

## BOOK REVIEW

### *SERVING WITH EYES WIDE OPEN*

by David A. Livermore  
(Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2006)

The sub-title reveals the gist of this book: *Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence*. The reader understands what *IQ* is and most readers know about *EQ* (Emotional Intelligence), but the author introduces a new term, *CQ* (Cultural Intelligence). The author is a strong supporter of short-term mission trips, but he is passionate that what we do on these trips be strategic in value and respectful of the needs, assets, and sensitivities of the receiving culture. He wants to open the readers' eyes to our cultural blind spots. This is no insignificant issue: *Some estimate that as many as four million Americans take short-term mission trips out of the country annually; and American churches now spend as much on short-term mission trips as on long-term missionaries.*<sup>1</sup>

Part One of the book is a broad sketch of the nature of today's world. It covers 1) Growing Population (and where it is concentrated), 2) Poverty vs. Wealth (*Twenty percent of the world live on one dollar a day.*), 3) Disease (especially HIV/AIDS), 4) Displaced Peoples (12 million out-of-country and 24 million more displaced in-country), 5) "McWorld" (business across national borders), and 6) Fundamentalism vs. Pluralism (one-right-way vs. many-right-ways). This section of the book also covers the characteristics of the world-wide Christian Church, which is the fastest-growing religion in the world, is dominantly global-south, is persecuted, and is hungry for trained leadership.

Part Two of the book unpacks the differing perspectives of Americans vs. Nationals on short-term mission trips. Particularly insightful is the author's debunking of the "life-changing" value of a mission trip on the American traveler. He cites studies that have found that the life-changes are all too short-lived, with most Americans reverting to old values and behaviors within 6-8 weeks. Additionally he notes the radical value shift from traditional missions' emphasis on self-sacrifice to a dominant emphasis *me* as a short-terminer, i.e., my personal transformation. He also calls for a toning down of the rhetoric in American claims regarding how much good we are doing in other countries on our mission trips and how urgently we are needed.

Chapter 6 gets into theology as the author wrestles with biblical hermeneutics and application in cross-cultural contexts. He particularly challenges the simplistic notion that as long as we are teaching the Bible, cultural differences don't really matter, because the timeless principles of the Bible are trans-cultural. Now, indeed, the Bible is trans-cultural and it is full of timeless principles, but each person reads the Bible with his own cultural blinders on. It requires constant and painstaking vigilance to ensure that we do not unwittingly export our Americanized interpretation of the Bible. What is called for is a deep awareness of what the Bible meant in its original context. This is a wise and needful caution and is a foundational value in biblical hermeneutics. However, let the reader be cautioned when the author rejects "bibliolatry," which he defines as abusing the Bible as the *end* rather than a *means* to the end, which is Jesus. He defends this statement as not a diminution of the Scriptures but rather a heightening of them. This is a misleading argument. First of all, the accusation that fundamentalists idolize the Bible (bibliolatry) is a worn out canard. Further, the disparagement of Christians using the Bible as life's *answer-book* or *rule-book* is unnecessarily condescending. Finally, the author's favorable

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<sup>1</sup> Page 12.

citation of Brian McLaren<sup>2</sup> tarnishes the author's argument because McLaren has moved so far away from a conservative view of Scripture itself and biblical hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup>

Part Three explores and illustrates the four elements of Cultural Intelligence (CQ): 1) Knowledge CQ: Understanding Cross-Cultural Differences, 2) Interpretive CQ: Interpreting Cues, 3) Perseverance CQ: Persevering through Cross-Cultural Conflict, and 4) Behavioral CQ: Acting Appropriately. The author helpfully analogizes "culture" as the "software that runs our minds." For example, one culture sees a dog as virtually a member of the family, while another culture avoids dogs as dirty nuisances, or perhaps part of one's diet. No one cultural view of dogs is correct or incorrect. However, it is important that we as foreign guests understand the local cultural nuances regarding dogs, time, individualism, power distance, and attitudes toward uncertainty. He alleges that "Perseverance CQ" is most determinative in selecting people for cross-cultural work. This speaks of the sheer determination of the person to push through the frustrations and hard work of getting it right culturally.

The author addresses the classic "Ugly American" concept under the category of Behavioral CQ: *The biggest problems for most short-term mission teams are not technical or administrative. The biggest challenges lie in communication, misunderstanding, personality conflicts, poor leadership, and bad teamwork.*<sup>4</sup> The prescribed antidote is to persistently question our presuppositions and become excellent listeners. However, the author goes too far when he applies mission-trip humility to our assessment of the salvation effectiveness of other religions. This is unfortunate in that the crux of the missionary task is leading other people to salvation through Jesus Christ. He states that *...we need to be freed from trying to figure out who's "in" as a member of the people of God and who's "out."* My goodness, isn't that a fundamental distinction in evangelism?! The author supports his thesis with a quotation from Lesslie Newbigin<sup>5</sup> who is, unfortunately, no friend of conservative soul-winning.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from the aforementioned regrettable theological weaknesses of this book, it is a stellar handbook on cultural awareness. This book should be required reading for every American adult preparing for a cross-cultural mission trip.

Timothy G. Walton  
Alderwood Community Church  
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<sup>2</sup> Page 79.

<sup>3</sup> See McLaren's books, *A New Kind of Christian* and *A Generous Orthodoxy*.

<sup>4</sup> Page 155.

<sup>5</sup> Page 173.

<sup>6</sup> Newbigin rejects the doctrine of election to salvation (86), rather, *all human beings without exception are accepted as beloved of God*. He believes the Bible is a factually flawed book (97). The "principalities and powers" of Ephesians 6 are mortal and terrestrial (207). The Great Commission is not a duty, but rather an explosion of joy. (116). Paul gives no exhortation to be active in mission, but rather only to faithfulness (119). World evangelization initiatives are aggressive imperialism (155). He goes so far as to affirm that to ask, *What happens to the non-Christian after death?* is to ask the wrong question (177) and he takes three pages to explain why, with the concluding statement that such a question is actually a perversion of the gospel (279). [Page numbers reference Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.]