



DO YOU KNOW what it is like to work with you Americans? Let me tell you a story.”

The speaker was Daniel Coulibaly. I was in Mali, West Africa, doing some consulting work for World Vision.

The elephant and the mouse were best friends, according to Daniel. One day Elephant said, “Mouse, let’s have a party!” So they did. Animals came from far and near. They ate and drank and sang and danced. And no one partied more exuberantly than the elephant.

When it was over, Elephant exclaimed, “What a party, Mouse! Did you ever see a more wonderful celebration?” But there was silence. “Mouse?” Elephant called. “Where are you, Mouse?” Then to his horror Elephant discovered Mouse—crushed on the floor, stomped into the dirt, trampled to death by the enthusiasm of his friend the elephant.

“Sometimes that is what it is like to work with you Americans,” said Daniel. “It is like dancing with an elephant.”

Why Listen to a Mouse?

In the face of great world need, dare American missiologists take time for mice? People are going to hell. People are perishing for lack of vision. For lack of teaching, Christianity in many places is “a mile wide and an inch deep.” Physically, too, people are hungry. People need health care, schooling, and clean water. They need legal aid, title to land, job training, and secure child care. They need houses and churches built, marital counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, and special help for the marginalized. In some places, this is a *kairos* moment, a window of opportunity. If we have

Telling stories: contextualization and American missiology

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the resources and power to tackle such problems, why should we stop to listen to mice?

Why bother with diversity? Because—moving to another metaphor—each body part plays a crucial role. Ephesians speaks of God's great plan for unity in his universe, "the mystery of his will ... to bring *all* things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:9, 10). In chapter 4, this unity-in-diversity is applied to the church, capping a passage on Christian maturity: "From (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as *each* part does its work" (Eph. 4:16). Every part has a role. A parallel passage, 1 Corinthians 12, says plainly that a hand must be a hand. An eye must be an eye. An ear must be an ear. Only then will a body be healthy.

Because such differences in the body of Christ are precious, we must—returning to our first metaphor—listen to the mouse and the hippo and the crocodile. A Brazilian church is not American. Brazilian evangelism, discipling, theologizing, teaching, administration, counseling, financial management, youth work, church discipline, leadership training, and publishing must be Brazilian. Thai ministry must be Thai. Nigerian ministry must be Nigerian.

Christian unity is prized throughout the book of Ephesians. Even in chapter 4, the word "one" is repeated seven times: one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father of us all, one body, one hope, one faith, one baptism. Yet this unity is not colorless or uniform. Like a complex textile, it is woven of many hues. Like a dynamic ecosystem, it pulsates with amazing species.

American Missiology: Social Science

Although Americans often crash through the world like elephants. American missiologists have led the way in studying the crashes, applying anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

A pivotal figure in missiological anthropology is Eugene Nida of the American Bible Society (ABS). After World War II, many Christian ex-GIs wanted to go back overseas as missionaries. Preparing in college, they were drawn to the social sciences. These disciplines became recognized as training grounds for ministry. Both Jim Elliot and Billy Graham studied anthropology at Wheaton College, for example. An early textbook was Nida's (1954) *Customs and Cultures*.

As an ABS consultant, Nida worked closely with a relatively new mission, Wycliffe Bible Translators. This agency integrated linguistic theory with mission practice. Nida expanded that to anthropology. In the 1960s and 1970s, the American Bible Society published a journal, *Practical Anthropology*. Frequent contributors were Nida, William Smalley, William Rebyburn, Jacob Loewen, and Louis Luzbetak, a Catholic.

In 1965, Donald McGavran became founding dean of the Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission. A former missionary to India, McGavran emphasized the study of church growth. Out of the Church Growth Movement, many book-length case studies applying the social sciences were written in the 1960s and 1970s.

In time, psychologists, too, began researching missionary care. "Psychology and Missions" is the topic of the Summer 1999 special issue of the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*.

