

What Have We Learned From 200 Years of Doing Missions?

Various Leaders Share Their Views

Raising the sails for the wind of the harvest

STEVE SMITH, CHURCH PLANTER AND CO-AUTHOR WITH YING KAI OF *T4T: A DISCIPLESHIP RE-REVOLUTION*

From the days of Carey until now, missionaries have continued to refine ways to implement biblical expectations for God's kingdom to come fully to unreached peoples. Each generation of missions has moved forward in the journey toward appropriate expectations and models of reproducing evangelism, discipleship, church-planting and leadership development. In their quest to learn appropriate biblical, cross-cultural ministry patterns, missionaries have steadily moved from paternalistic models to empowering models, albeit with setbacks and hiccups along the way.

Reliving the movements of Acts has moved from a remote possibility to a realistic faith-filled expectation with each generation. To believe that we have arrived would be a naïve assumption. However, what we have learned in 200 years of missionary history is bearing fruit in unprecedented ways. We have learned more deeply that God's heart is to ignite kingdom movements that result in

multiplying generations of disciples and churches similar to the book of Acts. The number of true church-planting movements characterized by 4th+-generation disciples and churches continues to grow at a rapid pace, limited no longer by continent, worldview or religion.

We have grown in faith that our Father has prepared a harvest already in every people group. We know that he has sent us out as harvesters. What we have learned in addition to faith is an assortment of best practices of evangelism, discipleship, church-planting and leadership development that are better enabling us to posture ourselves to cooperate with the Spirit of the harvest. Acts-like movements are no longer a distant reality or occasional anomaly. We have come to expect that the Spirit is blowing and that we can raise appropriate sails of ministry to move with Him to see 30-, 60- and 100-fold fruit. We do not cause it, but we expect it because of greater understanding of the Spirit of the harvest.

There is much to celebrate two hundred years later

PAUL PIERSON, PROFESSOR EMERITUS, FULLER SEMINARY

The Great Growth of the Church Around the World.

It is now widely recognized that two-thirds of all active Christians live in what were formerly considered "mission fields," that is, in Asia, Africa and Latin America. And the church is still growing more rapidly than the population.

- Furthermore, with few exceptions, those churches are strongly biblical and evangelical. That is, they are Christocentric and believe strongly in the historic Christian faith.
- The growth of the cross-cultural missionary movement from Asia, Africa, and Latin America is, I believe, the most important fact since Carey sailed for India in 1793. No longer can the Christian faith be seen as a "Western religion." Its universal nature, the fact that the gospel is for all races, languages, cultures is being more clearly seen as it is being communicated

by men and women of a myriad of races and cultures. The promise to Abraham and the picture seen in Revelation 7 are being fulfilled!

- There is much greater sensitivity to cultures than before; through the study of anthropology and missionary experience, we recognize that every culture has within it elements that can be used to communicate and live the gospel. To become Christian does not mean to become Western.
- The growing understanding of two important theological concepts undergirds mission today; the *Missio Dei*, and the Kingdom of God.

The Missio Dei reminds us that the mission is God's mission. He is ceaselessly active in ways and places we can never fully anticipate. We are called to participate in His mission. It is His, not ours, and we can trust Him to bring it to completion.

The Kingdom of God. Jesus brought the Kingdom into history, a new reality. And God is working to establish His Kingdom. This concept, which is profoundly biblical, enables us to overcome the false dichotomy between evangelism and ministries of compassion and social transformation, and to embrace the ministries of the Holy Spirit and power that our Pentecostal and Charismatic colleagues have rediscovered.

Issues to Be Faced in our Changing Era

We need to recognize that we have entered a post-denominational era in much of the world, and that this will be a growing tendency in the future. Our traditional Western denominations were formed around 16th- or 17th-century issues, no longer relevant in missionary contexts, (if they ever were).

We need to be clear in our definition of mission. I define mission as the communication of the Good News of Jesus Christ with the purpose of calling men and women to become His disciples and be formed into worshipping, nurturing, witnessing, serving communities called churches. These communities should become centers of witness and service in their own societies and beyond, including ministries of compassion and hope-fully, social transformation.

- It is important to focus on *discipleship*, seeking to plant churches and form believers who grow beyond conversion to maturity in personal and corporate life, the inner life with Christ, the Christian community, and the world beyond. For example, how do we address the fact of Rwanda, where “revival” had taken place earlier? Or the rapid growth of the Church in sub-Saharan Africa, where there is still great political corruption?
- *Globalization and Migration.* Cross-cultural mission is now from everywhere to everywhere. I am a pastor of the Hollywood Presbyterian Church. We have around 15 nations every Sunday in worship—and probably

120 languages spoken within two or three miles of the church. One of our former students, Magdy, from Egypt, was expelled from a Middle Eastern country, and now he is evangelizing Muslims near a large university in the United States with impressive results.

- *The focus on transformation that goes beyond but begins with evangelization.* Transformation will no doubt mean different things in various contexts, but should include gender equality, care of children and minorities, health care for the poor, etc.
- *Contextualization and “insider movements”*—new forms of the church. The recognition of the values that exist in every culture.
- The need for *partnerships and greater cooperation.*
- The need for *new methods of selecting and training leaders for the growing churches*, especially among the poor. This should include both institutional and non-institutional models, training men and women in the context of their ministries.
- *A theology of power.* Power is the most important religious category in most traditional religions. We have not paid enough attention to its importance.
- The need for a more *biblical theology of the church*, its nature and purpose. We must have mission at the heart of our ecclesiology.
- The *theology of the Kingdom of God* should be at the center of our thinking along with the *Missio Dei*. It provides a framework for a more biblical understanding of evangelism (called to become citizens of the Kingdom), the need to embrace and express the values of the Kingdom (justice, concern for the poor, etc.) and provides a scope for the Charismatic emphases, the gifts of the Spirit, power (since the Kingdom has already come, although not fully, in the coming of Christ).

