

Missionary of the Kingdom:

An Interview¹

Introduction

The contents of this file are of a different nature than that of the other files in this Mission/Missiology line-up of articles. The core of this file is a lengthy interview of myself and of Fran, my wife, conducted by a Christian journalist Bert Witvoet, Co-Editor of this *Vanguard* magazine, later to become the editor of *Christian Courier*. Though not really intended that way, it became something like a missiological bomb within the mission circles of the Christian Reformed Church. It generated a voluminous correspondence within those circles, some of which is also found in this file. In view of the fact that this interview was published only about 42 years ago and some of the people involved in the touchy *and personal* controversy the interview generated are still with us, I have decided not to include all the correspondence and of those included I omit some of the names. I have no desire to open wounds that have closed since, to embarrass anyone or to pit friends and colleagues against each other. It may be of interest to some to know that *the subject of polygamy is a major subject in the reactions*.

The broad outline of this file then is as follows:

- An editorial (p. 2)
- The Interview Itself (p. 3)
- Reactions to the Interview (p. 27)

“Inside the *Vanguard*”

¹ *Vanguard*, Dec/1972, pp. 4-15. I do want it understood that, though I do stand for pretty well the entire interview, the wording is largely chosen by Witvoet. Sometimes I would have chosen to express myself differently.

Editorial by Robert L. Carville²

This December issue contains a most extraordinary interview article with a Canadian missionary to Nigeria named John Boer. In it Bert Witvoet has gotten down to the depths of a man's vision, while at the same time doing it in an utterly human way. Humour, wisdom, curiosity, and even artful arrangement characterize "Called to be a Missionary of the Kingdom" (page 4). It is especially significant because it highlights the kind of Christian community that has been developed in Nigeria – a pattern that this struggling, vibrant part of the church has largely adopted from Western missionaries and the North American Christian cultural context. Its strengths are our strengths; its failures are our failures. A look at the Nigerian church is to see ourselves in a mirror.

What do we find? That missionaries may never discuss political issues in the light of the Bible because the church might be persecuted; because the white missionaries are afraid; because the nationalistic religion of Nigeria cannot be politically challenged – even in discussion and study of the Bible.³

What do we find? That higher education in Nigeria, along with the urban centres of industrial growth and technology are shaping the future of Nigerian culture and West Africa – and that our mission efforts have nothing or little to say to these powerful institutions. We just aren't equipped to do it. We are sending preachers when scholars, scientists, and urban planners are the need of the hour – to help flesh out the gospel being preached from the pulpits. Our missions have been so busy planting churches and nurturing them that the larger trends of Nigerian culture have developed in a way that completely isolates and makes these bush churches irrelevant to the central concerns of the nation.

It is impossible for persons trained as preachers and theologians to do the work of constructing a whole society, and they shouldn't either. Their responsibility is to

² *Vanguard*, Dec/1972, p. 3. Carville was not present at the interview. Thus his interpretation is that of a third party, which means: not always precisely on track.

³ The prohibitions in this paragraph, as Carville expresses them, are the mission's, not the nation's.

preach the Word of salvation for all of life. We would like to reiterate our proposals from the January 1971 issue of *Vanguard* that we begin conceiving of our mission effort as a total strategy involving persons from every walk of life.

R.L.C. (Robert Lee Carvill)

Called to be a Missionary of the Kingdom

The Interview

John H. Boer, a sturdy, certainly blonde Dutch-Canadian, who used to work in the lumber industry in British Columbia, Canada, is now, and has been for the past six years, a missionary of the Christian Reformed Church in Nigeria. He had intended to become a pastor in Canada, but a speech by Dr. Evan Runner, professor at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, set John to thinking about missions. Dr. Runner intimated that missionaries to Africa, in their attempt to save souls so that these souls may save other souls, acted as if the Lord had intended His creation to end up as a string of ghostly beads. John took Runner's comments as a challenge. A visit to Calvin Seminary by Eugene Rubingh, representative of the Sudan United Mission in Nigeria, further directed John's heart and mind towards mission work. Maybe he and his wife Frances should go to Nigeria instead of Canada? The whole development came as a complete surprise to John himself. He had never read up on missiology and, although he had heard missionaries preach, was never particularly impressed.

"Now I understand why these missionaries could not preach very well," he said. "They were used to a different background and were unable to adjust and relate to the North American situation. I suppose I am a lousy preacher too for that reason. At least I feel uncomfortable when preaching on furlough," he added with a chuckle.

I was interviewing John Boer in the quiet of my livingroom. It was a warm, sticky Ontario morning outside. Since experience had taught me that the wet heat would not penetrate our living quarters until the afternoon, I felt safe to put John

and myself through the paces for a few hours. Upon learning that John intended to come to Toronto, with his wife Fran and their three-year-old son Kevin, my wife Alice and I invited them to stay at our house.

The invitation was not entirely motivated by charity. I wanted an opportunity to interview John Boer. I had read a few articles by him, among which was a copy of his lectures entitled "Evangelism in Nigeria." These lectures were given at a conference of the Nigeria Fellowship of Evangelical Students. While reading the copy of his address, I came across the following quotation:

Why do people think of the Christian offer of salvation as irrelevant? Surely not because the gospel is irrelevant, but the form in which it has generally been presented is irrelevant, for it did not address itself to the needs of the people and the nation. We have not come with the *entire* gospel Nigeria is presently searching for her salvation, but we are not providing her with concrete Christian guidelines except that we negatively protest against corruption and bribery.

It is high time that we come to realize that the modern industries introduced in Nigeria are not simply objectively designed structures, but they are shaped by sinful men and they are the embodiment of certain values entertained by such sinful men. The sinful desire of man to control his fellowman for personal profit is a built-in characteristic of modern industry. Not only the individual must be converted, but also his industrial empire in its very structure.

Whatever you may think of the bird, the song is strangely out of tune with the usual comments of missionaries. Only a mother would dare to suggest that "my Johnny is not out of tune; the whole choir is." Nevertheless, *Vanguard* decided to investigate. In our opinion, a plea for wholeness in missions coming from the mouth of a missionary is newsworthy.

The First Term, 1966-1969

"Before going to Nigeria," John continued, "I studied African history and literature at Michigan State for half a year. I came out of these courses in a negative frame

of mind about mission work. All the writers that I had to read in that history course more or less agreed that missions and colonialism had been very much a hand-in-glove sort of affair. And they have been actually, and this has had bad consequences. Today, many modern Nigerians look at missions as a kind of leftover from colonial days.”

What was your introduction to Nigeria like?

We came in very confused days, somewhere between the first and the second coup of 1966. We first spent four months in Baissa for further training in the Hausa language. In September 1966, we went to Wukari where we are now. We came there just when the Ibos were fleeing for their life. The Ibos had been running the market, they had been running the post office, they had been running everything of consequence. So everything was disrupted. The only other person at the station, Miss Dorothy Sytsma, was on furlough. Here we were. We did not know what to do. We tried to fix the house a bit, but we could not buy as much as a nail.

How did you make your contact with the Christians that were there?

The word soon went out that the missionary had arrived. The people knew that a missionary was coming. So, the elders of the church came the next day. And about a week later Dorothy Sytsma came back to the station.

What was some of your first work?

No one had told us what to do actually. Officially, I was to be the counselor of the Classis, but we did not know what that meant. We were just put on the station. This was one of my first frustrations.

