



The Peculiar Language of Christian Mission: *Seven Common Images that Confuse and Misdirect—Revisiting the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*¹

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Thesis: *The vocabulary, terminology, promotional jargon, and even the slang of missions produce images that affect motivations and aspirations of the missionary and also the patterns of support of missions.*

Doubtless, anyone who reads the literature of missions or participates in the formal or informal discussions and reflections on the mission of the church could list an assortment of terms, phrases and words, that are common and yet confusing. The confusions in question here are insidious because they result from well-meaning attempts to reason and form sound judgments using linguistic “handles” that represent images and domains that are at odds with the truth of the matters under consideration.

Earlier in this century as modern social sciences emerged and became more empirical and systematic, the phenomena of human perception, comprehension, and communication came under intense scrutiny. Earlier images and presumptions of the nature and function of the human mind were substantially revised to reflect the evidence that the mind is less a storehouse of discrete data than an elaborate switchboard and linking system. At the risk of oversimplification, the importance of language as part of this elaborate system has become increasingly emphasized within the scholarly research of mental processes. Metaphorically, the mind can be assumed to function as a switchboard connecting new clues, evidences, and stimuli to earlier experiences, recollections, understandings, and misunderstandings of previous experiences. The place of language within this process is somewhat akin to the function of the programming language (the software) within the computer. The language shapes the way the computer deals with the signals; in effect, then, the meaningful actions, decisions, and functional outcomes are as dependent on the “soft” realm of language as upon the “hard” realm of electronic signals and hardware components. In the human mind, language similarly enables, and yet it inherently carries the tendency to direct, restrict, and foster errant connections. Thinking generally involves the attaching of words to ideas and experiences; the problem lies in the extra experiences and contexts which are already attached to the words chosen.

Some of the earliest of the modern stream of reflection and research on this problem was carried out by Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941), particularly represented in the compilation by John B. Carroll, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (M.I.T. Press, 1956). They are best remembered for their summative hypothesis that proposes the understanding of thought as being

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constrained, enriched, or biased by the words one uses in the given mental “conversation.” The continuing flow of research into this matter suggests that Whorf, and Sapir just before him, were indeed on the right track, but that the phenomenon is even more complex than their understanding concluded.

To say it another way, any word or descriptive phrase that is selected formally or informally by an individual or group while trying to think or discuss an idea becomes a constraint or enrichment of that idea, bringing various sorts of nuance from other experiences and contexts, whether appropriate or not.

The motive of the review presented here is first to call attention to the hazards which accompany the choice of particular terms and second to encourage the rethinking of the matters associated with these seven terms which, by now, have become distorted and obscured. The seven terms selected for this discussion are not the only problematic terms, nor indeed are these all equally hazardous. Most simply, these seven reflect one participant’s sensitivity and judgment. The list here has been selected from a collection which spans over forty years of mission-related scholarship and field experience.

Three categories of terms are represented. The first two terms represent emphases which common language adds to the rudimentary intent of Scripture. This category is innocent enough in its origins and may indeed be vested in interpretative differences in the exegesis of Scripture. But in that the linguistic and semantic biases take on a life of their own, they must be challenged.

Two examples are given to represent the second category: technological reasoning and mechanistic presuppositions. One of the widely used manuals of the church-growth movement illustrates this source of distortion. In that book, the rounded numbers of the Acts of the Apostles are treated as if they were data from a micrometer. The book calls upon Scripture to support the presumption that quantification and detailing of the procedures of mission and evangelism are absolute requisites from the mind of God. Thus the teaching of mission has, in some circles, become loaded with technique and numbers, building upon the presumption that mission is a business to be conducted by the rules of economics and monitored by statisticians.

The third category is represented by three examples, focused respectively on metaphors that have their roots in Scripture: *stewardship*, *bridges*, and *planting*. Except for the word, *bridge* or *bridges* in this use, these terms are directly drawn from Scripture. But their uses and meanings are not very close to the contexts in which they are used in the Bible. Thus they appear to be unassailably sound and doctrinally well-washed, but the extra loadings that come along with their use in reference to the doing of mission today distorts and to some extent contradicts the Bible.

The Go of the Gospel. For a very long time the concluding portion of Matthew’s account of the Gospel (28:18-20) and the testimony of Luke (Acts 1:7,8) have been read as if the imperative of this command is equally on *go* and *make disciples*. The *Great Commission*, so-called, has been seen by many as the major biblical basis of missions. (Surely Mark 16:15-18 has also served this argument over-well despite its weak claims for inclusion within Mark’s text.) The typical English-language Bible renders the Greek in such a manner as to suggest this dual imperative: go, make disciples. One consequence of not discerning the priority of *making disciples* is the ease in exempting oneself from the mandate to make disciples if one can claim not to be among those who are under the command to go. The Christian community is thus divided by a most inappropriate line: some have the responsibility to witness, others do not. Never mind that Luke says that the disciples were all told: “You will be my

witnesses;” if a person can reason that not all were called to go into strange and far-off lands, then not all were intended to be witnesses. In sum, this emphasis on *go* which is so important in the mission mandate has become an excuse for a lesser concern for making disciples by those who stay at home.