Histories of American missiology will give a more complete picture.¹ One significant component is social science, the study of the encounter between “elephants and friends.”

American Missiology: Foundations

“What a limited horizontal view!” some from other countries may protest. “Socially engineered success (church growth, cultural adaptation) isn’t the goal of mission. Even the devil has successes. In all this emphasis on social science, where is theology? Where is the Holy Spirit? Where is suffering? Where is mystery?”

“It is not worth while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar,” observed Henry Thoreau, American essayist (1817–1862). Some would ask, “Is American missiological emphasis on social science unbalanced? Are Americans too busy ‘counting cats?’” In the current volume, Samuel Escobar criticizes American “managerial missiology,” for example.

Worship and piety

Throughout history, there have been many motives for mission in the U.S. and elsewhere. These include a personal call, obedience to scriptural command, rescuing the hell-bound, compassion for the hurting, eschatology, God’s kingdom, civilization, the glory of God, the propulsion of God’s love, a desire to be useful, and, for women (who constitute the majority of missionaries), empathy with women. We continue to be propelled into mission by a variety of motives. Yet in principle American missiologists would affirm the core of mission to be God’s greatness over all the peoples, God’s grace, and God’s glory.

In this light, even “counting cats” may be done worshipfully. Management skill may be seen as a gift of God, just like medical skill. Management means stewardship and accountability, fulfilling the charge given in the “creation mandate” recorded in Genesis 1:26. Management is by no means the mother of mission, nor its base. It is subordinate to the Word and the Spirit. It is a tool. We must repent of the human tendency to idolize tools and of the tendency of some American missionaries to idolize management. But we need not see management as antithetical to the Holy Spirit, any more than we view medicine that way. We need not fear management. We need not call for muddling mediocrity in management. We call for excellence, as it is used in its own subordinate sphere.

Mission begins in worship. Therefore, American missiologists affirm the primacy of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, fellowship, love, holiness, and perseverance. We admit a struggle with Christian workers’ perpetual temptation to emphasize the kingdom more than the king. We resonate with the lines of T. S. Eliot’s (1935, p. 45) play, *Murder in the Cathedral*:

“Servant of God has chance of
greater sin
And sorrow, than the man who
serves a king.
For those who serve the greater
cause may make the cause
serve them,
Still doing right; and striving with
political men
May make that cause political, not
by what they do
But by what they are.”

¹ Two useful references are Shenk & Hunsberger (1998) and Shenk (1990).

We keep in mind also the words of a mission-minded American, A. W. Tozer (1969, p. 15), who said, "We are called to an everlasting preoccupation with God, to be worshippers first and workers only second. The work of a worshipper will have eternity in it."

Scholarship

Beyond worship, American missiologists are not satisfied merely with applied social science. We are also concerned for theory. What is the value of theory? In brief, theory adds historical depth, comparative breadth, ordered system, critical sharpening, and elegance. Theory protects people. Without theory, practitioners tend to shoot first and aim later. Sometimes they hit the target. Often they wound people. Always they waste bullets. Theoretical reflections help us avoid scandalous, laughingstock mission projects that dishonor the Lord.²

When doing scholarly work, we must also pay attention to research methods and resources. Pragmatic Americans excel here. "Tools of the Trade" is the theme of the January 1999 issue of *Missiology*. This detailed report of the 1998 American Society of Missiology annual meeting describes many impressive reference works-in-progress.

In sum, American missiology affirms the primacy of worship and scholarship, not just applied social science. Yet we struggle here. Some reasons for this will emerge in the next section.

Do Westerners Only Support Success? American Values Underlying Missiology

"Have you ever noticed that Westerners only support success?"

Two Asians at an international Christian conference were walking around a

lake. One had supervised a highly praised socio-economic program. Western Christians had lionized him. Publications had described his work glowingly. But as he gazed across the lake, he mused to his friend—who reported it to me—"Have you ever noticed that Westerners only support successes? I wonder, would anybody be interested in me if I were to fail?"

