

## **In Circles: Painful Adventures in Christian Culture Crossing**

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This is a chance as much for you to teach me as for me to teach you. Please interrupt with comments, corrections, and objections.

As I have spoken with some of you and with the Urban staff, I have gained the impression that being Westmont students up here is like being fishes out of water (or alternately, if you have found the Westmont bubble suffocating, birds out of water). The ubiquitous, sometimes deep, sometimes shallow Christianity of the mother campus is far away, hidden away along with the estates and gated mansions and Lotusland and Neverland – where, it may suddenly seem to you, it belongs. The people you are meeting in your internships are *not* conservative evangelical Protestants. Not only that, they aren't interested in becoming any of the three. And often they seem happier than you expected – perhaps even happier than you are!

If this is so, then perhaps these questions have been going through your minds: Does Christianity matter to these people? Does it matter beyond our own little circles? If not, does it matter at all? Is it even true?

For reasons I will explain to you shortly, I have felt that way too recently. (Let me steal my own thunder and give you an answer to the questions: *Maybe.*)

But first let me suggest a frame of reference. Michael Jenkins draws on Robert McAfee Brown's *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* to describe a "hermeneutical circle" not unlike my own experience:

1. "Action in the world leads to a jarring experience."
2. "Our overall understandings are shattered, and we reflect on the need for new ones."
3. "We turn to the Scriptures with new questions."
4. "This leads to a new level of action."
5. "The scope of our action widens" [and sets the stage for another turn of the circle].

Jenkins' hermeneutical circle is fine as far as it goes, but I want to suggest several important modifications. The most important such modification is the inclusion of *others* in the hermeneutical circle, so that it becomes centered on Christ rather than on "me." Lesslie Newbigin's theology of mission describes crises like these that come from and lead to cross-cultural contact. This sets up a three-cornered dynamic of acculturated missionary, cultural mission field, and Scripture, all in conversation and all susceptible to being transformed in the exchange according to the eschatological Trinitarian fulfillment of John 16:12-15. So let me show you something I think makes sense of what happened to me, and which I have a feeling will help you make sense of yours. [See figure.]

The attacks of September 11 and the aftermath created an urgent need for me to understand what was going on – what was behind the events. Ordinarily I would have turned to the usual sources to meet that need: Journalists, analysts, experts of various kinds, and especially Christians with gifts of discernment. However, the world's journalists were ill-equipped to understand it; they have trained themselves to see the world in certain ideological lenses, and in this case the ideological lenses were not helpful. Ditto for the western establishment's foreign policy analysts, comparative area experts, and scholars of Islam. These had grown comfortable seeing the world in ways that proved to be profoundly inadequate. For instance, with a few notable exceptions, most scholars of Islam and comparative area experts had failed to appreciate the character of militant Islamism, its appeal, or its 'root causes.' Politicians were typically following agendas that prevented them from speaking plainly about what was happening. Big media, the power establishment, and the academy all failed massively to see 9/11 coming or to respond insightfully in the months afterward. The church failed too. Some of the dumbest statements following 9/11 came from Christians. Moreover, the church has failed to adjust and compensate even more massively than these other institutions.

All this sent me looking elsewhere in search of answers. I couldn't just open the paper or the usual newsweeklies, or scan the bookshelves at retail bookstores or even at school libraries. I sure couldn't turn on so-called 'Christian radio.'

I ended up turning to an informal network of bloggers and on-line commentators that had already begun springing up before 9/11, but which exploded in the weeks and months following as more and more people like me came to the same conclusions that the usual information sources were hopelessly behind the curve. Turning to these people was a godsend; the 'free market' of opinion and source-referencing online turned out to be much quicker at identifying inadequacies and improving itself than traditional media. (Over time the traditional institutions have closed this gap somewhat. But only somewhat.)

However, this turn had an unintended side-effect. On-line commentary is far more blunt and self-revealing than print or broadcast commentary. It doesn't just offer arguments; it displays personalities and invites people into each other's lives. So it brought me into contact with whole communities of people who were unlike me, who didn't feel like going to great lengths to understand me, and who weren't interested in becoming like me. To a respected and befriended professor in the Westmont bubble, this was a shock!

