

# Embracing a Legacy of Border Crossing

Cross-Cultural Engagement and the  
Integrity of Christian Witness

*By Charles Scriven*

**Y**ou meet others every day. Some look and sound the way you do. They are “your people.”

Some are different. They wear baseball caps at weird angles, and you don’t. They eat fried okra, and you eat mashed potatoes. They talk fancy and you talk plain. They’re richer than you, or poorer.

The differences may involve conviction, life-shaping belief. Some people are Catholic, and you’re Pentecostal. Some vote Republican, and you vote Democratic. Some go on and on about injustice, and wink at infidelity. Others dwell on personal values and hard work, and go along with a society of haves and have-nots.

Now and then you meet people—on television or, these days, right where you live and work—who are *really* different. They have a whole different religion from yours. They grow long beards, or cover their hair and faces, or they shave their heads and wear wispy robes and live apart from the hurly-burly in communities of meditation.

Some people, you learn, use animals for food that you thought were household pets, or find genital mutilation of infant girls acceptable, or train children to blow themselves up for a cause. And from another perspective, it may be just as shocking that you give the elderly so little honor, or consume so much of the world’s resources, or drive around dressed in a bikini.

Variety is a fact. The dark side of variety is reckless passion for what “my people”—the people I know and identify with—think best. All too often, this passion churns into violence, leaving behind a rubble of broken hearts and dreams. Think Bosnia, Rwanda, Palestine, Angola, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka. Recall the ferocious discord of American inner cities, now and then still breaking out. Remember the World Trade



Center. The places are familiar, and the list long.

One solution, widely put forward, is tolerance. It's a fashionable ideal, but tolerance works best when people are prosperous and happy, and have no need of scapegoats. Otherwise, even the well educated may turn on the strangers they have put up with and kept at arm's length, little known and little understood. Our parents and grandparents were alive when Germany, then the best-educated country in Europe, skidded into ever-deeper resentment and self-doubt, and in the end turned its murderous rage against the Jews.<sup>1</sup>

You may marvel at "the basic similarity of humans / And their tiny grain of dissimilarity,"<sup>2</sup> and that tiny grain may be as winsome as the changing seasons. But it may also set minds on edge, make voices shrill, goad people into savage acts.

That is why the encounter with others is no matter of indifference. Attention must be paid: when you meet another person, you hold the future in your hands. Whether you enhance that future or debase it depends on how you feel, think, and act. And the Christian responsibility for these interactions cannot be overstated. Worldwide, if not in the developed countries, religion has growing influence, and among

the world's religions, Christianity, so one authority declares, will leave on the twenty-first century the deepest mark of all.<sup>3</sup>

What will that mark be?

It is said that a man dressed as a clown appeared at the trial, in 1997, of a Frenchman who was charged with deporting Jews to Germany. The defendant was said to have done this during the Second World War, when the French government cooperated with Hitler, and Jews who ended up in Germany most often met with death. After the war, he had escaped notice and risen to an impressive position in government.

The clown suit was an expression of outrage; it dramatized the absurdity of what had happened. But the man who wore the clown suit was barred from entering the courtroom. Nevertheless, he returned in street dress. He attended the remainder of the trial, and when the guilty verdict was finally announced, a court attendant heard him say: "Without truth, how can there be hope?"<sup>4</sup>

How can truth come into play when you encounter others? How can exchanges among persons who are different from one another build hope and not despair?

According to the Bible, God addressed human

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brokenness by challenging a man and his family to become repairers of brokenness. Abraham and his seed, God declared, would be the bearers of blessing for all, the first peacemakers. The Hebrew people had no interest in abstract truth, no interest in knowledge for its own sake. But they did have a passion for saving truth, for knowledge applied to human need and aimed at the healing of relationships. Without saving

selves; and what is more, this woman belonged to a culture and an ethnic group the Jews had little time for.

But she knew the reputation Jesus had for healing, and her daughter was desperately ill. So, prostrating herself, she begged for healing mercy. According to Matthew, Jesus ignored her. And the disciples, who thought her a pest, urged him to "Send her away" (15:23).

At this Jesus opened his mouth: "I was sent only to

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truth, there could be no hope.

When God said "all the families of the earth" would be "blessed" through Abraham, the first word was "Go." "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house'" (Gen. 12:1-3).<sup>5</sup> It was in the going—in the long journey to a strange world and world of strangers—that Abraham and his seed would become the first peacemakers.

Connecting with people who are different would be, in other words, their daily lot. They would be strangers themselves, and would, as God said another time, love the strangers they met (Deut. 10:19). In crossing borders, they would bear the blessing, and instead of merely tolerating others, they would interact with them.