Did you feel welcome when these elders came to greet you?

Yes, the Jukuns (that’s the name of the tribe) are a very personable people. They have a way of making a stranger feel very welcome ... at least at first. Later on you realize that they allow you to come only so near and no nearer.

We started helping Dorothy Sytsma in the Evangelistic Training School. But it did not take long before I was asked by two vacant churches to become their counselor. This brought me right into the life of these congregations.

Missions Restrict the Gospel

When did you first become dissatisfied with what you have referred to in your writings as the narrow scope of mission work?

My apprehension started before I came. I suspected from what I had heard and read that the work was too church oriented and too bush oriented. Both of these orientations kept the gospel from entering into the directing structures of Nigerian culture, namely the universities and the cities. But during the first term, which is two and a half years, I did not express myself on any of these things. I just did what came my way. I penetrated the life of the congregations I served as deeply as I could to find out what really was going on, what the experience of faith among these African people was. What we are doing in the bush is by and large good, but it is deficient. My suspicions were confirmed.

Is it not possible that when a person is as prejudiced and suspicious as you obviously were that he'll usually find what he is looking for?

Yes, I recognize that in myself. I am a prejudiced person, I am opinionated sometimes. That's why the whole first term I kept quiet. I just wanted to listen.

What evidence of narrow scope in missions did you find?

First of all, from the pulpit you often hear: "Look, we are Christians, and we have nothing to do with politics, because politics is dirty. Let's not get involved." Furthermore, I have been in touch with many pastors and have found that their theology is rather pietistic. This has to do with the training we missionaries give them. The spiritual is considered more important than the material. Fortunately, in practice, these pastors do much better. They will fight very hard, for example, for a dispensary in their community and are often in the forefront when it comes to social improvements. I have been reading the newspapers and have found that people in government, even when they are Christian, tend to be secular in their

thinking. I have spent a whole week with Christian university students. I was impressed by their prayer life, by their deep sense of faith, but also terribly depressed by their narrow conception of the gospel. They have no idea that as Christians they have a divine task to do something about the very structures of their society.

Secularism is of course a worldwide phenomenon. It has swept the western world and is sweeping the third-world nations as well. Is it fair to accuse the missionaries of having brought secularism to Nigeria, for instance?

No, secularism is not brought in by the missionaries alone. But missionaries – my colleagues and myself as well – we don't have a philosophy of culture that can put things in perspective for us and by which we can help the Nigerian meet this phenomenon that comes from the West. We help secularism along by default, by presenting a narrow gospel.

It's the age-old question of Christ and Culture.

Yes, which the missionaries resolve either in a bush style or in a pietistic style.

Polygamy is Not Just an Institution

Give me an example of how the missionary approach has in the past violated the demands which this question of Christ and culture places on you.

There was one fellow in one of the churches where I was counselor who was a stranger in the village Rafin Kada (stream of the crocodile). This fellow was appointed chief in his home village of Kente. Well, becoming chief means that you inherit wives or that you are given wives. That is part of the tradition. Now the Nigerian church has always been strongly opposed to any form of polygamy ...

for obvious reasons ...

for obvious reasons, yes. So, the first reaction of the elders was to put this man under discipline. It was only on my insistence that they did not put this man automatically under discipline but that they first went down as a delegation to

talk to him. Now, this man realized that what he had done was not ideal but he pleaded for the understanding of the church. He was hoping to put a Christian imprint on this particular village and to make it possible for Christians in the future to hold this office without becoming polygamous. The church, however, did not accept this reasoning and put him under discipline.

What solution did you have in mind?

My plea was, “Look, let’s give this man a chance; let’s help him; let’s pray for him. Then let’s take it to Classis (church council;” otherwise the local church would be in deep trouble. The local church either did not want that approach or was afraid of the criticism of others in the Classis. I am not sure. At any rate, they put him under discipline. And that means probably that this man will stay under discipline for many many years and maybe sometime he will be excommunicated. Let me add that most *present* missionaries would agree with my approach. What the Nigerian church leaders do today is partially the result of an earlier mission approach and partially the result of Nigerian legalism.

What is the cultural significance of a chief having many wives? Why is that part of their tradition?

For one thing, having many wives is necessary for the chief if he wants to gain the respect of the people. Having more than one wife means you are a man of stature. Secondly, it gives you a chance to have many children. It is considered important that a chief leave many children behind. There is much work to be done I don’t know what role the wives play here.⁴ There are elements of which I am not aware.

Does scripture allow you to defend a more relaxed position on polygamy?

When Nathan the prophet came to King David to tell him that he was the man who had sinned, he made an interesting comment. He said: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul; and I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom.” (RSV) The whole tenor of the passage is that God disapproved of

⁴ That is, whether the women freely enter into this arrangement or whether there is an element of force.

David's act of adultery but not of his having many wives. It's not until the New Testament that we get a more clear indication that God prefers monogamy. But even then it is not that clearly spelled out.

There seems to be a great deal of patience in the scripture with respect to polygamy. There is in Timothy the admonition of Paul that elders and deacons should be husbands of one wife. This passage shows the direction which the church ought to pursue, namely monogamy. But it indicates also that there were those within the church who were polygamous.

We have to realize that monogamy and polygamy are based on views of man and woman. It's not just that this man has two or three wives and these people have only one wife.⁵

You would say that the problem of polygamy has to be faced in a more comprehensive way?

We should not do away with polygamy as an institution, but we should try to undermine the values which are assumed in polygamy. You will find many Christian households where there is only one wife, but where the basic relationship between husband and wife has not really changed all that much.

The reason why you missionaries get stuck is because we in the western world don't do our job. There is no continuity of cultural insight.

Right.

Traditionally, Africans Don't Separate Life and Religion

Would you say that Nigerians are susceptible to an approach that would recognize the unity of human life, culture, and religion?

Traditionally, there is no distinction between religion and culture in Nigeria, or in Africa in general, I am told. Among the Jukun people the cultus⁶ and the rest of life

⁵ There are reasons for these different practices; they are based on the local worldview, including human relations.

⁶ Religious rites and practices.

have always been extremely closely integrated. To them your question would be strange. It's only in the Christian churches that we find some kind of dichotomy.

Only in the Christian churches?

Well, I shouldn't say this, because the Muslims are also getting it now. I told you about the students I met for a whole week. They thought of their Christian lives in terms of prayers, reading scripture, going to church, and of course witnessing to the love of Christ wherever they can. But they did not think in terms of their work. I met a Lutheran student of theology there. He was finished with seminary and was now doing post-graduate work at one of the universities. After I had spoken two or three times at the conference, he came to me in the privacy of my room and confessed that he had had feelings deep in his heart that corresponded to what I had said. However, he had not been able to express his feelings to the church that had sent him to seminary. He was afraid that they would take him out of school and reject him. Nor did he talk to his professors about it out of fear that it might still get back to his church. This to me is an extremely significant incident. That this could happen in Nigerian culture!

