

*An Austrian offers
constructive alternatives.*



ANDREAS KOSTENBERGER is an Austrian who became a Christian in 1983 at the end of his university training. He is professor of biblical studies and theology at Briercrest Schools, Caronport, Saskatchewan, Canada, and visiting professor of theological German at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Ill. He holds a doctorate in economic and social sciences from the *Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien*, a master of divinity in cross-cultural ministries from Columbia International University, and a Ph.D. in biblical studies and theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Anguish over Austria: rising above pragmatism

By *Andreas J. Kostenberger*

Anguish for the spiritual well-being of one's countrymen has rarely been more movingly expressed than by the apostle Paul, who wrote, "I speak the truth in Christ-I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit-I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart, For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel" (Rom 9:1-3). Only a Jew like Paul could know from experience the agony that resulted from the apparent intransigence of his very own people to the truths of God.

Such feelings of anguish and agony welled up in my heart as I read David Sanford's article on Austria, the so-called "graveyard of missions" (April 1994). It seemed like I had heard this term before, only then applied to France, a country perhaps even more apostate than Austria. Would it be better to call Austria a "graveyard of missionaries"? Even that would probably not be quite accurate, since failing messengers of the gospel are rarely "buried" in Austria. They usually return after their first term, bruised not buried, discouraged not dead, perhaps traumatized but rarely through with their lives. They often reclaim the houses they had rented out in their temporary absence, reconnect with families, supporters, and sending churches, and go through a period of adjustment.

I am sorry, but my sympathies do not primarily lie with them. Quite frankly, the missionary-centered approach to missions, where feelings of missionaries supersede the condition of the lost, is becoming increasingly distasteful to me.

Nevertheless, it is important not to view the lost, in the present case unbelieving Austrians, as guiltless victims or even as fruit ripe for the picking, waiting for eager harvesters to arrive. These people have generally hardened their hearts to the gospel, not just individually, but also nationally, culturally, religiously, socially, and politically. They actively suppress the truth. They are blinded by the god of this world, with their minds resembling a spiritual obstacle course. For

someone born, raised, and converted in Austria, these truths are more than mere theory—they are deeply felt experience.

The state of the Austrian church: Should we avoid confrontation ?

Spiritually speaking, Austria is a country living in the Dark Ages. After a brief time when the Reformation appeared to take root, the Counter-Reformation extinguished the new life springing up and plunged the cause of Christ into a deep depression from which it did not recover for centuries. The church's role in the Anschluss, i.e., the annexation of Austria by Hitler in 1938, of course still remains ambiguous. To this day, the function of the Austrian state church is primarily religio-cultural and socio-political rather than genuinely spiritual.

So we are told it is the better part of wisdom to ignore the Roman Catholic Church when evangelizing in Austria. This may be successful in individual cases, but how can one afford, in the long run, to avoid dealing with the dominant religious institution of that country? Is this the way Martin Luther reformed the church? Perhaps a strategy of non-engagement can be crowned with limited success and may even be wise for a season until the emerging evangelical church has summoned adequate spiritual strength and resources to rise to the challenge. It is my conviction, however, that evangelical Christians will never become a force to be reckoned with in Austrian society unless they muster the courage and acquire the theological training to stand their ground in the face of predictable Roman Catholic counterattacks.

If there is some success at the moment, I believe, it is largely because the Roman Catholic Church, like a giant elephant, is slow to react, deeming it unnecessary to deal with the annoying but minute gnats of evangelical activity. If it should ever feel seriously threatened, it will most certainly retaliate, and such retaliation may be as difficult to avoid as it was for Iraqis to dodge the bombs dropped by the allied forces over Baghdad. Such a pattern of avoidance positions evangelicals automatically on the defensive. It may be more appropriate to draw inspiration from our Lord himself, who confronted the religious authorities of his day courageously, with deep spiritual conviction, and with unrivaled scriptural competence.

In short, I think it naive to expect the word of God and the Spirit of God to do the whole job for us. As evangelicals, we need to be prepared to engage the entire culture of the people we seek to reach. As it is, we are barely scratching the surface. We may not feel comfortable with liberation theology, or with the kind of gospel proclamation that compromises the primacy of evangelism (and probably rightly so), but people are more than souls - they are human beings living in integrated systems of relationships, i.e., cultures, and we need to reach them not just as religious beings but also as cultural and political individuals.

Without such an integrative and holistic approach, evangelical missionizing, I am afraid, will never truly impact entire cultures. (See anthropologist Paul Hiebert's comments below.-Eds.) The efforts of missionaries will at best result in isolated conversions that leave the individuals so converted dangling, alienated from their own cultures, and unequipped for the challenges they will face in influencing their world.

No easy answers: some constructive alternatives

If I read David Sanford's article correctly, his story line can be sketched as follows. Using a failing missionary couple as a foil, he proceeds to show how those poor souls did it all wrong. Asserting that, "Surely there's a better way," Sanford then points to missionaries to Austria who are successful. The implication is that other missionaries can be successful, too, if they follow the 10 simple rules set forth by the author. What started like a promising and frank discussion of missionary failure, ends with a rather simplistic, shallow, and unduly optimistic perspective.

