

Tales of Mutual Conversion

When I was a kid, my life goal was to be a missionary. There was a girl that lived in our neighbourhood with whom I often played and had sleepovers. One day, my mom got a call from my friend's mom who said that they were atheists and that they were disturbed that I was trying to convert their daughter to Christianity.

When my friend had told me that she didn't go to church, I had regaled her with fantastical tales about Jesus' miracles and had taught her my favourite camp songs like, "Father, I adore you" (including the sign language for extra impact). My mom told me to dial it back and luckily their family still let me come over.

The theme for this year's Mennonite Church Eastern Canada Spring Assembly was The Great Re-Commission: Making Disciples in the Congregation and the Neighbourhood. The Assembly took as its central scripture passage this post-resurrection text from Matthew 28:16-20 that we heard a few minutes ago. Here is the heart of it again:

Jesus said to the eleven disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

In the Bible, this passage is entitled "The Great Commission", but because of my *adult* discomfort with missionary efforts, I was tempted to call this sermon The Great Decommission. Who am I to try to convert someone to my religion? Surely I'm not *that* kind of Christian.

But does someone have to be born into the faith in order to be considered Christian? Are those who want to be Christian not allowed to be if they so wish? I also have Mennonite friends who were not born a Reimer or a Brubacher, but they still consider themselves to be Mennonite and would like to be fully included in our community of faith. And what were the Reimers and Brubachers before we converted to Christianity? We are all settlers to the faith. It is not our indigenous homeland.

Perhaps the missions model with which I am most comfortable is Mennonite Central Committee's. In the "principles and practices" part of their website, the book of Micah is cited, saying, "What does the Lord require of you but to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God" (6:8). This reflects a familiar call to service as a way of being a disciple of Jesus in the world. Our actions, more than our words, reflect our identity as followers of Christ.

In order to look more closely at what the Bible has to say about missions, I read through the book of Acts, which chronicles a host of missionary stories featuring Paul, Peter, Philip, Priscilla and even missionaries whose names don't start with the letter "P" like Aquila.

Let's explore the dynamics of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8. The Holy Spirit tells Philip to walk a southwest bound desert road from Jerusalem to Gaza – unfamiliar territory for Philip who is from Bethsaida in the Northeast.

And on this wilderness path, Philip meets someone whom he might not have met otherwise - an Ethiopian Eunuch – an important figure in the court of the Ethiopian Queen. This is not a poor, powerless person. In fact, he is in charge of the Queen's entire treasury; however, he is still a marginalized person because of his physical status as a eunuch. It appears that he is already Jewish since the text says that he was coming back from worshipping in Jerusalem, although he would not have been allowed in the Temple itself since he would have been deemed ritually unclean (Dt. 23:1).

The eunuch is studying the Hebrew Scriptures when he sees Philip and invites Philip to sit with him in his chariot and help him to interpret the passage he is reading from Isaiah. After their conversation, the eunuch sees some water and tells Philip that he'd like to be baptized. It doesn't sound like Philip is using heavy handed missionary tactics.

Something I noticed about the missionary efforts in the book of Acts is that they often start with an invitation to hospitality and dialogue by the one who becomes converted. In other words, the encounter is instigated by the future convert, not the missionary. In addition, God is present and at work in some way before the convert even meets the missionary. In the story we've just heard, God tells Philip to go

down a certain road where he will find the eunuch and the eunuch is already reading from the scriptures and shows an openness to further illumination about their meaning.

Another conversion that takes place in Acts 16 happens when Paul meets a business woman named Lydia, who invites him into her home. In my NRSV translation, it says that Lydia “urged” Paul and his companions to stay at her house and that she “prevailed” in so doing. Lydia, then, is the one coaxing Paul to talk with her further, not the other way around.