I was in one of our mission hospitals where generally speaking they are doing a beautiful job. I watched a fellow come through one of the wards pushing a little cart with medicine. Each bed had an identification mark and on his medicine bottles there were corresponding marks. The fellow was friendly enough as he passed out the medicine to the right patient. But something struck me about the way medicine was handed out. Knowing how in Nigeria medicine and healing have always been much of a spiritual affair, a matter of chasing out evil spirits, trying to placate ancestral spirits, I was shocked to see this in a Christian hospital. It seems to me, any time medicine like this is handed out to a person in that context, it should be accompanied by a prayer, or by some statement. I know there are more things going on in that hospital. There is preaching, But at that moment, when the pill is given, *then* they have to know that this is the power of God working in that pill. If it isn't, that pill isn't going to work. This is part of their whole culture. As far as I am concerned, that was a secular act, done in loving

concern, to be sure, but without the power to make any impression on the pagan receiving it, or any Muslim. The Muslim would pray over it.

The Second Term, 1969-1972

You said that during your first term you kept quiet; you wanted to observe. What did you do when you came back after your first furlough?

After I came back, I prayed to the Lord that He would open a way to me so that I could begin working at some of the things that concern me so much. I had no idea how this would come about. One day, out of a clear blue sky, I got a letter from a fellow whom I did not know very well. "John," he said in this letter, "I have a problem. I am writing about my problem to you because I somehow feel that I can talk to you about it."

In the letter he explained that he had been appointed to a cabinet post by the military government. He wanted to know from me what it meant for him to be a Christian in the government. "How do I serve Christ in the government?" he asked me. What reason could he have had for consulting me? I had never expressed my concerns to him.

I was overjoyed to receive this letter. I could not help thinking that it had come in answer to my prayers. The Lord had a hand in this business. Well, we wrote back and forth and I finally went to visit him. After some discussion we decided that he would contact other Christians who had been placed in a high position and that we would form a study group for a while. We would study the scriptures, we would study literature of other Christians abroad, and in prayer we would try to make up our minds what it means to be in government in Nigeria.

Since it would take a fair amount of my time, I said that I would have to get permission from the Executive Committee of the Mission [a committee then still made up of white missionaries in Nigeria]. Well, I asked the Committee. They called me in and after asking me some questions, passed a secret minute. By "secret" minute is meant a minute that is filed but is never made public. The secret minute says something to the effect that they forbid the Reverend John

Boer from participating in this kind of ministry. The reason they gave me was that it was too dangerous. Nigeria is under military government which forbids political activity. They were afraid that I might endanger the whole mission – the whole mission might be sent home.

I can understand that fear. But then I pointed out to them that I was not forcing myself into the project – I had been asked by a high government official. Secondly, I was not intending to engage in any political action. We were just going to form a study group together. By the time it would come to action I would no longer be involved. But the Executive Committee insisted that it was too dangerous.

Later on, I was told by somebody else that what they thought I was after was to form a Christian political party. I had never talked about that. But, because they know of my views, they assumed that I wanted to set up a Christian political party, something that was far from my mind. They never asked me! And I did not realize that this was in their mind. That was the end of that affair.

How did you respond?

I told them, “I’ll have to think about this a great deal. You may well have driven me home now.” But then I thought later on, “Well, time is still young, maybe other avenues will open.”

The Influence of McGavran

On the part of the Executive Committee there was no real understanding then that mission is as wide as life itself?

Right. In theory they would all say, “The gospel is as wide as life,” but in practice we are all getting more and more into what in missions I call McGavranism. McGavran is a missiologist in California who has made quite an impact on the evangelical world of missions. He insists that missions should concern themselves solely with church growth. If education helps church growth, then have it; if it does not help, don’t have it. If hospitals bring people to the church, establish hospitals; if they don’t help, don’t. He is not against the wider gospel, but he feels

that the missions should not concern themselves with that. That leaves out the whole notion of the Kingdom in missions.

Do missionaries realize that that sort of approach lays the foundation of what the local churches are going to do eventually?

Well, some are not interested in what I have to say. Others say, “Yes, that’s a good idea, but it’s not for me.” Some colleagues express sympathy with my concerns, but none have publicly so expressed themselves. I guess they are wrapped up in internal matters, home board relationships, finances, indigenizing the churches, etc. Deep down they do not share my conviction that our present method is self-defeating in the long run.

There is no unanimity about our task. If a person wants to bring Christ to Africa, the question is not asked, “What does that mean?” If he belongs to the right denomination, he has the proper skills needed for his job, and he passes the psychological tests, he goes. No one is tested on his philosophy of culture or missions, and no one is asked to subscribe to one.

Paul’s Methods Are Not Authoritative

How would you consider the argument that Paul and the other apostles did not sit down to work out a philosophy of culture either; they just went out?

Well, for one thing, I don’t really think it matters so much what they did. I don’t think Paul’s methods are really authoritative for us. Preaching the gospel is. But how Paul did it and how we must do it today are unrelated questions. I have never considered Paul’s methods normative.

O.K., Paul’s methods may be irrelevant in the sense that they should not be copied, but wouldn’t you say that Paul, if he was led by the Holy Spirit, as we believe he was, would also get direction in using a right approach? Is there nothing to be learned?

Eh, yes ... I suppose.

Or was the question of culture less troublesome at that time?

Well, for one thing, Paul was more of an indigenous person than foreign missionaries are these days. We are going to a culture that we don't understand, the assumptions of which we don't share, the experiences of which we can hardly fathom. That's one big difference between us and Paul.

What is another difference?

The second difference is that we are going to countries that have various layers of culture. They've got traditional cultures and they've got secular cultures intruding from the outside. Besides, we are also in a more differentiated culture than was Paul.

Let's go back to ...

Excuse me, there is one more thing I want to say about Paul. This is something that has come to me the last few months, because people do often bring up this question of Paul's methods. I think we should seriously consider what Jesus said about leading us into the Truth. Paul and the other apostles did not have a worked-out strategy, they did not have a mission history, they did not have mission experience; they did as well as they could with the guiding of the Spirit. We have that same Spirit, but we also have a backlog of history. All of this we must use to be led into the Truth.

Other Opportunities Arose

Let's go back to your second term and your hopes to find a new way. You prayed to the Lord, you received a letter from a Christian in government, a letter which you saw as an answer to your prayer. Next thing you know you are not allowed to answer the call for help. Was this the end of your hopes?

No. As I said before, I hoped that other avenues would be opened – and they were opened. I was invited to be the main speaker at a conference of evangelical students. This to me was a test case because there were representatives of the whole Christian community. There were Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Baptists, Anglicans, Lutherans; I believe there were even Roman Catholics. They were Christian leaders on their respective campuses. That's why they were chosen to

attend the conference. In other words, they were the cream of The Christian crop from all Nigerian universities.

Now, they had never heard of a broader scope of the gospel. I tried to relate the search for a new Nigeria to the search for the new Kingdom. I tried to unveil humanism for them as it works itself out in Nigerian government. I spoke on man in industry. All these things together left most of them kind of shocked. It was entirely novel to them. But they were also enthusiastically approving. I wrote a report to my colleagues about this, in which I explained that the enthusiasm can be traced back partly to the fact that these people are African and that they recognize almost instinctively the unity they had lost through the influence of the church.

I had a somewhat similar experience in the Theological College of Northern Nigeria. I spent three nights with students of theology and found that they were equally enthusiastic about the notion of a wider gospel. Subsequent to this I was asked to speak to another group of students on the same issue, but because of my coming furlough I was unable to accept it. All of this shows me that the full gospel clicks with these Christian Africans. And that thrilled me, for that first engagement was a test case for me, and it was the first one that led to these other invitations. The very first night I came to that initial conference, I literally trembled, I was so scared. There are after all a lot of anti-white feelings. It also showed me that, if we are going to do something for a new Nigeria, this is the time to do it.

