



## “When Mission Threatens”

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“Welcome to my country,” he said with a gleam in his eye as he shook my hand. I was attending a powwow here in Pasadena, and the irony of the greeting was not lost on me. He represented the original inhabitants of this country who have lived here for millennia, and I represented the settlers who came only recently. Perhaps irony is second only to tragedy as the best word to describe the Christian mission to Native Americans. It is a history of mixed motives and contradictory impulses; the worst of human greed and the best of human love intertwined with a critical error: the belief that Christian community could not exist apart from European culture.

Probably the best-known Protestant missionary to the American Indians was John Eliot, the Congregational minister who began evangelism efforts to the Algonquin Indians of Massachusetts in 1644. He was certainly sincere and genuinely concerned about the welfare of the Indians in the wake of European settlement of their lands. By 1660 he had trained 24 Indian evangelists to reach their own people. A New Testament was published in their language in 1661 followed by an Old Testament in 1663, against the steady argument that he should just teach them English. By 1671 he had gathered more than 1,100 Indians into 14 “praying towns,” aligning with the idea that new believers must be separated from their unbelieving relatives. While the hindsight of history helps us see the errors of some of these practices, when you think of Eliot’s context, it was in fact a remarkable achievement (just ask David Brainerd).

However, all these events took place in a context of growing animosity and

grievance between the Indians and the English. In 1675 King Phillip’s War began, named after the Wampanoag king who felt threatened and decided to fight for his land, which was shrinking daily under the onslaught of English settlement. This was the same tribe that befriended the Pilgrims decades earlier, helping them survive and celebrating with them the “first” Thanksgiving in Plymouth in 1621 (first only to the English; the Indians had always done so). A few months after the war began, on December 16, 1675, an event occurred that brings out the tragedy and irony of the times: the Great Swamp Massacre. The Narragansett Indians, perceived allies of the Wampanoag, were attacked by the English. More than 300 mostly women and children, were burned alive in their wigwams. According to one early account,

[The] shrieks and cries of the women and children, the yelling of the warriors, exhibited a most horrible and appalling scene, so that it greatly moved some of the soldiers. They were in much doubt and they afterwards seriously inquired whether burning their enemies alive could be consistent with humanity and the benevolent principle of the gospel.

With a history that includes many stories like this, should we be surprised that after 400 years of Protestant missionary outreach to Native Americans we are still looking at a response rate of 3–4%? It is interesting to note that, in the very same period, Protestant missionary outreach to other parts of the world were generally more successful by comparison. Why? Were these others just better missionaries? I doubt it. One key difference is that they were usually part of a minority in a foreign land, while the missionaries to the Native Americans were part of an ever-increasing, competitive, soon-to-be

majority. In most of the places where missionaries have ventured, they have been a tiny minority. In short, they represented a lower level of threat.

Wouldn’t it be true to say, then and now, that the effectiveness of missionaries is directly proportionate to the level of threat they represent to those to whom they go? Some would argue that being a threat is an unavoidable consequence of genuine mission, that such confrontation is a mere reflection of the war between light and darkness. This is true, but not totally true. Not all aspects of a culture are threatened by the gospel message. Some aspects of culture are obliterated, to be sure, but others are redirected and others are left alone. There are very few examples in the New Testament where the invasion of the Kingdom threatened the livelihood of a person, unless it involved something spiritually immoral (Jesus and the money-changers, Paul and the idol-makers). By and large, the threat of mission was limited to those aspects of a culture in direct opposition to Kingdom values.

So while there will always be an offense attached to the cross, how can we avoid being unnecessarily threatening? How can unnecessary offense be minimized? First, we can rejoice with the increasing numbers of missionaries coming from countries not perceived as imperialistic world powers. This immediately and automatically makes them less threatening than an American missionary. This is a positive and growing trend. Second, whatever ethnicity we are and whatever the perception of our nationality, we need to seriously ponder how we may pose a threat to those we are trying to serve. The history of mission to Native Americans reminds us that where mission threatens, it often fails. 🌐