The Mission Field of Japan

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone. Yes, my name is Andrew Buchanan. It is an honor to be here at Learners Exchange, brilliant institution. How long has it been going on for?

30 years. Nobody remembers. All right. We're of that age where we can't remember. Were you guys the first?
Were some of you here at the beginning? It was 2008. Okay. Dr. Patrick, I think. Okay, nice. Wow. All right.
No, it's all right. So, yes, my name is Andrew. I was born and raised in Japan. My parents were missionaries there for 20 years. They were with Fellowship Evangelical Baptist International, a little Canadian counterpart to the Americans' Conservative Baptist International.
It was a small mission organization, but missionaries tend to all know each other. in Japan. They often go to the same language school.
[1:04] And, yeah. My parents are the loveliest. I think a few of you have met them. They'll be back here in May as well. So, I'm hoping to bring them around and introduce them to folks.

Right now, they're in Montreal. So, I grew up in Japan. I lived there until I was 16. Mainly, we had a couple furloughs back in Montreal. But we had to leave at 16 because I was just getting into far too much trouble.
For grade 9 and 10, I went to CAJ Christian Academy in Japan. I begged my parents to send me off to this boarding school so I could get a better education. But I really just wanted to be free of their authority.
I thought it would be more fun to gallivant about Tokyo. So, I was getting into trouble with that. And the mission actually said, you should probably come back to Canada and sort of try and keep an eye on Andrew.
And so, they left the field because of me. And the next year, I left home and kind of went off and did my own thing. I didn't get saved until I was 22. That's 10 years ago now.
[2:07] I was in Calgary. And, yeah, it's been quite the trip since. What was the word you used in furlonged? You said vacuum. Furlough. Furlough. It's also, I think they call it home assignment these days.

Yeah. It's after four or five years. Or for our family, they'd go back to their home country for a year. So, I'll talk for about half the time. But I'd like to hear from you as well.
So, we'll be looking at some of Japan's context. But we can't forget that Christianity is for the world. For every tribe and tongue. So, while it really does help to know the culture, the legends that they revere, their social imaginaries, the way they see the world, the gospel is always a stumbling block. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. So, it is always a miracle when one believes.
So, this morning, I'd like to talk about Japan and the Japanese.
But I'm going to ask that while you listen, you be thinking of ways in which God might speak to them. What Bible passages might arrest them, shock them out of their stupor, or comfort their weary souls?
[3:23] So, I ask for your wisdom, because God works through his church. And we're in this together. We're all human. And in one sense, our lot, our condition, it's all the same.

Lost, but for the grace of God. But for Christ, we'd be lost. So, help me in thinking of ways for the gospel to penetrate into their hearts. I think this will be productive.
While growing up in Japan has given me an accent that sounds authentically Japanese, I'm by no means a master of the language. And in much the same manner, even though I've got a deep appreciation for the culture and the people, it still doesn't amount to much more than a child's understanding.

And while I do believe and feel it in the depths of my being that God has prepared and called me to serve there in the name of Christ, and while I have taken steps to become more familiar with all things Japanese, this still by no means means that I have a perfect or even near complete understanding of the people as a whole.
But in my searches, in speaking with Japanese Christians, in worshiping in their churches, both indigenous and Japanese-speaking ones abroad, there's a few in this city, some lovely congregations, yeah.
[4:44] In continuing to read everything I can get my hands on on this topic of Japanese Christianity, from their own theologians and from missionaries that have served over there, I've come to find a whole number of interesting, downright exciting things that give me great hope for reaching the Japanese.

