

As always...

...the more detailed version with photos is available on our website at www.teamarequipa.net.

Missionary Mom

"A Christmas Story"

by Megan McKinzie

You know how almost every home in the states has a Christmas tree this month? Well, here in Peru, almost every home has a nativity scene displayed. It is hard not to think about the story of Jesus's birth when I see the nativity scene everywhere that I go. Peruvians can relate to the story of baby Jesus and the Virgin Mary. I would like to share a personal story with you relating to the Christmas Story.

As you know, my Spanish is mediocre. I can extrovert with the best of them, but when it comes to explaining myself or my faith in the vocabulary of a mature adult, "lacking" would be the word I would use to describe my Spanish. God has a way of humoring us, doesn't he. Two months ago, a friend that I have made in my new neighborhood came and knocked on my door. She wanted to know if I could work with her on conversational English. She has a really good English foundation but still lacks in conversation and common vocabulary we would use in conversing. I agreed, and she has been coming to my home for one hour, twice a week.

In our first meeting, she asked me a lot of specific questions about our work here. I wasn't shy in explaining about why we moved here, the church, and the developmental projects. She went on to explain about her family and the faith that she has grown up with. She is Catholic, but both her mother and her sister have converted to evangelical Christian groups. There are a few things she is still uncertain about, but she told me that she was interested in "experimenting" in Christianity. Talk about an open door. I asked her if she would be interested in reading the Book of Mark with me in English. She could practice reading, recalling what she read in English, and listen to me read aloud in English. I gave her N. T. Wright's little commentary, *Mark for Everyone*, to read as her homework. God sent me a friend here in Peru to lead through a study of Mark in English! Isn't he funny?

I have loved our time together. She has become a sweet friend. We converse a lot (which is what she wanted), and we have made it through the first part of chapter 7. We have discussed the question "Who is Jesus." But the first part of chapter 7 describes a scene where Jesus returns to Nazareth, his home, and is teaching in the synagogue. The people realize that he is teaching with authority, but it doesn't take long for the gossip of the townspeople to spread and decide, "Who is this guy kidding? This is Jesus, Mary and Joseph's boy. He grew up here" (my version, obviously). My friend and I had a conversation about knowing Jesus. Here we have read six chapters of a Gospel account of Jesus' time on earth, and Mark has made evident that Jesus is Lord over demons, sickness, nature, and life itself. But now Jesus enters his own hometown, and he is merely seen as Joseph and Mary's boy. Mark says that Jesus was baffled at their unbelief. These people had known Jesus his entire life . . . but had they?

So many Peruvians, and people throughout the world have "known" Jesus their entire lives. They can tell you the Christmas story. They can even recall the gospel account and the crucifixion story. But my friend and I conversed about something today that I hope resonates in her heart tonight. I shared with her, "I can't help but read this and think, do I really know Jesus? I know him not as Baby Jesus or as the main character in all of these Bible stories I have grown up hearing, but do I know him as Lord over everything? When someone knows Jesus as Lord over everything, their life can't help but change."

I am reading through a book right now called *The King Jesus Gospel*. It is reshaping my view of how I share the message of Christ with others. Jesus is King. Jesus coming as a baby is part of that story, but the beginning happened long before that with the people of Israel. This Christmas I have been able to share my faith with a friend. I don't know where she is on her journey with God, but I am confident that God is using me to help guide her in the process of seeking him.

ACDU View

by Kyle Smith

If you read my article in last month's newsletter you know about the big changes taking place here in Arequipa. Some of those big changes have already started to take place. We have now signed a contract on a three story building that we will put to use in a variety of ways. We have also worked out the details of Alfredo's employment and he will begin working for CUDA full-time in January. Here on the field these changes seem monumental and extraordinary. We are moving from an informal NGO run by two families to having Peruvian leadership and planning two businesses that will begin to generate an income for our organization. Big changes.