In Acts 10, a Roman centurion named Cornelius invites Peter to his house after a dream in which God tells him to do so and Peter asks Cornelius why he sent for him. I won’t say much more about this because Lori will be taking this as her central sermon text in a few weeks. The important thing for us today is that God has spoken to Cornelius before he meets Peter, Cornelius initiates the encounter and Cornelius is the one with the divinely given information to set the agenda. Again, not a coercive story about a missionary forcing himself on a passive or resistant convert.

In Acts 18, we meet a Jewish man named Apollos - a man with a reputation for being knowledgeable about the Scriptures. Apollos had become a follower of Jesus and had been preaching about him in Ephesus which is where he came across some of Paul’s fellow missionaries – a married couple named Priscilla and Aquila. After having heard Apollos preach, Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and corrected him on a few points of theology – namely the meaning of baptism (24-26). What I find interesting about this passage is that Apollos, the missionary, does not have all of the information and is willing to be taught and corrected, in part, by a woman, Priscilla, who is more knowledgeable than he is. Missionaries don’t possess the whole story – they need to make room within themselves to learn and grow through their encounters with others.

And what about post-biblical missions? What about stories we’ve heard from around the world that certainly present missions in a bad light? I remember one news story I heard after the Tsunami hit Southeast Asia in 2004. A group of missionaries went to Thailand to help clean up and rebuild and promised the locals that God would never let this happen again if they converted to Christianity.

And what about missions closer to home? We have been hearing a lot about Christian Residential Schools, whose mission it was to “take the Indian out of the child” in line with the Canadian government’s policy of “aggressive assimilation”. Christianity and Canadian values were seen to be one and the same. This is something that many of us are thinking about in relation to Canada 150.

It is hard to separate missionary efforts from colonialism, whereby Christians spread the faith while simultaneously contributing to cultural genocide.

But this isn’t always the case. Consider the work of the Jesuits in Latin America and China. The Jesuits were founded by a Spanish knight-turned-monk named Ignatius Loyola in the mid-16th century and Jesuits were very involved in Catholic reform in response to the Protestant Reformation.

The Jesuit society is still at work in 112 countries on six continents. Jesuits focus on education (founding schools, colleges, universities and seminaries), intellectual research, and cultural pursuits and have a strong focus on social justice issues and inter-religious dialogue.

Even though we see missions and colonialism as common bedfellows historically, the Jesuits often found themselves at odds with colonialists. They didn’t see themselves as accountable to European nation-states and fiercely protested against the slave trade of indigenous people. In the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in Latin America, the Jesuits intervened on behalf of the indigenous people against the exploitation of the colonialists and they helped the indigenous people to establish local, self-governing city-states where they could still practice their local customs. Perhaps because of their conflicts with the colonial powers, the Jesuits were expelled from the Americas for a number of decades in the 18th century.

In the 16th century, an Italian Jesuit named Matteo Ricci traveled to Macau, China and began to immerse himself in the Chinese language and culture and took an “apologetic” approach to teaching Christian beliefs to the Chinese which means that he tried to express Christian ideas in a way that was reasonable to and harmonious with Chinese ideas and culture. He even dressed like a Chinese scholar.

Another Italian monk named Prospero Intorcetta travelled to China and published the life and works of Kong Fuzi into Latin in 1687 and this became very influential to European Enlightenment philosophers. In the West, Kong Fuzi is well-known by his Latin name Confucius because of these translations. What we see in the work of these Jesuit missionaries is a pursuit of cultural exchange and mutual edification.

I'd like to think that Philip and Peter and the early Christian missionaries were also transformed by their experiences on their missionary journeys - that the eunuch, the business woman and the Roman centurion had a profound influence on their way of thinking about the world. Not just the other way around.

My friend Zoë Janzen and I went to India for a few months when we were 19 and didn't know anything about anything. Some of the Mennonites there kindly set us up with a few brief service projects to keep us busy. For part of the time, we went to stay with an Indian family that lived outside of Calcutta in a rural area. They took in orphans and even ran a school for them in their home. These kids were Hindu and Muslim and this family would make sure that the kids could observe their individual religious ceremonies and traditions while living with them. I know that it sounds clichéd, but I think that I can speak for both of us by saying that we were certainly more transformed by the experience than those we were supposedly helping.