Yeah, with the good news of Jesus. So let's start by taking a brief run through Japan's past experience with Japan. The first official account of Christianity being introduced is through the missionary expedition of Francis Xavier.
He was one of the founders of the Jesuits. That was in 1549. Some theologians I heard think that there was like a Nestorian branch of Christianity that might have, like in the early centuries, gone in and come back out again, but there's no real evidence for that.
So by 1570, there were 20 Catholic missionaries in Japan, and Nagasaki had become the center for Japanese Catholicism. Christianity briefly flourished with estimates of up to 300,000 converts. That's just amazing. By 1587, however, a ban was put on Jesuit missionaries because of a concern with colonialism.
[6:04] The Philippines was undergoing some difficult times thanks to the conflict between Spain and Portugal. On one occasion, on a hill in Nagasaki in 1597, 26 Christians, including three young boys, were crucified for their faith and then stabbed with a javelin.

By 1614, Christianity was officially banned and the church basically vanished. I think it had something to do with a few high-profile cases of apostasy among some of the missionaries.
I think that did a lot to quench kind of this revival or burgeoning forth of the spirit. Shusaku Endo, some of you might be familiar with a book he wrote called Silence.
It's about a couple Jesuits who traveled to Japan to find out if the rumors of their mentor's apostasy were true. You might have seen the movie by Martin Scorsese that came out in 2016.
Both the book and the movie do a chilling job of portraying the persecution that faced Christians at the time. One of the ways in which the Japanese government found Christians was by lining up all the residents of a town and having them step on a bronze plate with the likeness of Jesus or Mary imprinted on it.
[7:26] These were called Fumi-e. E is picture. Fumi is to step. So Makoto Fujimura is an American-born Japanese artist.

He does things in the traditional style but these beautiful abstract paintings. And he's a Christian. So many of these beautiful resting works are hanging in churches. I used to go to Tim Keller's church.
Makoto Fujimura helped Martin Scorsese in making this film because Japanese, artist, and a Christian. And he wrote a book called Silence and Beauty. Makoto did.
And in it he talks about how these Fumi-e with the imprint of Jesus that has been worn down by thousands of people stepping on it.
He says this is the best representation we have of Christ in picture. I really like that idea of a savior that's just been trampled upon.
[8:23] So the ones who refused to step and sometimes even spit on the plate would then be tortured till they recanted or simply executed.

More than 400 Japanese martyrs have been recognized with beatification by the Catholic Church. 42 have been canonized as saints. But over the following 250 years there were countless more martyrdoms under the shogunate as the underground church was systematically rooted out.
Those left were referred to as Kakurekurishshan or hidden Christians. But their impact was minimal. And the few of them that remained hidden until Japan a few of them remained hidden until Japan was reopened by Commodore Perry in 1854.
So that started off another wave of missionaries being sent to Japan. Many clergymen were sent from Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox churches. And though proselytism was still banned for another

20 years, the Meiji Restoration in 1871 introduced the freedom of religion, giving all Christian communities the legal right to existence and preaching.
In October 1945, right after the Second World War, right after Japan's surrender, General MacArthur urged Protestant leaders in the United States to send a thousand missionaries to try to convert Japan to Christianity.
[9:57] And many did answer that call. Some of them I know as the most compassionate, genuine human beings on this planet. today, Japan has a population of 126 million, but there are still only about 3 million Christians in Japan.

That's less than 1%, and only about half of those would be labeled as Protestant or Evangelical. Yeah, actually I believe this 1% statistic also includes Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.
It's difficult to collate data especially so in matters of religion. We'll see a little bit later with the Japanese syncretism, the way that they kind of believe a whole milieu of different things.
It makes it quite difficult to sort of pin down where they fall on the scale and which percentages should go up. Just earlier this week on the bus going to Granville, I met a Japanese couple.
They were here on vacation. I started up a conversation with them, and upon hearing that my parents were Christian missionaries and that I was going to Japan in the same capacity, they told me they were Ehoba no Shonin, which means Jehovah's Witnesses.
[11:15] I don't think I'd ever met Japanese Jehovah's Witnesses before, at least not to my knowledge. I would have loved to have talked further with them.