I want to use this month to expound a little on our building. We'll be posting detailed pictures on our site and social media accounts (facebook.com/cudaperu, twitter.com/cudaperu) as we renovate the three floors to their specific purposes. On the first floor we will be opening a cafe. We are in the thick of the design phase with colors, logos, counter/bar areas, and seating arrangements all being considered. The building is located at the intersection of two of the busiest streets in Arequipa. The layout of the first floor will give us plenty of room to create a unique environment. On the second floor we have two spaces. One we'll use as office space and the other (for now) as a storage area. The office space will come in handy for the usual office needs, official meetings, and borrower group meetings. The third floor is laid out like the second, with two spaces, but the large space is large enough to use as a classroom. We intend to use it just for that purpose and begin offering English and Spanish classes. Being so close to the major university, there will be no shortage of students that need English classes. Our cafe/building manager will live in the third room, thereby offering better security than the security companies can offer. We are excited about all of the things we'll get to do in this building through CUDA. God is planning big things for our NGO.

Bringing Alfredo on board in January was a key part of the plan for this building. Simply put, our families don't have the time to carry on our individual ministries and start a cafe and language institute. Having Alfredo devoted full-time to the management of the NGO and its projects will be an incredible blessing. The expertise and passion he brings to the job will make our projects run more smoothly and help us reach new people groups. These last few months Alfredo has been devoting more and more of his free time to the NGO but in this last month, as he is cycling out of his current job, he has started leading our weekly meetings and taking the initiative in new ways. God has certainly blessed us with a great co-laborer in Alfredo Oporto.

One last thing to mention: CUDA now has a board of directors! We invited a double handful of interested and talented people to join our board, and they accepted. Go to www.cudaperu.org/Blog.aspx to learn more about Monty Lynn, Budd Hebert, David Fann, Ileene Huffard, Sheila Owen and Mark Elrod. They complete, and give validation to, the current board of Greg and I. In January Alfredo will join the board as the Executive Director of CUDA. Pray for them, and us, as we seek God's will in serving our global neighbors in Arequipa Peru.

Crossing Cultures

"Acclimation"

by Larissa Smith

Living in a foreign culture for years is an odd thing. At first, everything was either extremely interesting or extremely annoying, because we were evaluating all experiences against our own and determining whether new things should be accepted or merely endured. I've been writing this column for two years, which means I've spent lots of time paying attention to the things I experience, trying to put my finger on their value to a Peruvian's life and extrapolate the value I should integrate into my own.

Honestly, it has gotten hard. Yes, there are still blatantly obvious things that drive me absolutely bonkers, because my subconscious will not assimilate them into my own existence. For example, I refuse to honk when the entire line of cars is sitting at a red light. Where are we supposed to encourage each other to go in this situation? No clue. So I don't honk. And the petulant voice that adults use when they are making a plea is worse than fingernails on a chalkboard to me and there is no way I will adopt that habit.

However, the difficulty hasn't come because I end up only focusing on things that irritate or frustrate me. Rather, it has come with my adjustment to the culture and comfort level moving around within it. Simply put, I don't notice the differences as much because I'm used to them. It was easy to observe things that struck me as unusual when they actually were unusual, but the number of those things that jump out at me has shrunk to very little.

As long as we live here, this is a very good thing. God is stretching us in new ways that aren't culturally-driven, but deal with situational decisions, personality differences, or simply being pulled to doing new things that require big steps of faith. It's not that the culture is no longer a factor, but it is becoming a background question rather than a focus as our work grows.

The biggest blessing of this new phase is the shift from a view of us (missionaries) as separate from them (Peruvians) as we move into a collaborative effort. Peruvians are taking part in developmental work, evangelism, leading discussions at church, ministering at our new coffee shop (projected launch of February), and filling the places in our hearts that can only be held by close friends. Parenting, faith, marriage, work, and life in general provide our common ground, and we are stronger for the different backgrounds we bring to share with each other. We struggle together, work together, praise together and laugh together.

