MISSION IN THE NEWS

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Some thoughts and further information about John Chau and his mission to the Sentinelese and a good story about Bible translation.
Category: Observations

A number of people have asked my views on John Chau the young American who was killed while seeking to evangeliseÂ the people on the Sentinel Islands off the coast of India. I've been reluctant to comment because I know next to nothing about the Sentinelese people and language and I only became aware of John Chau and the agency he works for, All Nations (not that one), when his story hit the headlines.

The reports in the press (in the UK at least) painted Chau as a rather naive and ill-prepared young man, who really didn't know what he was doing. However, Ed Stetzer has published a couple of articles which show that there is more to the story than meets the eye. I strongly encourage you to read both articles. In an article for the Washington Post, Stetzer makes the following point:

> *According to reports published in several places, Chau prepared several years for this mission, including training as an EMT and in sports medicine, both functions that might be helpful in an isolated missions endeavor. Much of this new reporting shows that the North Sentinelese were a long-term focus for Chau.*

His actions were not based on a spur of the moment decision but were the result of long-term planning and preparation (including linguistic studies). The article goes on to discuss (for a secular audience) the legitimacy of evangelistic mission work.

> *Propagating oneâ€™s religious beliefs through missionary activity is practiced by segments of the worldâ€™s largest religious groups, including Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. Even the United Nations affirms missionary activity as a legitimate expression of religion or belief.*

In a second article, this time for Christianity Today, Stetzer expands some of his earlier points, this time for an evangelical audience. I appreciated this call to reserve judgement on complex issues:

> *We live in a world today where some people are simply unable to wait for more information, even when something seems odd. The result can be hot takes that cause more harm than they help.*
>
> *Now we know more. We know that Chau was not a rogue individual, cavalierly traveling to a protected island as an adventure stunt. According to Ho, he was an intelligent, educated, humble, and gentle man who intensely focused over years on one, singular goal: to reach the North Sentinelese with the message of the gospel.*
>
> *Now, that does not mean that everything was done as we might prefer. Furthmore, it does not answer many of the important questions on which we still do not have clarity. However, it does start the conversation at a different place.*

I also think that this emphasis is helpful:

> *Hereâ€™s the reality. At the end of the day, I am among those that believe the world needs Jesus. I believe we are called to get the gospel to the ends of the earth and to every tribe.*
>
> *We can point out our disagreement with Chau, and I will address those, but many Christians need to really decide if they can say,*
>
> > *I actually believe what is offensive to many todayâ€" I really believe that the world needs Jesus. And, I am OK that you think me a fool for believing that.*

With these comments in mind, I'd like to highlight a few things which I think need mentioning:

- As Ed Stetzer says in the Washington Post article; mission, in the Bible, is carried out in teams. However pure his motivation and however excellent his training, the notion of the individual missionary is generally not a helpful one. There is a lot to be gained by working with others.
- The possibility of John Chau carrying diseases to the Sentinelese people has been highlighted in a number of places. This is important, no amount of vaccination or quarantine could fully obviate the possibility of him carrying something nasty with him. There is little point in teaching an eternal message to people if your very presence is likely to usher a significant proportion of them into eternity in a short time. I don't see an easy solution to this, but it isn't an issue that can be ignored.
- In terms of practice, I am very uneasy with reports that he paid local fishermen to drop him off on the island and that those fishermen are now being prosecuted. I don't struggle in the slightest with the idea that John Chau broke the law in order to spread the gospel - that can be par for the course (see my next point), however, I am uneasy about him encouraging others (not Christians) to do the same.
- Whatever our reservations about his approach, John Chau challenges us about our attitude and willingness to spread the message of Jesus at home and around the world. If we believe that the only hope for humankind lies in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, then we need to take seriously the call to share that story with others. This will mean doing uncomfortable things, it will mean getting attacked by the secular media and it will mean (for some) suffering and even dying for the gospel. Former generations took this for granted, but to the church in the West, this seems an alien concept.

In other news, I'm rather late to this story on the BBC website about Bible translation in Zambia.

> *"It's like a miracle," says Hastings Sitale, recalling how he felt when he saw a booklet written in ciShanjo, a language he had only ever spoken before.*

> *Mr Sitale, who describes himself as "just a farmer", is part of an estimated 20,000-strong Shanjo community in Zambia's remote Western Province.*
>
> *Over the last few months, he has been part of a group of amateur linguists, mostly fellow farmers, who have been creating a spelling system for their mother tongue.*
>
> *For the first time stories passed down through the generations by word of mouth are being written down...*
>
> *... Isilimwe Limakazo, 25, is the youngest person to take part in the translation project.*
>
> *He says the experience of taking part has led him to "want to only use the Shanjo language every day".*
>
> *He sees a bright future for the language.*
>
> *"Even my friends are cutting songs and videos in ciShanjoâ€¦ before when they were singing, they used to make mistakes but now because they have learned to read and write the language properly, if they produce another album, then it will be better than before."*
>
> *Enoch Walubita, another farmer and translator on the project, is similarly enthused.*
>
> *"The advantage of this project is our people will be exposed - on the map."*
>
> ***"We were thinking we are nobody, but now we are the same as everyone in the world."***

I love the highlighted quote!

Getting back to Ed Stetzer's articles, if you think that he doesn't say everything that needs to be said, then this tweet is helpful (I've felt like saying similar things after reactions to some of my blog posts).

https://twitter.com/edstetzer/status/1067935264436293632