A Need for Being Plain and Honest

And so you have finished a second term and are on your second furlough. How do people receive you back home? Are you the mythical missionary who is considered to be a rung higher on Jacob's ladder than even the regular North American pastor?

I try not to be. My youngest brother at first avoided me but was later surprised to find out how human I was. I have not really moved around much outside my circle of relatives these first two months. I have been too busy. It is an attitude that I try

to discourage by being as common as I can be, because it is something that gives me the shivers.

So you spit a few times?

Eh, no. Maybe this is one of the reasons I have a beard, I am not sure.

It really makes you look more like the apostle Paul than anything else.

Well, it isn't that I don't want to look like Paul; I just don't want a halo.

So, instead you wear this hairy halo around your chin.

Yes. (we both laughed).

How do you like going around speaking to the people about missions? I understand that's what you missionaries are expected to do during part of your furlough.

Well, I am going on for further studies this coming year; so, I have been relieved of this duty. If they would have asked me to go on deputation work, I would have asked to be relieved. The way I feel right now, I have too many objections to the limitations of our present work that I can't speak with any degree of enthusiasm. I would be dishonest speaking about giving the people a good picture of what we are doing.

There is Always a Barrier

You have been in the bush for six years now with a furlough in between of eight months. Earlier in our interview you said that the Jukuns have a way of making a stranger feel very welcome ... at least at first. Do you feel now that you have come closer to the people you work with?

Yes, and no. The reason I say yes is because when we first came we were suspicious of Nigerians, also of Nigerian Christians and Nigerian pastors. My earliest relationship with the Nigerians was kind of standoffish. I didn't really know how to relate to them. Well, we happened to have some good pastors in our area and some other fine Christians besides pastors too. I have seen them

operate, I have heard them talk and pray, and I have seen them sweat and suffer. I have come to respect the Nigerians, especially some of the pastors. I have tremendous respect for them. I have been able to work with some of them rather closely, *but*, always only up to a certain point. The Jukun people have never defined the point to me, but they have let us know more than once that there is a barrier. This sort of thing hurts. I have had it happen to me that one of the pastors, whom I respect tremendously and who I thought had come as close to me as any of them, told me that after all was said and done, I was a white man. Both of us had been involved in setting up a youth project, and both of us had made a tactical mistake. "Let's forget and forgive," I told him, "and let's get on with the project." Oh no, I was a white man and he was black. He wasn't even going to have coffee with me anymore. "People know that we come here very often and they think that we are revealing all their secrets to you." That really hurts, you know.

Did you tell him that?

I told him that I was a human being like anyone else and that I needed friendship too. "You have your own people." I said, "I haven't. I come from far away and need you to talk to and confide in. If you people don't accept us then who will accept us? How can I live here as a Christian? Without fellowship? That's impossible." I guess they don't realize that white missionaries need friends too. That is partly the fault of the early missionaries because they kept themselves at a distance socially.

A Jukun to the Jukuns?

Is there a difference in living style between the white missionary and the black pastor?

Yes. We live on a European mission station; he lives in a traditional Nigerian compound. We drive a car; he rides a bicycle or a motorcycle. We have a bigger house, we have a fridge, we have a gas stove. We have a minimum, but we do need some of these things to retain our sanity. That does create a difference. But,

they always know that they are welcome at our house at any time. Whenever they come, and the food is ready, they eat with us.

Do you eat with them?

We eat with them. They drink our coffee; we drink their Nigerian beverages.

You may not like this, but I am again going to use Paul as an example. Paul gave good advice, I think, when he said that he was a Greek to the Greek and a Roman to the Roman. Let me ask you now, are you a Jukun to the Jukun?

No. I guess I have to be honest on that one. I think you have to appreciate that. Again, Paul was in a different situation. Although there were no doubt different cultures at that time, there were no *great* differences in technology. He did not go from a so-called developed nation to a so-called developing nation. I assume that the places he visited and the places he came from were economically and technologically much the same. We come from a technologically developed culture that has all kinds of gadgets and conveniences. In the part of Nigeria where we are there are hardly any of these conveniences. Now, you can shed a lot of that stuff, but there are certain conveniences that we do have. We have a fridge. It's a twelve-year-old fridge, but it's a fridge. We have a gas stove. The alternative to having them is that my wife has to go to market every day and has to cook on an open fire. She can now teach in the Bible school, she can also run a wholesale bookshop, and she is free to serve as hostess to our many Nigerian friends as they drop in.

Besides, the Nigerians would consider her crazy to live the way they live. They would not want us to. We do have the same kind of furniture that many of them have. It's locally made, handmade. We have their kids in our house. To me the important thing is, do the Nigerians feel at home in our place? And I think they do. You can adjust only so much without going nuts. The process of adjustment continues as long as one lives there.

They do not have our sense of privacy, for example. Now as much as you want to, you can't completely deny everything you have been brought up with. We need

more privacy than they do. One man, an anthropologist, tried to live like the poor Jukun. His children were running around naked. So, the chief sent him a note saying, "You've got money, dress your kids." His wife just about went nuts. Paul's advice is good; we try to follow it as much as we can.

Reflections of a Feminine "Outsider"

I thought that John's explanation of how they could not be a Jukun to the Jukuns was particularly good and convincing. From the comfort of a modern home in Southern Ontario it is rather easy to kick around such grandiose notions as changing one's living style.

But as I listened to John I began to realize that no one can and should totally deny his upbringing and his culture. All of that has gone into the make-up of the person. To ask for total rejection of one's make-up is to ask for the dissolution of the person involved.

From a conversation I had with John's wife, Fran, I was convinced that they had gone more than half way.

How do you fit in with the Jukun women?

I find it very hard to get close to any of the Nigerian women. I find myself relating well to children. Maybe that's because I am a teacher. The problem I have in getting close to the women stems from the fact that I don't know the local language. We speak the Hausa language, which is the trade language in our area, but few women know much beyond market Hausa and church Hausa. Now that there is a linguist in our station, Bill Evenhouse, who is working on the Jukun language, we may wish to learn the Jukun language, depending on what the future has in store for us. Most Jukun women are illiterate; they don't do any reading; so, there is no common point of interest along that line, either.

What do you like most about Jukun women?

I would say their openness to each other. Although I feel very much left out, I can see that they have very nice relationships with each other, with their co-wives, with their sisters.

Are there no jealousies among the co-wives?

I am sure there are, but this is hard for an outsider to observe. Some polygamous families are happy and some are not, the same as with monogamous families. One Christian woman half jokingly, half seriously, said to me, "I have to work much harder than you do because you have help. I wish my husband would marry another woman."

What do you like least about the ways of Jukun women?

One thing I find very hard to understand is their relationship to their husbands. Our idea of a family, husband and wife participating and doing things together, is not very commonly held, even among Christians. Many women prefer to go their own way, make money at the market, for instance, and this does cause a lot of tension in the family.

I see they have their own brand of women's lib.

In a sense, yes. They must do what their husbands say in one way, and in another way they can do whatever they want to, against the wishes of the husband.

The Problem of Image

Does your stay in Africa put any strain on your family relationships – husband and wife, parents and child?

