

Amazed and Perplexed #3: God's Plan and Foreknowledge¹

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Abstract

This article is the third in a four-part “Amazed and Perplexed” series, originally published in Korean. While focusing on Korean missions, the article explores God’s providential guidance and use of all of macro-history and of scientific developments in working out his world mission in contemporary times.

Key Words: communications, history, technology, transportation

Introduction

“Jesus of Nazareth, ... delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:22-24). The outpouring of God’s Spirit at Pentecost signaled Jesus’s enthronement at the right hand of God the Father. The first two articles of this four-part series explored how Jesus in recent times has worked afresh in ways that he did two millennia ago. In particular, by his Spirit Jesus has demonstrated himself to be intent on living among all kinds of people worldwide who might be considered inferior and weak by those who are comfortable and self-sufficient. Just as those people present at Pentecost were astounded at the Spirit’s work, we today should be amazed and even somewhat confused at how the crucified and enthroned Jesus works among people who are humble, are often neglected, and suffer.

This third article dares to examine how events of recent times have unfolded according to God’s plan and foreknowledge. Those of Jesus’s day thought they had disposed of him, once and for all. However, at Pentecost Peter proclaimed that all that had happened - in particular Jesus’s life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and exaltation - had occurred just as God had foreordained them to take place. Similarly, God has not been working in contemporary times out of desperation or by scrambling to catch up with what has caught him off guard. The divine plan continues to unfold, and Jesus’s work by his Spirit is fully in line with that eternal plan.

How important aspects of God’s plan have been working out in recent times, specifically in connection with God’s mission throughout the world, is what this article seeks to explore.

A Disclaimer

This article is not an exercise in eschatology. It does not attempt to match biblical prophecies with alleged “end times” events. Some readers may therefore be disappointed, since many Christians today are convinced that contemporary events are unfolding specifically as God predicted long ago in the books of Daniel, Revelation, and other biblical passages. This article understands that the biblical “last days” began with the appearance of Jesus and his outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, as Peter explained in quoting the prophet Joel: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...” (Acts 2:16-21). Accordingly,

we remain in the “last days,” although specifically where we might be in respective relations to Jesus’s First and Second Comings is unknown to us.

Rather than connecting dots between specific biblical prophecies and contemporary events, this article is an exercise in historical discernment, exploring how God’s plan and foreknowledge have been working out over recent generations in connection with his worldwide mission. First will be a look at some macro-historical developments, followed by some considerations of what has been happening scientifically-technologically.

