

The Use of History

A Post-3/11 Paradigm for Mission in Japan

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Editor's Note: This article appeared in the most recent compendium in the SEANET series (12), Seeking the Unseen: Spiritual Realities in the Buddhist World (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016, pp. 193–204) and is reprinted by permission (see advertisement on p. 16).

March 11, 2014. We are sitting in a meeting room in northern Japan. The room is part of a temporary housing complex for those who lost everything in the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. Some friends of mine are holding a Bible study, and I think most of the people who have come are there out of gratitude for the aid they received.

After a very dull Bible study where the “teacher” kept on talking, people are randomly chatting over cups of tea. Suddenly one lady says,

Oh, by the way, the other day, something very interesting happened to me. I was feeling down, thinking about all the things that I lost in the tsunami. Then this Jesus that you talk about came to me and said, “Those things are gone, so do not worry about them. But in the future, there will be a clear river flowing for you.”

A man shows up at the house of some Christians who moved there right after the disaster and says, “Jesus appeared in my dream and told me to come to you.”

Another man, when he talks about his experience, says that God pulled him out of the water when he got swallowed by the tsunami. As he says the word “God,” he pulls out a necklace that he has on. It has a cross hanging on it. The combination of “God” and the cross is extremely unusual in Japan. Obviously, he recognizes that the God who pulled him out of the water has something to do with the cross.

The disasters which hit the Tohoku region on March 11, 2011, changed the physical landscape of Japan. But it is becoming clear that they also marked a change in the spiritual landscape of the country. In the past, missionaries had seen very little fruit for their efforts over many centuries. Now we are beginning to see a new understanding of mission emerging in Japan—one which God himself is initiating and leading.

One pastor who has been planting churches in the area described the change as “a kind of powerful force moving them on.” He refers to the current mission practice in Japan as being in a state of “paralysis”—shocked, standing still, and unable to move effectively. He realizes that God is calling us to have a paradigm shift. We need a paradigm shift to understand what God is doing right now and also to reach Japan at such a time as this.

The authors of this article are a team of Japanese mission leaders, each with a different resumé of mission experience. They worked together to integrate their experiences among the devastated population of post-3/11 Japan. This article is an edited version of their presentation to the SEANET consortium in Southeast Asia.

The New Paradigm

Much of the current practice of mission in Japan has not changed for the past two centuries of Protestant mission. Missionaries and pastors have first established churches as beachheads of the kingdom, and set them apart from the society that they have seen around them. They then—deliberately or inadvertently—positioned their churches as places of culture, learning, and spiritual purity. They sought to attract people into churches on the basis of these advantages. Those who came to the churches and wanted to understand the faith of their “hosts” would then be trained through Bible study until they professed faith themselves. After that, they would take a generally passive role as church members, mostly restricted to the attendance of Sunday services.

We could summarize the mission strategy to date under the following six areas:

1. Calling people to gather with us
2. Not being involved in the local society
3. Building a church separate from the local society
4. Creating encounters with the Bible
5. Missionaries talking about Jesus
6. Prioritizing an intellectual understanding of the gospel

To a certain extent this strategy has not been completely unsuccessful. There are around eight thousand Protestant churches established in Japan. Three hundred thousand people regularly attend Sunday worship (<http://church-info.org/html/churchmap.html>, site discontinued). However, the Japanese church has generally had an extremely limited impact upon the surrounding society (Furuya 2011, 138–39); Christian ministry has been primarily dependent on professional clergy, with little lay involvement (Braun 1971, 33). Demographic shifts have meant that such dependence has by now become unsustainable (Hastings and Mullins 2006, 19–23). The church population in Japan is in decline.

At the same time, we have seen a new engagement amongst some Japanese

Christians with the society around them. After 3/11, there was a huge outpouring of funds and volunteer work from all around the world to the affected region of northeast Japan. Even though the initial relief operation is over, it will take many years until the Tohoku region has fully recovered. Towns and villages in the area were effectively wiped out. The church within Japan has also been challenged to respond. Many Christians have moved into the area on a short-term or long-term basis, and at least one church has relocated to Tohoku.

Christians have developed long-term relationships with communities in Tohoku, and they have often found themselves involved in the work of rebuilding these communities. Rather



than attempting to establish a separate, parallel Christian Japan, these individuals have felt themselves called to live out their lives naturally as members of the kingdom within the existing Japanese society. In doing so, they have been brought into contact with those to whom God has already been speaking.

We could sum up this new paradigm along the same lines:

1. Being sent out to where people are
2. Taking our place in local society
3. Building the kingdom of God within that society
4. Creating encounters with God
5. Jesus himself speaking
6. Prioritizing an experiential understanding of the gospel

The first three items are what is now known as “missional church.” But from the perspective of the Japanese church, this is a complete change of direction from past practice. In particular, the third item is revolutionary. Japanese Christians have generally taken a separationist approach to the surrounding society and sought to create parallel, “clean” societal structures within the church. Now we are beginning to see Christians who understand their primary ministry as serving within existing societal groups to bring gospel transformation to that society.

