

InterVarsity and the Indigenous Fourth World

The Natives have a Plan to Save Us All

God loves Native and Indigenous peoples. Some of them go to college. In InterVarsity we don't need any motivation beyond that to serve Native students and through them to impact their communities and the world.

But there is more. We are missing something important if we don't recognize that Native students are not just another ethnic minority to be served with a niche ministry sensitive to their particular character and challenges. We risk applying our ministry technologies, with all of their practical efficacy, to an inadequate end which both illustrates and perpetuates some of the dysfunction of the First World. Most importantly, we might miss what the Spirit has to offer us. What makes this ministry unique, and why does this matter for the gospel and for IV?

The idea of the "Fourth World" -- indigenous minorities -- might help our thinking. The common understanding of the Third World as places of poverty, social and political instability, high infant mortality, etc. (with the Fourth World often as bad or worse) is not particularly helpful. Even less the outdated geopolitical model of the cold war era (where the First World is the U.S. and her western allies, the Second is the Soviet bloc, and the Third is everyone else).

Colonialism

The lens of colonialism, however, is more helpful. Much of the Third World are places that have regained sovereignty after a period of colonization by European powers, places where Native populations were always a majority. Language and cultural distinctives were largely able to survive. The Fourth World, by contrast, are places where Native people groups have limited self-determination, with small populations unlikely to ever have political power in the nations in which they now find themselves, and under tremendous pressure to conform to the majority culture. This is the position of American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Pacific and Atlantic Islanders in the U.S. and U.S. territories.

The story of the conquest of the Americas is, in a fair reading of history, a story of genocide. When Native utility as trading partners, sources of forced labor, and buffer states (against other colonial or Native powers) was outweighed by the value of their lands, they were ultimately killed or forcibly removed (even so-called "voluntary" migrations were under great pressure, and comparable victims today would be called refugees). All of this was justified by ideologies of racial superiority and manifest destiny, complete with religious rationalizations. A few Natives were assimilated, proving the generally held rule of their intractability to "civilization." It is a sordid story. The survivors and their descendants are still among us and suffering for it today. We cannot continue to ignore them as ghosts of America past and move on. The simple fact is that the dark causes of it all remain lodged in our hearts and institutions. When evil is transacted, both victim and perpetrator require healing. In IV, Native Ministry forces us to realize that Jesus is the only guiltless servant, and even he became the suffering servant, identifying fully with the mess we created, as if it were somehow his responsibility. How much more should we, when we *are* responsible.

Those who have engaged in this task, however, have a long history of meager harvest. Despite waves of mission activity among Native peoples, lots of trips to the rez, and tremendous expenditure of resources, their situation has hardly improved and few have turned to

Christ. Some Native observers have suggested that the fundamental approach has been flawed. It has been tainted by the same colonialism and paternalism that doomed relations in the first place. No one really wins on the terms of the colonizers. But what if the very elements of Native culture and religion that we have misunderstood, feared, and suppressed so long turned out to be a path of life for both Native and non-Native people?

Contextualization

Another lens that can help us is the lens of contextualization. InterVarsity has long been a champion of contextualization. The idea that students are the best missionaries to students, having the resources of the Spirit to influence the university world from within, is part of our DNA. We have long believed the institution reflects, albeit imperfectly, the goodness of God: that it is worth redeeming; that in the end we bring more than a lifeboat of saved souls to our risen and glorious King.

The contextualizing impulse is always a two-way street. To be open to the work of the Spirit in a new context is to be open to a reinterpretation and deepening of the old context. Old wineskins may burst. Peter understood this after he (and the Spirit) visited Cornelius, and the church was forever altered by Gentile cultures. Paul understood this when he engaged Greek philosophers in Acts 17, leveraging the revelation of God in their own tradition to build a bridge of understanding. We learned something new about God when “in the beginning, the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God.” We could look at the entire NT as an act of divine linguistic contextualization.

Revelation in new contexts also brings judgement in the scriptures. The Hellenistic Jews rejected the Hebraic Jews’ method of resource distribution, Ephesian converts burned some of their valuable scrolls, leaders in dialog rejected the sexual morality of the Roman world (Acts 6, 19, and 15 respectively).

We have, in InterVarsity, internalized the principles of contextualization. We (to some degree or other) take cues for organization, operation, and resourcing from corporate culture, look to campus culture and pop culture for forms for worship and metaphors for the gospel, etc. We see in the scriptures freedom to appropriate these cultural forms. But two questions emerge. Is there evidence that the Spirit is at work in all of these “cultures” (things like business culture, consumer culture, etc.)? Secondly, in what kinds of cultures do the scriptures point us as likely places to *expect* the Spirit to be moving? This essay is intended to clarify doors of opportunity: so let’s consider the second. The answer, in short, is *the nations*. The first and most natural place to find a culture. Nations here as *ethnos* -- peoples or people groups -- not what we think of as modern nation-states. Many scriptures point to potential in the nations. Sukkot prophetically anticipates an ingathering of nations, Jesus clears out selfish national pride in the temple to make room for the nations. Pentecost brought the nations together to unleash them. God, in his sovereignty directs the nations (the prophets, Acts 17, etc.), for their good (the Psalms, Amos 9:7, etc.).

Redeeming and renewing some old edifices of the West can be a worthy effort, but one of the deeply ingrained pathologies of the West is the desire to rebuild Babel, establishing monocultures to make the world a safe place for our pride and appetite, eliminating the competition. Given the recent experience of our country we could conclude that, like Bitcoin, our virtual cultural “currencies” are prone to bubbles that pop. Old wineskins again. Perhaps our first and most natural place to find that new wine is in the Fourth World, the first

people of this land. Indeed, we might ask ourselves why we do not pursue knowledge of traditional and indigenous cultures with as much energy as we pursue insight into the monoculture of the West.