Americans do expect success. And such expectations creep into missions. But who are Americans? There are striking differences between the G.I. generation, the Boomers, the Busters, and the Millennials. Economically, an abyss yawns between Bill Gates at Microsoft and an employee at McDonald's, and this gap is growing. Women and men value different things to some extent and respond differently to situations. Ethnicity intersects America: salsa now outsells catsup.

However, there are common concerns. Most Americans emphasize self-reliance, pragmatic problem-solving, and choice. Most have a strong sense of entitlement. Most have compartmentalized worldviews. And many are embarked on active spiritual journeys. To understand Americans in mission, it is worthwhile to explore these values.

Self-reliance

Americans admire active, assertive, ambitious achievers—self-starters. Many of us dream of leaving the big company and striking out on our own. A surprising number do so. Internet technology, in particular, has made it easier for one person to run an independent consulting business.

Whatever our jobs, we are raised to "do it my way." We are not antisocial. Far from it. Self-reliance doesn't mean ignoring people. What it means is that *I choose* my people. Often my choice will not be my

² See Hiebert (1999) for a helpful exploration of theoretical foundations.

kin. To compensate for weak kin ties, we are a "nation of joiners," forming all sorts of voluntary groupings. Some of these are essential for knitting the fabric of the community together, like the Parent Teachers' Association attached to every public school, the auxiliary assistants who help at hospitals, and the volunteer fire departments in small towns. It is easy to form new missions and ministries in America.

Many American individuals are philanthropic, giving money and time to causes ranging from ecology to the arts to Christian missions. Americans like to give, but they want to feel a sense of participation in deciding how the donation will be used.

Americans don't know much history or geography, and they have little appreciation for raconteurs who transmit the heritage orally. We live here and now. Although many of us cannot afford to buy a house or maintain health insurance, and although we are disillusioned with our national leaders, still we take charge of our own destinies where we can. For example, we take responsibility for our own emotional well-being. We seek counseling when necessary. To simply suffer our fate would be unthinkable. And on weekends we go to building supply stores or computer stores to buy materials so we can do our own home repairs or computer upgrades. That's the American way.

Problem-solving

Americans admire pragmatic, efficient problem-solving. We do not admire leisurely contemplation of the eternal mysteries. Even in theology, according to historian Mark Noll (1985), we have emphasized "methodological common sense," drawing on Scottish common sense philosophy. We value efficiency, statistics, and technology. We also value change. We expect new consumer goods, new amusements, new ways to get work done better. And we prefer frankness to

nuanced courtesy and informality to hierarchy, because these enable us to get right down to business. In mission there is "a practical, activity-directed style of argument of American advocates of mission that runs through A. T. Pierson and John R. Mott to Ralph Winter" (Walls, 1990, p. 5).

We view much of life in measurable terms. Intelligence can be measured. Compatibility or adjustment can be measured. A girl's attractiveness can be measured on a scale of 1 to 10. Even faith: "If you do not commodify your religion yourself, someone else will do it for you," comments R. L. Moore (1994, p. 11) on the Amish.

Doing mission, we like to tackle pragmatic problems with quick, measurable solutions. Ten houses built. Ten dramas performed. Ten sermons preached. One hundred people won to Christ. We approach mission through systems management, diagramming strategy concepts such as tentmakers, nonresident missionaries, multi-individual decision-making units, or criteria to distinguish unreached peoples. Because we are goal oriented, we screen out imponderables that do not fit our planning procedures. Uncertainty and paradoxes are shoved aside. We avoid long discussions fraught with ambiguity, especially in another language. After all, we remind ourselves, our donors deserve results.

Money is valuable not only for its intrinsic usefulness, but also because it serves to measure intangibles. Can our ministry afford air conditioning? This year's software in all our computers? Travel budgets? Glossy paper in our promotional magazine? If so, we must be doing something right.