Do I consider myself fully Peruvian? No. But my life experience has been pulled enough in this new direction that I am no longer fully American, either. We have a foot in two different worlds, both of

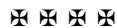
which are home and neither of which are complete in our lives without the other. So for me, crossing cultures hasn't meant changing from one to another, but splitting the difference and being willing to redefine myself by new standards if necessary.

A Word

by Greg McKinzie

When we talk about ecclesiology (our understanding of the church), there are two levels to consider. The first is the abstract, presumably universal level at which we think about what the church is. The second is the practical level at which we think about how a local church must embody that essence. One problem that has affected many churches is the assumption that the second level, that of application, is just as universal as the first. This belief leads some to the conclusion that the forms, styles, practices, and traditions of the church universal should be pretty much uniform throughout the church local. The expectation that the New Testament will provide those forms bolsters the assumption.

In this series, I will work through some of the factors we take into account as the church in Arequipa seeks to embody Christ faithfully in our context. I hope to show how we go about translating the first level into the second level.



From Idea to Embodiment

Last newsletter we left off with the question, how do our contextual ways of being together as family manifest? Or, how do we move from our theological claim about what the church is (the family of God) to a lived experience? In order to pose the question in one more way, I'll share a story:

When Tim, Denise, and Noah Henderson visited us last year, Noah became ill. We called Alfredo's wife, Judith, since she is our pediatrician. She saw Noah at her clinic as soon as she could work him in. But when he didn't get better, we called her again, and she had him come to their house, because she was off at that time. After she had seen him and adjusted his treatment, Tim and Denise naturally thanked her for the generosity of seeing him in her home during off hours. She responded, "Don't worry about it. You are Alfredo's family and maybe mine soon as well." (For those who don't know, she has since then been added to the family.)

The question here is, what causes a non-Christian to take seriously her husband's church as *family* in the sense that she responded in the same way she would toward her own in-laws? I'm not suggesting that Judith wouldn't have been as generous to other friends. But it is significant that she did not say, "You are Alfredo's friends," or "You go to Alfredo's church" (thank God!), but rather "You are Alfredo's family." How do we demonstrate that with our lives so that it is real to someone who doesn't otherwise believe that God is in the business of adopting us "as his children through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:5)?

In the US, church culture in general has phased out the use of "brother" and "sister" in regular discourse (not to mention "brethren," which has naturally gone the way of most KJV-speak). I even have the sense that there is a little awkwardness when we speak in those terms. In Peru, it is the opposite effect, though I suspect for very similar reasons: *hermano* has become synonymous with *evangelical Christian*. "He is an *hermano*" just means, "He is a Christian." In other words, the family metaphor has lost its power in Peruvian Spanish. The general expectation here is that the claim to be a member of the Christian family means nothing more than to be a member of the Christian religion--what it is to be *family* in the Peruvian sense of that word doesn't actually come into it.

Given that my overarching point in this series is that applications are not universal, let me reiterate that the question is about how best to foster the lived expression of church-as-family, *not* about which are the only good or right church forms, styles, practices, and so forth. To point out what we do to foster church-as-family is not to suggest that other practices are opposed to family life or otherwise inferior. Rather, I merely wish to explain why we do what we do.

So, finally, what do we do? Most fundamentally, we work to ensure that "church" is not identified with a building or holy space. A family is not a home; a household is not a house. Thus, we seek to detach church from its typical cultural meaning in order to attach it to a new definition--not just by preaching about a new meaning from within the old but by living the new meaning. In this way, we try to create the question, If church is not a place or an identifiable institution (in the usual sense), then what is it? How can we call ourselves "church"?