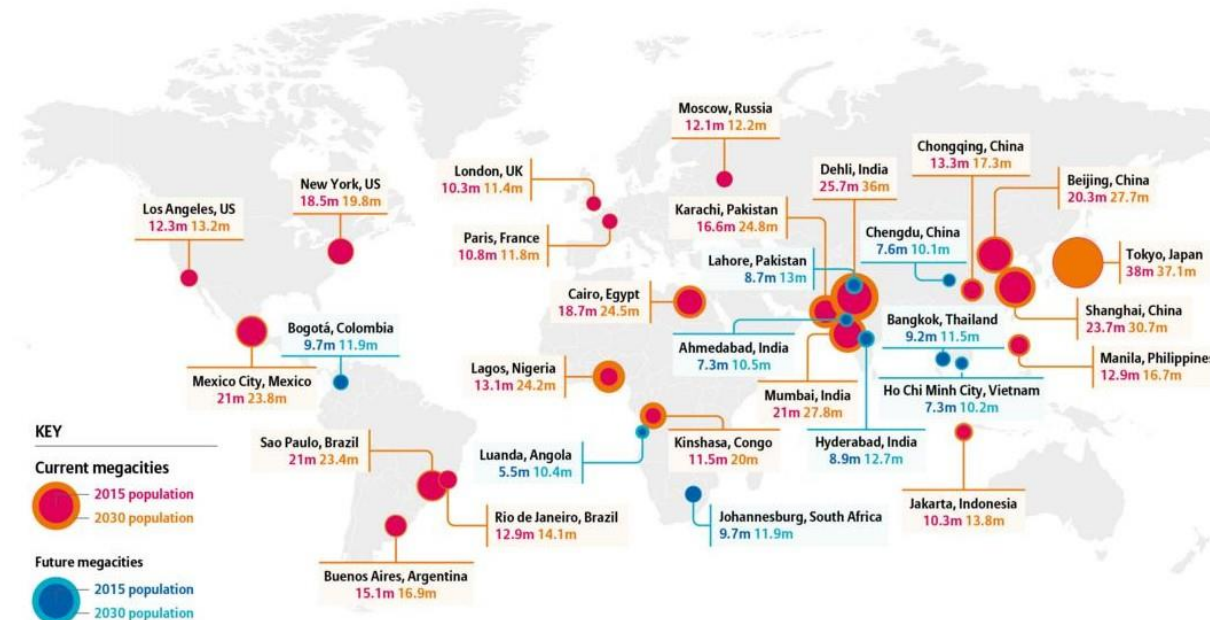
Macro-Historical Developments

The modern missionary movement began a half-millennium ago in conjunction with European migrations throughout the world. The first phase was primarily Roman Catholic, as Spain and Portugal expanded their economic and political influence around the world. During the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, the Russian Empire’s spread eastward across Asia and into the northwestern part of North America helped to spread Russian Orthodoxy, including missionary expansion into parts of East Asia, most especially Japan. The Protestant phase of modern missions began in the 1700s, then accelerated in the nineteenth century with the worldwide spread of the British Empire, Dutch expansion, Scandinavian and German ventures, and the transcontinental growth and international trade of the United States. It needs to be noted that non-European cross-cultural missions were taking place as well, for example by both freed North American slaves and freed West African slaves who had resettled in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Having become an international Christian community there in Freetown, these zealous Christians carried out numerous missionary ventures into more eastward parts of West Africa, for many their former homelands.

The first half of the twentieth century saw two major European wars sandwiched around a severe economic depression. One result was the disintegration of the modern empires of Europe and Japan, enabling other countries’ economies to develop more independently and other peoples to migrate more freely as well as multidirectionally. Another result was the rise of the capitalist-socialist Cold War, which lasted through most of the latter half of the twentieth century and whose competition for loyalties stretched globally. With the fall of the Soviet Union and China’s incorporation of capitalist principles, even freer and more worldwide movement of goods, capital, and people have marked the early twenty-first century. A third result has been the political and economic empowerment of Islamic peoples as a backlash against the Ottoman Empire’s early-twentieth-century demise (and subsequent creations by Western powers of new Middle Eastern countries, including the state of Israel) and against ongoing effects of former European imperial rule in northern Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Another major development, spurred in Europe by the eighteenth-to-nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution (and later by its spread elsewhere) and one that has accelerated since the mid-twentieth century, has been worldwide urbanization. By all accounts, over the past few generations the world’s population proportions have rapidly changed from majority rural to majority urban. Moreover, megacities have mushroomed particularly in East Asia and South Asia, as well as in parts of Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas, as shown in Figure 1 (Allianz (2015) below:

Figure 1 Selected current and future megacities 2015 to 2030



Source: World Urbanization Prospects: The 2014 Revision

Megacities of previously unimaginable population sizes are now a reality, with forecasts of continued growth. Urbanization, especially on such large scales, brings different kinds of people together, both from elsewhere in-country as well as internationals from other countries near and far. Especially pertinent for Korean missions is the astounding growth of cities throughout South, East, and Southeast Asia, as is clear from the graphic above. Churches and mission agencies based in the Republic of Korea are geographically well-positioned to contribute to urban ministries in “global gateway cities” (especially including Greater Seoul and Busan) that have built-in international networks through numerous groups connected to their home countries, often including unreached peoples. (Several mission groups specifically focus on such “gateway global cities,” e.g., IMB 2019; Wagner, Peters, and Wilson, eds. 2010.) In addition, megachurches have exploded in many of the world’s megacities, no more notably than in South Korea. Many of these megachurches have become major players in world missions, including in evangelism, church-planting, training seminars, publications, NGO work, and satellite communications.

As Christians, we should believe that all of these macro-historical developments have taken place by God’s plan and foreknowledge. Peter’s declaration in his Pentecost sermon about God’s plan regarding Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection carries a special, unique character with respect to God’s work of salvation of the world in Jesus Christ. At the same time, God’s mysterious plan and foreknowledge pertains to all events of the world that he made and governs, including wider historical and societal events. What has been happening over the past 500 years with people migrating, empires rising and falling, economic swings, urbanization, and how Christian missions have developed in relation to these and other wider events all fall within God’s plan and foreknowledge about his world.

Special and further mention is needed here about the growth of cities. One important biblical-theological trajectory ends in the holy city of God, come down from heaven (Revelation 21, 22). Throughout the Scriptures, cities play important roles in God's mission, whether Jerusalem as God's special dwelling place in Old Covenant Israel, Nineveh as the object of God's love, Antioch as the base of Paul's and others' missionary ventures, or other metropolises included in biblical accounts. Throughout Christian history, cities have been hubs and bases of Christian work, including Baghdad, Geneva, Freetown, Pyongyang, and Singapore. Worldwide urbanization today means that increasing numbers of people are coming together and thus fostering opportunities for cross-cultural gospel ministry. One vitally important ministry is the unique gospel witness given when different peoples - especially those with painful historical interactions, for example Koreans and Japanese - come together as one body in Christ.