Sounds like it would have been a good conversation, but my stop had come. So just as an aside, I'd like to encourage you all to strike up a conversation with the Jehovah's Witnesses we see all around this city because they're very kind and they love to talk about the Bible and we've got such strong reasons for believing that Jesus is God incarnate.
It's in there. Even their translation can't really mask it. Being just one more loving Christian that points to Christ's supremacy could have an eternal impact on their lives.
So that's a little, yeah. I digress. About three quarters of Japan's land area is made up of mountains. I'd like to say too that it's not just a few small islands but really rather big Japan is.
The west coast of the United States so Vancouver right down to Tijuana, Mexico that's about the length of Japan from Hokkaido to Kyushu and that's not counting Okinawa way down in the south that's like the Hawaii of Japan it hardly even counts.
[12:36] Yeah. 15% of Japan is agriculture 12% is inhabited only 12%. So while there are definitely some densely populated cities there are thousands of even smaller towns all throughout the most beautiful countryside you've ever seen.

These smaller towns are emptying out quick however. There are more opportunities in the big city the flashing lights the glamour the glitz it's fast paced young people are abandoning their rural homes in droves.
So there's a demographic gap that's becoming more and more geographical. Japan's population is aging faster than any other nation on this planet. About a third of the Japanese are over 65 and they have the highest life expectancy in the world and none of them are having babies.
I guess especially not the ones over 65. Japan is number one in sexless marriages. infidelity and porn are the norm.
Most simply choose to focus on their career rather than have a family. There is fast growing concern over the future as the working population decreases there's the lack of taxes and a steady increase on welfare among the elderly.
[14:00] A report was put out just this January that showed the poverty rate for single elderly women would reach 50% over the next 40 years. So healthcare aids are going to be in the highest demand and many will just go without proper care.

There are some very hard times ahead but even now drinking and alcohol is a huge problem. If the boss is going out it's considered one's duty to drink with them.
If you're not coerced into alcoholism through work then you're facing unemployment and at real risk of suicide. Japan's suicide rates are among the highest in the world.
Each day an average of 70 people die from it. The general attitude towards suicide has been termed tolerant. In many occasions suicide is seen as a morally responsible action.
This brings us to the topic of honor and shame. Unlike the West the Japanese do not have an individualistic mindset. they are collectivist through and through.

[15:14] There is a saying the nail that sticks out will be hammered. So the strong cultural social national identity of the Japanese far supersedes any notions of individuality.

In Japan one of the highest virtues is that of sacrificing oneself for the nation's honor for the glory of Japan. with samurai way back in the day as retainers or servants of lords and nobles the code of self sacrifice was honed to the sharpest of points.
If one failed in one's duties seppuku or ritual suicide was considered the appropriate response. Even today people have committed seppuku for mispronouncing the emperor's name in a public address.
Shame is seen as something that must be dealt with. We understand guilt the individual culpability before a righteous god.
But they have an understanding of shame. That's one more akin to the Hebrew way of thinking. Shame shows a relational defect. It affects the honor of every party involved.
[16:30] It's a collective responsibility. For many, the easiest way to deal with it is through suicide. It's generally believed that it must be dealt with with sacrifice.

Righteousness as seen by the Japanese is pulling together for the good of all. Failing that, it is to sacrifice oneself, an act of judgment against the self, ridding the world of shame.
An example of the collectivist attitude can be seen in how they celebrate the coming of age ceremony. On the second Monday of January, the Japanese enjoy a public holiday called Seijin no hi, or the coming of age day.
On this day, all the young people who have turned 20, or will turn 20, between April 2nd of 2019, last year, and April 1st of this year, will participate in local ceremonies to celebrate their entrance into adulthood.
Everything about this day is highly structured, from the traditional clothing that is worn, to the speeches and the formality of the ceremony. Parents and friends are also an important part of the occasion.
[17:39] Every school gymnasium across the country is filled. It is a beautiful sight. This is contrasted to the coming age ceremonies we have, where I don't know what we have.