It was a *real* shock. My wares were not only unwanted, they seemed ill-suited to the task. I chronicled the growing sense of helplessness I was feeling in an anniversary reflection called "How September 12 Destroyed My Faith." This piece tells of my year-long encounter with two worlds:

America after terrorism, and the Muslim world in the face of unprecedented world scrutiny. Neither was guided by the gospel; neither was even interested in being so guided. Each was intent on destroying the other and replicating itself. In their conflict the good news was marginal. As I looked on, what I had to offer began to seem more and more unattractive, irrelevant, impotent, and trivial. Seeing this in 2002 helped me see that it had been true in all sorts of other contexts over the church's history. Christianity as a substantive way of life, I concluded, was on the edge of extinction. So was my own faith.

What I did then turned things around for me. I took the question that most bothered me in light of what I had discovered in the previous year – “Why should I believe in the Christian faith when Christians do so many evil things in God's name?” – and searched the Scriptures for an answer. I thought it through in writing. When I finished, I realized that the storm had passed. An answer to my questions was there waiting for me to seek it. None of these people – global democratic capitalists, antiglobalists, Islamists – had silenced Jesus. He has proven to be their Lord too, not just mine.

It is well and good to trust that Jesus is the King of all kings and Lord of all lords. But in the crunch, I found that abstract trust unsatisfying. Part of that might be my weakness of faith; but I think a powerful force behind my dissatisfaction was the Holy Spirit. God was goading me on to test the spirits. God was holding back his blessings until I ventured out in faith to carry the message into a new frontier *and* bring that new frontier to the message, to see whether and how the two had anything to do with each other. Neither God nor I was satisfied with my easy “yes” to the issue of whether the good news was good news to *these* people. My answer had to become concrete. The interaction had to happen in order for the leaven to spread further through the lump of dough. My interim answer had to be “maybe” – or, put in a more theologically defensible way, “let's see.”

Since deciding to find out for myself, I have kept writing to understand these new worlds, kept up relationships made during that first year, and shifted my research agenda in response to the questions and perspectives that I uncovered after September 11. These have become an integral part of my theology and my life. The book I am writing on theology through the Lord's Prayer is profoundly influenced by my interaction with them. They are changing the ways I pray, teach, and interact with believers and non-believers. Furthermore, my work is having an effect – tiny, but real – in those circles.

Does that qualify as the Spirit taking what the Father has given the Son and declaring it to us? I think it does. Might the crises in your life be the same Spirit at work? You tell me!

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<i>According to Work et al* ...</i>	<i>Christians ...</i>	<i>Jonah [or use the biblical character of your choice!] ...</i>	<i>I ...</i>	<i>You (?) ...</i>
life brings us to encounters with the unfamiliar.	may (rightly or wrongly) identify unfamiliarity with inhospitality to the faith.	receives the Word to prophesy to Ninevah.		
this shocks expectations and drives us to rethink.	may assume the faith is either well suited or unsuited to navigating what Alasdair MacIntyre calls the “epistemological crisis.”	sets sail for Tarshish instead.		
we turn to what we trust in, which either satisfies us or fails us.	may discover old or new trust in both other ‘gods’ and the God of Jesus Christ.	sleeps, then confesses YHWH. His crew call out to their own gods, then to YHWH.		
we learn to trust in whatever meets our new needs.	as well as non-Christians may find this an opportunity for the Word to gain a new hearing.	is delivered by the fish. The stilled sea saves the crew.		
these turns transform us in unpredictable ways into people of new convictions.	may be strengthened and even made through the process, in which case the angels rejoice.	prays in thanksgiving. The crew sacrifices to YHWH.		
these new convictions arise out of and create new forms of life.	realize that this is the Spirit taking what the Father has bestowed upon Christ and declaring it to the Church (John 16:12-15).	fulfills his vow. The crew vows to YHWH.		

\*This scheme draws on Michael Jenkins drawing on Robert McAfee Brown’s *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 30-31, to describe a “hermeneutical circle” of theological transformation (see *Invitation to Theology* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001], 64-65). I have expanded upon it by drawing on the insights of Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), particularly as he uses John 16:12-15. My own writings referenced in the narrative are at <http://telfordwork.net>.