I think there are likely to be more tensions because you are more dependent on your immediate family. The fact that you're supposed to be kind of an example does not help any. You don't openly fight with your husband the way you probably would here, where it would just be passed off as just a thing you are going through.

The necessary struggles of married life.

Yes.

The situation being what it is, what attempts are you making to show the Jukuns that you are like them?

We try to be as natural as we can ... and to some of our closest friends we do try to explain some of our problems.

Do the women know that you have breasts, or don't they know that yet?

Some suspect that white women don't, because we bottle feed our babies and we don't usually expose our breasts the way they do. You remember the story we told you about the wife of one of the missionaries who was nursing her child in church and how one African woman whispered to the other, "Well, at least she has *one*."

Jukun Frankness and Sophistication

Is there more openness about sex among the Africans?

Yes, especially with the young children. We have a Nigerian girl living with us who is just about twelve years old and who is beginning to develop one of her breasts just a bit. Since she usually dresses topless around the house, the boys tease her about this. They tell her that she won't be able to nurse her children properly. The idea of breasts being necessary for a future mother is drilled into them from the time that they are young. She says she is going to ask her mother for some medicine to put on the one so it will quit growing, until the other starts too. They just joke about this. A little girl in Canada would probably be a bit shy about this.

Yes, and she would probably ask for medicine to make the other one grow instead of stopping the one that is developing.

Right.

Do you object to the term "primitive" when referring to the Jukuns?

I don't like the term. It has too many bad connotations. In their own way they are very sophisticated. We are primitive in their eyes, because we don't know how to

get water out of the well, carry children on our back, and carry big loads of wood on our head.

Would you say that you love the Jukun people?

I love certain members of the Jukun people, especially the little girl that lives with us and her family. They mean an awful lot to us ... and some other families as well. Yes, I would say that I love the Jukun people.

Willingness to Adjust

Would you like to stay in Wukari all your life?

Not in Wukari, no. I would not mind staying in West Africa all my life. I miss many things in Wukari. Besides, Kevin would have to leave home when he goes to school if we stay in the bush ... and I know John would not be happy to stay in Wukari all his life. I guess I am not liberated enough as a woman to ...

To seek happiness apart from your husband?

Yes. If I knew that this is what he wanted to do, I think I could adjust to that situation.

What is it that struck you most when you came back to America this time, things that you knew were there but had forgotten about?

All the things that people have, that seem to be so essential here, like big cars, wall-to-wall carpets, many clothes.

So even if you don't quite live like the Jukuns, you have adjusted to the extent that you don't live like us anymore?

Yes, that's for sure.

I thanked Fran for the necessary woman's angle on life among the Jukuns. We had talked easily, at least whenever Kevin was not clambering on her lap or shouting into the microphone of my tape recorder. Fran is a quiet sort of person, blonde

like John, but sturdy in a different way: she is a great support to John. Much of what she said confirmed what John had said.

Would you say that you live like an upper-class bush Nigerian?

An upper-class bush Nigerian, yes, that's a good way of putting it. We don't live at all at the level of the educated Nigerians in the city.

A Wise but Inflexible Policy

The native preacher does not get the same salary as you do, does he?

No, he gets a lower salary than most Nigerians with comparable education.

Why is that?

The congregations have not yet assimilated the gospel fully, to the extent that they recognize their responsibility in giving. The Christians will pay considerable sums of money when it comes to building a new church building, because that's a matter of prestige. I told one consistory that was planning to add all kinds of fancy things to their new church, "If Christ were to weigh what you do as elders, he's not going to ask you how much money you spent on that church but how well did you take care of your evangelist." They were upset about what I said, but they did not change their plans to embellish the church. The Mission Board does not pay the salary of black pastors. That the Nigerian pastors are paid by their own churches is a result of a widely-held policy that indigenous churches should look after their own pastors as well as after their own evangelists.

That seems like a very wise policy to me.

It is, but to the Nigerians it looks absolutely loveless. They think that there is an endless supply of money in missions and they wonder why it's not being distributed more freely. Of course, this policy should not be applied without some flexibility. There are times that great opportunities for further outreach arise but are not taken because "we cannot change our policy. If you set a precedent, where is it going to lead to?" You hear this all the time. This means in effect that there is a measure of disbelief. Christ tells us that we must live in the world as if

He is coming back anytime. But this method seems to assume that we have all the time in the world, that we can reach people at another time if we cannot reach them now. Some day the Nigerian church will get big enough and rich enough to send people to another area.⁷ In the meantime, many of these pagans are becoming Muslims or simply secular people and they are closing up to the gospel. Even though there is a lot of wisdom behind that policy there is an element of disobedience in it that scares me. Well, these things are being listened to a little more today; some changes appear to be in the air.

Recommendations, Gratitude and Apprehension

What are some of your recommendations for a more integral and helpful mission approach?

Mission boards should work out a set of principles and goals which would guide and bind those who work within the organization. History teaches us that organizations with clear and single goals always achieve much more than those who express their policy ambiguously.

Perhaps missions should hire more specialists, like economists and political scientists, who can assist African Christians in gaining a Christian perspective in specific areas of life. This cannot be done by just one denomination or one board. We have to develop a cosmopolitan atmosphere in missions.

Are you appreciative of the work that has been done in the past?

Yes, I am. I am tremendously impressed by the work of the early missionaries. The physical hardships they had to go through are simply unbelievable. I am appreciative of the comity agreements that have been reached in Nigeria, by which each mission group agrees to limit itself to a certain area, so that there is no competition among denominations. I am also grateful for the ecumenical spirit they have helped to create.

⁷ Writing this footnote in 2015, that situation has been realized since a couple of decades ago, first to other areas within Nigeria but beyond the traditional borders of the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria. During the 21st century, partnering with the CRC mission among them, they have moved beyond the borders of Nigeria to Sierra Leone.

A church has been built. It has been built too much in line with western structures, but nevertheless, it's there. The churches govern themselves and they are free to change as they please. They are fiercely independent. So, it has not been a failure altogether – I am not suggesting that. I am suggesting that the work of missions has not directed itself to the leading influences in Nigerian society and culture. Students, especially, have been neglected, and they are the ones that are the future leaders of Nigeria.

What hope to you have for Nigeria?

I expressed my feelings in my review of Eugene Rubingh's book *Sons of Tiv* in the *International Reformed Bulletin* where I said that if Christ should come back within fifty years, I'd expect that he would meet millions of Africans who would welcome him joyfully. If he should stay away for two hundred years, and the trends continue as they are now, I would think that he would meet very few Africans waiting for Him. Africa will have been largely secularized.

How about Americans and Canadians?

Probably the same thing applies. Straight line thinking is very dangerous, of course. That's why I say, "If trends continue." I am not as optimistic as most missiologists are about Africa.

But hasn't the church survived all these centuries?

Oh, I think there will be a church, but possibly a very weak and small one. In North Africa there used to be a strong church; now there's hardly a church left. The same goes for Asia Minor. The church is indestructible if you look at the church in terms of the whole world, but this is not true for any local church or group of churches.

So, the question of Christ "Will there be any faith left when I return" is still relevant?

Yes. Very much so. That's the question I have for Africa.

