

# The Legacy of Colonialism on Understanding Cross-Cultural Mission

*Ryan Shaw*

Today the negative effects of historic colonialism are still impacting the global Church, specifically related to (1) the Gospel and (2) how cross-cultural mission is understood.

Historically, while colonialism tended to be an oppressive system whereby a dominant country subjugated another people for their own gain, the mission movement sought to operate separately from colonialism. Yet, because missionaries often came from colonial power nations, the two were seen, and unfortunately often experienced, as dynamically connected.

This often made it difficult for the Gospel to be grasped, understood and applied into the daily lives of the people being reached. The message of Christ and His Kingdom felt irrelevant to the lives and issues local people were facing. We still face this problem in many unreached and unengaged cultural contexts today.

The most successful missionaries of the colonial era learned the importance of separating the Gospel truth from all Western cultural traits and pitfalls, allowing Jesus and His words to stand on their own, amidst the God-given culture of the target people. They encouraged new believers to express their new faith in uniquely cultural ways relevant to them.

They taught that while Jesus Christ and His unchanging Truth transcends culture, God always uses forms of local believers to express that truth. They expected new followers of Jesus, from the deep reservoir of their own cultural and even religious past, to interpret Christ in a culturally relevant way that enriched the total expression of the universal Christ.

Fast forward 100 or so years. Many of the countries missionaries originally went during the colonial era now have large populations of disciples of Christ (across Asia, Africa and Latin America). The Gospel itself has become “indigenized” or “naturalized” in many of these places.

This was achieved through the hard work of faithful and courageous indigenous local ministry leaders over the years who expressed and taught faith in Christ in uniquely African, Asian and Latino cultural ways. These ways allowed the Gospel to begin to be perceived as something indigenous, grown from within, rather than understood as originating from the outside. These expressions of devoted life in Christ and understanding Scripture are a gift to the global body of Christ.

As local culture and expression rightly influence faith, interpretation of Scripture, spiritual disciplines, understanding spiritual power as well as styles of dressing, worship, prayer, hospitality and other general expressions of spirituality, this has created true,

dynamic faith. While we still have a great deal further to go, the global Church has come a long way in seeing the Gospel take indigenous root and natural expression in many cultures.

Now let’s move from the historic progression of the Gospel itself to the foundational mandate of Jesus to His global Church regarding cross-cultural mission. How far have we progressed concerning an “indigenized” and “naturalized” understanding of cross-cultural mission in global south churches? Again, let’s consider history.

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Again, fast forward 100 or so years. Researchers tell us the center of gravity of global Christianity has dramatically shifted so that now approximately two-thirds (69%) of all believers globally are in the global south (Asia, Africa and Latin America). We rejoice at the encouraging implications of this as the Holy Spirit awakens this giant for cross-cultural mission.

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During the colonial era, the mission movement globally was dominated by westerners, which was appropriate at that time due to the parts of the world where the Gospel was and wasn’t. They brought with them the concepts of “full-time missionaries,” planting churches with full-time paid pastors, buildings being necessary, and many other outside trappings, in contrast with Jesus and the early church’s zero budget model of disciple multiplication through simple, culturally relevant churches. Additionally, they often brought a sense of cultural superiority instead of celebrating who God had culturally made the target people to be. Paul’s own example was exactly the opposite of this (1 Cor. 7:17-24; 9:19-23; Acts 19:8-10; 20:33-35).

Again, fast forward 100 or so years. Researchers tell us the center of gravity of global Christianity has dramatically shifted so that now approximately two-thirds (69%) of all believers globally are in the global south (Asia, Africa and Latin America).<sup>1</sup> We rejoice at the encouraging implications of this as the Holy Spirit

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1. World Christianity in 2025 – Center For the Study of Global Christianity, Gina A. Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing

awakens this giant for cross-cultural mission.

Yet, while the epicenter of the global Church has shifted to the global south, the rate at which the global south is scattering message bearers is not commensurate with its population. The western Church is currently scattering .31% of the Church into cross-cultural mission while the global south Church is scattering .01% into cross-cultural mission.<sup>2</sup>

Due to these statistics, we must ask, “Has the concept of cross-cultural mission been ‘indigenized’ or ‘naturalized,’ finding localized cultural expression, from within the global south Church?” Doing so requires a “rethinking” of the historic western example and traditional models of cross-cultural mission and a necessary reframing through a Biblical and Spirit-led cross-cultural mission approach.

So, let’s grasp the current predicament. As cited, historically cross-cultural mission from the West took place to the point where over time the Gospel took indigenous root and is today, in many places, functioning as a relevant, cultural expression of faith, free from western constraints. Yet for the most part, an understanding of cross-cultural mission, in much of the global south Church today, is still seen as a western responsibility, not yet “naturalized” or “enculturated” from within the global south Church.

It is tragically common for committed believers in global south nations to have significant misunderstandings about cross-cultural mission. Some of these include – “global mission is for white people,” “Africans and Asians are receivers of ‘missionaries’ and cannot be senders”; or “cross-cultural mission is for churches in affluent, wealthy nations who serve people in poor countries” (making the emphasis of mission humanitarian instead of Gospel centered). We often hear global south pastors say with tears in their eyes, “We love the Great Commission, but we are a poor church. How can we do cross-cultural mission?”

Why is this still the case? Each of these misunderstandings betrays an outlook steeped in a western model of cross-cultural mission. When Africans, Asians and Latinos are mobilized for mission today, it is often through the lens of this historic, traditional model. Instead, it seems necessary to come alongside African, Asian and Latino churches to deeply wrestle with Biblical and Spirit-led models of cross-cultural mission and integrate these into their own mission mobilization. The mobilization fruit will then be explosive and lasting.

Did Jesus only give wealthy, affluent churches with big budgets the Great Commission mandate (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:19-23)? Of course not. He gave it to poor, Jewish fishermen who proceeded to “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) through multiplying and reproducing disciples and simple churches everywhere they went, with very little money involved (Acts 8:4).

What then is the answer to our current predicament? Just like the Gospel is meant to be rooted in a

local cultural expression, blossoming from within, interpreted through the lens of cultural and religious past, that same people’s understanding of cross-cultural mission is also meant to be so.

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Holistic mission mobilization serves this process immensely. Encouraging local churches and entire denominations in global south nations to put ongoing, consistent mobilization principles, tools and strategies within the life of their fellowships. This process enables their people to be envisioned with cross-cultural mission corporately over the long-term while obeying the Biblical and Spirit-led models of doing so, not merely reproducing the traditional, western-influenced models.

Let’s partner with the Spirit in pursuing holistic mobilization today toward the “indigenizing” and “naturalizing” of cross-cultural mission vision within every national Church. Let’s work to overcome the misunderstandings and false outlooks about cross-cultural mission by mobilizing the global south Church to lay down traditional, western models and instead take up and integrate Biblical, Spirit-led models of cross-cultural mission.

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2. State of Christianity In The World – [www.vision.org.au](http://www.vision.org.au)