As a rule, Americans pay little attention to the rest of the world. Every so often, however, something propels us into the international arena. Then our pragmatic, problem-solving outlook shapes the way

we connect. Looking at people in need, for example, Americans who care enough to get involved may ask, "What can we do to fix them?"

Choices

Americans expect choice. Supermarket aisles demonstrate this. Choosing starts early: Toddlers are urged to choose among breakfast cereals. In so doing, they are practicing assertiveness and self-reliance, which they will need as adults. Americans expect choices, from their doctors to their specialized magazines.

Ironically, the result is overchoice. It is exhausting to juggle all the options a well-balanced American considers necessary. With so many possibilities, Americans tend to work too hard and play too hard. There is little time left to think or simply to be.

Entitlement

Americans expect comfort, good health, happiness in marriage, and good grades in school. People have a right to these benefits, many feel. If things don't work out, they want to sue somebody. Youth, in particular, expect instant achievements and are impatient with time-consuming processes.

Even in the post-modern world, this sense of entitlement continues. A survey of U.S. high school seniors asked, "Do you think the world will be better or worse 10 years from now?"

"Worse," most answered.

Later in the survey, another question asked, "Do you think your own life will be better or worse 10 years from now?"

"Better," most answered.

The article reporting this was titled, "First Class on the Titanic." Wherever they may be, Americans feel entitled to good seats.

Fragmented worldviews

Paradoxically, in view of their sense of entitlement, many of the Buster generation lack hope for a coherent worldview. Politicians have betrayed them, they feel. Religious leaders have betrayed them. Families have betrayed them through divorce or busyness. They would like marriage, a vocation, a cause, but they are afraid to commit. They would like to end world hunger and promote world peace, but they don't see how. They don't see any overall purpose to history or pattern for the world.

Yes, they see technological progress. Some of them are Microsoft geniuses, after all. And they make existential discoveries. They fall in love. But these "truths" vibrate in separate worlds. They live split lives, half mechanist and half mystic.

The generation now coming of age is called the Millennials. Extensive consumer research on these young people born after 1983 finds that they respect authority; build large, strong friendship networks; accept diversity; live in an online global village; think iconically, learning through story and metaphor; are spiritually open, seeking the "whys" of life, not out of anger or alienation but out of curiosity; value their parents and siblings, although this is not always apparent; want to work for a better world and community; and want to *do* things that make a difference—mission trips, feeding the homeless, community service.³ Some data suggest the Millennials also do drugs and sex earlier and more casually.

Increasingly, coherence and identity are constructed rather than organic. "The fragmentation of American identities and worldviews causes us to construct our personal identity, tribal 'community,' and

³ Personal conversation with the Rev. Dr. Randy Rowland, generation researcher, Seattle, Washington, October 1999.

worldview,” says Paula Harris, Urbana Convention coordinator. “We live in a constant and daily tension between the global (CNN, McDonald’s, Target, GAP, Microsoft) and the local, between the image (grieving Kennedy’s death, the TV sitcom groups we connect with, our Internet relationships) and the real. So we constantly construct identities, tell stories, and create new tribes.” Other peoples face the same global/local tensions, but most have stronger ethnic heritages on which to draw. Many American ethnic foundations are flimsy.

Self-designed spirituality

On our mystic side, Americans recognize that spirituality is a legitimate area of need. So, for example, between the Starbucks coffee kiosk and the Thomas Cook money exchange in the Seattle airport, a shop space has been reserved for spirituality. Members of any religion may sign up to occupy part of this area. Here they offer spiritual counsel to travelers who ask for it.

This counsel need not be Christian. For many Americans, Christianity is suspect. They think it has contributed to patriarchal sexism, ecological rape of the earth’s resources, racism, the fostering of low self-esteem because of an emphasis on people being sinners, and repression of emotions. Politically, they identify Christianity with right-wing extremists.

Young Americans prefer “designer religions.” Individuals select the components that appeal to them, even if they draw from several religions. If they commit to one, they tend to emphasize those parts that they like. “I’m comfortable with that,” is a common phrase. A conversion may be profoundly felt but transient. Since religion is individual, it is poor form to intrude one’s religion on others unless they ask about it. A person may share

his story but should not push others to follow.