A Pregnant Future

John and I concluded our interview with a moment of prayer for the Kingdom of Christ and our place in it. John and his family are going on to Amsterdam, where John hopes to take up studies at the Free University. He wants to study missions, economics, political science and hopefully “culture” as well, all courses which he feels he needs to implement a view of missions that is a bit broader than McGavranism. He assured me that when he speaks of the deficiencies of mission work he speaks of himself as well.

One question that arose in my mind was “What will his third term be like?” Somehow I felt, and still feel, that the Lord has good things in mind for him. There seems to be a pattern of development in his career that smacks of the Lord’s guiding and blessing hand. One term of silence followed by a second term of contacts followed by a year of studies, followed by one, two, who knows how many, terms of fruition?

What struck me most about both John and Fran was the quiet, unpretentious way they had told me about their work. They manifested honesty and simplicity. These qualities they may well have had all their life, I don’t know. But perhaps the Jukun people have added their touch of openness to the souls that were within their gates.

As we said farewell to the Boers, John expressed the following wish, as he shook my wife’s hand: “*Allah ya saukad da ke lafiya.*” Not being a Jukun by birth or contact, and therefore being less frank, I hardly know how to report on this delicate situation. You see, my wife was “in a certain condition” and had been for the last six months, if you know what I mean. What John was saying in effect was ... well, anyway it means ... “May God cause ‘it’ to come down well.” All I can say in response is, “amen, and may John, Fran and Kevin go well as they leave for Europe. May God give John a blessed third term.”

But for Nigeria I have a special wish, scrambled together with the little Hausa I have learned; it’s a wish for a new Nigeria: “*Allah ya saukad da ke lafiya.*”

Reactions to *Vanguard* Interview

1. Letter from Robert L. Carvil, Vanguard Editor

February 13, 1973

Dear John:

I've enclosed some of the reactions we've had so far to the interview. I've also had many positive comments, including one from ABC,⁸ who called to say that he really appreciated the article and that he thought it was just right. Yesterday DEF from ... was in town after having gone to Grand Rapids for a meeting of the Foreign Missions Board. He told me that at the meeting GHI of the ... CRC had asked for and received permission to distribute 50 copies of the issue containing the article. But permission was denied for a discussion of the article/interview because that was a basic matter that had to be put on the agenda beforehand (some old bylaw or something was dug up to justify this). DEF tells me that this Board has let its discussions degenerate into mere technicalities and that seldom is there a discussion of basic policy matters. He also reports that there were different kinds of reactions, including some who thought it was a real eye opener, some who thought it was disgraceful, and some who thought it was interesting. He also reported that Dr. Rubingh gave a very objective presentation of the situation. I also explained to DEF what had happened and the attempted suppression or alterations, etc.

I think that basically most people felt that they had finally found out some truth about the inadequacies as well as the strengths of the Nigerian mission. The defense that Rubingh personally (I think) gave to DEF was that we could not expect more of mission churches and personnel than we did of the churches back home. And are the churches back home all that right and great?

⁸ I will be referring to individuals along this pattern: "ABC," "DEF," etc.

If you'd like, please respond briefly to these charges of condoning polygamy.⁹ Otherwise, let it go. It shows the legalism and pharisaism of the North American conservative Reformed mentality.

2. Letter from John H. Boer

February 20, 1973

Dear GHI & DEF

Just received a letter from *Vanguard* today in which Bob, among other things wrote a sentence or two about what transpired at the recent meeting of the Board of Foreign Missions. He writes that the reaction to my remarks as reported in *Vanguard* varied considerably. Some were to have found the article merely interesting, some disgraceful, while yet others welcomed it as a necessary revelation of mission truths. I should appreciate it if you two men would tell me a few more details as to the reason some thought the remarks to be disgraceful. You don't have to mention any names, for I realize that these meetings are not open and you are expected to keep it reasonably secret as to what transpires in between the often dull minutes.

You two men might be aware – if you read the volumes of missionary reports that must come across your desks – that for several years now I have expressed dissatisfaction with our narrow goals in Nigeria. Also have I expressed this in a 1972 issue of *IRB*, but I never get any reaction from anyone. I wonder whether anyone ever bothers reading our reports and if they do, whether anyone ever takes them seriously. At any rate, I was glad for the opportunity given me by *Vanguard* to express myself in a public forum so that the public might become more aware of weaknesses that ought to be corrected and thus *force* the authorities in the board and office to consider these issues. What used to be missionary council in Nigeria was seldom inclined to deal with more than immediate little problems and I suspect that the same is true for the Board.

⁹ See letter number 4 below.

Among other things, according to my opinion, the mission needs first of all spell out clearly its goals. It is nothing short of irresponsibility to fail to do so and is doing the churches we serve in Nigeria a terrible disservice by our lack of clear goals and philosophy. This means the mission goes with the prevailing wind, the clearest example of which is the history of theological education. Secondly, the board as well as all its personnel must become more aware of and sensitive to the historical, political and economic context in which missions are carried out, including the problems of colonialism, neo-colonialism and their effects. We need to worm our way into the universities. My experience is that there are many Christian students eager to do their bit for Christ, but prevented by narrow visions and lack of leadership. They consequently turn into largely “secular Christians” who will give leadership to Nigerian society. Our narrow mission goals defeat the purpose of our whole program in the long run.

I am just throwing out a few thoughts and problems, but could go on for a long time. The Lord willing, I hope to write about some of them after we settle back in Nigeria. My question to you men is: what are your suggestions now to get the discussion going? I am not interested in needless controversy. We need change. What ideas do you have to help bring this about? I have my insights from Nigeria, but you are on the other side of policy making. Is there some joint action we can take? What can you do and what, in your estimation, should I do together with possibly a couple of like-minded colleagues in Nigeria?

3. Letter from Pastor DEF

March 6, 1973

Dear John,

I am very happy with your letter. I do read the reports hurriedly and notice that your struggles and W. Evenhouse's¹⁰ do somewhat stand out. Yet it is difficult to get a picture one can tie into from the reports in such a way that action can be

¹⁰ William Evenhouse, son of Henry Evenhouse, former General Secretary of the CRC Board of Foreign Mission.

taken. About the best a guy can expect from reports is that a delegate begins asking questions. So your letter and your article in *Vanguard* are most helpful.

What your article did in the board meeting is a step in the right direction. GHI asked for permission to distribute the issue of *Vanguard* in question and asked for a discussion on it. The board voted not to discuss the article. In the discussion, Gene Rubingh gave the essence of the article (after the vote was taken I believe) and an ancient minute was dug up saying that the executive board must take care of the technical matters in their monthly meetings, as much as possible leaving the board free to decide policy etc. when it meets in January. This is a positive result opening the way for the board to have to consider many of the things it now simply (conveniently?) has no time for.

Concerning the spelling out of goals. It seems that our missions have grown somewhat like Topsy. As needs and opportunities presented themselves and the talents to meet these needs were discovered among us, we went forward. Even today a particular program in a given situation depends on the abilities of the missionaries. I think of our work in Argentina where two of our six men are or were quite heavily involved in teaching. I agree that more thought should be given to goals and bases, that we as CRC are all ears on organization and technical matters and tend to get sleepy when the more basic issues come up. It seems that you will have to keep on laying out before the powers that be the issues involved. And if you do it in a way that is not impeded by personal frustration, it will be blessed. In the meantime you will have to work according to your world and life view where you are. If you feel we are too one-sidedly in the bush and not nearly enough in the cities and universities, make a case for it with us. I don't mind standing up and being heard, but I've got to be informed and know what I'm talking about.

