the Fitness Centre, besides getting into shape, was to begin breaking out of this religious ghetto. At least I got to meet non-Christians but, even here, I didn't really develop any close friendships with unbelievers. When I became Conference Minister my main contacts were other ministers and members in their churches. And there was never enough time to connect with them all – let alone develop friendships with non-Christians.

It took some momentous experiences in my life to bring me to the point where I would begin opening my life in a serious way to non-Christian people and to believers who were not inside my tightly drawn circle. In losing my health, my vocation, and my financial security, I discovered that I had to, in a sense, re-start my pilgrimage from the ground up, on different soil and with a different orientation. I began to notice that most of the people on our street do not go to church or claim to be Christians. Slowly I have begun to “hang out” with some of them. I began meeting other handicapped persons at the pool - persons who had also been side-lined by society for one reason or another. Some of them were bitter, some just lonely and afraid of their future. I asked one such man if he and his family would like to hang out at our house for the evening. He and his son came. It was a little awkward at first, but we had a great evening.

This is all new territory for me – forty years after becoming a Christian. I am on a journey into the world, stumbling as I go, and learning from some of you. But interestingly enough, I am finding God already present and active in the places of the world that I used to look at only from a distance. I have discovered, ultimately, that to draw the sharp lines between in and out, like I did in my earlier years, is not that helpful in trying to connect to the wider world outside the church. I am learning that Jesus' example of mingling with the “outsiders”, even becoming their friends, is not such a bad idea. And I am even becoming convinced that this is really the only authentic way that we will be able to be in mission in the 21st century.

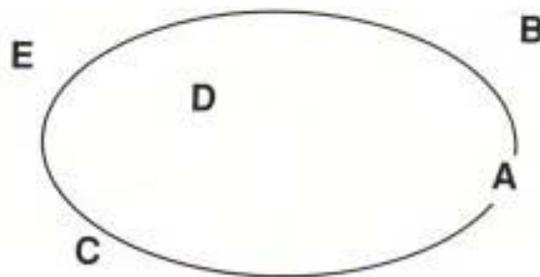
I believe that many of us need a new revelation from God similar to that which Peter had. He had to go through the traumatic experience of learning to erase the lines of bias that separated him from the wider world. It was hard for Peter and it is hard for

us. But if we have the faith and courage to grab a big eraser and begin erasing that solid line between the ins and the outs, maybe we could catch the spirit of Christ that allowed him to be known as a “friend of sinners.”

From Boundary Thinking to Journey Thinking

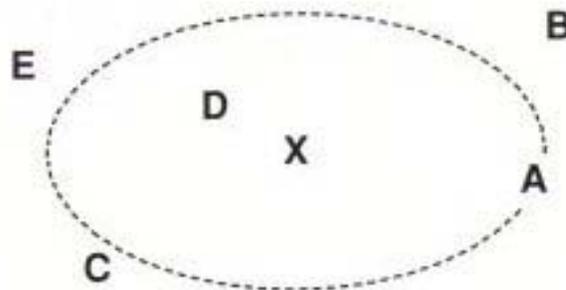
In closing I would simply like to introduce a few diagrams that depict how many evangelical missiologists are beginning to visualize people coming to Christ. It leaves much room for discussion and even disagreement, perhaps. But it will be good for us to know what Christian leaders on the edge are saying these days.

Boundary Thinking



This is the traditional way of thinking. D is in. E, B and C are out. We are confused about A, who seems to be sitting on the line. Most of us are comfortable with this model. It allows us, like the Pharisees, to judge who “exactly” is in and who is out. Things are crystal clear in God’s Kingdom. It gives us a warm, cozy feeling of being on the “in” group. Sometimes this is expressed in a “better-than-thou attitude.” One problem with this model is the question of who gets to draw the line? It seems that every group and individual draws the line a little differently. Even though all claim the Bible for their authority, the line gets drawn all over the map!

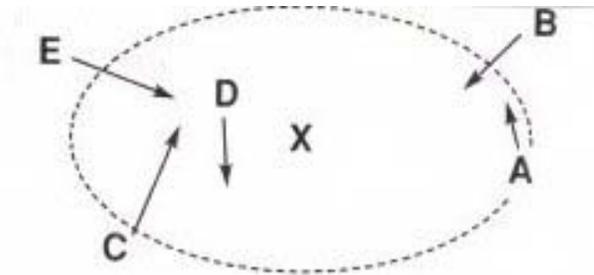
Centered Thinking



Centered thinking gets rid of the boundary and focuses instead on a point we will call X, or Christ. As we de-emphasize “in/out,” we become more aware of how close or how far away D is from the center. We begin to notice that “outsider” C may be as close to the center as “almost insider” A. In centered thinking we are content to let

God draw the line if there needs to be one. Our job is to love people, not plot them on a chart

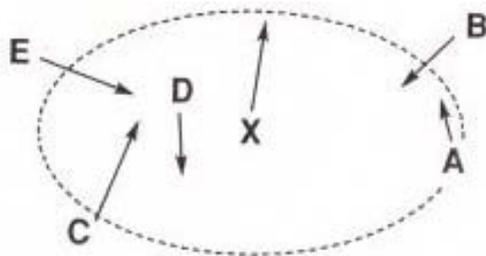
Process Thinking



In this model we introduce movement – which way are people moving, and in which direction? Now it is clear that B and E are better off than A – they have set their sights on Christ and are moving toward him. A, the fence sitter, is shown to actually be going nowhere. And D, the “insider” is being distracted from Christ, perhaps to follow some contemporary idol. The question now is not where to pigeon hole people, in or out, near or far – but to influence their direction and momentum as we are able. As the old gospel song says, “There’s life for a look at the Savior” could mean that the one’s we often peg as “outsiders” may be closer to the Kingdom than those who have been sitting inside their solid boundaries for half a century but distracted by the lust of the flesh, the pride of life and the cares of this world.

This model makes us uncomfortable because we are not in “control”. All we do is live authentic lives, love God with all our heart, soul and mind; love people, give account of our faith to those who ask, and leave the rest to God.

Journey Thinking



In journey thinking we realize that the center point, Christ, is not static. Christ didn’t just plo p himself down in our culture. He is actively at work in the world around us. He is moving somewhere. And we are called to follow where Christ is going. Now the most important question becomes whether one is following. Who in this diagram would you rather be? A or D, B or C?

In our postmodern world, we can not limit ourselves to boundary thinking. Moving beyond boundary thinking may help us understand some of the sayings of Jesus like...

Many of the last will be first..., Do not judge..., I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also.

Conclusion

I offer these models to help us think how we can better be in mission. The Christian church in North America is facing a crisis of tremendous proportions today. It needs a new vision of what God is doing in our world, and the courage to get on board with God, even though it might mean exploring new ways of thinking and acting.

For myself, I am determined to keep trekking on my personal journey from inside the comfortable boundaries we have drawn for ourselves - into a world where direction and momentum in relation to Christ are more important than sitting in judgement over who is in and who is out. And I know some of you well enough that I know you are willing to trek with me.

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