In our experience, as Christians have taken their faith out into their daily lives, we have realized more and more that God himself, rather than missionaries and pastors, has been the agent of mission. God’s Spirit has been active in directly stirring the hearts of the Japanese people, appearing to them in dreams and visions, and leading them to himself. When we refer to “creating encounters with God,” we do not just mean directly inviting people to experience God in a supernatural way; we are also coming across many people who have already had such experiences and are looking for Christians to provide interpretation and understanding of them.

The combination of Christians involved in growing the kingdom of God meeting with ordinary Japanese who have been receiving supernatural encounters with God has formed a new paradigm for mission. The main activity of Christians working within this model is to discern the places where God is already at work, and to take part in the mission of God in Japan.

Spiritual Sensitivity

Japan is a highly modernized society, but it would be a mistake to think of it as a secularized society. Only 25 percent of the Japanese population claims adherence to an organized religion (Lewis 2013, 310), but the observance rate of religious ritual is much higher (Kawano 2005, 2). Belief in supernatural power (fortune-telling, palmistry, spiritual apparitions, and so on) outside of the traditional religions is widespread (Lewis 2013, 163–90). Many

Japanese distrust Western conceptions of “religion” and would think of religion as unnecessary; at the same time, they would be comfortable with the idea of being connected with “heaven” (*ten*), as shown in the use of words such as *tenmei* (fate), *tenshoku* (vocation), and *tensei* (nature). It is commonly said that it is hard to express the concept of a monotheistic God in Japanese, but *Otentosama* (“Mr. Heaven”) has this connotation and was used in early Japanese Christianity as a translation of “god.” Rather than the Western God-sin-salvation approach, an appropriate form of evangelism to spiritual Japanese draws out the latent religiosity and the ancient veneration of “heaven” inherent in Japanese people and presents Jesus Christ as the object of their faith.

Recently five young mothers began a Bible study. Instead of taking them through the doctrines of Christianity or the life of Jesus, the facilitator began by asking how many of them had experienced God at some point in their lives. All of them put up their hands. The study proceeded by then showing them from the Bible the nature of the God who had already been talking to them.

On a separate occasion, one lady in Kyoto had a son who attended a Christian kindergarten. As well as telling her the Bible stories he had heard in school, he also told her about his dreams where he had talked with Jesus. He told her that he remembers being with Jesus before his birth. The lady herself had also heard from God when preparing the house for a family funeral. She did not need to become “converted” to Christianity; she and her family had already met with Jesus. As she began to read the Bible, she said, “I feel like this is what I always believed and what I always knew.”

Another lady had been heavily involved with the New Age movement and introduced herself as a spirit medium. The spirits she saw were apparently benign, but annoying. She wanted to be free from them, but had seen them her whole life and did not know what to do. When a Christian moved next door to her, he

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did not need to witness to her. Instead, she appealed to him: “I know that Jesus is with you because I can see his aura on you.” Her spiritual sensitivity allowed her to discern the Spirit of Christ within the Christian. Together, they experienced Jesus’ power over the spirits as described in the Gospels. After her baptism, she did not see the spirits again.

In fact, those very portions of the Bible which can feel uncomfortable and embarrassing within Western forms of Christianity—casting out demons, possession, visions, and miracles—can have direct, practical application to spiritually sensitive Japanese.

However, spiritual experiences and direct communication with God can be difficult to share with other Christians. The dominant form of Christianity in Japan is modernistic and rationalistic, and suffers from the “flaw of the excluded middle” (Hiebert 1982, 43). Missionaries have been uncomfortable and fearful of the spiritual side of Japanese life, and have wanted to ensure that converts stayed away from such things, so have spread a form of Christianity that is characterized by disengagement from and distrust of the spiritual realm. So the most likely response that Christians would give toward people who have seen Jesus would be either to ignore or not pay too much attention to the claim. They might say, “Well, you have to be careful with such things. So let’s just study the Bible together.” If appropriate follow-up is not given, new converts who have started off by experiencing Jesus will soon switch to simply reading about Jesus. When people just “read about Jesus” and try to live a Christian life, this tends to become just a religion or morality. How many purely “religious” and “moral” people do we have in churches! Hence, within this new paradigm of mission, an appropriate follow-up process is essential.

Following Up

When someone initially claims to have seen a vision of Jesus, we should not necessarily accept this uncritically. First ask what he looked like and what he said. Many of my Muslim friends who have seen Jesus in visions and dreams all say something in common. They say that there was a sweet aroma. Those in Japan who have seen Jesus do not use the words “sweet aroma,” but they talk of light and hope that they experienced.