One of the best border-crossing stories to emerge from this legacy is about Jesus' entrance into the region of Tyre and Sidon. The story shows the difficulty of truthful encounter with another, and it shows the rewards that follow effort, even halting effort.

In Tyre and Sidon and its surroundings, strangers abounded. The Greek-speaking city dwellers looked down on Jewish farmers in the countryside, and the Jewish farmers looked down on them. Ethnic tension bristled. When Jesus arrived, he had already collected followers and established a ministry of teaching and healing. But he had also begun to sense the danger in his mission. Herod, the puppet governor, had executed John the Baptist, a man whose vision Jesus largely shared. That execution seemed ominous.

Feeling the strain, Jesus entered a house, hoping, Mark tells us, that no one would know he was there (7:24-30). But a woman found him. This was in itself remarkable. Women then had no right to assert them-

the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). According to Matthew, that's how he saw his mission, and that's why he was ignoring the woman's supplications: she was a Canaanite, outside the house of Israel. When she persisted, Jesus dismissed her with a pointed ethnic reference: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (15:26).

As a boy, Luke tells us, Jesus had sat long hours listening to the rabbis and asking questions. He had been eager to learn. Luke says that as he grew in years, he "increased in wisdom . . . , and in divine and human favor" (2:46, 52). Now, encountering a person who was different from him, and who refused to be docile, Jesus was about to grow again. The woman, hearing his sharp words, would come back with an eye-opening rejoinder.

For Canaanites, unlike the Jews of the day, dogs could be pets, and around the table this woman was familiar with, even the dogs ate. Around her table, in other words, mercy knew no boundary. And so, bending Jesus' words to her own purpose, she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Matt. 15:27).

In the story Matthew tells, these words changed Jesus' mind. From then on, his mission expanded. Stunned into wider concern, he healed the woman's daughter, and directed his attention to Gentiles as well as Jews.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus was not one to be always suspending judgment. That may be the fashion when mere tolerance is the ideal and you learn not to judge other persons or other cultures. But Jesus did make judgments about others, sometimes positive and sometimes negative. Still, he was not set in his ways, not boxed into



himself and unable to see or learn from another person's point of view.

Not that the border-crossing legacy is easy. The Gospel account shows Jesus enlarging his outlook by seeing with other eyes and feeling with another's heart. But it also brings to life the struggle that may go along with this, and the value of another's assertiveness against our own resistance to larger vision. When you meet another person who engages you in life-changing conversation, you meet a gift from God. In Matthew's account, the Canaanite woman was such a gift to Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

All this suggests a standard for being human in a world of difference: self-confidence enhanced by humility. You have a point of view, and you embrace it with passion. You undertake a mission, and you pursue it with passion. But your passion is not the reckless vehemence that says "my people" know it all; it's not the wanton self-regard that veers to the edge, or goes over the edge, of violence.

The passion proper to the border-crossing legacy tries to look with other eyes and feel with other hearts. It takes a position and works for a goal but is neither self-sufficient nor self-satisfied. It is eager to find seeds for new vision and new being in the challenge of another person's face, another person's point of view.<sup>8</sup>

So in the give-and-take of conversation, you learn about others and learn about yourself. With the faithful, you share life in a community of conversation. You reach out to one another, listening and learning, and you acknowledge the Canaanite woman—the stranger, the seeker, the antagonist—whose life and words undermine complacency and summon you to growth. Again and again, you seize together the gift of new understanding; again and again, you craft together a more faithful way of being the people you are called to be.

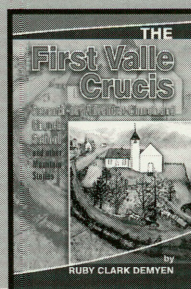
The journey of Abraham goes on and on; border-crossings never cease.

When you live the Christian faith, you remain, of course, always on the journey of Abraham; your border-crossings always take their cues from Jesus. The biblical story, with its climax in the "Father, forgive them" of the cross (Luke 23:24) and the joyous turnaround of resurrection, gives strength and guidance every day. You follow where the story leads. You adjust as conversation casts new light upon the path. And you pray never to drift with the wind of fashion, never to bend to the will of those with stony hearts and paltry sympathies. Blessing for all is the