We have a birthday party with the family, and then you go and get legally drunk with your friends for the first time. That seems to be what's done here. In communication, Japan is called a high-context culture.
A high-context culture is one in which harmony and the well-being of the group is preferred over individual achievement. In low-context cultures, communication must be more explicit, direct, elaborate, because individuals are not expected to have knowledge of each other's histories or background, and communication is not necessarily shaped by long-standing relationships between speakers.
Because low-context communication concerns more direct messages, the meaning of these messages is more dependent on the words being spoken, rather than on the interpretation of more subtle or unspoken cues.
Utilizing small communication gestures and reading into these less direct messages meanings. So low-context cultures are the opposite.
[19:00] Direct verbal communication is needed to properly understand a message being said. And doing so relies heavily on explicit verbal skills.

In Japan, you need context to communicate. I was over there after the big earthquake in 2011 in Kamaishi, one of the many towns that had been affected.
connected. There were a number of volunteers helping to clear and sort the mess. We worked alongside those that had survived their village being decimated by the tsunami.
On one of our breaks, as I was eagerly explaining Christ's death, the significance of Christ's death and resurrection, an elderly gentleman that had been sitting by listening quietly, deigned to politely inform me that I was just too young to be speaking.
He said, it's not my place to fill the silence. I was honored. Honored that he'd stoop to explain Japanese etiquette to a foreigner.
[20:07] Usually they allow foreigners to blithely, just ignorantly eschew all sorts of customs. They don't expect us to know their ways. In a real sense, he honored me by allowing me to know what would be expected of a Japanese youth.

And he was right, too. Only a couple months had passed since the disaster. The people were grieving. As delicate as I tried to be, with as much love as I could muster, I know my message was still ill-timed and insensitive in so many ways.
But is there ever a right time? The cross is stumbling block enough, but I don't want to add to that. So I was frustrated by that conversation.
That showed me that I needed to get an education. The Japanese highly value credentials. But I'd also need an education in formality, in communication etiquette.
The Japanese have three main levels of honorifics. There's teinego, or polite language, sonkego, which is respectful language, which elevates the other, and kenjogo, which is humble language, or self-deprecatory speech.
[21:28] So depending on the age and status, etc., of the one to whom you're speaking, you use a mix of all three. So if I talk on the phone, at first they can't tell I'm not Japanese, but I sound like a teenager.

I left when I was 16. I sound like an insolent youth. Yeah, and that's a barrier. That's a barrier. So I'm really looking forward to getting back there and starting some tutoring and learning how to address folks properly.
Yeah, that'll be good. At the age were you when the guy said you're too young to speak? I was 24 when that happened. Yeah. Marian, I think she joked outside saying, I heard you're going to teach everybody how to bow.
But I can't actually. The way that the Japanese bow is a little different. We don't put our hands together. I think this is maybe Chinese. I think this might be Thai, perhaps. The Japanese, you keep your hands by your side and you bow from the waist, keeping the long spine, head straight, just like that.
Yeah. And you hold it and then you come back up. Yeah. That. Done. 70% of the churches in Japan have congregations of less than 30 members.
[22:48] Despite these small numbers, though, there is vitality. Yeah, their eyes shine. They tend to be older. There's a higher ratio of women to men.

And they are worried about the state of the church in Japan. They pray fervently for the gospel to go forth. But evangelistic outreach seems to be at a minimum.
In a culture that it so esteems the collective, it is difficult to step out of line. While not facing threats of death or persecution, it's still considered unseemly for a Japanese person to become a Christian. They might be slightly ostracized by their families, but they won't lose their job. Instead, shame enters the picture. It's seen as dishonoring.
Dishonoring to the nation, to the way of the Japanese, to all the ancestors, dead and gone. You're saying they're all wrong if you're becoming a Christian?
[23:50] Who do you think you are? That's kind of the attitude towards it. As to the religions of Japan, while they played a great part in its formation, today they are mainly considered cultural accoutrements.

