

Eternity in Their Hearts: A Report

Charles St-Onge, June 1, 2000

If all of humanity is descended from one set of parents, and one post-flood family, then would not some remnant of the events of Genesis 2-11 remain in the cultures of the world? The answer author Don Richardson gives in his book, Eternity in Their Heartsⁱ, is an emphatic “yes!”ⁱⁱ Richardson documents stories from around the world of peoples already prepared to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His thesis is that these stories represent the powerful general revelation of God in the world, preparing people for the special revelation of the Scriptures. In the first part of the book, he documents what he sees as vestigial traces of monotheism present in many tribal religions. Even more startling are his stories of peoples already prepared for the arrival of Christian missionaries. In the last half of the book, he presents some missionary approaches that make use of these monotheistic traditions and customs.

The argument at the core of the book is that many tribes of the world already have a concept of the existence of one, true, “sky-god”, even if they know little about him. He may go by different names, but he is the same God that we worship. Richardson believes that missionaries should distinguish between “high gods” so distorted by myth as to be unidentifiable with יהוה, and others who can be so identified. For example, it would not have been possible for Paul to proclaim that Zeus and the Trinity were one and the same. On the other hand, the writers of the New Testament saw no problem using the Greek θεος for God. Rather than introduce the Christian God as a new and alien deity, then, missionaries may be able to use a people’s vestigial monotheism as a point of departure for the proclamation of Jesus Christ. I use the word vestigial, because Richardson sees these beliefs in a high god as corrupted memories dating back to Noah and our first parents. He provides many examples of tribes encountered by missionaries who had stories of a single, all-powerful “sky-god”. Liberals, however, disregard this monotheism or write it off as the influence of unknown, earlier Jewish or Christian contact.ⁱⁱⁱ Since monotheism can only be a later evolutionary development, preceded by polytheism and then henotheism, these stories of a single “sky-god” should be disregarded.

The evidence Richardson presents is persuasive. The story of the Santal tribe of India is especially intriguing. The tribe has a creation and fall story remarkably similar to the account of Genesis 2-3.^{iv} Furthermore, this tribe was looking forward to a time when they would be reconciled to this high God, whose favor they had lost long ago. Just as impressive is the story of the Karen tribe of Burma, who also had a creation account similar to Genesis, and who awaited the arrival of a “white brother” who would bring a book from the high god *Y’wa*.^v Richardson also tells stories of tribes with customs that might provide a door for the Gospel. The Asmat, for example, have a ritual whereby peace is made between tribes through the means of “birth” reenactment involving both peoples.^{vi} Likewise, the Chinese language symbol for *come* contains a pictograph of a man on a tree, with two men on either side. “The ideograph...seems to carry a code that says, ‘come to the man on the tree.’”^{vii}

Richardson makes heavy use of two Scripture passages to reinforce his thesis that God has provided strong general revelation of himself in many human cultures. The first is Acts 17, the story of Paul in Athens preaching to the Greeks about their “unknown god”. He sees in this passage that Paul looked for the presence of יהוה in the community to whom he was preaching. Richardson goes further, showing from a quote in Titus that Paul saw more than a fortuitous accident in the “unknown altar” of Athens.^{viii} In fact, Paul may have believed that the altar was indeed originally erected to the one true God! The second passage Richardson uses is the account in Genesis 14 of Abraham’s encounter with King Melchizedek. In this account, Abraham does not even question whether or not Melchizedek worships the same god that he does. In contrast the King of Sodom, who was also a Canaanite, clearly did not worship the same god as Abraham. Richardson sees in Melchizedek a type of those peoples who have some vestigial monotheism. The King of Sodom represents those people who do not have

such memories. Missionaries need to distinguish between these two, but they should not assume that all peoples are like the King of Sodom: some may indeed be Melchizedeks waiting to be found!

The crux of the whole point Richardson is trying to make hinges on knowing God. Can one identify the one true God without being in saving relationship with that God? Richardson believes that the answer must be yes, and he does this by distinguishing between special and general revelation. Romans 1:19 says “what may be known about God is plain to (men), because God has made it plain to them,” and this is Richardson’s thesis. If God’s “invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen” (Romans 1:20), it should not be surprising that some people have given the God who is creator of all and above all a name. In John 4:21-24, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that, although she worships the same God he does, she does not know that God. In contrast, the Jews *know God* and thus have salvation. Also Luther, in his explanation of the 2nd article of the creed (Large Catechism), writes that “all who are outside the Christian church, whether heathens, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, *even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God*, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing.” (italics mine)^{ix} Just as most people know that Bill Clinton is the President of the United States, most people have knowledge of the one, true God. That knowledge, however, is not saving. Knowing that Bill Clinton is President is not the same as knowing Bill Clinton, who is the President. One is general knowledge that really does no good, while the other gives access to one of the most powerful people in the country. In the same way, knowing God is of no benefit, while being in relationship with God is salvific. Only Jesus can establish a true, personal relationship between God and men.

Dr. Randy Schroeder believes that everything we read, hear, or see is neither purely good nor bad, but a percentage of one and the other. If that is the case, this book is about 90% good. It contains a great deal that is valuable, and has a good scriptural distinction between special and general revelation. There are some minor concerns, inevitable for a Lutheran reading a book written from another confessional perspective. Richardson does not, for example, distinguish between the roles of clergy and laity in missions. He describes the Philip of Acts 8 as “that spunky layman”^x and a role model for other missionaries. He also supports decision theology, as evidenced by his endorsement of the use of the “four spiritual laws”.^{xi} These are, however, theological points that do not distract from the great value of the historical information presented. I would even consider using portions of this book in a catechetical class as part of a study on general revelation. A critique often leveled against Christianity is its euro-centeredness, and lack of ubiquity. How could God speak to one people, Israel, but not to all? I believe this book is a wonderful starting point for discussion of that question.

ⁱ Richardson, Don. Eternity in Their Hearts. (Regal, Ventura, CA, 1984)

ⁱⁱ *ibid*, p.84

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*, p.134

^{iv} *ibid*, p.43

^v *ibid*, p.74

^{vi} *ibid*, p.123

^{vii} *ibid*, p.129

^{viii} *ibid*, p.22

^{ix} Tappert, Theodore. The Book of Concord. (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1959), p.419

^x Richardson, Eternity in Their Hearts. p.200

^{xi} *ibid*, p.131