While statistics serve the mechanistic part of a person, they will not serve this spiritual side. The mystic wants stories—testimonies, experiences, and personal encounters. He wants songs and dance, drum-beating and incense, ritual and drama, tears and joy.

Like all human beings, Americans are limited, as this somewhat tongue-in-cheek survey of values has shown. Still, when practiced wisely and humbly, American qualities such as activism and sense of individual responsibility can be seen as gifts from God and potential blessings to the nations.

Born Again in the USA: Challenges to American Missiology

What, then, are the challenges facing American missiology today?

- One-third of the world’s population is under the age of 15, often listening to the same music, watching the same videos, wearing the same clothes, and sharing many of the same fears as American teenagers.

- Catastrophic disasters slam the earth. Even without unusual crises, routine economic structures oppress millions. People whom God loves struggle to survive.

- Pastors and laity long for theological education. For some, interactive web-based courses might deliver these globally.

We would be foolish stewards if we ignored American organization and resources available to serve such populations. Americans bring to these needs “vigorous expansionism; readiness of invention; a willingness to make the fullest use of contemporary technology, finance, organization, and business methods ...; and an approach to theology, evangelism,

and church life that emphasizes addressing problems and finding solutions," according to Scottish missiologist Andrew Walls (1990, p. 18).

Americans in mission today also bring a knowledge of the theory of contextualization. Knowledge is not enough, however. It takes time to learn a language, to adapt to a culture, and to be a friend. It requires openness to ambiguity and even to failure. This is true for individuals and for large projects. Yet because our activist values propel us, and because we have the resources to do so, we often jump into mission projects like elephants.

How we need to learn to dance lightly! How we need to learn to emulate the God who took on local form, talked the everyday language, and listened seriously to ordinary human neighbors.

In this context, let us consider four issues that challenge American missiology:

Compartmentalization

Often a missiologist is trained in a specific discipline: theology, Old or New Testament, a social science, management, pastoral ministry, communications, etc. He comes to the broad subject of missiology incomplete, struggling toward wholeness. Rarely do seminaries help. The major seminaries perpetuate deep cleavages between a "school of Bible and theology" and a "school of world mission." A student who enrolls in one division has little time to take courses in the other.

Admittedly, there are integrative networks that eddy against this fissioning stream. Missiological research journals include *Missiology*, *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, and *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. Growing out of *Practical Anthropology*, the journal *Missiology* is published by the American Society of Missiology. This body cultivates equal representation from Catholics, conciliar Protestants, and independent Protestants.

The Evangelical Missiological Society, which meets concurrently with the Evangelical Theological Society, publishes an annual thematic compendium. These volumes have included *The Holy Spirit and Mission Dynamics*, *Reaching the Resistant*, *Missiology and the Social Sciences*, and *Christianity and the Religions*.

There are many parachurch movements which unite people of various denominations, such as the AD 2000 Movement, the InterVarsity Urbana Mission Convention, and mission agencies themselves. The "Perspectives" course, offered widely across North America, baptizes laity in mission theology, history, and strategy. This course is produced by the U.S. Center for World Mission, founded by Ralph and Roberta Winter.

In spite of these networks, American mission thinking suffers from compartmentalization. This happens even at the congregational level. Many Americans live in their own circle of friends, walled off from people who are different. This is called "cocooning." They don't want to think about the rest of the world. If they are Christians, they avoid thinking about mission. One hundred years ago mission may have been an adventure. Today it is often an annoyance. The masses of data pouring out of the media are overwhelming. An ordinary Christian feels he doesn't know enough to make intelligent decisions. He knows some missionaries have made mistakes in the past. Yes, sometimes he feels vaguely guilty. "But I know God doesn't want me to be upset. So I've decided not to think about that any more," one person told me. He has decided that mission is no longer his responsibility: "I have other priorities."