Land and Time

Understanding the value of Native cultures (even of our own European cultures of origin) requires a great deal of study and introspection. I offer this brief reflection on Biblical concepts of Land and Time as (I hope) a helpful way to introduce some of the theological significance and contribution of an indigenous perspective.

In Acts 17 Paul speaks not only of *nations*, but *lands* and *times*. God established nations, having determined "...boundaries of their dwelling place."

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26-27)

Native people speak regularly of the *land*. It has spiritual implications as the gift of the Creator. The land is the provision of God: a home, sustenance, a sacred trust, an opportunity to tend and a legacy. By tending it properly we learn how to depend on God. Living in harmony with it we learn about God. It is most emphatically not a commodity to be traded, a resource to be exploited, or a placeholder for whatever we please to put there. Land is *meaningful* place. We need only look to the significance of the land among the tribal people of God in the Bible to know there is something to this. Moreover, it is *God* who is sovereign over the distribution of the lands; there is no legitimacy for European conquest of the Americas, all of our tortured juridical and theological reasoning notwithstanding. Yet we remain fixated on our notion of *right*, of *our* right. What if some of our national restlessness could be traced to the uneasiness of living in a stolen home? Native peoples are, on this analysis, the host peoples of the land, and *their* welcome is the key to legitimacy for European and other immigrants.

Time is harder to understand. Again, the OT helps us. God, in the Torah, established a whole cycle of feasts and celebrations intimately connected to the agricultural cycles of the land. Moreover, God established ceremonies and other sacred times, all with the intent of rehearsing and cherishing elements of life grounded in the life of God. To occupy ourselves in ceremony is (or can be) to participate in the harmony of Shalom. The Native practice of things like protocol and ceremony *connect*. It is hard for us in the secularized West to see the point sacred time; to understand the "meaning" of it as if it could be abstracted from the lived experience of it. I get that. I've sat through Native protocol on my sore butt, wondering when we could be done with the preliminaries and get on to the point of the meeting. Then I realized, or rather experienced, that transacting honor and welcome *was* the point, and I have in fact experienced a lifetime of meetings where no one actually *met*. We need meetings of trusted and valued *persons*, not a meeting of our insecurities, agendas, and prejudices.

The word Paul uses in Acts 17 for time is *kairos*. It is not *chronos*, or chronological time in the way we usually use it, as a mere placeholder for productive activity. Children show us our need for *kairos*. As I originally write this, Christmas is approaching. Every morning (usually much too early), my three-year-old asks me what day it is, and then what will happen. It does not nurture his soul much to give him a chronology of activities. What he wants is relationship and

significance. I tell him it is Christmas time. That satisfies him. Kairos is meaningful time. My Spiritual Director in IV has been laboring for years to invite me into deeper rhythms of the practice of sacred time. We labor to recapture what God originally gave us as a gift of culture.

To see an instruction to “go native” would be to read too much into the land and time allusions of Acts 17. Clearly, however, Paul sees value in it that resonates with Biblical revelation. I do not believe it is a stretch to say that indigenous practice of land and time is the way God intended us to be human. This might account for some of the strengths of Native communities. While wave upon wave of immigrants have quickly lost many cultural distinctives (within a generation or two), Natives have been remarkably resistant to assimilation.

God in his sovereignty placed them in *this* land. God has a witness in every place. As we decolonize and contextualize, we can perhaps tap into the pentecost experience anew, and experience God’s welcome as we experience theirs. I do not intend to romanticize, as if the rez were populated by Native gurus, or oversimplify, as if we can easily untangle layers of trauma and assimilation. But Native people are still here, and God still has something to tell us by their presence.

Sharing

The subtitle of this essay (The Natives have a Plan to Save Us All) is deliberately ironic: with a short exposure to most Native communities, one will quickly realize that, while Native people may gossip, complain, disapprove, chide or even trick, they will not roll out master plans to reform white people. There is nothing in the soil here to grow conspiracy theories or empires, or force anyone to believe anything. No, it is the white people, traumatized by generations of empires and bewitched by reductive principles, who have come to believe there is safety and wisdom on that path. Many Native people, however, do care about white people, and many will *share*.

When Jesus sent out his disciples two by two to the surrounding towns and villages, he gave them the authority to heal in his name. But we find out at the end of the story of his intended benefits for the disciples. Perhaps, as we are sent out to Native students we can discover, by God’s grace, that he intends healing for *us*.

I’d like to shift point-of-view for a moment and speak as a (somewhat conflicted) “bi-racial” enrolled member of a Native American tribe. I wouldn’t be a Jesus follower if God hadn’t shown up with his grace and love for me, and he did it in the secular university world. God is not far from us, even here. But I have found over the years that, while God’s witness here is real, I cannot make my spiritual home in the temple of the unknown god. It is (among its other fundamental pathologies) a meritocracy. Home can’t be a place you earn. That’s ok, though. The cultures of this world were never meant to be home, only gifts to lead us home. Home to our Creator. Why does God give these gifts? “...that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him,” (Acts 17:27). We have, within this wonderfully diverse university world in which we move, an opportunity to serve people from the Fourth World. They have gifts. Their cultures, their stories, their histories, their families, their voices, *themselves*. It’s Christmas time. It’s time to give, to share. It’s time to open God’s gifts.