One of the most important outcomes of this non-institutional identity is that it diminishes the impulse to evangelize by inviting nonbelievers "to church" (i.e., to a location and religious ritual). Of course, it is still quite reasonable to invite friends to church (i.e., to a gathering). When we invite nonbelievers to our meetings, though, they are not invited *to* a church but rather *into* a family gathering. The dynamics are very distinct. Yet, inasmuch as we avoid attracting people to "church," we also avoid attracting people to the family--because our aim is to win as many as possible *to Christ*. Therefore, we root our familial self-understanding in the identity and call of Jesus. He says, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and mother" (Mark 3:25). Our existence as family is not our goal or primary concern; it is a result of kinship to Jesus. But our way of life together does serve to proclaim this gospel in deed.

A primary way in which we shape the Sunday assembly *per se* into a familial mode of existence is through intimate conversation. Rather than merely adding this onto supposedly core religious activities, we attempt to weave it into the everything that the church gathering is about. This necessarily shapes the ways in which we sing, pray, read Scripture, confess, encourage, bear burdens, and otherwise carry out the "one another" dimension that the NT calls *fellowship* or *communion*. The practical upshot of this is a need to meet in small numbers (this is the "quality by way of size management" mentioned in the last article). In order to facilitate a truly relational, familial gathering, we encourage small, intimate meeting sizes. Naturally, there is a need to meet with the extended family, so to speak, but every meal cannot be a holiday gathering or a family reunion (to stretch the metaphor a bit).

All of this is centered around the table fellowship that is the Lord's supper. Thus, a family meal is at the heart of every Sunday gathering, because "communion" is at the heart of every Sunday gathering. Here we have a form or practice that is different than many in our home context are used to. I point this out in particular in order to exemplify the web of considerations that inform our decision to "do church" in this way: although there are scriptural considerations directly related to the supper at work as well, the family-meal shape of our communion practice is bound up with much more. It is a vital part of our embodiment of family life.

On a final note, I will add that another very important aspect of redefining church as family is the demonstration that church is not just the Sunday assembly. Our church tradition has long argued for a technical redefinition of church as assembly (the people) rather than church as place (the building). But even among such strong advocates of a biblical understanding, the emphasis has often fallen on the assembly rather than *the people of God*. In order to embody a more complete redefinition, then, it is necessary to ensure that the Sunday gathering does not bear the whole weight of "life together." That is, we must live together (singing and praying and reading and all the rest) throughout the rest of life and not just at a scheduled time of religious observance.

Just For Kids!

by Rachel Steele

Once again it is December and Christmas is almost here. The time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is always my favorite time of year. It isn't Christmas day that I love, so much as the time of preparation before Christmas day. It is the baking and decorating. The shopping and Christmas carols that play over the radio and in the malls. There is a feeling of anticipation and expectation that is felt in the month or so before Christmas that is unlike any other time of year.

