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Evangelical Missiology for the 21st Century: The importance of the Iguassu Missiological Consultation

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Foz do Iguassu (Iguassu Falls) straddles the border between Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. This magnificent waterfall was the backdrop for an historic consultation held in October 1999 that gathered 160 mission practitioners and scholars from 53 countries to listen to God and to each other. The participants of the Iguassu Missiological Consultation met to discuss the way Christian mission is changing and needs to change at the turn of the millennium.

As Dr. Bill Taylor, the Executive Director of the World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission noted, this was the only international consultation on missions to be held in the last two years of the 1900s. Although the missions movement has successfully operated with the understandings and mandates of the later half of the twentieth century, there is an urgent need for a reexamination of the missionary paradigm. New factors, such as the surge of missionary interest in the younger churches, the challenge of non-Christian religions, the pressure of a global economy and the renewed awareness of the spiritual opposition to the gospel, mandated a fresh examination of the task at this critical time.

The Iguassu Consultation affirmed the centrality of the gospel and the uniqueness of Christ as the only Saviour of the world. However, while the heart of the message of redemption found only in Christ has not changed, the circumstances under which the cross and the resurrection are proclaimed are different from the twentieth century. The Soviet Union, the major geopolitical force that challenged the West for world domination, has crumbled, making the Commonwealth of Independent States more open to mission. Areas which in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century absorbed a greater portion of the missionary force and are home to a large percentage of the world's population, such as India and China, are now closed to traditional missions. The supposed superiority of the western culture of consumption is evidenced by a world culture based on brand names. But the Christian gospel, for so long associated with the West, is not part of this package and must compete in its traditional areas of strength with other worldviews. In this postmodern situation, the gospel is only one of the possible answers, as Chris Wright so ably demonstrates in his paper, 'Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralisms: Challenges to Evangelical Missiology in the 21st Century'.

The historical moment facing the consultation was similar to the major shift that occurred after World War II with the granting of independence to so many colonial possessions. Ralph Winter usefully tracked this transition in 'The Twenty-five Unbelievable Years, 1945-1969' which appeared as an appendix in the last volume of Kenneth Scott Latourette's masterful *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*.¹ This great emancipation of colonized peoples led to increased opportunities for the advance of the

¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Advance Through the Storm, Volume 7, A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971).

gospel. In spite of the often-repeated charge that colonialism and Christianity went out to conquer together, the truth is that colonialism was not a friend to missions but hindered the work of the gospel in many ways. The venue of the conference highlighted this fact in a particularly forceful manner.

The Iguassu area is significant because it was the scene of a tragic chapter in mission history. In the eighteenth century Jesuit missionaries settled their converts in Christian villages (*reductions*) to protect them from other hostile tribes and colonists. As part of the consultation, the participants viewed and discussed the movie, *The Mission*² that depicts a failed attempt of some Jesuits to protect their Indian converts from the destructive attacks of the colonial powers. Filmed on location, the sweep of the Iguassu waterfalls played a major part in the story. Meeting in the shadow of the great waterfalls on land that had been home to the Guarani people added to participants' understanding of the destruction and enslavement of the Guarani. Dr. Valdir Steuernagel, a Brazilian of German ancestry, provided an introduction to the viewing by explaining the historical and personal context. As a fourth generation descendant of German colonization, he described how he could see the film from the perspectives of both a settler and a native Brazilian. The year 2000 marks the five hundredth anniversary of the colonization of Brazil, yet he reminded the consultation that the same problems and oppression are still the lot of the native peoples of Brazil, pointing out that there were no Indian descendants at the consultation. Indeed there are few native Guarani left in the whole Iguassu area.

While there were many questions raised by the theological basis of the movie, Dr. Steuernagel emphasized the dedication of the missionaries and asked those present to consider the force of their own missionary call. In spite of the mistakes made by the Jesuits, their commitment challenges missionaries today. In this era, it is possible that missionaries will be called upon to face similar ethical dilemmas that will require hard decisions and even martyrdom. This mood of serious engagement, not only with global strategies but also with personal sacrifice, characterized the entire consultation. Gathered together were not armchair thinkers but active participants in God's work worldwide.

The Iguassu Consultation was planned so that the majority of those attending came from the younger sending churches and affirmed the movement of missionary initiative to these churches. The presentations of leaders from new sending churches to the plenary sessions and in the strategy groups meant that the focus was on the real questions facing the missionary movement. The church as a whole can rejoice in the vitality that the younger sending churches bring to the missionary task. Their voices need to be heard for the spiritual welfare of the entire church, including the church in the traditional sending countries. This combination of younger and traditional, of practitioners and missiological educators gave the Iguassu Consultation a ring of authenticity and global perspective.