The more that I study world religions, the more I realize how porous the boundaries are between religions. We have this idea that we participate in inter-religious dialogue as if the conversation is between this one monolithic never-changing religion called Christianity and this other monolithic religion called Buddhism or Islam, or whatever, but all of our religions are moving, changing, fusions of various individuals and cultures. We might be able to find a central kernel of everlasting truth in Christianity, but it is viewed through a kaleidoscope of global experiences and perspectives. Even early Christianity was a blend of Jewish and Greek influences. And these Jewish and Greek influences were also influenced by the cultures they encountered earlier, etc., etc.

I'd like to tell you a bit about someone whom I've come to admire tremendously – the South Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung. Her mother was third-generation

Presbyterian and her father's spiritual practices included a mix of Confucianism, Taoism and Korean Shamanism, even though he had technically converted to Christianity when he married her mother. While Chung was in university, martial law was imposed in South Korea and she joined a student activist movement and had to study secretly. She was eventually kidnapped for hiding another student activist, then tortured and imprisoned by agents of the dictatorship and she says that this experience made her into a spiritual seeker and a theologian. While she was in the torture chamber, she says that she felt the very gentle but firm hands of a shepherd God, holding her close and guiding her through the valley of death. Psalm 23 became her mantra that she repeated over and over again.

Chung eventually moved to the United States and now teaches at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In 1991, she was asked to be the keynote speaker at the huge gathering of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, Australia. She began her address by inviting 16 Korean aboriginal dancers to perform and then invoking an eclectic mix of the spirits of Korean ancestors and Christian martyrs. She framed her entire presentation around the concept of liberation, but argued that liberation can only happen if people are empowered to experience God through their own cultural traditions. Her presentation did not go over well with everyone.

She was accused of religious syncretism – of combining Christian teachings and practices with elements of other faith traditions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism and Korean shamanism.

She responded by saying, "If [you] ask me, "Are you a syncretist?" I say, "I am a syncretist, but so are you." She argued that people who don't admit that they are syncretists are exerting colonialist, patriarchal power. She asked, why are you allowed to adopt Greek philosophical categories for Christianity, but I am not allowed to bring my Asian perspectives to Christianity? And then she explained that people from non-Christian cultures will interpret the gospel out of their life experience and need to be true to their identity, history, and culture. Otherwise, Christianity becomes a religion of oppression, not liberation.

Liberation, for Chung, is another word for salvation. Liberation is salvation in this life in the form of justice and peace. In an interview she was asked about salvation

and what it is that we need to be saved from. Her answer was a very Asian one – a blending of Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist virtues that fit rather well with Christianity.

She said that we need to be saved from ego and self-centredness and from our hunger for power in order to receive abundant life. Abundant life, she said, means right relationship with God and right relationship with every living thing based on mutuality, reciprocity, respect, balance and harmony. Her Korean interpretation of dearly held Christian beliefs has refreshed my mind and soul and awakened me to new ways of reading scripture. When I read her work or listen to her speak, I feel like the eunuch who has met my Philip on a desert road and been illuminated about my own faith.

I watched Chung's TED talk and some interviews with her recently and I'd like to conclude with something that she said. She said that our hearts are meant to be broken. Not tragically broken, which can happen, rather broken wide open. And when our hearts are broken wide open, this leaves room for wisdom and compassion to come flooding in. She also compares the heart to an empty bowl – if it is already completely full, how do we have room for delicious new food that someone might feed us? If our hearts are hungry and wide open, then we can still receive new food.

It is my prayer this morning, that our hearts be broken wide open to experiences of mutual transformation. That we hear the call from God that sends us down desert roads to meet people that we might not otherwise meet and to live out our discipleship with humility and compassion and curiosity, as followers of Christ.