

Response to “I’ll Have a Cheeseburger with No Cheese, Please”*

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Dr. Lynn Shmidt opens his address by recounting the cautionary tale of one Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1682–1719). Shmidt tells how Ziegenbalg studied the culture and beliefs of the people among whom he ministered—but received a severe reprimand and censure of his published work on his findings.

I am reminded of the example of another pioneering missionary, the famous Dr. David Livingstone (1813–1873), who lived about 100 years after Ziegenbalg. Like Ziegenbalg, Livingstone deemed it necessary to undertake considerable pre-work before proceeding to the work of evangelism. Indeed, he seems to have viewed his role as that of explorer, finding ways to open the “Dark Continent” to future evangelistic efforts. His Great Journey of 1852–1856 and Zambezi Expedition of 1856–1864 had the express purpose of providing missionaries unhindered access to the unreached peoples of that continent by finding navigable waterways to reach the African interior.

Moreover, Livingstone proclaimed a message of “Christianity and Commerce,” saying that the goals of Christianity and commerce required similar agendas and ought to work hand-in-hand. He says,

Sending the Gospel to the heathen must, if this view be correct, include much more than is implied in the usual picture of a missionary, namely, a man going about with a Bible under his arm. The promotion of commerce ought to be specially attended to, as this, more speedily than any thing else, demolishes that sense of isolation which heathenism engenders, and makes the tribes feel themselves mutually dependent on, and mutually beneficial to each other. With a view to this, the missionaries at Kuruman got permission from the government for a trader to reside at the station, and a considerable trade has been the result; the trader himself has become rich enough to retire with a competence. Those laws which still prevent free commercial intercourse among the civilized nations seem to be nothing else but the remains of our own heathenism. My observations on this subject make me extremely desirous to promote the preparation of the raw materials of European manufactures in Africa, for by that means we may not only put a

* This paper is a response to Lynn Shmidt’s installation address, “I’ll Have a Cheeseburger with No Cheese, Please,” pages 51–58, above.

stop to the slave-trade, but introduce the negro family into the body corporate of nations, no one member of which can suffer without the others suffering with it. Success in this, in both Eastern and Western Africa, would lead, in the course of time, to a much larger diffusion of the blessings of civilization than efforts exclusively spiritual and educational confined to any one small tribe. These, however, it would of course be extremely desirable to carry on at the same time at large central and healthy stations, for neither civilization nor Christianity can be promoted alone. In fact, they are inseparable.¹

Thus, both Livingstone and Ziegenbalg apparently shared a common understanding—albeit with widely divergent strategies—that preparatory work was integral to the task of spreading the Gospel. However, whereas Ziegenbalg received a stern reprimand for his work to understand the people among whom he ministered, Livingstone was widely praised for his efforts—despite the fact that he gained only a single, subsequently apostatizing convert.² The different response the two missionaries received for their efforts is striking, to say the least.

Whether this difference is the result of changing missiological mores or merely of different personal and geographical circumstances (Great Britain for Livingstone and Germany for Ziegenbalg) would be an interesting topic of inquiry—but it need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that there is a tension in missionary work between (a) presenting the Gospel with minimal effort toward understanding the religious perspectives of those being served versus (b) taking time to understand those perspectives deeply prior to any presentation of the Gospel.

This tension can be traced to divergent views of the place of non-Christian religions within a Christian worldview. Those who would eschew the kind of prior work undertaken by Ziegenbalg and Livingstone view non-Christian religions as irrelevant for evangelism, at best; as demonic opposition to evangelism, at worst. Those taking the opposite perspective may regard non-Christian religions as means of prevenient grace, cultivating an awareness of

¹ David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa* (London, J. Murray, 1857; reprint, Project Gutenberg, 2013), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1039/1039-h/1039-h.htm>. Accessed December 14, 2017.

² It should be noted, however, that debate persists as to whether Livingstone's lone convert, a chief of the Bakwain (BaKwena) tribe in Bechuanaland (Botswana), remained a faithful Christian. See, for example, Anthony Nutting, *Scramble for Africa* (London: Constable and Company, 1970), 137.

and longing for the Transcendent that prepare adherents for receptivity to the Gospel.

A similar tension can also be observed in the field of culture. Some may view non-Christian cultures as stumbling blocks to the Gospel, while others may find *praeparatio evangelica* therein. In a recent work entitled *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, authors Georges and Baker take the latter view.³ They communicate convincingly that people enculturated in honor-shame societies can best appreciate the Gospel when the Biblical story is presented through a lens of honor-shame inherent in the text itself.

In light of the complex issues surrounding missiological study of religion and culture, it seems likely that neither Ziegenbalg's detractors nor Livingstone's hagiographing fans were entirely justified in their polarized verdicts. The proclamation of the Gospel is indeed of utmost importance, but the hard work of preparation for authentic, effective communication of the Gospel is likewise indispensable. All the more, therefore, do we today need people like Dr. Lynn Shmidt to remind the Church of its irrevocable commission of evangelism and simultaneously to equip the Church and its missionaries with the theological and sociological resources to undertake this work with the most winsome of methods.

³ Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016). See my forthcoming review in *Journal of Asian Mission*.