4. Letter from Robert L. Carvil, Vanguard Editor

February 13, 1973

Dear Dennis (Dennis Ryan, Australia)

I don't have it before me now, but I believe that I saw a passage in one of your letters where you took issue (and thought your readers would take issue) with John Boer's position on polygamy in the context of the Jukuns of Southeast Nigeria where he works as a missionary. I don't find either any historical relativism or any endorsement of polygamy. I do find, however, a recognition that to introduce revolutionary proposals, thus creating a tremendous cultural dislocation, can sometimes be more crippling than the sinful practice of the ages. But it is clear from the passage that Boer believes that monogamy is the norm which must be obeyed and striven for. When he points out that evidently some people in Corinth had more than one wife, his interpretation may or may not be suspect. I think you may have a point here. I feel that he is right when he says that you have to change people's hearts and then their moral attitudes before you can expect immediate cultural change. Don't attack the institution itself so much as the underlying attitudes and rationale.

5. Letter from Dennis Ryan

February 20, 1973

Dear Bob (Robert Carvill)

...

Of course Boer is right in saying that people's hearts must be changed before expecting an immediate cultural change. I don't think anyone would dispute that. But I can't agree that there is no endorsement of polygamy. Why else would Boer make nonsense of the David/Nathan episode (p.8, col. 3)? His conclusion that God disapproved of David's adultery but not his polygamous retinue inherited from Saul is reached without a proper application of hermeneutical principles. It is clear that simply because God does not spell out His disapprobation of each and every breach of His law, it does not mean He condones the breach. Surely the statement of the Lord Jesus to the Pharisees in Matthew 19:8 must apply with

equal force to David's many wives. What on earth do the commandments re adultery and coveting another's wife mean if God condones polygamy?

On page nine, column one, Boer gratuitously infers that there is ("seems to be") "a great deal of patience in the scripture with respect to polygamy." Brother, the Scriptures are *not* a nose of wax, that we can shape them according to our own particular predilections. Boer is way out to infer condonation of polygamy from Paul's injunctions to elders and deacons. If he mosey's along using that kind of hermeneutical principle he'll end up with three wives himself, on the basis that he's not an elder or a deacon, but a missionary, thus exempt from Paul's instructions.

...

But my objection is that Boer will not own that God does not condone polygamy; rather, attempting to defend the obviously long and protracted acceptance of the gospel, he won't face up to the fact that the thing is wrong, but tries to make it more or less harmless by saying God doesn't really mind that much. But if Boer sees in I Timothy 3 a patience with polygamy, what does he make of Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3? Especially Ephesians 5:23, which clearly assumes that there is *one* husband and *one* wife. Also, Peter adjures husbands to give honour to the wife as the weaker vessel, though she is still a *joint-heir* of the grace of life.

May I have a last word on the David/Nathan affair? I would like Boer to sit down quietly and read Deuteronomy 17:14-20, with a special emphasis on verse 17. Incidentally, chapter 24 of the same book verses 1-7, ought to be a reasonable indication of God's view of marriage. I already mentioned, in my letter to John, that it seems clear that Genesis 2:24, both alone and in juxtaposition with Matthew 19:4-6, cannot allow the kind of loopholes Boer would like to find.

Well, Bob – if nothing else, the Boer article has given me a much-needed stimulus to look again into some of the Scriptures that I often don't look at. So I'm grateful to him. Also, I wish to go on record as stating that I am not opposed to Boer's conclusions, so much as his eisegetical method of arriving at same.

...

6. Letter from John H. Boer

March 12, 1973

Dear Bob (Robert Carville, Editor)

...

I must confess to being greatly surprised by the re-occurring emphasis in Dennis Ryan's letter that he finds me endorsing polygamy in the interview. It is, I would think, more than abundantly clear from my responses to Witvoet's questions that I consider monogamy as the Christian form of marriage. If Ryan does not recognize that basic note, anything else I say on this issue will not convince him either. Thus, I refer him once again back to the original!

There is, however, a necessary distinction Ryan fails to make, namely the distinction between approving monogamy and the methods employed to establish it as the normal and recognized form in a Christian community emerging from a polygamous tradition. History has demonstrated the exceeding difficulties obstructing this process. Studies have been made of rather arbitrary locations with respect to this question. In a Uganda congregation under the influence of a mission that has insisted on monogamy for almost a century and where the official stand of the local church has coincided with that of the mission, the Christian laity has in practice refused to accept monogamy as normative. In a similar study of a Togo Christian congregation the result is identical. The Ghanaian Christian sociologist Dr. Busia indicates that in Ghana the same situation prevails. My own pastoral experience in Nigeria also confirms these findings. In some cases Christians practice polygamy, but experience it as a fall into sin, the temptation of which is too strong to resist. In many more cases Christians simply have not accepted the normativity of monogamy. I believe it fair to say, on basis of my own experience, that a substantial percentage of Christian monogamists in Nigeria adhere to the institution only for a legalistic reason: the church demands it. In many such marriages the basic relationship between husband and wife does not differ much from polygamous marriages. Then what has been gained? The shell of a Christian marriage form. Some gain, no doubt, but at the unnecessary exclusion

of literally thousands, if not millions (!), whose basic idea of the marriage relationship is identical to that of their monogamous neighbours and who share their desire for joining the Body of Christ.

As a missionary pastor one is driven to study the Scriptures on such matters and finds that indeed an amazing degree of patience is displayed throughout its pages, but especially in the OT, with respect to this problem. Understand for once and for all: not approval, but patience. I don't believe I made nonsense of the David-Nathan scene where the Revised Standard Version of the Bible has it that God "gave" David the wives of his predecessors! This is an amazing passage, but we must remember that it is not basically concerned with the question of polygamy, but with a specific series of sins involving adultery, lies, scheming and "legal" murder. For the purpose of this discussion, the passage is a useful example of the "careless" way in which the OT treats polygamy. Though in the creation accounts, i.e. the pre-fall situation, monogamy is quite clearly considered normative, in the subsequent prophetic-historical accounts the OT does not make an issue of the matter.

Ryan would also have me study Deuteronomy 17 with special emphasis on verse 17. A victory gained by making one's partner's arguments appear ridiculous is cheaply gained. Nevertheless, I cannot suppress the question: does God expect any such future king to limit himself to *one* horse? To ask the question is to answer it. The same holds true for the multiplying of wives. In *that* context of oriental despots it was not a question of having one or more wives, but rather of having a relatively few or a host like Solomon's. Again, this passage does not basically deal with the question of polygamy. The three items: horses, wives and wealth are adduced as specific and likely examples of dangers to be avoided as tending to move a king to further his own glory rather than God's.

Again, Ryan directs my attention to Deuteronomy 24:1-7, a passage that, according to Ryan, gives us "a reasonable indication of God's view of marriage." In his letter, the brother also refers to Jesus' statement on this matter (Matthew 19:8) which indicates quite clearly the principle I seek to establish, namely a tolerance on the part of God with the realities of human existence in a concrete

context. Rather than attempting to legislate a social evil out of existence, God sought to regulate it and thus to take the worst sting out of a bad situation. God did not play the part of an iconoclast, but because of the hardness of their heart, He allowed a situation He did not basically appreciate, simply because the new rule was already quite revolutionary at that stage. One could describe God's approach as incremental rather than revolutionary or iconoclastic.