The recommendations made by Sanford are in large part sensible and are generally more sensitive to Austrian culture than missionary practices traditionally used. They are worth giving serious consideration. What I find disappointing, however, is that the article rarely rises above the merely pragmatic. The primary issue addressed is that of success in the missionary enterprise. Also, the essay moves merely on the level of human common sense, rather than considering

larger theological issues as well. Lastly, the proposals are made from the perspective of an outsider (Sanford), about outsiders (the missionaries he cites), to outsiders (missionaries reading his article). He does not seriously enter the complexities of the Austrian national history and psyche (see here, for example, William M. Johnston's *The Austrian Mind*), and without significantly consulting or involving Austrians themselves in the process.

It may therefore be appropriate to provide what I consider to be constructive suggestions of my own. During my years of observing missionaries in Austria, the following lessons began to emerge.

1. *Be prepared.* To begin with, missionaries should come to Austria well-prepared. They should already have a good grasp of the language and should have read widely on Austrian history and culture. The few missionaries I knew who did well were those who met those qualifications. Better a few quality missionaries than a large number of likely dropouts.

2. *Be diligent in establishing a growing network of significant contacts in Austria.* Too many missionaries vegetate in missionary subcultures with little or no effectiveness in reaching Austrians. Representatives of mission agencies, be more selective in the missionaries you accept to go to Austria.

3. *Be human.* Missionaries are all too often afraid to let anyone know that they are still sinful, and most certainly human. Indeed, it is important to know the difference between these two characteristics in order not to equate being human with being sinful. Much more important than superhuman perfection (a remarkably persistent missionary myth) is a willingness to take risks, to make mistakes, and to learn from them. You cannot adequately explore and understand the ways of the Austrian culture in a year or two. I remember once being asked by an American friend to tell him "in five minutes or less" (!) "what kind of people Austrians are." I can still hardly believe my friend was serious (and I will certainly never forget the disbelief with which I responded). Missionaries, if you don't enjoy immersing yourselves in a long-term study of other people's history and culture, if you are more the activist-type, do yourself and Austrians a favor and choose a faster-paced missionary setting.

4. *Be realistic.* I have frequently found the implicit stereotype of a missionary to be one of emptying oneself of one's own interests, vocational identity, even one's humanity. Missionaries will never be able to become Austrians, no matter how hard they try. Therefore, they should not pretend that they can, and set more realistic objectives for themselves. A wrong concept of "self-denial" renders them utterly unattractive to Austrians. At the same time, if missionaries accentuated their own American identities, they might find that Austrians are very interested, even intrigued, to find out more about America. Missionaries, be yourselves, not who you think you need to be in order to be liked by Austrians. This could be a very liberating realization indeed.

5. *Be trained theologically.* Finally, missionaries are often inadequately trained theologically. Having spent a few years in North America and having received some theological training myself, I now know that programs offered to aspiring missionaries tend to focus on skills and social sciences-type courses such as cultural anthropology or cross-cultural communication, often at the expense of learning the biblical languages, hermeneutics, or theology. This deficit on the side of theology, I believe, renders missionaries seriously deficient once they are on the field, especially in the long run. Seminaries, consider whether the present curricular balance between theological and social science and skills-related subjects provides for a responsible preparation for missionary service.

Not every field requires the same type of preparation. Perhaps it would be best to diversify the present offerings and make available missions degrees that include serious engagement with theological subjects and biblical languages (as does, for example, the new Ph.D. in Intercultural studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School). Missions representatives, for a field such as Austria consider taking missionaries who are adequately trained theologically.

Questions for further thought and final reflections

While in Austria, I once asked a missionary what, in his estimation, was the greatest obstacle to reaching Austrians with the gospel. Without hesitation, he gave this one-word response: "Apathy." This assessment, if correct-and I find it to be quite apt-brings into sharper focus the difficulty faced by missionaries to Austria. For doubtless the indifferent are even harder to reach than the antagonistic. While my own questions might differ from his, I agree with Sanford that it is time to ask some tough, even radical. questions.

First, why does no one question whether it is a wise use of limited resources to send ever new missionaries to "graveyards"? Second, what- ever happened to the concept of identifying and reaching receptive people groups? Third, seen in eschatological perspective, what is the relation between the need to re-evangelize post-Christian Europe and the urgency to preach the gospel to those who have never even had a chance to hear the gospel once in their national history?

Fourth, where are the serious efforts of relating current missionary efforts to the examples and teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the early church as recorded in the Scriptures, not to speak of the Old Testament? Regarding the last point, there appears to be a growing consensus among concerned Christians that Scripture and theology have suffered serious neglect not just in the church, but especially in missions. See, for example, the writings of the late David Bosch, Ed Rommen, and David Hesselgrave.

It occurs to me that it might be wise for missions agencies to listen to the insights of the kinds of "nonmissionaries" cited by Sanford, if they want to avoid becoming increasingly irrelevant and being by-passed in favor of less conventional approaches. Missions agencies, are your support-raising limits reasonable? Are policies that all but force missionaries to surrender their professional identity conducive to reaching the lost in certain areas, or can they be counterproductive? Finally, how can believing nationals be used-and supported, financially and otherwise-in reaching their countrymen? This can probably not be accomplished by rigid policies that preclude such support.

We should be driven by a heart-felt compassion for the lost rather than merely by a passion for missionary success. We should stand with one foot on the word and with the other on the world, rather than embracing a pragmatism that results in analyses largely devoid of true spiritual depth, theological engagement, and prophetic discernment. We must trust, not in human ingenuity or ability at strategizing, but in the God without whom there would be no mission to accomplish.