
The concept of limited good and the spread of the gospel¹

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For the past four decades, I have become acquainted with the Mazatecs of Huautla de Jimenez in southwestern Mexico, speaking their language, making friends, working among them at different occasions. Recently, the anthropologist George Foster has articulated for me insights which have given me a deeper appreciation for the customs of these people (1967:122–152). Foster speaks of “limited good” which also helps explain ways in which a deeper understanding of the truths about Jesus Christ has been slowly spreading.²

Hoarding anything good

Most of the Mazatec women of Huautla do beautiful embroidery. Their blouses have so many colorful birds or flowers embroidered on them that the cloth can hardly be seen through the stitches. I found when I complimented a woman on her work and asked, “Who taught you how to do this?” the woman would answer, “Just I know.” This meant no one had taught her; she had learned by herself. It seemed to me that it was pride which kept the people from acknowledging help.

This also happened when I asked how the village baker had learned to make bread. Just he knows—he got it out of his head. To me, it was obvious that a person could not acquire that kind of knowledge spontaneously.

¹ This article is a revision of: Pike, Eunice. 1982. ‘The Concept of Limited Good and the Spread of the Gospel.’ *Notes on Scripture in Use* 2:3-7. It was first published in *Missiology: An International Review* VIII.4, October 1980, and was reprinted by permission.

² Foster has been criticized for his “tendency to describe all of the people of individual communities or even all peasants as possessing homogeneous cultural and psychological characteristics” (DeWalt 1975:150). DeWalt himself chooses to begin with assumptions of intracommunity diversity and socioeconomic inequality in order to examine the effects of several different factors that may powerfully influence the process of technological and the economic changes in rural agricultural communities (1975:151).

Although there is diversity among the Huautla Mazatecs, still Foster’s description of the concept of limited good is stimulating and applicable to these people, even though they are not the specific ethnic group he was describing.

Some years ago, I was asked if the Huautla Mazatecs had the concept of limited good. My first reaction was no, until I remembered the embroidery and the baking. In speaking of the Tarascan Indians, George Foster says that their behavior suggested they saw their social, economic, and natural universes—their total environment—as one in which almost all desired things in life such as land, ... friendship, love, ... security ... exist in absolute quantities insufficient to fill even minimal needs of the villagers.... I found no one would admit ... [learning] anything from a neighbor.... To confess that [they] “borrowed” an idea is to confess that [they had] taken something not rightfully [theirs] (1967:123,142).

After many years of contact with the Mazatecs, this helped me understand why the women do not admit to being taught to embroider. No formal education had “taught” them; rather they learned in a casual way, watching other people at work. The baker, too, had learned in an indirect way how to make the bread.

In watching the Mazatecs interact, I came to see there is another way people learn which is nonthreatening to the teacher: by ridicule. A mother says, “Maria doesn’t know how to embroider, her stitches aren’t even.” Maria ducks her head and tries to improve. Such sharp remarks provide the specific information a person needs, but neither party considers that this is teaching; rather in the opinion of both, the student is self-taught.

Years ago, I taught a woman to read. She enjoyed reading Bible stories and the hymnbook. At her request, I also taught her oldest daughter. Then they asked me to teach the second daughter. I resisted, urging them to teach her themselves since it was impossible for me to teach everybody. Were many people to learn, they needed to help each other, so I tried to show them how. My suggestions were received without enthusiasm, so eventually I taught the second daughter as well. With three women in one family reading well, I felt no need to teach the fourth and insisted that they do so themselves. But they never did.

According to Foster’s observations, these women probably thought they would lose some of their own ability to read if they passed that ability on. This not only made them hesitant to teach someone else but also explained why the daughters would not urge their mother to make the sacrifice in order to teach them. Foster also observed that a mother’s love apparently is considered to be limited. “A mother’s love, like all other forms of Good, is limited; she must reduce the amount she gives to one child in order to show love to another” (1967:129). The Mazatec women had tried to explain that to me, but at the time I had had no category for understanding this.

When a happy, healthy two-year-old began to lose weight and become fussy, the women told me that it was because the mother was pregnant again. The Mazatec women and I were looking at the situation differently. I thought the mother was losing her milk because of her pregnancy so, therefore, the baby was losing weight. But they thought the child was losing weight because the mother was sharing her love with the unborn child she was carrying.

Could this concept be applied to God by the Mazatecs, so that his love was limited? This was how they viewed wealthy benefactors. According to Foster:

Potential and real patrons are zealously guarded and cultivated, and every effort is made to reserve the attention of powerful individuals to a single person or family; it is assumed

that the bounty of a generous patron is easily spread thin (1967:128).

In early contact with the people, I discovered that our Mazatec neighbors tried to restrict our attention to themselves. My partners and I had gone to the Mazatec area to befriend and evangelize them as well as translate the New Testament into their language. Many of our would-be visitors felt uncomfortable passing through the owner's yard on their way to our rented house. We found that to meet new people we had to walk around town. If we stayed surrounded by our neighbors, the opportunity to meet anyone else was restricted. This imprisoning jealousy we took as a personality trait of this one family, not realizing that it was part of a widespread concept that good in the world is limited.