This is the first test. It is possible that whoever they saw was not Jesus. Remember, the angel of darkness also would like to speak to people. If we know what Jesus is like, we should be able to recognize whether what these people saw was Jesus or not. If this figure was dark and condemning, that is different from the Jesus I know. Jesus would condemn sins, but even when he does that, there is a sense of love and grace.

Affirm and confirm. I do believe that it is important to say to them that it is very natural for Jesus to show up and speak to us. Also, if it does seem that it was Jesus, I say something like, “That sounds like something Jesus would say.” If it did not seem to be Jesus, it is important to say something like, “Hmm . . . I am not sure if that was Jesus,” and explain what he is like in my life and in the Bible. This is helping the person grow in discernment, as well as providing more testimony to them.

Ask again what he said and ask how he or she responded to that. Interestingly, many of those who have seen Jesus in visions and dreams have had a change in their behaviour and in their lives because of their experience of Jesus. One man, after seeing a vision of the cross, started speaking to Jesus about everything—simply because “he answers.”

If the person has not done what Jesus had said, encourage him to do it.

Encourage the person to keep on walking with Jesus. “Walking with Jesus” is simply continuing to dialogue with Jesus. Encourage the person to keep talking to him and to listen to what he says and do what he tells him to do.

Mr. C is a community leader. He is an incredible servant and is very much trusted by the people of his community. He came in contact with Christians after the disasters, and that is how we met. We spent time together, first just hanging out. One day, he said that he had a migraine headache. One of us prayed for him. We left.

On our next visit, Mr. C said, “Oh, by the way, I got healed.” That was the signal for us; we went on to encourage him to ask Jesus some questions. We simply said that he loves talking to us. Would you like to hear what he wants to say to you? (At this point, I was afraid that we were getting too weird. Thankfully, my friend was not afraid at all.)

We suggested three questions to ask Jesus: “What do you think about me? What do you want me to do today? Is there anything I need to apologize for?” To my surprise, Mr. C did not hesitate at all. After spending a few minutes, we asked him what he heard. As he told us what he heard, we felt that it was surely Jesus who spoke these words. Within some of the house churches in Japan, these kinds of “questions for Jesus” are a simple form of daily devotion. They encourage people to connect directly to God and receive their answers from him (Fukuda 2012, 31).

As we asked him if he felt awkward at all doing this, he started to tell us what had happened a couple of days before.

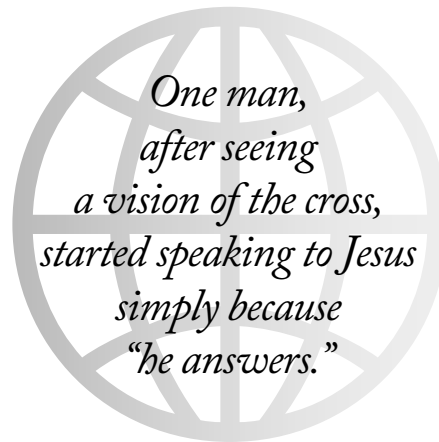
I got a call from my grandson who lives in a city about two hours away by car. He had some struggles, and he left his home and he wanted to come see me. He left his home by bicycle and got stuck along the way. I asked him where he was, but he did not know. He asked me to come find him. It was night, so I decided to wait until morning to go look for him.

Early next morning, I drove out to go find him. I knew that he would

not be travelling on a highway. As I drove along a regular road, I came to a point where the road split into two directions. I had no idea which one he would be on, and making a wrong decision would cost me several more hours.

At this point, I was very surprised to find myself saying, “Jesus, where is my grandson?” It was very strange, because I am Japanese and I am not a Christian at all. A Japanese would ask Buddha for help in times like this. But right after I said that to Jesus, I found myself choosing the road that most people probably would not take.

But as I drove on, I saw my grandson riding his bicycle. Because Jesus helped me find my grandson, I was sure that he would be able to talk to me. (Personal conversation with author)



This is a testimony of a man who would not normally be considered a “believer,” yet he was already communicating with Jesus. We asked him if he read the Bible. When we did, he got a little tense. Maybe this was a very uncomfortable question for him. But then he said that some of his friends sometimes include a Bible verse when they write to him. When he liked the verse, he would write it out on a big piece of paper and post it on his wall, pondering upon it day to day. Sometimes he wanted more and he went to his Christian friends and asked them to show him where those verses were in the Bible. This is one example of the hunger that we see in those unbelievers who have experienced Jesus supernaturally.