Called to the Field. Although the idea of a spiritual calling has become less a part of the ordinary conversation of many younger Christians today, the central idea of God’s call to particular individuals or to whole groups of people is biblical and responsible. But for quite some time *call*, as in reference especially to the personal equivalent of Paul’s call into Macedonia, has been too loosely used with the result that the mission of the church has a sort of out-there-but-not-here tone. A careless use of *called to the field* becomes but one more justification for the perverse human tendency to look down on other people. They are the field, we are not. For many years the insensitivity to us-them distinctions, as implied in the unfeeling use of the term *foreign*, has allowed missions to become a sort of side-show on the mainstream of being the church. This *elsewhere* of mission makes it far too easy for God’s people in any nation to ignore the responsibility for “making disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28.19).

A World of Thirds. The earliest documented use of the term *Third World* emerged innocently from a European journalist’s attempt (during the years of the great East-West tensions over communist socialism) to identify the incipient power of the non-aligned nations with the French notion of the “powerless press” as the *Third Estate*. When included within a Peruvian delegate’s speech in the United Nations, *Third World* quickly jumped the track and became a basis for classifying nations in terms of extent and form of economic development.

Much tension has arisen over this presumed intention to malign a sector of the world as being *third*, in the sense of priority of importance, and worse, as suggested by the common term “third rate.” Especially because the modern missionary movement has focused primarily in regions of the world which are less technologically modern, mission leaders have developed a great anxiety over the casual use of this term, *Third World*. The uneasiness and guilt among American mission agencies led to the search for a different but correlated term. Led by the church growth school with its emphases on quantification and categorization, general acceptance of the term “Two-Thirds World” has come largely to replace the earlier *Third World*. The major virtue of the replacement term is its acknowledgement of the vastly larger “third” part of the world (if the western nations and the socialist nations are assumed to be the first two parts). Whether anything else commends the newer term is unlikely. The compulsion to classify and to differentiate is still at the root of it. Whether we divide ourselves from those we choose to serve in terms of sender versus receiver, rich versus poor, mission-sending nation versus emerging-church nation, developed versus undeveloped, Christian versus pagan, in any such distinction there is a persistence and exaggeration of the naturalistic tendency to classify our group above their group. *Us versus them* lives and prospers; the humility of the man of Galilee is desecrated.

Completing the Job. The advent-oriented notion of completing the work of Christ in the world has been around for a very long time. Perhaps this idea motivated the disciples’ explicit question to Jesus, “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled? (Mark 13:4). The curiosity about *when, what, why, how, and who* is part of human nature; very likely it is the reciprocal image of the Creator’s own attribute of being the revealer. In any case the issue is not in having reasonable questions but of making timing and technical-tactical planning a compulsive fetish. Strange and dangerous consequences of this preoccupation have been seen repeatedly through the history of the church. Timing charts in church basements based upon Daniel and the Revelation are benign curios in contrast with the aberrant sects and their well-meaning vigils

on cold mountainsides awaiting the apocalypse on timetables of their own making. Enlightenment assumptions about the efficacy of science, the industrial revolution's commitment to the power of efficiency within human enterprise, and modern technology's belief in quantified detailing of plans altogether drive today's Christians more than ever into this compulsion to organize themselves so as to influence history—to know God's timetable so well that they can undertake on their own decision to complete the job. Strange indeed that so many Christians overlook Jesus's own statement that He had left with the Father the answers to questions of timing and did not even carry into the incarnation the ability to satisfy such a curiosity (Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32). The mission of the church is to persevere in the Word and works of the Gospel until He comes. So be it.

Controlling through Stewardship. In the more explicit biblical examples, stewardship is usually emphasized within a parable. Generally such parables of stewardship point toward God's demonstrating trust by delegating the overseeing of that which is His. In effect, God invests in people by turning resources over to them. In the parable of the talents (the ten minas) of Luke 19:11-27, for example, the dramatic moment of the story occurs when the Lord returns and asks for an accounting. Always the trust is tempered by the judgment. Christians who recognize that God has entrusted them with resources assume a guardianship over those resources which will allow them to give God an accounting. Transferring this image of stewardship to the affairs of intercultural mission always runs into a problem: "Judgment belongs to God" (Deuteronomy 1:17); "Do not judge and you will not be judged" (Luke 6:37). Is stewardship that is ultimately governed by accountability to the donor-master an appropriate model for the church's mission-assistance activities?