Shintoism is fully Japanese. It's an animistic religion full of myths and legends of kami, or like gods or spirits. These spirits are relatively uninterested in the human realm.
only about 10% of Japanese people are Shinto. Still, everyone, absolutely everyone, participates in the yearly festivities surrounding it.
Many join to carry the mikoshi through the streets, these big, they're not floats, they're like sacred religious palanquins, wherein or on a spirit will temporarily reside as they bring it from one temple to the other.
So in Shinto shrines, we have Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Shinto shrines, there's a partition, and at the center of it is just an empty room where the spirit dwells.
[25:03] Some theologians surmise that Jewish teachings on purification and tales of the Ark of the Covenant played a role in the formation of Shintoism, but Japanese scholars flatly reject this.

still, there's some compelling, some very interesting correlations between the two. And I think there's an innate understanding of purity, thanks to Shintoism, and the need for cleansing that could be a link to the gospel.
A number of kanji, or the logographic pictograms, the symbols, Japanese, Chinese use them, they have some very interesting connotations. The kanji for a ship, is just a combination of three other kanji that go together to make it up.

So one is boat, eight, and mouth. And, I don't know, the only other ship I can think of, the big ship of legend, had eight mouths on board Noah's Ark, so that, I don't know.
Another one, the kanji for righteousness, is made up of two kanji, sheep and self. I don't know how else you could come to that, how that would, kanji did come over from China in the early first millennium.
[26:25] What came off from China? Kanji, the writing system. Oh, really? Yeah. And so it seems there was definitely a bit of, not Christian, necessarily, but biblical influence, for sure.

Yeah, Christian too, if it's a sheep. No, yeah, who knows? Who knows? It seems as if God has planted small seeds of truth hidden deep within the islands of Japan.
In fact, when Francis Xavier landed in 1549, he was astounded because he thought that even Japan, quote, had been penetrated by the Lutheran heresy, end quote.
But he's referring here to the teachings of Buddhism, specifically Jodo Shinshu, or True Pure Land Buddhism, and its view of grace. So, Shinran Shonin, born in the late 12th century, was the great reformer of Buddhism that developed the True Pure Land teachings.
His parallels with Luther are also quite interesting, amusing to note. Both were born 1500 years after the start of their religion. Both, if you count Christianity as being inaugurated with Christ.
[27:37] Yeah. Both studied in monasteries. Both felt helpless and overpowered by their own depravity. Both were deeply impacted by the original writings. Both saw grace as being key to their understanding of salvation.

Neither wanted to start a new faction, but simply to reform. Both even eventually got married and had six children. Shinran believed that human depravity was so great, and the age had become so evil that no amount of religious activity could possibly be sufficient to save someone.
Shinran steadfastly insisted that it was impossible, even after 10,000 lifetimes of effort, for a human to accrue one ounce of merit. For Shinran, grace meant unmerited grace, or it is no grace at all.
All merit must be unconditional and vicarious for all who believe. It is safe to say perhaps that the essential difference between Shindan and other Buddhist thinkers of his time, or any other time, hinges on the denial of the merit acquisition principle.
He says, No one can place their faith in Amida apart from the grace and prior initiative of Amida. It is Amida alone who transfers his merit to us.
[28:56] So Amida, he was one of the Bodhisattvas, or one of the Buddhas, a being who has reached enlightenment, but then chosen to stay behind in order to help others along the way.

