

FURTHER REFLECTIONS



How Is Missions Working Out For You? Part 2

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In the last issue, I asked the question: Since 86% of the Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists of the world do not know a Christian personally, what should we do?

Or better, what should we do *differently*?

The point from Ralph Winter's Lausanne 1974 presentation that most people remember now is the concept of the unreached. Winter was "raising the flag" of cultures without churches. It became a rallying cry of mission efforts since then. More recently, people have put a new twist on it, in part because Christians want something "new" and exciting...not something from the 1970s or 80s.

But, the problem *is*, that the problem *is* ... still there.

In 1974, a part of the "shock" was that there were some 2.3 billion individuals in thousands of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist (and other) people groups without a church. But the bigger surprise was that current efforts were 1) not touching this need at all, and 2) it would take a whole new kind of evangelism—cross-cultural evangelism—to reach them. Winter said that when people come to Christ it:

... inevitably take(s) place as the result of some Christian witnessing to a near neighbor, and that is evangelism. The awesome problem is that the additional truth that most non-Christians in the world today are not culturally new neighbors of any Christians, and that it will take a special kind of "cross-cultural" evangelism to reach them.¹

In other words, the evangelism task almost always occurs within cultures where the church exists. Most believers in good churches know about evangelism (at least theoretically!). But they

don't know—and aren't expected to know—what it is like to have the gospel break through into a *new* culture, what we call "frontier missions."

So, those who become global workers from our churches have few experiences to prepare them to understand how evangelism and church planting might happen in a totally new, different culture. They have never seen it in their own culture! Nor do they usually have much experience in understanding their own culture enough to know which elements of that culture and church life are biblically based and which are culturally based.

What Winter went on to say in 1974 was that no matter *where* the missionary was coming from—America, Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America—the difference in culture between them and the unreached was so significant that it required a special kind of evangelism. This "cross-cultural evangelism" would take into account a deep understanding of the receiving culture and also take seriously evaluating and understanding the sending culture—both secular and cultural elements.

Certainly, today, more and more workers have experiences that make it easier to do this difficult work. Sometimes it is merely that they know how to work hard in life (like farmers!). Or perhaps they already know more than one language, which can make learning another easier. Perhaps they are bi-cultural, and thus understand more than one culture in depth.

But no matter what, there are new things to learn about the unreached. Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist cultures are distant from anyone who was not raised within them. So, what Winter was saying was

that we need a whole new kind of cross-cultural evangelism that goes deeper than what we have needed to do in most mission work up to this point.

In the last paragraph of his talk in Lausanne 1974, Winter added suggestions about what this "new" kind of evangelism might look like:

Jesus died for these people around the world. He did not die to preserve our Western way of life. He did not die to make Muslims stop praying five times a day. He did not die to make Brahmins eat meat. Can't you hear Paul the Evangelist saying we must go to these people within the systems in which they operate? True, this is the cry of a cross-cultural evangelist, not a pastor. We can't make every local church fit the pattern of every other local church. But we must have radically new efforts of cross-cultural evangelism in order to effectively witness to 2387 million people, and we cannot believe that we can continue virtually to ignore this highest priority.²

How serious are we to see the "obedience of faith" among all the Gentiles on behalf of his name (Romans 1:5)? Are we serious enough to be sure that 1) we are careful to follow the Scriptures, and; 2) we are willing to let our culturally-bound understanding of Christ and the Bible go if necessary, for the sake of the gospel itself? Are we willing—even desirous—to encourage those coming to Jesus Christ from radically different cultures to determine themselves how they will follow the Scriptures in their context?^f

1 Winter, Ralph D. 1975. *The Highest Priority: Cross-cultural Evangelism*. In *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, edited by J. D. Douglas. Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 213.

2 *Ibid.*, 241.