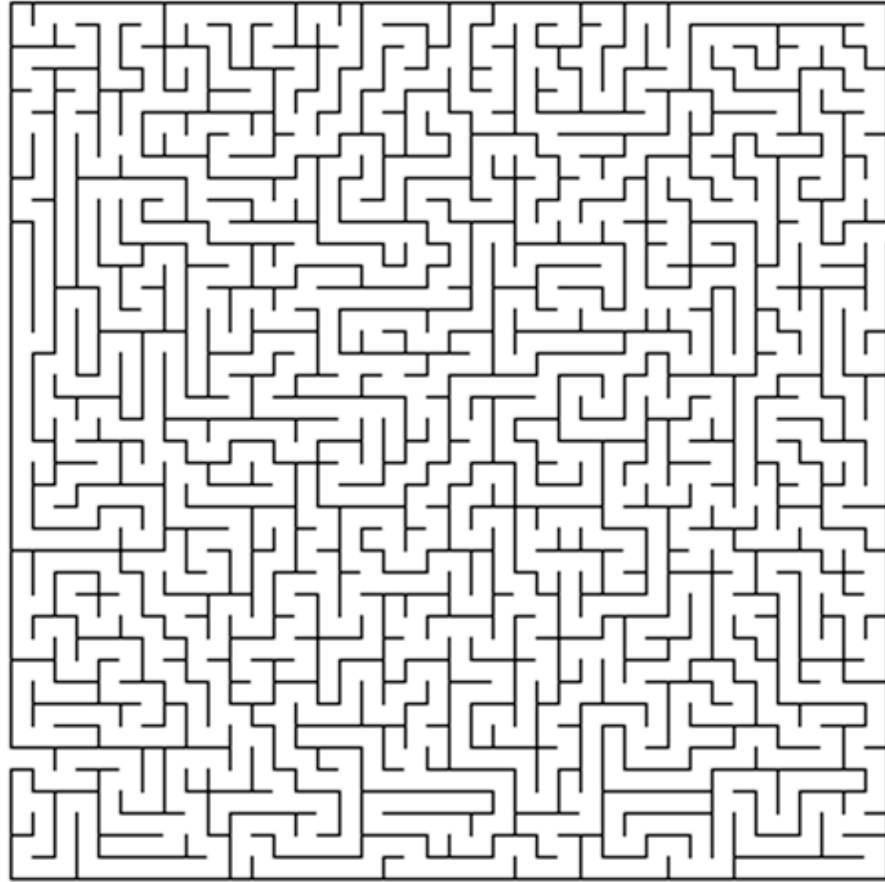
You are probably excited, too. You might be wondering what Santa will bring or what you will discover under the tree come Christmas morning. Will it be what you wanted? Will you get what you have asked for? When I was a child I remember the excitement, trying to guess what I was receiving. I also remember that there were many Christmases when I was disappointed. The actual day was somehow less than all that I had allowed myself to imagine it would be. Do you ever feel like that? That feeling of disappointment when you don't get exactly what you asked for? Or when what you asked for wasn't nearly as exciting as what you thought it would be? Are you like me, waiting and waiting and then thinking, this is it?

Sometimes I wonder if that is how Mary felt when Jesus was born. She had been visited by an angel, who told her she would have this very special baby. She visited her cousin whose own baby was excited at her presence, but when Jesus was actually born it was in a barn, with only cows and sheep and some other animals in attendance, and the only people who came to visit that night were some dirty shepherds. After all, this was the son of God. If I had just given birth to the son of God I would think there would be something visibly special about him, glowing skin or the ability to interact and speak, but he didn't do any of those things. Jesus was just a baby, like every other person who has ever been born he had ten toes and ten fingers, two eyes, two ears, a nose and a mouth, and I wonder once Mary had given birth is she thought, just for a moment, *Oh, that's it, He looks just like any other baby.*

I hope she didn't. I hope that when she held Jesus in her arms she thought how amazing it was that she held God in her hands. I think that some of our excitement about the coming of Christmas must be what all the Israelites felt as they waited for the Messiah to come, and as the Wise Men journeyed from the east to see the new King that had been born.

So this year, instead of being excited about what I might receive under the Christmas tree, I think how exciting it is that Jesus is coming. I try to imagine what it must have been like to think, finally the savior is on his way, and come Christmas Day I will be thinking how amazing it is that God became a person, a little baby, just like you or me, so that I could know him and he could save me.

Help the Wise Men find Baby Jesus!



Just For Kids!

Recent Articles

HU Professor Ileene Huffard Joins CUDA board

We are proud to announce that Dr. Ileene Huffard will join the 2012 CUDA Board. Dr. Huffard directs Harding University's Mid-South Professional Center and is an Associate Professor of Education.

She brings expertise that is of special value to CUDA's Living Libraries program. Dr. Huffard's participation in the board is an important step in the promotion of literacy in Arequipa.

November 30, 2011

HST Librarian Sheila Owen Joins CUDA board

CUDA is pleased to announce that Sheila Owen will join the 2012 CUDA Board. Sheila is the Associate Librarian at the Harding School of Theology.

Her talents are an exciting addition to CUDA, in particular the Living Libraries program. With Sheila's help, we hope to make the promotion of literacy in Arequipa even more effective.

