



The Mystery in Other People by Jim Stier



Two weeks ago, I was introduced to a young couple in Nairobi. He is a Somali man, and they have recently sensed God's direction to take the gospel to the town where he grew up, a town of fanatic Muslims. I saw no self-pity in them as they described to me the persecution that has already started and the humiliations they are enduring. Love, joy, humility, and determination are powerfully evident in their spirits. I was moved, and once again impressed with the inestimable value of our faith. They made Jesus as the pearl of great price come alive to me as we talked. I have a lot to learn from this couple.

There is much talk amongst those in missions about the importance of contextualization. That is a big word that helps us focus on a great advantage

we have when we go out to extend the kingdom of God. The gospel isn't specific to or designed for spreading any particular human culture. There is no holy language for us. There are very few essential rituals, and even they can be adapted to suit circumstances. There is no place in the west or east that our believers must bow down to. All peoples have a holy calling and purpose. Our message is meant to enhance all cultures without crushing them under outside impositions. When this is properly understood, we open the doors for joyous participation in the kingdom from all peoples on earth.

I love that. Paul spent a great deal of his efforts and a lot of the space in his epistles making sure that we would honor these principles. People don't have to become cultural Jews in order to be disciples of Jesus! This makes Jesus so much more accessible to the peoples of the world.

However, that's only part of the picture. In Ephesians chapter one, Paul begins with an eloquent exposition of the above principles, calling them the mystery of the gospel. In verses 10 and 11, he draws some conclusions about God's intention in all of this. "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord."

When we go with the gospel to new peoples and new cultures, we're not doing them some kind of big favor by allowing them to make some cosmetic adaptations to their expressions of Christian life. As we introduce them to the kingdom we're opening up a whole new avenue through which God can



reveal Himself to us. Jesus will shine through them as He never will shine through us. It's not a question of who lives a better life for Jesus. It's a question of the "manifold" (variegated, multi-colored, multi-faceted, infinitely varied) wisdom of God.

We need each other.

It is a great tragedy when any culture disappears or is mangled through contact with a more dominating people. There are ways that Jesus will never be manifest except through that people group that we are reaching out to. We must let them be who they are, or they will never be able to fulfill their particular role in revealing Jesus.

The kingdom of Heaven is hugely diverse and rich in perspectives. Every people group that comes into the Kingdom adds to the richness.

I have been inexpressibly edified by the incredible courage of an Umbundu man, the iron determination of a young Koryak pastor, the filial love of a crippled Chinese woman, the loving obedience to Jesus of a Nepalese housewife. Brazil, a land of celebration and hope, has modified me forever in so many ways.

Unfortunately, when we look at people across cultural or racial borders we usually don't see them. We see how well they perform at being us. They're never as good as we are at being us, since we've been doing it for a lifetime. This leads us into all kinds of inadvertent patronizing and unconsciously arrogant attitudes. It cuts us off from one another, and ruins the circulation of life in the body of Christ.

We need to ask God to give us eyes to see. We tend to like conformity, but God is committed to variety. Let's be more like Him.

As you go out from your base or ministry to reach a distant and foreign people group, have eyes to see and ears to hear. If you do, you will see the manifold wisdom of God and hear the deep mysteries of the gospel. Your ministry will be revitalized and your cultural isolation broken. Jesus will be manifest in new ways.

You need the unreached.

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