In the NT the preference or normativity of monogamy receives stronger expression and Ryan adduces certain relevant passages, but the element of patience remains. Not every Christian was above reproach, not every Christian was temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, even through these were considered standard apparently. Certainly one aspiring to the office of bishop should be characterized by all of these things (I Timothy 3). The passage implies that not everyone lacking this combination of characteristics would be placed under discipline or excommunicated. And monogamy was one of these virtues.

The reasons for polygamy may well vary, but in its Nigerian form I find that it is often based on male chauvinism that leads men to reduce women to objects furthering the husband's economic status or his prestige. It is an institution that allows the male to gratify his sexual desires in a cultural context that denounces as immoral two births within two years for very practical and pressing economic reasons. Frequently polygamy is not an intolerable situation for the wives involved, because they share the assumptions of male chauvinism. It is no cause for surprise that educated Nigerian women reject the institution, for they have rejected its basis: male chauvinism. And *that* is where the church needs to join battle. Simply toppling the superstructure is of limited value; we must hack away at this foundation.

Nudging away at this foundation requires also to teach and make available suitable means of birth control, which many missions are in fact doing. Then the African Christian, at least those that do not regard western talk about birth control as the latest subtle imperialist trick to retain world dominance, can have the opportunity of satisfactory relationships with his wife without being offensive by breaking a taboo imposed upon him by economic situations. Better still, as

western (and that includes Australia for the purpose of the discussion) Christians we should seek to break the economic powers in our respective countries, the powers that are partly responsible for the need of such taboos. And now I am talking about neo-colonialism. You see, all of these world problems are related to each other.

However, in spite of all the arguments on our part, the decisions are no longer in the hands of westerners, missionaries or otherwise. The decisions from now on will be made by the national churches called into existence by the Holy Spirit through the missionary agencies from the west. Nigerian church leaders, for example, tend to ignore missionary advice on the issue under discussion. After all, the missions were the first to insist on the present legalistic method of combating polygamy while the African deep down has not accepted its normativity. I am not now referring to my own mission, which is a relatively recent arrival, but to missions that began at the turn of the nineteenth century.

In short, the normativity of monogamy is beyond question, but how to establish monogamy as a recognized norm is quite another problem. All my personal experience as mission pastor, my readings in missiology, and my understanding of the scriptural data converge upon the conclusion that a drastic mistake has been made one hundred and seventy years ago, drastic because it has unnecessarily excluded many for the official Body of Christ.

7. Letter from JKL, a Senior CRC Missionary

January 26, 1973

Dear John & Fran

...

The condemnation of earlier work is easily done and evidently needs no evidence to substantiate it. To the casual reader this may make you appear to be quite bright but can hardly be justified.

But what was far more troubling was your treatment of Paul the Apostle. I think your questioner was not too happy either from the way he responds and later returns to the subject. If we dispose of Paul's activities as being relevant to his own times only, it appears that we remove much of *Acts of the Apostles* and of his letters from the realm of Holy Writ to a piece of ancient history no longer pertinent or inspired for the 20th Century. If this is so what have you done to the Bible as being *now* the Word of God?

One more comment: You speak of being restrained on a particular project by the Nigeria field council, but then tell of public appearances where you promoted the interference of foreigners (yourself as one of them) in the political affairs of a nation not your own. Did you clear this with the Mission Board? For your present studies you declare to be with the purpose of carrying on with this project which is unacceptable to Nigeria field council and certainly to the Nigerian Government. How do you feel about this in its ethical implications?

...

8. Letter from John H. Boer

February 7, 1973

Dear JKL,

...

I appreciate your remarks and questions with respect to the *Vanguard* interview. In the interest of friendship, I will not go into your remarks about my appearing to be bright to the ignorant. The aim of that article was hardly to establish that and if you look at it in that context, you have not caught my central concern, a concern I have expressed on various occasions, also in your presence, if I am not mistaken, during the in-service conference last summer. Neither was this interview a "condemnation of earlier work." I re-read the interview with that statement in mind and find no justification for that interpretation. Criticism and condemnation are almost opposites. It is true, of course, that, except for the issue of theological training, almost all in-house publications regarding our CRC mission work have

been very positive and complimentary, not to say propaganda. The constituency hardly knows of any of the real problems that exist, but they have a right to know them. They have a right to hear criticism from the inside. Every human endeavour is open to criticism, and missions is no exception. Why should missions be treated as a holy cow? When I was a seminary student, many of us were turned off by the sweets handed out by the mission board. We realized that life simply is not that romantic or heroic. The facts and the problems are not only those of missionaries and office personnel, but they are also of the constituency that supports and, hopefully, prays for us. It is my opinion that they have been – dare I say it? – deceived/misinformed by the one-sided information they have been fed through the years. Finally, if you think such criticism is of the evil one, you should read men such as John Taylor, the secretary of the CMS, and Hendrik Kraemer, a world famous missiologist of this century, both of which have mercilessly criticized missions and their results. And, though my criticism does not arise from reading them, I find subsequently, that some of their merciless criticisms are very similar to mine. Looking backwards, I guess I find myself in the company of angels!

My treatment of Paul – I think I can be short about that by pointing out that you and I are closer than you may have imagined. There is no arguing against the fact that SUM/CRC has not followed Paul's mission methods. He knows no stations, schools, hospitals, building departments, etc. I don't think Paul's methods are authoritative for us today and, apparently, neither does CRC. And that, I imagine, would include you.

Political activity – I have never advocated missionary political...¹¹

As to what is unacceptable to the mission or CRC denomination, that can be changed. The present policies have been developed from the opinions of various people. Opinions and policies can change, and that is one of the reasons I agreed to submit myself to this interview. Opinions at home must be changed, that is opinions of the constituency. It is anyone's perfect right to attempt that. Now, you may not agree with my opinions, but you can hardly deny me the right to holding them or to seek to influence the constituency.

¹¹ For some inexplicable reason the rest of this paragraph is missing.

I realize that in this interview I stuck my neck out and that there would be adverse comments. That holds true for any public utterance. I also realize that when folk disagree, they will often impute false motives. However, I ask you not to agree, though that would be nice, but at least to understand my concern, one that I share with no small minority, both inside and outside the CRC.

I trust that we understand each other a bit. You have been frank and so have I. That's the way it should be between brothers in Christ.

9. Letter from John Hamilton (Maryland, USA)

January 27, 1973

Dear Bob,

...

You should have seen me, absolutely ecstatic and waving the *Vanguard* around in Sunday School the next morning, using it as an example of being an agent of the kingdom (everywhere!). (Later I read it more thoroughly though, and will reluctantly have to refrain from handing out copies of that issue, with the apparent historical relativistic view on polygamy.)

...

January 29, 1973

10. Letter from a college friend and CRC pastor

Dear John & Fran,

Here I looked in the magazine *Vanguard* and whose "tronie" stares me in the face? Yes sir, John Boer. I had to look twice but it was you alright, beard and all. I

enjoyed reading the article of a “rebel” for God’s sake. I do not know whether the article reflected in detail your personal opinion nor would I want to give a judgment about the Nigerian situation. All I can say, and I mean this with all my heart, that God will give you the vision, the wisdom and courage as well as an open door to bring about something of what you are talking about in that article.

...