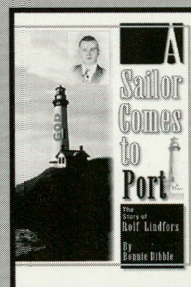
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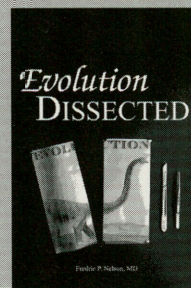
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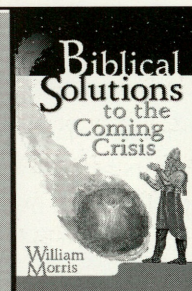
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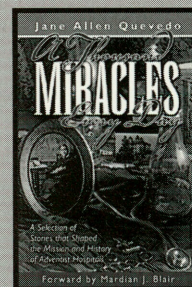
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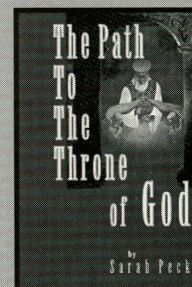
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grand and inviolate ideal. The way of Jesus is the means to its realization; it is how the ideal comes to be on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>9</sup>

Staying true when you're crossing borders is no easier than staying open. Following the resurrection, Paul broke a path to the Gentiles, and the blessing God had promised Abraham spread across the world as it never had before. Paul and generations after him encountered pagan others, others marked by the sins and sway of Rome. In their conversation with these others, they sought to understand them and to share their own understanding, and they invited them to join their congregations. Christian generosity was more inclusive than what the pagans knew, and many found that generosity compelling. Under the impact of the wider witness Paul began, the church advanced in numbers and in influence.<sup>10</sup> It also took a catastrophic turn.

Despite Paul's reminder that the seed of Abraham is "the root that supports you" (Rom. 9:18), the church pulled away from the Hebrew people, abandoning the Sabbath and diminishing Jewish affirmation of the body and the earth. Christian interest in the joys and tasks of earthly life shriveled, and the comprehensive hope of Scripture became a largely otherworldly fixation.

What is more, the Church began drifting into partnership with Rome. Even though Jesus had refused to cozy up to Herod, forgetful Christian leaders allowed their community to take on the trappings and attitude of empire. This further eviscerated Christian witness. The Church became, more often than not, an unholy echo of political establishments, whether imperial, democratic, fascist, or otherwise.

Knowledge wrung from darkness, it turns out, is darkness still.

**T**he encounter with others makes for friendship; it opens minds to deeper understanding and doors to wider peace. But the danger, well exemplified in the Church's compromise with Rome, is the kind of inattention that imperils the inviolate ideal and defining way of Israel's God. Encounter with others makes authentic witness possible, and puts it gravely at risk.

But the risk was there to begin, when Abraham left the security of the familiar for the adventure of mission. When you are Christian, and you embrace the border-crossing legacy, you run the risk; you pray for deliverance from inattention and humility to change

when inattention makes you reckless.

And you live from the hope that springs eternal by the grace of God, the hope that keeps your eye focused on the day when the dark side of variety in human affairs gives way to the winsomeness of peace and a single "pulse of harmony and gladness" will beat "through the vast creation."<sup>11</sup>

When things go right, that is where the encounter with others takes us.

## Notes and References

1. See, in Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), the chapter on "Why toleration has never been enough."

2. As Czeslaw Milosz does in his poem, "Eyes," in *The New Yorker*, Aug. 19 and 26, 2002, 76.

3. See Philip Jenkins, "The Next Christianity," in *The Atlantic*, Oct. 2002, 53-68.

4. The incident became the basis for a work of fiction, Michel Quint's *In Our Strange Gardens*, reviewed by Richard Eder, "A Clown Whose Message Is No Laughing Matter," *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 2001, E39.

5. Throughout, Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

6. Matthew's account, on which I have mainly relied, is in 15:21-28; besides commentaries, I have consulted Judith Gundry-Volf, "Spirit, Mercy and the Other," in *Theology Today* 52 (1995): 508-22.

7. For a literary reflection on the value of the other, consider C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1969). What Lewis says about reading has affected how I think about conversation with others. "The necessary condition of all good reading is 'to get ourselves out of the way,'" and to seek the enlargement of "mental being," not just the enlargement of "self-esteem." These quotes are from pages 93 and 115.

8. My language here reflects Emmanuel Levinas, on whom Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), has written helpfully.

9. As for the centrality of Jesus, this is what John teaches when, in 16:12-15, he says the disciples will learn many things they cannot now bear, and says, too, that the Spirit who guides them will always "glorify" Jesus.

10. An arresting account of this growth is found in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Stark argues that the steady growth reflected superior moral vision and the prospect, for converts, of benefits they could not otherwise receive.

11. Ellen White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1950), 678.

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