December 6, 2011

HU Professor Mark Elrod joins CUDA board

CUDA announces another exciting addition. Dr. Mark Elrod, Professor of Political Science at Harding University, has joined the 2012 Board.

Dr. Elrod is a sponsor of the student-led social-justice advocacy group, HUmanity, and a strong proponent of microfinance. His expertise in international relations and political theory adds an important dynamic to CUDA's administration.

December 6, 2011

VU Staff Engineer David Fann joins CUDA board

CUDA announces the addition of David Fann to the 2012 Board. Fann is a Senior Staff Engineer at Vanderbilt University's Institute for Software Integrated Systems and an adjunct professor at Lipscomb University.

Fann brings a specialization in electrical engineering to CUDA's operations. His experience with creative solar power solutions and other engineering-as-missions endeavors in underdeveloped contexts will especially benefit CUDA's new Pure Life Power initiative to bring solar power to poor households.

December 6, 2011

Into Year Four, Part 1

Critical reflections on the work to present

By Greg McKinzie

September 1st marked our three-year anniversary in Arequipa. It's time for some introspection. So where are we? That question raises a variety of others, some of which I find difficult to answer. What is success? How do we measure it? How have we failed? What have we learned from failure? What is God doing now?

Because writing about these issues on the team website presumes supporters as our audience, some other questions arise as well. To what extent, if we're being honest, do supporters' expectations define success and failure? How much transparency do they really want?--again, being honest, many people don't want the gritty details, and many don't feel comfortable with talking about "failure." There is a strong impulse in missionary reporting to opt for spin rather than transparency. We can always look on the bright side.

And in fact, when people ask me how things are going these days, my answer is, unequivocally, "good." There is enough positive going on that, overall, "good" is definitely my assessment of the mission work. Of course, that doesn't mean we don't have all kinds of frustrations and challenges "behind the scenes" (phrasing suggestive of the extent to which the public face is perhaps supposed to be an act in English language? . . . but I digress).

Therefore, if we're going to engage in critical self-assessment on the website, let it be known that we want supporters really to understand what is going on here. And since, if I were to write it all up at once, it would break the length rules of the blogosphere, we'll go a small chuck at a time. We want to be about transparency, integrity, and forthrightness. Offer your feedback and especially your prayers as we talk through God's work through Team Arequipa.

So, how do you measure success in mission work? Is talking about "measuring," or even "success/failure," the right conversation?

December 6, 2011

Into Year Four, Part 2

Critical reflections on the work to present

By Greg McKinzie

To pick up with the question I posed at the end of Part 1, how do we "measure success" in missions? My reflections last year (<http://teamarequipa.net/archives/224-lessons>) already broached the subject, and indeed, I wouldn't say anything differently at this juncture. The point of that post, however, is that our evaluation of strategy and measurements of success must be controlled by our theology. Aside from the parting shot in the final paragraph, I did not take any steps to develop a theological framework for that purpose. Thus, I'll embark on that task here.

It was renowned Peruvian (Arequipeño, in fact!) missiologist Samuel Escobar who pioneered the critique of what he calls "managerial missiology," which "fails to appreciate those aspects of missionary work that cannot be measured or

reduced to figures." [1] More recently Escobar has written:

The sense of urgency about evangelization in places where the gospel has not been preached yet and an effort to formulate a long-range vision for mission are distinctive notes in the missiological school I describe as "managerial missiology." Its basic tenet is that Christian mission can be reduced to a "manageable enterprise" thanks to the use of information technology, marketing techniques and managerial leadership. Their efforts to visualize the missionary task with "scientific" precision has led to the formulation of concepts such as "unreached peoples," "homogeneous units," the "10-40 window" or "adopt-a-people." These concepts and techniques need the correction that comes from a biblical view of people. What I am seeing in the application of these concepts in the mission field is that

missionaries "depersonalize" people into "unreached targets," making them objects of hit-and-run efforts to get decisions that may be reported. Missionaries from a large American mission board that has adopted managerial missiology are now running up and down Latin American countries with their portable computers and programs to find the "unreached," with not time or energy left to relate with their denominational brothers and sisters about partnership in missionary service. The difficult task of discipleship and building the body of Christ are bypassed in the name of managerial goals that seem designed to give their missionary center in the United States an aura of success.[2]