However, the consultation also reinforced the necessity for better training and preparation for all missionaries, whether they are from the traditional or the newer sending countries. One of the findings of the consultation was that more work needs to be done in the area of training and support for missionaries from the younger sending churches so that the enthusiasm and energy they bring will not be dissipated because of avoidable circumstances. These conclusions follow up on an exceedingly useful 1996

² Starring Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons, it depicts the work of the Jesuits in settling Indian converts in Christian villages and the subsequent conflict the missionaries had with the colonial authorities. Warner Brothers, Inc. 1986.

working study and survey done by WEF Missions Commission: *Too Valuable to Lose: Exploring the Causes and Cures of Missionary Attrition*.³

Iguassu did not come to provide answers as much as point to areas that require greater definition. The major results of the consultation were summarized in the conference statement. Through an interactive process the consultation produced the **Iguassu Affirmation** (which is reproduced elsewhere in this issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology*). Working from a rough draft prepared before the consultation using the major papers as a guide, the document went through three major revisions in the five days of the consultation and was finalized in a plenary session on the last day. The four sections outline the missionary challenge, as seen by a cross section of mission practitioners and strategists.

The **Preamble** sets the context of mission thinking and activity and attempts to balance the insights gained from western mission management models with sensitivity to the biblical mandates for leadership. There was both criticism and solid affirmation for the insights of managerial mission thinkers who have broken the task down into comprehensible units. It was impressive to this observer that the harshest criticism of the western quantification models and the strongest affirmations of the insights gained from such quantification both came from Latin America. One brother from Guatemala who is serving as a missionary in Central Europe expressed his appreciation for the managerial models by saying: 'Luis Bush showed us that the task of world evangelization could be done and that we could have a role to play in it'. Iguassu showed clearly that more needs to be done in defining the role of strategic planning.

The second longest section, **Declarations**, contains the doctrinal basis of the **Affirmation** and is Trinitarian in tone and content. Taking a strong position on the authority of Scripture, it acknowledges the centuries of Christian reflection that produced the great credal statements. It affirms the Lordship of Christ over both the church and the universe and his position as the unique revelation of God and the only Saviour of the world. Included with the expected call to proclaim the gospel in every language and cultural context is recognition of the reality of persecution and martyrdom. This theme marked some of the presentations and is seen as a necessary component of any confessional document in this present time. Throughout the Declarations, the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in mission was affirmed. The consultation also issued a strong call for personal and corporate holiness as an essential mark of Christian mission.

The longest section of the **Affirmation, Commitments**, focused on areas that need continuing reflection. It is debatable whether it is correct to single out this section as the most important of the document. However, it is the topics dealt with in the **Commitments** that should form the basis of research and discussion for the next two or three decades. The topics range widely from theological concerns, such as a call for renewed reflection on the Trinitarian basis of mission, to practical topics that deal with the actual practice of a mission organization such as care of missionaries.

Iguassu has produced statements that will require biblical reflection. Some topics, such as 'Church and Mission' or 'Gospel and Culture' are obviously areas that require serious study. But the **Affirmation** also calls for deep engagement with issues of 'Spiritual Conflict', 'Mission Strategies', 'Economics', and 'Ecology'. This is a clarion call for missionaries to deal with cultural and practical issues that are not usually on their agenda.

³ Edited by William D. Taylor, (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1997). The study looks at missionaries from fourteen countries: six traditional sending countries and eight from the younger missionary movement. It is an example of the type of research that needs to be undertaken to document the relevant questions facing today's missionary enterprise.

It was recognized by participants that problems which occupy the lives of those outside the faith must have a biblical answer in order to effectively communicate the gospel.⁴ Some of the areas follow on from the **Declarations**, indicating the desire to see more fully articulated some of the real concerns of mission. One example is the call to work on a theology of martyrdom. It is clear that the **Declarations** are a call to action and may be one of the most enduring legacies of the Iguassu Consultation.

The final section, entitled **Pledge**, reaffirms the urgency of the task of world evangelisation. Rooted in Trinitarian theology, the **Pledge** is a common commitment to prayer, reflection, and action. Ending with the eschatological vision of [Rev. 7:9](#), the **Iguassu Affirmation** looks forward to the great wedding feast of our Lord and Saviour.

This issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology* presents some of these papers, but unfortunately the printed page cannot give the sense of discussion at the consultation. As a participant and co-chair of the affirmation drafting committee, I can affirm the consultation was an honest attempt at defining the key issues in mission. As noted above, it was a working consultation with the final **Iguassu Affirmation** the product of the input from the entire group. The participants were serious about the nature of the task facing the church. There were signs of hope, areas of concern, and a clear sense that the work of mission was dependent on the power and presence of God, as mediated through the Holy Spirit indwelling believers.

Iguassu is now part of mission history, but we pray its legacy may continue to shape the history of the church. Many mission professors present at Iguassu indicated their intention to use **The Iguassu Affirmation** in their classes. It is certainly a seminal document defining the areas of mission at the turn of the millennium.

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Iguassu Affirmation

**World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission
Foz de Iguassu, Brazil
October 10–15, 1999**

⁴ It seems to this observer that it is a healthy sign that missions are dealing with the issues that occupy the minds of our hearers. The apostle Paul used a similar approach in dealing with those to whom he would proclaim Christ.