

Rich Lusk

Sermon follow up

11/19/06

In light of my sermons from Romans 12 the last couple of weeks, as well as David's global missions Sunday School class, I thought I would give some reading recommendations. Maybe you can get some of these books on your Christmas wish list!

My sermons from Romans 12 have heavily emphasized how we should respond to those who wrong us. David's class has emphasized the messiness of cross-cultural missions. Both of these topics are expansive and have a myriad of practical applications. They are both categories of Christian living that we know to be important, and yet we struggle to practice them as we should.

First, let's consider forgiveness. We know that we are called to forgive others in a way analogous to God's forgiveness of us. How does that work? Where can we get some practical tips on how to exercise this grace towards others? Are there limits or conditions on forgiveness? Does forgiveness cancel out discipline or punishment for the wrongdoer? Does forgiveness require full reconciliation? How do I cope with lingering bitterness and resentment?

One of the best books I've read on forgiveness is Miroslav Volf's *Free of Charge*. Volf teaches at Yale, but don't let that throw you off -- he writes in an easy to understand fashion, full of relational illustrations. Further, he upholds the evangelical convictions he was raised on when he grew up in a Christian home in Croatia. The fact that he comes from a country torn by racial and religious strife means he has seen first hand the need for and power of forgiveness. This book was chosen by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, as the 2006 "Lent book," meaning that he recommended it for reading during the season of Lent. While I do not agree with all of Volf's exegesis or applications (I guess that goes without saying!), I think any Christian who struggles to forgive would be greatly encouraged by his work. Volf emphasizes that forgiveness is a gift we offer to one who has wronged us. It is not a private feeling in the heart, but a social transaction with public consequences. Volf grounds our practice of forgiveness in the gospel itself -- particularly our union with Christ.

Another book worth looking into is Jay Adams' *From Forgiven to Forgiving*. Adams is noted for his rigorous application of Reformed theology to counseling concerns. This book handles several issues quite differently from Volf's work, and for that reason they are good complements to one another. Adams is not afraid to tackle hard questions, such as forgiveness as it relates to cases of marital infidelity, the extent to which we can forgive the unrepentant, the danger of taking shortcuts in working towards reconciliation, and what to do when *you* are the offender. It is a solid and practical book.

Ken Sande's work *Peacemaker* is very useful in understanding how relationships work and how conflicts should be settled in a biblical fashion. Sande's follow up work *Peacemaking for Families* applies these same principles to specific situations within the household. I highly recommend these works.

A few other books to consider include *Exclusion and Embrace* by Volf; *Embodying Forgiveness* by L. Gregory Jones; *The Peaceable Kingdom* by Stanley Hauerwas; and the chapter on bitterness (ch. 21) in John Piper's *Future Grace*.

David's global missions classes have showed some of the complexities and ambiguities that we find ourselves enmeshed in when we get involved in mission work. No doubt, this can be a bit unsettling. Living in a culture that has been heavily influenced by the gospel, many decisions we have to make about how to relate to the surrounding culture seem quite clear cut. But on the frontier mission field, where the church is not yet fully established, the situation is quite different and the alternatives that confront us are often very fuzzy. Many American Christians have romantic, sentimental notions about the mission field, and David's class has helped to shatter those misconceptions. Many of the missionaries we hold up as heroes today (e.g., William Carey, Amy Carmichael) were routinely criticized in their own day for not being sufficiently successful, or for accommodating themselves too much to the culture they were trying to reach, or for getting bogged down in "social justice" issues rather than simply "preaching the gospel."

Cross cultural missions opens our eyes to a number of deeply philosophical issues. How does the gospel relate to culture? How is the gospel "contextualized"? How does a Christian from one culture reach people in another culture? How much of his own culture should he try to shed for the sake of communication? What kinds of strategies should be adopted? How do word and deed relate on the mission field? How does the missionary from the wealthy West disentangle the gospel from the history of colonialism and the abuses of capitalism? How does he keep people from becoming "rice Christians," that is, embracing Christianity in a nominal form in order to get various material benefits that the mission offers? How do we translate the Christianity (theology, liturgy, hymnody, etc.) that we are familiar with into the language, forms, and categories of the culture we are trying to reach? How do we keep from unduly Westernizing the people we are hoping to Christianize? What constitutes "success" on the mission field? How should we expect the gospel to transform the culture we are reaching? How quickly should missionaries leave the growth and maintenance of the church to indigenous leadership?

These are daunting questions and I would suggest the church is still figuring out how to answer them. Thankfully, fruitful mission does not depend on having all of these issues worked out fully. However, we cannot afford to ignore these questions either. David's presentations challenge us, but they are helpful precisely because David has wrestled with these sorts of questions on the mission field as he has worked in India. Pray for us as church leaders as we seek to develop a TPC philosophy of global missions and link up with missional works around the world.