Urbanization also increases such socio-economic problems as cramped housing, human trafficking, and illicit drug industries. Even so, God's work in and through cities is undeniable and unmistakable. Korean missions should focus accordingly on urban evangelism and holistic ministries, while continuing their absolutely essential service among rural and remote peoples. Here we are primarily affirming how the growth of cities and associated Christian mission work are according to God's plan and foreknowledge. Particularly important for Christians is our awareness of the challenges and opportunities of urbanization, followed by our proactively serving in all sorts of cross-cultural ministries that arise.

Scientific and Technological Developments

Creative inventions and discoveries are as old as the human race. God the Creator made human beings in his image, including our capacity to create and invent. While it most definitely appears that the pace of inventions and scientific discoveries has accelerated in recent times, it is helpful to remember that part of what it has always meant to be human is to be creative, curious, and inventive.

It is also important to remember that God is the original Creator and Inventor, as well as the all-knowing King of the universe. He has never been surprised or somehow caught unawares when human beings have made new discoveries or brought forth new inventions, no matter how scientifically sophisticated, electronically dazzling, or awesomely powerful they might have been. Christians must not bracket God out of his full and intimate understanding of subatomic science, smartphone wizardry, ever-increasing computing speeds, or any other scientific or technological development. Just as with macro-history, science and technology do not operate apart from God's plan and foreknowledge. Nor are science and technology any less available to God for his purposes in Christian mission than are the kind of macro-historical developments sketched above.

Since this article and series have a special Korean focus, it is also important to note that different peoples of the world have varying historical understandings of inventions and technological developments. One of the best-known examples of such a controversy concerns movable type: Was it invented in China, Korea, or Europe? (See, e.g., Trubin 2010). What about touch screens? (See, e.g., Ion 2013). What is inexcusable in such matters is making conclusive claims out of ignorance of the worldwide landscape of varying understandings of inventions. Most important for this article is to note that, no matter how various people may view the matter, no scientific or technological development has taken place apart from God's plan and foreknowledge.

Transportation

A half-millennium ago, Europeans - including missionaries - migrated to the Americas, Africa, and Asia in search of new markets and of peoples largely unknown to them. Ever-improving technologies of sailing and navigation aided their transoceanic travels. The invention of steam engines and their application to ships, beginning in the early nineteenth century, increased long-distance travel capacities. Throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, increased use and speeds of automobiles and trains have made rapid overland travel widely accessible. Moreover, the early-twentieth-century invention of the airplane and increased use of air travel from the latter part of the twentieth century have enabled people up to today, including missionaries, to travel great distances in increasingly short periods of time. We must remember as well that many migrants must resort to cheaper means of transportation - e.g., walking, animals, fishing boats - often at great personal risk as they seek better lives in distant locations.

All of these advancing means of transportation aid missions work tremendously. Missionaries can reach unevangelized and needy peoples like never before, including for short-term ministries. Missionaries, leaders, and supporters can reach each other quickly and easily, whether for consultations, support-raising, or furloughs. The days when missionaries packed their coffins with them and said goodbye to home supporters, waving handkerchiefs as their ocean vessels sailed away toward distant horizons, are now distant black-and-white memories recalled only in historical accounts.

Benefits accrued by Christian missions from developments in transportation have not come without costs, however. One cost is financial. Traveling for great distances as frequently as mission participants do costs a great deal of money. Most of that money comes from offerings of Christians who willingly support the Christian missions enterprise. (This cost born by Christian supporters is not diminished by arguments made by some, e.g., the nineteenth-century U.S. mission leader Rufus Anderson, that by God's providence governments and corporations have born the far greater cost of constructing railroads and other means of transportation (Anderson 1874:207).) While today's travels have become part-and-parcel of missions service, the financial cost of travel must not be forgotten.

Related is the disparity between those who have access to resources to cover those costs and those who do not. While people today migrate in multiple directions (as outlined earlier), frequent long-distance travel is available primarily to those with relatively exorbitant financial resources. The relational, strategic, theological, and ethical consequences of economic disparities between traveling mission practitioners and those who cannot travel are significant (Bonk 2007:51-156). Those with resources would do well to acknowledge those disparities and, somehow, appropriately adjust our actions as needed.