Another good which the Mazatecs consider to be limited is blood. Foster observes that "blood is seen quite specifically as a limited Good, as a non-renewable substance" (1967:130). The Mazatecs are more distressed if a child bleeds when stubbing a toe than if the child receives a bad bump but does not bleed. Should someone cause another to bleed by striking them with something, they are fined more than they would have been if the whack had merely caused a bruise.

Foster summarizes his explanation of the concept of limited good: "Someone's advantage implies some else's disadvantage seems to me to be the key to understanding the Image of Limited Good" (1967:124). This concept in reverse might also explain an incident I had observed. When several children in one family got the measles, the mother had sent them visiting all over town. She hoped that by passing the measles on, her children would not have as much left and would get well faster. My friends complained bitterly, not liking what their neighbor had done, but understanding why she did it.

Indirect, casual teaching

The question seemed to be if the Huautla Mazatecs had a concept of limited good, as described by Foster, was this concept of losing good whenever they passed some on, keeping them from sharing with their neighbors what they had learned about Christ? The ability to embroider, crochet, bake, or make adobes was passed on in a casual manner. Was there a casual, nonthreatening way by which the gospel might be passed on?

Many people had heard of God's love and Christ's redemptive work on their behalf. They know that if they are glad to be called God's child, they should live in a way not to shame their Father. In the last few decades, the whole climate of the highland Mazatec region has changed. Where murder and robbery were frequent 40 years ago, now murder and highway robbery are rare. Tales about witchcraft are also less frequent. Could those who trust in Christ have been acting as salt in the area, counteracting corruption (Matthew 15:13), even though they are not highly visible? How had word about trusting the Lord spread throughout the area?

Foster concludes that "an individual can acquire Good—money, a powerful patron—by tapping sources that are recognized as lying beyond the village system" (1967:144). Knowledge about God has come into the Mazatec area through Catholic and Protestant workers from the outside. In addition to the big Catholic church, there are little Peregrino (Pilgrim Holiness) congregations in 10 villages. But what had the Mazatecs themselves done about spreading the gospel?

Since the usual way of teaching-learning among the Huautla Mazatecs is informal, indirect, almost by osmosis, and since the people are afraid of losing good when they instruct someone, then an indirect, informal way of teaching about the Lord might be very useful. This has been the case. About 70 hymns had been put to Mazatec words which people loved to sing. Once two children came to ask me if I had any medicine for sadness. They explained that one of them was sad because both the parents had died, and she was living with an aunt who was crabby. I taught them a hymn of Jesus' love and care. The children left happy and returned the next day to make sure they remembered it correctly. Later the aunt and uncle visited me. They, too, had learned the hymn and were delighted the child was happy now.

That type of casual witness does not threaten the concept of limited good and precluded any concern at losing either knowledge or God's love. Years ago, I told colleagues that to ensure the Mazatecs understood a bit of doctrine, we needed to put it in a hymn. In the sixteenth century evangelization of Mexico, Linda Popp says, "The use of religious music as a means of evangelization and acculturation constitutes an important chapter in the history of the spiritual conquest of Mexico" (1980:61). She adds of Fray Pedro, "It was his musical instruction which gained the friar his most phenomenal results" (1980:62). The first bishop of New Spain had the priests teach music wherever they went "as an indispensable aid in the process of conversion" (1980:64).

Among the Huautla Mazatecs, the gospel was also spread through the records produced by Gospel Recordings. Before electricity came to the area, many listened to the records on hand-cranked phonographs. Later, affluent storekeepers played them on record players. Many people played them until they were completely memorized. Radio also became a vehicle for evangelization. The New Testament in Huautla Mazatec (translated, for the most part, by George and Florence Cowan) has also become a basic tool for witness.

Scripture and the concept of limited good

Assuming that the Huautla Mazatecs do have a concept of limited good, I sought out Scripture verses that speak of God's love and kindness as unlimited, so knowledge is not lost when it is shared.

James 1:5 urges us to ask God for more wisdom at any time and he will give it to us. Romans 8:32 tells us the Lord will give us everything we need, including wisdom and the friendly interest of people who can help us. Romans 8:39 tells us nothing can separate us from God's love, so we need not fear he will love us less if we tell someone about him. In fact, Matthew 28:18–20 specifically instructs us to teach people about him. Luke 6:38 admonishes us to give, promising we will receive back even more generous amounts. We should not hoard even our own lives (Luke 9:24).

Foster's anthropological insights on limited good were helpful in teaching Huautla Mazatecs. I realize a need to emphasize some of the more familiar verses a little more, including Daniel 12:3 with its promise of a special welcome for those who have taught others to love him.

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