

Prelude to A "Neighbor-ology"

*Confessing the Faith in Thailand today.
Part of the Evangelistic Situation.*

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"He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen". I John 4:20.

"As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world". John 17:18.

I

A conversation between a missionary and a woman suffering from cancer:

M. How are you today? I have come to visit you hoping that I may talk with you a few minutes about the Christian religion.

W. I feel neither well nor bad. If you want to tell me your *dhamma*—you are a teacher of religion, aren't you?—go ahead.

M. Yes. I am a teacher of the Christian religion. This book I have in my hands is the Scripture. Just as the *Tripitake* is very important for Buddhism, this book is very important for us. There is a prayer, quite short and concise, in the Scripture. The name of it is the Lord's Prayer

W. Just a minute! I am a northern Thai woman. Speak to me in the northern Thai dialect. You said that you are a teacher of religion, didn't you? How can anyone be a teacher of religion unless he is at home with the language of the people? Speak to me in the dialect. I am tired of hearing your poor Thai

M. I am sorry. I can speak only the Bangkok Thai

W. I thought so. You cannot! I don't like people like you. You missionaries are always trying to teach people while you really do not understand the people. The Buddhist monks are much better than you missionaries. I will call in a monk right now. I will listen to him. He will understand me. He can comfort me with his *dhamma*. He can speak my own language. You are wasting your time here. Go home!

This may not be a striking story for those who engage in missionary work in Asia from Japan to Pakistan. It shook, however, the foundation of my self-licensed theology and strategy of mission. The point of irritation in the conversation was not really a matter of language. My poor language only intensified the already existing dissatisfaction. She was annoyed at me for looking at her *in my own terms*. She felt that she was only an object of my religious conquest. I had a message for her but I never dreamed of the possibility that she might have a message for me. She was not quite real to me. She would become real when she listened to me! She noticed this imperialistic onesidedness and rejected me with unusually vehement language.

Through this experience I discovered something more basic than the religious conviction of a Buddhist. I discovered my neighbor who is not *maya* (illusion) but very real. Dr. John Baillie can help me to say clearly what I mean by the "reality" of my neighbor:

"The test of reality is the resistance it offers to the otherwise uninhibited course of my own thinking, desiring and acting. Reality is what I 'come up against', what takes me by surprise, the other-than-myself which pulls me up and obliges me to reckon with it and adjust myself to it because it will not consent simply to adjust itself to me". *The Sense of the Presence of God*. p. 33.

I believe that every word used here in the context of "the sense of the presence of God" can be directly applied in expressing "the sense of the presence of neighbor". Our sense of the presence of God will be distorted if we fail to see God's reality in terms of our neighbor's reality. And our sense of our neighbor's reality will be disfigured unless seen in terms of God's reality.

When his neighbour becomes one whom he 'comes up against', a missionary realizes that he is sandwiched between Christ's saving reality and his neighbor's "other-than-myself" reality. Then he hopes to pursue two kinds of exegesis: exegesis of the Word of God, and exegesis of the life and culture of the people among whom he lives and works. These two exegeses are closely interrelated and his whole existence is entangled in them. Called to remain in this sandwiched situation, he retains his missionary identity.

By submitting and committing himself to the Word of God, he tries to communicate the message of the *real* Christ to his *real* neighbors. The sandwiched missionary is not sitting, like a slice of good looking Swiss cheese, between Christ and his neighbors. According to the words of the Lord: "As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). He

is "in motion". He has a definite direction to go "into the world". With a deep sense of solidarity with his Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic or animistic neighbors whom he meets in the world, he takes the question asked by them to the enlightenment and judgment of the Word of God. The questions asked are real questions since they come from real neighbors. Theology has become no more a private affair but a matter that involves the community of men. From the accepted formula: "Philosophy asks questions and theology answers", he now moves on to see that "his neighbor asks the questions and he seeks the answers in Christ". He makes distinctions between "philosophy and neighbor" and "theology and Christ". Philosophy neither sweats nor hungers nor feeds water-buffaloes. But his neighbor does! Theology can become a religious crossword-puzzle. But his Christ cannot be reduced to a game. Neighbor and Christ "resist the otherwise uninhibited course of his thinking".