Fellowship

An effective missional movement needs to continue to reach outwards. When it turns in upon itself, it dies. In the past, the typical response of Christians toward a person who has shown interest in Christ was to first invite him to church or events sponsored by the church. The idea was that the person would meet other Christians and become touched by the love and the kindness of Christians. They would have a nice meal at the church. Slowly they would get pulled into the Bible study group and the other programs at the church. Unfortunately, the initial experiences of fellowshiping with Jesus would gradually be replaced by Christian activities. God becomes replaced by Christianity, meeting Jesus with church meetings.

At the same time, we cannot deny the importance of fellowship with fellow believers. How do we make sure that the movement continues to reach outwards, and yet also allow for believers to encourage and strengthen one another? As this paradigm is still developing and we are still discovering how to work effectively within it, we can only offer some tentative suggestions.

One approach is to introduce someone who has heard from God to one person who understands this new paradigm. One person will continue to ask him what he has been hearing from Jesus and how he has been responding. They will pray together. Meet and pray with only one person? Is that enough? We would dare to say yes, if this one person has the new paradigm. Because one of the characteristics of those who experience Jesus supernaturally is that they cannot keep their mouths shut.

Mr. M is a local politician and mayor of his village. He saw a vision of the cross at one of the events that Christians hosted. I asked him if he had seen visions before. He said that he had. When I asked him about his visions in the past he said, “In my dream, I saw Buddha on my left shoulder and other gods on my right shoulder.” I asked what that meant

to him. He said, “I thought that my life is going to be all right.”

Then we asked him to describe the latest vision he saw.

As I was watching a pastor speak at this event, all of a sudden, I saw two groups of clouds. They caught my attention and I kept looking. I noticed there were two crosses in the clouds. I started shouting, “Look! Cross! Cross!” The pastor on the stage did not know what I was talking about. I thought that everyone else was seeing the same thing, but the other people thought that I had gone crazy. Finally, I climbed up on the stage and tried to grab the crosses, but then they disappeared.

We asked him why he tried to grab the crosses. He thought that they would bless him. After this he was given a concise Bible, and he now reads it every day, ponders on it, and writes down what he has learned in his notebook. When he leads a town business meeting, he speaks from the Bible. “There is so much good stuff in it!” he says. No one has taught him to do a “devotional,” and no one has taught him to share his faith, but he does it naturally because he simply loves it. Those who come to faith through a direct experience of God still need encouragement and training in how to read the Bible and to share their testimonies of how God has met with them. At the same time, they have a greater than usual enthusiasm to discover more about the God that has met with them.

And because their experience of Jesus is so real, these people are not shy to talk about it. They take it for granted that Jesus gets involved with our lives. This is definitely contagious. The people around will naturally want to experience the same wonderful Person. When they are in need, they will think of speaking to Jesus, because of what they heard from their friend. So before long there is a fellowship of believers of a new paradigm.

After Mr. M’s vision of the cross, we went back to his past vision and asked him how he interprets it now that he has seen this recent one. He said, “I

Their conversion may not necessarily involve praying a sinner’s prayer—it may involve hearing the voice of Jesus and choosing to obey.

still have Buddha on my left shoulder and the other gods on my right, but now Jesus is on top.”

In his traditional Japanese house, he has a big Buddhist altar, and statues and pictures of other gods. Ebisu, the god of fishermen, is prominent. A Western, modernist approach would be to convince this man to renounce all his idols, break his connection with the temple and shrine, and destroy his religious past. Doing so would cut him off from his family, his communities, and the culture of his nation, which would make it very difficult for him to reach outwards with his new found faith. It also often requires a forceful act of persuasion on the part of the Christian worker. In the end, it is unclear whether he would be taking these steps to please God or to please the person witnessing to him.

In the case of Mr. M, however, it seemed like we didn’t have to force anything on him. He and his wife started talking to Jesus about everything after the vision. They now talk to Jesus when they get in a car to drive and when they are not feeling well. When they worry about something, they talk to Jesus. Jesus has started to displace the other gods in a gentle and natural way.

Conclusion

God has begun a new season in Japan, where people start walking with Jesus in totally different ways than we have known or taught in the past. He is at work in mission, in ways that we cannot anticipate and where we can only strive to catch up. For these people who are experiencing God directly, evangelism may not necessarily be a matter of sharing a doctrine of salvation or explaining a set of beliefs. Instead, it is a matter of proclaiming to them the “unknown god” that they may already be worshipping (Acts 17:23). Their experience of conversion may not

necessarily involve praying a sinner’s prayer—it may involve hearing the voice of Jesus and choosing to obey.

These people will not renounce their idols because a missionary has persuaded them to do so; they will do so because God has won their hearts and fulfilled their needs to the point that old practices are no longer needed. They will not share their faith with others out of a sense of obedience to the Great Commission; they will do so because their experience of Jesus is so real to them that they would dearly love for those around them to partake in it. They will not read the Bible because they know that this is what Christians are expected to do; they will do so simply because the Person they have met is so wonderful that they want to get to know him more. **IJFM**

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