In today's world mission of the church the scars of colonialism are still sensitive. Churches and agencies in the more wealthy parts of the world find themselves in a very awkward position. On the one hand, the sense of accountability for resources brought together in the name of Christ is motivated by a source-to-end-use sense of accountability. It is difficult to trust people who are different. Thus when stewardship is at stake the willingness to trust Christian brothers and sisters of another culture becomes a pretext for extending colonial-style control. The denial of trust that attends many of the Western church's current supports for individuals, for building programs, for the maintenance of expensive institutions of medicine and education is nothing short of disgraceful. Perhaps it is less than the root of the problem, but surely the way the term *stewardship* is used—linking trust with accountability is one contributing factor in the difficulty.

The Building of Bridges. The "bridges of God" is a metaphor that provocatively calls attention to the reaching acts of God recorded throughout the Bible and culminating in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The God of the Bible is indeed the God of redemptive power, authority, and will. In Jesus Christ God makes the culminating bridge to reestablish the relationship between humanity and God that has been damaged by sin. In modern times this notion of bridging, or reaching across by means of an element of common ground, historical point of contact, or cultural identity has become ever more popular. Cultural bridging, especially, seems usually to be a necessity if people of one cultural heritage and predisposition are to develop a credible witness among people of a different culture.

Thus it seems reasonable for mission-minded people of the church to be about the business of building bridges. But wait, just who is it that builds these bridges? Missionaries or God? Perhaps it is unfair to make this differentiation because many a godly missionary would readily give God the authorship and inventive credit for any bridge that the missionary may using. Yet the semantics of this idea of bridge-building falls prey so easily to the self-satisfaction that comes to mission organizations and missionaries when they reckon themselves to be the builders of the bridges upon God's behalf.

Such a posture tends to glorify human invention and cleverness. Worse, it shifts the role of prayer from the beseeching of God to show the way toward the bridges he has built and chooses to use into a sort of post-hoc seeking of God's blessing on the insights and cleverness which people have brought to bear on the task of mission.

The task of the missionary is to discover bridges much more than to build bridges. It would seem unlikely that Peter even wanted a bridge into the citadel of Caesarea, but God built the bridge right up to the doorway of Simon's house in Joppa (Acts 10:19,20). Paul and Silas were not the inventors and commanders of the earthquake which was the bridge to the jail-keeper in Philippi (Acts 16:26). In Athens, the Apostle Paul was in no way a builder of the key bridge that opened the Areopagus to the hearing of the Gospel. Instead, Paul discovered the bridge that God had built; all Paul needed to do was to be a diligent inquirer into the realities of the culture of Athens. He respected what was already there, though he found the idolatry repugnant. Within the heart of that particular manifestation of ungodliness Paul discovered the bridge.

The mission of the church must always spring from its commitment to seek God's ways, never to overlook God's paths while indulging in self-satisfying cleverness and technological brilliance.

The Planting of Churches. Sowing and planting, along with many other agrarian and botanical metaphors, are quite common within the Bible. Jesus used the variabilities in soil conditions to illustrate the various consequences of the Gospel. Then "Paul planted the seed and Apollos watered" (1 Cor. 3:6). Surely the church-planting metaphor has legitimate parentage. In biblical texts it is the Word that is planted, and especially in the Old Testament, people are planted. But what direction does it take the mission of the church?

If the term *church planting* were understood more in terms of God's planting his people to be his witness, then things would likely proceed more as God intended. But far too often in these technological times, the preoccupation in church planting is with techniques and procedures more than with the reality of being God's witness and identifying the missionary as a component of the nucleus. The church is objectified—made less a being than a thing. It is something to be placed, to be put, to do to, to act upon. With this sort of imagery, it is hard for the church planter to see himself or herself as an intimate part of the relationships which are church.

A missionary may know full well that the church is not its buildings or its properties; but is it as easy to accept that the church is the people of God, not merely some particular gathering that comes into being as a result of tactical interventions of the "planter?" If the church planter does not see himself or herself to be a full participant within the incipient community of faith, the church may never be born in that place. Indeed, birth may be a far more apt metaphor than planting, but sooner or later this detachment that makes missionaries into technicians would give rise to a new term, midwifery, and once again the church would be rendered an object not a subject.

The Language of Mission Motive and Recruitment

How mission is described and explained is indeed very important. Especially those who are in positions of responsibility for the dissemination of authoritative materials of and about the mission of the church bear a special responsibility for their use of language. Recruitment and encouragement of

support for missions are affected directly by both the intended and unintended messages conveyed by certain words and phrases. Especially within the highly competitive cultures of North America, the cause of missions seems to some to be best served by hyperbole, exaggeration, and clever new jargon. Beware, lest the images that result communicate falsehoods.

Worldwide, especially among urban people, the increased valuing of technology causes people to accept, respect, and expect technological reasoning and its resultant jargon even in communications about spiritual matters. So now we hear of stages and levels of spiritual development. Salvation is described in terms of a four-legged chair. The numbers of years before the promised fulfillment of the age is a matter of sober debate. Techniques of evangelism are taught as sequences of steps of action. Is it any surprise that people are recruited to be “church planters?” No, such things are not essentially evil, but when the words we use conjure up images that are askew, it is time for caution and correction.