Most pastors graduate from seminary without being required to take a single world mission course. They have little breadth of missiological wisdom to offer their people. As a result, many church

mission projects are done in spurts—uncontextualized, unsystematic, short term.

Since compartmentalization characterizes American life, it is not surprising that it also fractures missiology at every level. The challenge is to see the gaps, to plan for wholeness, and to build adequately comprehensive paradigms. This may be painful. Truly integrated thinking does not come naturally. It requires practice, energy, and time—the thing Americans lack most.

Uniqueness and unity

To cultivate both unity and diversity, in the spirit of Ephesians 4, is a prime challenge for missiology. This global issue appears in microcosm in the U.S.

How shall we reach Americans? Myriad books explore Americans' spiritual odysseys.⁴ Most of these books focus on a certain segment of the population. Americans are not all the same. In worship, some belt out loud praise songs, while others praise more reflectively. Some lift up their hearts through country music. Others express heartfelt worship through traditional liturgy and Bach organ fugues. Some come to God in hymns. Often a large church will nurture two or three of these subcultures in different worship services.

Is this segmented worship to the glory of God? "No," says René Padilla (1983) in his classic essay, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogenous Unit Principle." Such segregation fosters classism and racism. It rips apart the unity for which Jesus prayed.

On the other hand, we may answer "Yes" if we see these subcultures as gifts of God, enriching his world, flowing out

of his creative image which he has bestowed upon humans, providing local families, local worlds, where people can feel at home. The challenge, then, is to foster deep unity as well as particularity. This means teaching unity at every opportunity, developing exchange and interactive service programs, celebrating together, responding to crises together, doing mission together, empowering leaders from all congregations, and continually condemning racism and classism.

Today millions of Americans are Hispanic and Asian. Among them are spiritually vibrant, biblically knowledgeable believers. Repeatedly throughout history the American nation and church have been re-energized by immigrants. In the 21st century, the vitality of Hispanic and Asian believers could revitalize Anglo churches. Unfortunately, there is little traffic across the polite chasm that separates these family members.

The worldwide challenge to nurture unity in diversity is faced in microcosm in America.

Money and power

The first conference of Evangelical Mission Theologians From the Two-Thirds World subtitled their published papers, "Evangelical Christologies from the Contexts of Poverty, Powerlessness, and Religious Pluralism." How far removed from American missiology this is. While poverty and oppression are major realities for many peoples, these do not shape the categories and paradigms of white male theologians. Nor do missiological anthropologists offer better categories. Their preferred models (structural-functional, symbolic, cognitive, etc.) do not ade-

⁴ Some recent works include Dyrness (1989), Schultze et al. (1991), Roozen & Hadaway (1993), Bell (1993), Barna (1998), Lippy (1994), Moore (1994), Guder et al. (1998), Roof (1999), and Housden (1999). Two books that continue to serve as baselines are Kelley (1972) and Hauerwas (1989).

quately accommodate painful power imbalances. Yet if conspicuous consumerism, poverty, economic and political injustice, and suffering are deep human realities, these cannot be peripheral in missiology.

A huge issue is how to transfer resources without fostering dependency or corruption. Andrew Walls (1990, pp. 22-23) paints one picture: "In some broken-backed nations, those marked out by poverty of resources, technological breakdown, political instability, or economic disaster, the missionary bodies, often working in concert (Missions Incorporated, as one may say), now have the most flexible, powerful, and efficient organization in the country. They can fly people around the country and in and out of it; they can bring in machinery and service ailing plants; they have radio telephones that work; they can arrange currency, get foreign exchange, and send an international message quickly. They can sometimes do things that the government itself cannot do. And the local church, however independent or indigenous, can do none of these things, except insofar as it can act as a link to an outside mission. In the end, what will be the implications of all this power held by Missions Incorporated?"

