

Global Community: Is God really pleased?

By Joel Vestal

An article written for Leadership Network: March 2000

Surely God is smiling on those of us who desire to be missionaries to a postmodern culture in North America - or is He? We desire to embody the gospel we preach within community. Our vision is to contextualize our message to the postmodern audience through narrative preaching as opposed to propositional preaching. Our mission is to be salt and light in a tasteless and dark culture, within the framework of relationship. We prefer the mediums of art, expression, and experience opposed to a 95-point sermon used by generations before us to communicate truth. We wish to diminish the walls put up by others of a "secular-sacred" dichotomy and seek out what God can use for His redemptive purposes. We want to run away from a "consumer" driven Gospel that dictates our ecclesiology and embrace the Trinitarian and missiological God known in the Scriptures. We cringe at seeing the Gospel solely from a white American suburbia perspective that is caught up in seeing America turn back to God (whatever that means).

But there are other types of community that we have yet to engage. Have we desired to understand the Gospel from the perspective of an 18 year-old Rwandan girl whose mother died from diarrhea by drinking dirty water and whose father died of AIDS? How would it be to hear from a 29-year-old Chinese man who earns \$450 a year making baskets, has been arrested 43 times, and worships in an illegal gathering of Christians in his home? How about a 38-year-old church planter in Sudan who has lost 2 children through a never-ending civil war, boasts an income of \$4 per month, and has had his hand cut off by the Muslim army? Or a 48-year-old woman in Cairo, Egypt who is repeatedly denied promotions at her factory because she is a Christian, although she is the most qualified.

The question that has to be raised is this: Are we seeking this kind of community? Is God pleased with our love for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized in the world? What about our actions? (1 John 3:17) A vision and initiative for global community is what we must desire as a young movement. There is nothing more or nothing less that will capture our hearts, imaginations, and dreams than this issue.

I believe that if we do not foster global community, many of us are going to be shocked in Heaven. If we want to understand the ways of God, discern the words of Jesus, and unlock the mysteries of the Kingdom, then we must be in community with our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. We must be in community with those who suffer degrees of injustice that have never been known on American soil.

Martin Luther King said, "Injustice anywhere affects justice everywhere." Where are the voices for justice in our movement? Where and how are we seeking to be advocates for the poor, oppressed, and persecuted in the world and seeking ways for reconciliation and healing?

The issue of injustice has been raised for thousands of years. The best prophets raised this very issue with different perspectives. Habakkuk asked, "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?" (Habakkuk 1:3) David cried out, "How long will the enemy mock you?" (Psalm 74:10) Jonah was exasperated by the violence of the Ninevites and wanted them wiped out. Jeremiah challenged the Lord, saying, "I would speak with you about your injustice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" (Jeremiah 12:1)

When we try to get a handle on the issue of injustice, many other issues come to the table: church/state relationship, the sovereignty of God, making sense of human suffering, asking why the wicked prosper, hardship for those who desire to love God, and eschatological issues. It is important to gain understanding from a historical, biblical, and spiritual perspective.

As God created our world and every man, woman, boy, and girl in His image, how can we really make sense of the following?

- Why is the life expectancy 77.2 in Germany and 37.2 in Sierra Leone?
- Why in Sweden is a woman's real GDP per capita \$17,829/yr. and in Nepal \$720/yr.?
- Why in Jordan does just 2% of the total population have access to safe water to drink and 76% of the total population in Chad have no safe water to drink?
- Why in Cyprus do 0% of the total population have no access to health services and in Yemen 84% of the total population have no access to health services?
- Why in Japan is the infant mortality rate 4 (per 1,000 live births) and in Angola 179 (per 1,000 live births)?
- In the U.S. there are 245 doctors (per 100,000 people) and in Nepal there are 4 doctors (per 100,000 people).
- In Spain, only 1% of children do not reach 5th grade. In Mozambique, 54% of the children do not reach 5th grade.

I wish to provide two responses that are practical and often not considered in the literature I read or other messages I hear:

(1) We must be a voice and advocate for freedom and health for all peoples and religions. We, as Christ followers, do not need to just be a voice for Christians alone. We must stand for all peoples and religions in the world, for freedom and the chance to have clean water and a job. The idea that we are only a voice for Christians is wrong. Yes, we do seek justice for our brothers and sisters in the world who are followers of Jesus Christ. However, it is wrong if we do not seek freedom for all people in the world to have freedom to live. The Gospel alone is what will change people's lives. We must not use coercion, force, or manipulation to see people come to faith in Christ.

(2) We must be a tool for reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing. Most Muslims in the world, when they think of Christians, do not know the difference between Slobodan Milosevic or Billy Graham. From the 11th century to the 13th century, Christians

launched a series of armed expeditions - the Crusades - to the East and Constantinople. The West wanted to free the Holy Land from Islamic influence. These events are deeply embedded in the Muslim psyche. When you look today, do you wonder how the Muslim world views the situation in Kosovo? 95% of all Albanians who were ethnically cleansed in Kosovo were Muslim. Who were their killers? Serbians who are orthodox Christians by ethnic and cultural identity. Religion for centuries has been used as a tool. As Paul Marshall says, "Religion is not merely adherence to creeds or doctrines. Religion is the fundamental shaper of human life, social structures, and systems, sometimes positively so, sometimes not."

We as Christ followers must seek opportunities to be vehicles of forgiveness that will open doors for the Gospel. We must seek to mobilize the time, treasure, and talents of all believers to see a lost world reconciled to God, the poor cared for and empowered, the environment respected, and every person who has been created in the image of God granted a chance to live life and with freedom!