What makes this problematic is not the motivations and hearts of those who feel a sense of urgency about evangelization and therefore respond in culturally logical ways (i.e., as Westerners)--we should all feel a sense of urgency. Nor is it merely that the means (including the objectification and depersonalization of human beings) to a laudable end is flawed or just needs to be "balanced." It is that the end itself actually needs theological revisioning.

For communication reasons, our team has usually spoken about the "two facets" of our mission work as "church planting" and "holistic development." Though holistic development is actually a new concept for many of our supporters, "church planting" at least is familiar. Moreover, it is established missiological jargon. Yet, when it comes to evaluating our work (and accountability is a must!), we do not in practice or theory make the distinction between the two.

Before this post gets too long, I'll cut to the chase. Rather than attempting to measure "church planting" (which is countable) or "holistic development" (which consists of non-profit "business practices" that are very much a part of the Western goal-and-measurement value world), we conceive of God's mission in Arequipa in terms of *kingdom sowing*.

He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and

would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29)

The fact is that the NT nowhere speaks of "church planting," but Jesus is very keen on comparing the kingdom with the organic dynamics of planting seed. Of course, for the distinction to be of any value, the reader must grasp the difference between kingdom and church, which have been unfortunately muddled together at times. For brevity's sake, I'll assume the distinction is clear and move on to the fruit of the parable.

Undoubtedly, we might approach farming from a managerial perspective: carefully controlling irrigation and fertilization, monitoring seed quality and soil acidity, and generally applying the most advanced techniques in order to produce the most bountiful harvest--and then, of course, doing cost analysis. The parable can be stretched in that direction. But doing so misses its essential theological claim: *We do not produce the harvest; we merely sow*. The effect of sowing the kingdom is not something we can manage. We sow the kingdom--and sow we must--but we will never be in the position to say what the outcome should be.

The parable of the sower is about the kingdom--the way that it grows. It's unmanageableness is inherent. On a secondary level, though, the parable is also about roles. It challenges the desire to control and quantify the outcome of kingdom sowing with a different criterion: faithfulness in fulfilling our role coupled with hope and joy in witnessing God's faithfulness in fulfilling his role.

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[1] Samuel Escobar, "A Movement Divided: Three Approaches to World Evangelization Stand in Tension with One Another" *Transformation* 8 no. 4 (1991): 7.

[2] Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 167.

December 12, 2011

HU Professor Budd Hebert joins CUDA board

CUDA announces the final addition to the 2012 Board of Directors. Dr. Budd Hebert is the Director of Harding University's International Business Department, as well as the Harding Character Initiative.

We are excited about the experience and expertise that Dr. Hebert will bring to our operations in the coming year. He will be especially helpful to the CUDA Microfinance program, which is projected to double in 2012.

December 22, 2011

Into Year Four, Part 3

Critical reflections on the work to present

By Greg McKinzie

Continuing with the construction of a theological framework for evaluating the success of mission work, I turn to the parable following the one examined [last post](#). Mark moves from the uncontrollable dynamics of kingdom growth to the mysterious humility of the kingdom. It is indeed mysterious, because what we would call “the kingdom of God,” when God is the almighty sovereign creator of the universe, ought to be fairly impressive as far as kingdoms go. Of course, Jesus being the king in question, we know that his entire story challenges such assumptions. This parable in particular, though, issues that challenge as directly as a parable can (which is still pretty indirectly!).

