



# The “We-They” Habit: *Or Why Missions Miss*<sup>1</sup>

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Presuppositions or Premises:

1. Evangelism is inherently and necessarily a key factor in Christianity, rightly defined, biblically defined.
2. Missions, in terms of evangelism, teaching, and sharing joyfully in the work of the Holy Spirit, is (1) demonstrated in the apostolic church, (2) was demonstrated in macro-model by God’s redemptive work through Christ, and (3) is the continuing privilege of the church until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. Cross-cultural communication, an inherent problem in missions, requires extraordinary insights, sensitivity and skill.
4. Well meaning efforts, often based upon partial understanding and sometimes using offensive procedures can bring the Gospel into an area of need yet subsequently inhibit the proper development of the church.
5. The international aspects of the church provide an excellent source of insights about problems in our domestic situations.

Thesis: Missions can miss for various reasons. One of the more common reasons why otherwise biblical and well motivated missions miss is the tendency to draw distinctions between “us and them”—the “we-they” habit. The building of barriers between people.

Americans for the most part, are culturally limited and churches tend to be narrow. Values: “melting pot” ideology—others are to conform; “individualism” ideology—I’m right when I’m doing things my way.

**The We-They formula:**

We Have . . . . . They Need  
We Give . . . . . They Accept  
We Sacrifice . . . . . They Benefit  
We Know . . . . . They Learn  
We Speak . . . . . They Listen  
We Show . . . . . They Copy

**Evidences of Problems Created by We-They formula:**

Note: The problems are in “them”.

1. Lack of initiative—flaw of personality?
2. Deference to North American leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Ward. The “We-They” Habit (or, Why Missions Miss). Notes for an address. Evangelism Conference, Northern Baptist Seminary, Chicago, IL, 1974

3. Whitewashing (cultural ruptures)—through education, through “compound enculturation”, forcing/maintaining subservience through financial dependence (elaborate, expensive institutional forms; insistence on the American way no matter what the cost).

The numbers game: We outnumber “them” at key meetings

The money game: We push budgets up so “they” can’t do without us

The vision game: “You just aren’t thinking big enough”

The strategy game: Linear planning, goal setting—American Management Association.

The church is planted in every zonal region of the world. Is the age of missions over?

God’s work in the world will continue, no matter how isolated and withdrawn or selfish the church in North America becomes. The church is never defeated. I believe in the sovereignty of God, the Christ-centeredness of the church, and the infinite power of the Holy Spirit. Thus I view the current phasing down of North American missions with this working hypothesis: God is phasing down North American missions in order to (1) stimulate a reexamination; (2) clean out of the system those who can’t be retrained; (3) clear the tables for emerging new models of people-to-people relationships.

Three phases of international assistance (I see a parallel in missions):

Phase I: Giving

We have, give, sacrifice

They need, accept, benefit

Unfortunate consequences: dependency, paternalism

Phase II:

We know, speak, show

They learn, listen, copy

Unfortunate consequences: dependency, paternalism are reduced but hierarchy remains

Phase III: Reciprocity

A human exchange, a transaction. The new style—seeking genuine reciprocity.

Reciprocity suggests limited mission activity. It may allow a realistic approach to politics and socio-cultural dynamics. There is no such thing as a neutral foreign presence. Missionaries are sometimes a serious liability.

Four moves toward reciprocity:

1. Set timetables for transfer of authority and ownership.
2. Phase down Western-style schooling as the royal road to status.
3. Seek and accept junior partner status.
4. Negotiate exchange relationships
  - Find things you’d like to learn from other churches
  - Let other nationals tell you what they’d like to learn from you
  - Accept laboring roles

Byung Sook Rho said, “We can’t overcome culture, we should not overcome culture. The Spirit of God may work in a people to alter aspects of their culture, but we aren’t God’s cultural hatchets.”

God makes us alike in redemption, relationship, and spirit; but we remain people—people whose social characteristics are similar only to a limited extent.

Isolation must not become the goal of North American mission re-planning. Global interaction of the church is vital. Relations between the church at Jerusalem and the church at Antioch provide a useful model.

If you must differentiate “we” from “they” do it in terms of different but intersecting orbits around the center, Christ.