An additional cost is the adverse environmental impact that today's means of transportation have. Air transport alone accounts for about 5% of human-caused climate change (Abdalla 2018). Most people are well aware of air pollutants that road vehicles have been spewing into the atmosphere for years, but the increased emissions by jet engines of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are not as well known. Those involved in missions are by no means the only indirect contributors to air travel's part in polluting the atmosphere, but air travelers should not remain oblivious to the environmental cost involved.

These costs of today's rapid and convenient transportation provide one example of how recognizing God's plan and foreknowledge does not absolve us human beings from our various God-given responsibilities. Acknowledging that technological developments in land, sea, and air travel are within God's providence does not mean that we are excused from exercising judgment in weighing both the benefits and costs of such developments. Nor are missionaries and other mission participants exempt from responsibly using - or rejecting - such developments. God's plan and foreknowledge of all things includes how people, including Christians, decide how to live and exercise our stewardship responsibilities.

Communication

Recent technological developments in communication have perhaps been even more revolutionary than modern changes in sea, land, and air travel. Radio communication began in the late nineteenth century, leading to such Christian missions broadcasting ventures as HCJB ("Heralding Christ Jesus' Blessings") based in Ecuador in 1931 (Berg and Herkimer n.d.), FEBC ("Far East Broadcasting Company") in China in 1945 (FEBC 2018), and TWR ("Trans World Radio") in Morocco in 1954 (TWR 2019). Nascent Internet technology was initiated in the 1960s as part of the U.S. Cold War defense system (Zimmermann and Emspak 2017). Digital wireless technologies developed from the 1980s, leading to mobile phones and - integrated with satellite, GPS, and other digital technologies - contemporary smartphones. Today's practically instantaneous, worldwide information flow, unimaginable only a generation ago, now permeates almost every corner of the globe and of people's everyday lives.

These developments in communications technology have also taken place within God's plan and foreknowledge, not at all catching him unawares.

Opportunities for Christian witness have of course not stopped with radio broadcasting. Satellite networks enable international broadcasting by Christian TV stations, including several based in Korea. There are stations that focus on broadcasting evangelistic and discipleship materials into creative access areas; for example, SAT-7, founded in 1995, beams throughout the Middle East and North Africa using Arabic, Farsi, and Turkish (SAT-7 n.d.). Internet and wireless technologies enable the use of "web pages, email, mobile devices, social media, and Internet cafes" for "evangelism, discipleship, theological training, counseling, and leadership development" (AIBI-International dba Cybermissions n.d.). The global IT industry has opened up all kinds of Business as Mission opportunities, with "low barriers to entry, but high levels of competition" (Plummer 2015).

The particular ways for Korean missions to utilize communication technologies are practically endless. Since most Koreans are already adept at using the latest kinds of communications available, providing equipment or training for use is minimal. Internally, churches and mission organizations can thus utilize various media for communicating, no matter the geographical distances involved. For evangelism and discipleship, flash drives can be distributed with large numbers of audio, video, and text files. Internet interaction through websites and email have almost unlimited uses. Solar-powered mobile units overcome barriers of dependable electricity in many areas of the world, often for ministry among oral peoples (ION n.d.; FCBH n.d.).

Linguistically, while for Koreans communicating in Korean is easily done using most any media, communicating through other languages can be problematic. Thankfully increasing

numbers of Koreans are becoming adept at other languages as well. Also, there are increasing numbers of international Christians who are becoming functional in Korean, enabling partnering Korean mission organizations to expand their language capabilities for various ministries.

However, as with transportation, developments in communication technologies within God's overall plan and foreknowledge have also produced related costs that we in Christian mission are responsible to consider. There is the obvious financial cost of equipment, which escalates with such media as television and satellite transmission. Access to connectivity is another financial cost. Staffing, including translators, is another significant financial cost.

The cost of security must be taken into account as well. Governments cannot monitor all means of digital communication, but they can monitor some of them, particularly when wired transport of information is involved. Even when all communication is wireless, e.g., satellite transmission received directly, receptor instruments (smartphones, television receptor boxes, or whatever else) can be confiscated and examined. Maintaining security through encryption or other measures involve additional costs, whether financial or human hours spent on creating, maintaining, and improving those measures. These costs are necessary for guarding against the greater cost of mission personnel being subjected to harassment, arrest, deportation, or worse.

Conclusion

“Jesus of Nazareth [was] delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God,” Peter declared at Pentecost. Moreover, modern macro-historical developments, such as urbanization, as well as revolutionary scientific and technological changes in transportation and communication, have occurred within God's full understanding and providential guidance. All kinds of related missions opportunities and challenges have come with these developments, including the responsibility to act wisely, ethically, zealously, effectively, efficiently, and carefully. May God continue to guide us as disciples of Jesus Christ in our participation in missions, even in our amazement that ongoing events occur “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.”

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