

## INTRODUCTION

During my time in seminary I read a book called *Translating the Message* by Lamin Sanneh. The book was heady, dry, slow-going, and in general, a tough read. And yet, it is perhaps the single most influential work that lies behind this current book. At a bird's eye view, Sanneh's thesis is that wherever Christian missionaries have gone, they have *not* destroyed culture through aggressive practices (a common misconception), but rather, the reverse is true. While horrific practices like 'foot binding' in China or Sati (burning widows alive with their deceased husbands) in India have been subverted, the best aspects of any given culture haven't been destroyed, but preserved and redeemed. How could this be? In part, this is to credit the essence of the Christian message which is meant to be translated. Jesus' earthly ministry in first century Palestine was likely in Aramaic. Yet the New Testament was written in Greek. Why? Because the message of Christianity bears with it the presupposition that it is translatable. It is translatable because it is a transcendent message that is true for all times and all places, and in particular, for *all* cultures.

When it comes to the military culture of our day, I see many noteworthy and admirable cultural features, artifacts, and rituals. But it also has many barriers that have made it

resistant to the Christian message. This is ironic, because on the one hand the military borrows many Christian truths, while simultaneously distancing themselves from where those truths are derived. My two greatest concerns are 1) the alarming rate at which veterans are taking their own lives and 2) the disengagement of our military culture. I believe firmly that reaching active-duty, reserve service members and veterans is primarily an issue of the translation of the gospel. The issue of veteran suicide, in my estimation, is not an isolated anomaly of the military. The complexities of the military subculture isolate its members from Christian engagement and increase the same problems everyone else in the West is facing. In other words, veteran suicide (for example) is a greater problem in the military versus its civilian counterpart because of the cultural complexities that exasperate the pressures upon current or prior service members. To be clear, what is taking place in the military is also taking place outside of it. Suicides are on the rise, and for many of the same reasons (as will be discussed in chapters nine and fifteen). Thus, the way forward I propose and hope to demonstrate in translating the gospel is not an isolated suggestion unique to a particular kind of suicide. With some minor adjustments, suggestions can be applied to the broader population.

As for the format of this book, it follows an order. Chapter Two retells the story of my friend Kytte Yund, who took his own life. His story is exemplary and serves as a template for how and why many veteran suicides take place. While there are always exceptions, his story demonstrates many of the key factors behind veteran suicide while simultaneously debunking the misconceptions about suicide always being tied to combat experience and PTSD (though it sometimes is; this will be discussed in chapter sixteen). Chapters Four through Six and Eighteen very intentionally follow a framework of 'Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation,' the outline of the story of Scripture told through the rubric of

*Semper Fidelis*. The purpose behind this is to emphasize the need for reconciliation. Reconciliation is a word flippantly thrown around (in discussion of race, for example) and can be misunderstood. Reconciliation possesses two dimensions, one vertical and one horizontal.

Vertical reconciliation is the need for the creature to be reconciled to the Creator. This 'being made right' and securing peace with God is the priority (as will be discussed in Chapter Eight). A horizontal reconciliation is what occurs in light of the vertical. While the vertical reconciliation makes us right with God, the horizontal describes the effects and the implications that vertical reconciliation has for our lives. So, while Chapters Four through Six and Eighteen are more neatly focused on this vertical aspect of reconciliation, the intervening chapters examine its horizontal implications. Chapters Seven through Seventeen also seek to unpack the cultural complexities that have made the causes and solutions of veteran suicide difficult to understand.

Throughout the book I have intentionally scaled the language barrier between military culture, particularly the Marine Corps' own dialect, and that of the civilian world. The military speaks another language of acronyms, slang, and borrowed vernacular. The Marine Corps derives many of its terms from Navy nomenclature and customs that have, like other words in the English language, ceased to refer to one thing and now apply to another. I have defined and translated every term and acronym that was necessary to the story without which it would not have been understood. This 'translation' work is necessary, but it is, at best, supplemental to hearing the stories in their context that give meaning to the challenge veterans, active-duty or otherwise, face. I have included a glossary of terms in the back of the book to help readers.

While I will readily admit I am not a psychologist, statistician, medical doctor, or non-profit founder of an organization focusing outreach to veterans, I believe this

book has something to offer. It demonstrates that the impulse of our 'solutions' has produced a niched society that is overspecialized and non-communal. Here is one of the sub-theses of this book in terms of horizontal reconciliation: Facebook has more to do with veteran suicide than combat or PTSD does. To riff in the same direction of Sebastian Junger's recent work, *Tribe*, the problem isn't with 'them' (veterans) as much as it is with 'us' (society as a whole). To be more pointed than Junger, our biggest problem doesn't lie within society as much as it rests in the chasm between a holy God and His image-bearing creatures.