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (Mark 3:30-32)

The parable pivots on the “yet.” It asks the hearer whether she can believe that the kingdom will eventually be revealed as far more than its beginnings suggest. The same point might be made with virtually any seed, of course, but the force of the parable lies in the comparative “smallest” and “largest.” The kingdom begins in a

truly unimpressive way, and it will end in conversely extreme glory.

Undoubtedly, the implicit comparison is with other kingdoms. The parable is not about “church planting,” as though Jesus were saying, “Expect few conversions” or some such. Only to the extent that church planting is a part of the whole vision of kingdom sowing can we draw parallels there, and we have a broader scope in view for our work anyway. It does bring me to ask the question, though, as to what one should expect when sowing the seeds of the kingdom in Jesus’ way with church planting as a part of that.

I’ve no doubt that there will be resurrection moments, when the future manifests in the present. There will be times when society looks at the effect of faithful, sacrificial proclamation and says, “These people are turning the whole world upside down” (Acts 17:6). But the parable warns us against false expectations, for the resurrection lies beyond the cross. I will return to this point, but for now the issue is the parable’s challenge. Taking it together with the previous teaching, two important truths emerge to qualify our great expectations, as sowers, for God’s kingdom: we cannot make it grow, and it starts off in what we might call lowliness.

The problem, often, is that our egos get wrapped up in our ministry. We confuse what God will do with what we can do. Culture plays an important role, which I hope to examine in future posts, but another component is the sin that entangled the twelve throughout their time with Jesus—and the

reason that he speaks these parables: pride and ambition. It is not just that they had a different kind of kingdom in mind; that is a historically accurate claim but a theologically insufficient explanation. It is that their desire for a different kind of kingdom was deeply rooted in their own hopes to sit at the right and left of the Messiah, to lord over others as Caesar's minions were privileged to do, to call down fire on the unreceptive, and in general to avoid the death to self to which Jesus called them. As a one-sided reconstruction, that perhaps seems harsh, but it is certainly no harsher than the Gospels themselves.

This struggle is something that many of us would admit to on a personal level. We are, it seems, generally willing to talk about how our personal sin wars against the call to take up the cross and die to ourselves, imitate the sacrificial and servicial humility of Jesus, and live the kind of lives the Apostles eventually modeled. But it strikes me that there is a prevalent failure to apply the same honesty and critical self-evaluation to our corporate existence as church. Rather, we often reflexively strive for impressiveness, attractiveness, respectability, strength, influence, stability, comfort, and moderation as a social entity. And here's the kicker: we do so without recognizing how our sinfulness distorts our expectations about what it is to be representatives of God's kingdom and without letting teachings such as these parables cause recognition.

Justifications are easy to come by—making them all the more suspect. We can easily reason that if we are indeed representing God's kingdom, then of course we do not want to be unimpressive,

unattractive, unworthy of respect, and so forth. But that is not the point, just as Jesus' teaching about the cross is not a call to suicidal behavior. The point, rather, is that the kingdom when it is really the kingdom is subject to the sin of those who perceive it, and there is nothing about the seed itself that ensures they will be able to see beyond its obvious and evident "smallness." There will in fact be those—sometimes many at once—to whom it is quite attractive, respectable, and the rest. But that will not be the case because its representatives portray it as such in the other kingdoms' terms.

How does this inform our evaluation of the work in Arequipa? I believe it establishes a baseline. It does not "lower the bar," because the bar, as it were, is the full-grown mustard tree. We witness to the already-not-yet kingdom, the unseen glory of God. But the parable of the mustard seed demands that we recognize the seed we are planting as what it is—profoundly unimpressive by the world's standards. We dare not attempt to manipulate the hearer's perception of the message (which is the seed), and therefore we cannot expect the mustard seed to seem any bigger than it is. Some will recognize the tree in it; most will not. But whatever it will grow into, it is the smallest of seeds. As a baseline, that does not change the conversation completely, because there is much more to say, but it does shift its center.

How does this parable affect your theological framework for evaluating mission work?

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