Obeying the Great Commission: Are We There Yet?

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Obeying the Great Commission: Are We There Yet?

We do not know who was the first person to attempt to quantify Jesus’ Great Commission, but we know the voyages of Captain Cook and the stories of the lands he explored stirred the heart of an English cobbler named William Carey. Taking time away from his shoemaking, Carey made himself a globe out of left-over shoe leather and used the latest information to estimate the number of people on earth who needed the gospel. Where Carey could, he

used population figures, and for areas where these were unknown he guessed, using estimated population densities and areas to calculate the population. In addition to showing that there were hundreds of millions of people who had never heard the gospel, Carey also argued that Christians needed to make special efforts to reach people for Christ. Roman Catholics had long felt the missionary call, but Carey’s 1792 book mobilized Protestants as never before to preach Christ to the unevangelized. The next year, when Carey himself led a small team to India, his example gave new force to his facts and his arguments,

and inspired hundreds to follow his lead. At least a dozen missionary agencies were started, and churches were planted along the coasts of Africa, India and China.

The clear-sighted goal of this first era of Protestant missions work was to plant the Church on native soil with native pastors, and then reassign the missionaries to the regions beyond. However in 1865, Hudson Taylor, a missionary to China, was brooding over statistics, charts and maps. He realized that the Church had indeed been planted in many nations, but after beginning to raise up native pastors, the missionaries were not being reassigned to the regions beyond. Many missionaries felt the inland areas were too hard to reach or too dangerous for foreigners. Driven by a strong sense of call, Taylor adopted Chinese dress and headed for the interior. The China Inland Mission he founded set the pattern for 40 other missions that shared his calling to seek out lost souls for Christ, no matter how far away they were or how hard to reach. This second era of Protestant missions culminated in the Student Volunteer Movement, which by 1930 had sent more than 20,000 missionaries overseas, supported by perhaps half a million believers at home.

The success of this second era of Protestant missions led many to conclude that the Great Commission was complete and the missionary task accomplished. Of course no one thought Jesus' work on earth was done, but many seriously believed that since the Church was planted in almost every nation-state, local believers could finish the task. Many new independent nations emerged. Since the colonial powers were withdrawing, in the 1950s there was a call for a missionary moratorium in recognition of the strength of national churches.

In light of this Christian triumphalism, in 1974 Billy Graham convened an international congress on world evangelism in Lausanne. One of the questions to be answered at this congress was "How much of the missionary task yet remains?" Charged with answering this question was a missionary to Guatemala who was teaching at the Fuller School of World Mission, Ralph Winter. In a voice that rarely rose above a whisper, Winter answered the question in a way that rocked the Christian world. Drawing on the work of Cameron Townsend, founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators, and of Donald McGavran, the discoverer

of people movements, Winter pointed out that most of the non-Christians in the world of his day could not be reached by normal forms of evangelism. Winter argued that when Jesus told his disciples to make disciples of every *ethne* he was not commissioning them to reach every political nation, but every ethnic group. He asserted that the reason the Church misunderstood its task was "people blindness." People blindness prevents a church from seeing the hundreds of separate ethnic groups that reside within a nation-state. People blindness also keeps missionaries from seeing that a local church within one ethnic group cannot simply use ordinary evangelism to reach people in a neighboring but different group. Special cross-cultural evangelism must be employed if that different group is to hear about Jesus in a meaningful way.

So revolutionary was Winter's address that one of the experts whom the conference asked to comment on his paper did not grasp his idea, even though he had studied it ahead of time. Winter had shown that national boundaries were irrelevant to the missionary task because the nations (*ethne*) that Jesus wanted to reach paid no attention to national boundaries. He argued that even in the thoroughly-Christianized United States there was a cultural mosaic of groups who would never hear the gospel from the cozy, middle-class Church. The implication was that right down the street from a church could be a whole neighborhood of people who would never know Jesus unless someone loved them enough to learn their language and culture.

Winter's address, and the mission agency he founded, re-directed the missionary efforts of the worldwide Church. Realizing it was unfair to present Christ's message once again to the middle class of North America, who have the chance to hear the gospel every day of the week and twice on Sunday, missionary agencies have refocused their efforts on the 10-40 Window, where most people have a chance to learn about Jesus at best once a year. In the 38 years since Winter's address the proportion of the world that has never heard of Jesus has fallen from more than 40% to less than 30%, as Christians have refocused their evangelistic efforts. Plans now exist to reach those remaining two billion people. For the first time in human history, our generation has the opportunity to finish the Great Commission.

From What I've Learned...

GALEN CURRAH, RETIRED MISSIONARY CHURCH PLANTER, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANT, AND MISSIOLOGY TEACHER

From the little I have learned from others and through experience, I wonder if the current Church-Planting Movements have not taught international Christianity the viability of non-clergy movements, that everything Christ commanded can be

accomplished without money, clergy, chapels and power structures. Put positively, the biblical patterns remain both viable and perhaps more effective, over time, than privileged, ecclesial power structures.