Amida, according to legend, made 48 self-sacrificial vows, vowing to appear and help all those that called on his name, or may he not reach enlightenment.
So Pure Land Buddhism was introduced, so the original Buddhism, the Mahayana Buddhism, was introduced to Japan in the 6th century. Originally, it was a severely ascetic religion with strict practices, and one of those being the recitation of nenbutsu, or mantras, such as, I entrust myself to the Buddha of infinite light and life.
Shinran, in the 12th century, saw this as an attempt to acquire merit through mindless repetition, rather than to truly place trust in the Amida. Shinran even asserted that wicked men are more likely to be saved than so-called good people, since the former throw themselves entirely on the mercy of Buddha, while the latter might be tempted to think that their chances of salvation were improved by their own meritorious conduct.
The language that Shinran's followers use to describe this total abandonment of human effort and the reception of Amida's unmerited grace is close to the language Christians use for radical conversion.
[30:25] Shinran refers to it as eshin, which as a verb means to turn about. A contemporary follower of Shinran defines the controlling idea behind eshin as the radical conversion experience brought about by the working of other power, whereby the center of one's being, the mind of self-power, is overturned and abandoned.

Man thus gives himself up completely to the working of Amida's primal vow. Karl Barth, in his Church Dogmatics, once described Jodo Shinshu, the True Pure Land Buddhism, the teaching of Shinran as, quote, the most adequate and comprehensive and illuminating heathen parallel to Christianity.
He even referred to it as Japanese Protestantism. This, however, does not mean that it is salvific. the central character in whom they place trust is admittedly only a spiritual ideal.

This is a far cry from God incarnate, suffering and dying in our stead, then resurrected, defeating death, ascended, and soon coming again.
I can't find any numbers that seem reliable in figuring the percentage of Japanese that are Buddhist. It's anywhere from 35 to 80 percent by some accounts.
[31:53] But the difficulty seems to be in defining belief. Culturally, they are Shinto, but philosophically there appears to be a bit of Buddhistic nihilism.

Spiritually, they say they're secular and atheist. Ours is fast becoming a post-Christian society, if not already.
Theirs could be seen as a post- Buddhistic society. After centuries of the same depravity, they don't seem too optimistic in Amida saving them.
I've made good use of the law and grace gospel technique. So in a conversation, you ask, would you consider yourself to be a good person?
Over here, most everyone says yes. You're off to the races. Yeah. How do you stand up against God's law then? You know? Have you killed someone? No. But have you hated your brother?
[33:00] Right? That's murder of the heart. And so you start to show how God looks at not just what we do, but at our hearts. Well, I tried this over there, and you kind of get thrown off at the first question, because you ask if they'd consider themselves to be a good person, and they say no.

You're like, oh, okay. Okay. Such honesty. Your conscience must be like... Yeah, but it's not from an understanding of sin.
To them, depravity is from the collective accrual of negative karma, if they were to try and define it. But I think it's a little more of just an attitude of you kind of just give up.
You don't try too hard to make things better. Just deal with what you got, put in the time, and then die. That sort of seems to be...
Don't think too much about that stuff. You'll make yourself depressed. Just show up to work on time. Yeah. That's what you feel on the trains, and as you walk the streets.
[34:17] Just putting in time. Yeah. In the end, religion to them tends to appear outdated and superstitious. Their trust isn't in the grace of Amida, but in the idea of Japan.

They follow the Japanese way. That's their identity. That's what makes sense of who they are. It is a refined society. There is an austerity, an elegance, a deftness of hand.
There is room for nuance and subtlety, deep, deep appreciation of beauty. This is the culture that brought us the tea ceremony. Sen Norikiu is credited with developing it into the art that it became. He was a contemporary of Francis Xavier, and many of his disciples were Christian, if not himself. He too was heavily influenced by biblical teachings of humility, in particular, which are foundational to the way of tea today.
Have you seen the once broken pottery mended with the cracks filled in gold? Kintsugi, it's called. Yeah, Japan is rife with gospel images, pictures that can prefigure Christ.
[35:41] Christ. But the church over there is small, and it needs help. So, let's go. Yeah, let's go.

John Piper, wonderful preacher, his father became a missionary well into retirement age. He started when he was a little older. It's never too late.
Come join me on the streets. Yeah, the harvest is ripe. So, let's pray to God and ask for workers to be sent. Thank you, folks.