You should also note that the reason these contextualization questions are now so acute is because missionaries who were *not* aware of all these cross-cultural challenges went ahead and did missional work anyway, over the last several centuries. We are just now becoming aware of how invisible our own cultural presuppositions can be to us, even as they look incredibly strange to those from other cultures. We are just now realizing how much missionaries from earlier times confused their own culture with the gospel itself. That's not to denigrate their achievements -- they still did more than good than harm -- but it is a warning to us to not repeat the same errors.

Some Christian theologians have made "mission" foundational to all of their work, and any of their books would serve to inform and encourage you in thinking about how we should do missions as a church. I'm thinking here of men like N. T. Wright and Lesslie Newbigin -- but since I have described some of their works before, I will pass them by for now.

Here are a few books I have found helpful on these topics that you may not know about:

*Transforming Mission* by David Bosch. This is the THE standard work on missions today. It is an excellent survey of missions within the New Testament and church history. Bosch roots the mission of the church in the wider mission of God to form a people for himself. He takes up the challenges related to missions in a changing, post-modern world. His book certainly has its weakness and it is not exactly brief (587 pages). Bosch's view of Christendom ("Christian civilization") should be supplemented by something like Peter

Leitharts' *Against Christianity*. But overall, this is one of the most important books on global missions that you can get. Bosch works through all the major issues in a thorough way.

Harvie Conn was a professor at Westminster in Philadelphia. He wrote several works dealing with questions related to Christian mission. In particular, he was interested in the relationship of the church to the cultures she finds herself in and seeks to reach, as well as the relationship of the proclamation of the gospel to deeds of mercy in the work of evangelism. Any of Conn's works are worth consulting, as he has many helpful thoughts on contextualization of the gospel and the word+deed pattern of the kingdom. One short book that is quite useful is his *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace*. Conn argues that true mission/evangelism must always be holistic, *from the whole person to the whole person*. We must minister to both bodies and souls in order to show the fullness of the kingdom.

Many of Conn's themes have been picked up by Tim Keller. Keller is a very popular, often imitated, PCA pastor who works in Manhattan. Overall, while Keller's theology has some "soft spots," he has a very fruitful, winsome, and engaging ministry. Many of the questions he and the churches he has planted in New York have wrestled with parallel those questions that we have to ask about the mission field. Indeed, the issues of race, poverty, and cross-cultural relationships are just as important in many major cities as they are on the frontier mission field. Keller's book *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* is an excellent study of the mission of the church and our calling to reach the world with the gospel through both words (proclaiming the gospel) and actions (ministries of mercy). Keller wrestles with hard questions, such as how the wealthy can reach the poor, how suburbanites should reach inner cities, how word and deed should be related, how "conditional" we should be in offering mercy, etc. A lot of his book builds off a famous sermon by Jonathan Edwards entitled "The Christian's Duty to the Poor Explained and Enforced." Highly recommended for those interested in both local and global mission and mercy work.

The book *The Message of Mission* by Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra is a helpful exegetical study of the biblical vision for the church's mission. If you want to study the biblical teaching on mission, I highly recommend this work. It isn't always right, but it will challenge you to consider the centrality of mission in the biblical story.

Another helpful work is Mark Gornik's *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*. Gornik is speaking from experience, as he was part of a church plant and urban renewal effort in the Sandtown area of Baltimore. Again, while this is not a global missions book, it works through many of the same questions. Gornik shows that Christian mission must be holistic, including not only evangelism and discipleship (as those things are usually defined) but also economic and educational development. The Sandtown case study is very useful.

Other books that do a good job showing how word and deed must be integrated for Christian mission to move forward include *Churches That Make a Difference*, edited by Ron Sider, and *The Micah Mandate* by George Grant. The former looks at contemporary American congregations doing missional work in their local communities, though many of the lessons and insights are transferrable to global missions as well. The latter book is filled with encouraging historical sketches of ways in which faithful Christians have furthered the kingdom through their sacrificial labors.

Several interesting books deal with the way the church not only penetrates cultures, but transforms them and reconciles them to one another. Phillip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom* describes the exploding growth of the church in the global South and East. It is immensely encouraging to hear how the gospel is spreading so rapidly elsewhere, even as it seems to wane in the West. *Where the Nations Meet* by Stephen Rhodes gives several illustrations of ways in which the gospel promise to bring the nations together into the one family God promised Abraham is happening right now. *God's Global Mosaic* by Paul-Gordon Chandler looks at the impact of the gospel in various cultures and nations. None of these books examine the issues raised

by contextualization in any depth, so they are prone to oversimplify the way in which the gospel spreads. But their stories are encouraging nonetheless.

Finally, I would strongly encourage you to read the Peru Mission website. You've heard me (and now Claire Woods) talk about Wes Baker's work in Peru. It is an excellent model of the kind of mission the church needs to engage in. Spend some time here: <http://perumission.org/content/about-us.php>.