II

Our neighbors are not concerned with our Christology, but they show, from time to time, their interest in our "neighbor-ology". Not "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5) but "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) will speak to them. "And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his *sweat* became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (Luke 22:44) may make no impression on them while "In the *sweat* of your face you shall eat bread" (Genesis 3:19) is of their own experience. In this context "He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (I John 4:20) carries a special significance for us because its order is "neighbor—God". It does not read: "He who does not love God whom he has not seen, cannot love his brother whom he has seen".

It is imperative, then, for every missionary to learn how to look at his neighbors. His witness depends on this very point. Let me quote from Dr. Emil Brunner:

"The legalistic type of person finds it impossible to come into real human, personal contact with his fellowman. *Between him and his neighbour there stands something impersonal, the 'ideal', the 'Law', a programme, something abstract which hinders him from seeing the other person as he really is*, which prevents him from hearing the real claim which his neighbour makes on him. To the legalistic person, the person who acts according to principle only, the other man is only a 'case', just as for the judge (in a court of law) the accused is simply a particular 'criminal

case'. He deals with him according to some abstract ruling, not according to himself, not according to his unique being which can never be repeated, not as a person to be met 'here and now'.

The Divine Imperative pp. 73f.
(Underlined by the writer of the article)

We must discipline ourselves to see our neighbor immediately and straightforwardly. If we have some artificial cushions—one of them can be our own "neighbor-ology"—between us and our neighbor, we fall into a dangerous pit of legalism. We must know the difference between *the legalistic I* and *the missionary I*. The former is the I who does not want to accept the real claim which his neighbor makes on him. The latter is the I who is sent to the midst of the reality of his neighbor, and his Christian existence hangs on the claim his neighbor makes on him. Jesus Christ, faced by the reality of his neighbor, accepted the claim the neighbor made upon him. His confrontation with his neighbor was "uncushioned".

"And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her, 'Woman, you are freed from your infirmity.'

And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God. But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the sabbath, said to the people, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the sabbath day'. Then the Lord answered him, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?' (Luke 13.11-16)

The "uncushioned neighbor-ology" of Christ cuts like a knife through the "cushioned neighbor-ology" of the ruler of the synagogue.

Why do we have to consider neighbor-ology at this moment in South East Asia? Has it not been with the Christians since the beginning of the church, and haven't we argued it back and forth quite enough in the course of church history? Yes, indeed! We want, however, to make a point that "neighbor-ology" is, in fact, the best vessel to convey Christ. We want to insist on this from our missionary experience in South East Asia. Dr. Marcus Ward writes:

"The meaning of His person was learned through what He did in and for men". *The Outlines of Christian Doctrine* vol. I, p.48.

There are exciting implications in this for evangelism in Asia today. The ancient "East Mediterranean Christian Conference" employed metaphysical language to preach Christ. But today's EACC is called to preach Christ in "neighbor-ological" language. Earlier I have said that our neighbors in Asia are not interested in Christology but can be concerned with our neighbor-ology. This means that our neighbors in Asia are ready to hear our message of Christ if we put it in "neighbor-ological" language, though they would reject Christ if we present him in Christological language.

Neighbor-ology carries, therefore, a weighty responsibility in our theological obedience to the living Lord Jesus Christ. In order to be able to present Christ in "neighbor-ological" terms to our neighbor we must learn, first of all, to see him, whether he be Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, animist, Communist, nationalist, revolutionary, intellectual or uneducated, as someone whom we "come up against" and by whom we are placed in the "sandwiched" position. He furthermore rejects all of our legalistic approaches. We must try to build our neighbor-ology immediately upon our direct experience with our Asian neighbor, being guided by Christ who is the "un-cushioned" Neighbor to us all in Asia today.