In the political dimension, American citizenship carries connotations which a relevant missiology must address. No matter how loudly we separate church and state, simply being an American in the world is a political statement that shapes the way our witness and service are received. Being white in multiracial America is a statement too.

The void of missiological attention in this area is not absolute. Jonathan Bonk (1991) has made a fine contribution, as have a number of urban missiologists (Conn, Greenway, Perkins, Tiersma, etc.). These perspectives need to leaven the whole loaf of missiology.

Post-modern Jesus

All scholarship today is affected by a post-modern ethos. We can no longer rest in the clear categories of the Enlightenment. Reality is seen to be much more multi-dimensional. Facts are not value-free. Objects are not known apart from the subjects who know them. Cause-effect explanations cannot answer the question, "Why?" Logic must be supplemented by metaphor. Western progress is not the only path. Optimism is chastened: Not all problems are solvable. The clear worldview of the Enlightenment no longer holds. Paradox and ambiguity loom large. We have lost our "metanarrative," academicians say. We live with fragments, compartments, bits and pieces of truth. There is no longer any single story that holds it all together.

The virtual realities of media abet this split. Media present us with fantasy worlds and "sound bites" where great tragedies and beer ads are juxtaposed. By contrast, in the world of nature and the world of society, there are sustained rhythms. Seed time and harvest. Friendship, courtship, marriage, parenting, aging, dying. Creation, use, maintenance, repair. Knowing these rhythms helps us know ourselves, our potential and our limits, and the sequences that support happy choices. But how many young adults know the grand rhythms of nature and community as well as they know the limited rhythms of their favorite computer games? They exist among *non sequiturs* rather than contextualized connections.

Here clear witness to Christ erodes. In his book on post-modernism and missiology, Paul Hiebert (1999) observes, "Most Western Christians have yet to develop epistemological foundations that enable them to affirm the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to salvation and life eternal, and to boldly witness to the truth in

winsome ways.... Today Western Christians ride to work with Muslims and Hindus who are good people, often better than some Christians they know. How can they declare that these people are lost? The easy solution is to stress tolerance, to live our own lives and let others live theirs, and to hope that communities can somehow coexist in peace in the same nation and world. One of the greatest challenges to the Western church is to lay again the theological foundations of the uniqueness of Christ, and to train its members how to proclaim this with humility and love.”

Hiebert recommends “critical realism” and “critical contextualization,” drawing from both modern and post-modern reservoirs. While mystery, subjectivity, and symbol are essential parts of knowing, while “approximate knowledge may not be complete or exact, that does not make it relative or arbitrary.... Theology and science are not different ways of knowing. True, they ask different questions and use different methods of analysis.... But both begin with belief in premises, and draw on historical experiences to help them understand the order and meaning in reality. Both assume a real world characterized by an order that is continuous over time. Both assume the ability of human reason to understand the world, at least in part.... This has profound implications for us as Christians, for it means we must proclaim theological truth as public truth—true for everyone, not just those who believe it.”

The Big Story

In the story of the mouse and the elephant, we have seen ourselves. Many post-modernists think that this is *all* we can know—single stories. We have lost our overarching metanarrative, our integrating story, they say.

But Christians share a metanarrative older than the Enlightenment. Ephesians

outlines that story, in which God in Christ brings together all things in creation (chaps. 1 and 3), ethnic groups (ch. 2), members of the church (ch. 4), and members of the family (ch. 5). Here our American compartments, our diversities, our money and power, and our conflicting generations find their place in Christ and his kingdom.

We can tell that story, and surely the time for telling is now. When philosophers tinker with bits and pieces of the shattered edifice of truth, how blessed we are to be able to resonate the great themes of creation, stewardship of the earth, incarnation, substitutionary life-giving, resurrection, regeneration, spiritual empowering, community, heaven, and a God both powerful and personal. When evil is strong, it is time to tell about grace. When crucifixion takes place, it is time to tell about resurrection. Surely one of the resources most needed for the 21st century will be people of every nation—including Americans—who can tell the story.

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