

Challenges to Church and Mission in the 21st Century— The cultural landscape

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I believe that it was Professor Edward Blaiklock of New Zealand who said that, of all the intervening centuries, the twentieth century was most like the first century. If he were alive today I think that he might conclude that the twenty-first century will be most like the first century. Why? Simply because the challenges that Christian churches and missions will face in the century ahead are as unprecedented as those faced by the early church in the first century! There are numerous challenges of various kinds, but I have dealt with three *cultural* that may prove to be crucial. Time will tell.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism (especially in the Western world) is inclined toward relativism, experientialism, noncreedalism, spiritualism, togetherness and experimentation. Postmodernism is essentially post-Christian, often preferring the philosophy and practices of Eastern religions and Western secular psychology and practices in preference to those of Christianity itself. For example, there is a new movement in the churches of the U.S. and England (primarily) that has adopted many of the ideas and values of postmodernism in an effort to “reach” postmoderns. It is called the Emergent Church Movement. Christians in Asia should be prepared, not only to reject this movement, but also to help Western Christians understand and oppose it. (For a critique of the ECM see D. A.

Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications*, Zondervan, 2005.)

Environmentalism

Evangelicals have always emphasized what has often been called the “Cultural Mandate” in Genesis 1:28. Of course we Christians have a responsibility to care for the natural environment in which our Creator has placed us. For example, true Christians will be concerned that people have clean air and clean water; that we not pollute the environment; that we do what we can to avert global warming; and that we try to eradicate disease. That is not open to question. The problem for churches and missions is that there is new kind of environmentalism that has almost become a religion in itself. According to this “new environmentalism” the present world is as important—or almost as important—as the world to come. There is also a new kind of “holism” according to which the human body is as important as the human soul. Combined with this new holism, the new environmentalism threatens the New Testament gospel according to which a man gains nothing if he “gains the whole world and loses his own soul” (Lk. 9:25). (For an example of the ways in which the new environmentalism threatens the biblical gospel see Brian D. McLaren, “I am Green,” in his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Zondervan, 2004, pp. 231-44).

Disturbing Demographics

I had almost decided not to say anything about recent demographic studies because they are extremely discouraging, especially for us Westerners. Then a copy of

The Japan Times for May 28, 2006, was delivered to my hotel room. It featured an article by Robert Samuelson entitled “Motherhood Out of Style: Don’t count on perks to lift birthrates” (p. 13). After reading it, I realized that it would not be right to say nothing about the demographic threat to church and mission. The truth is that the latest statistics show that many of those countries in the Western world that have nourished Catholic and Protestant churches and missions for centuries now have the lowest TFR (total fertility rate) in the world. A TFR of 2.00 is required just to maintain the population of a country, but the TFR of countries such as Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Germany, Austria and Spain is well below that. Even the U.S. is in deep trouble. Not only does the U.S. have a TFR that is barely enough to maintain the present population (2.07), soaring immigration totals mean that population increase in the future will largely be among immigrants. In addition to all of this, one must take into account the fact that in many Western countries, it is the Islamic population is on the rise, not only in numbers but in influence. The significance of all of this can be found in a recent article by Mark Steyn which looks at “the century ahead.” The title of the article is “It’s the Demography, Stupid: The real reason the West is in danger of extinction” (*The New Criterion*, January 4, 2006; <http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110007760>). Could it be that the Western world which was reached with the gospel in the first century and whose churches and missions have carried the gospel to the whole world over the last twenty centuries, will be in serious decline during the 21st century? Could it be that the recent shift in the “center of gravity” of Christianity from the North and West to the South and East is part of God’s overall plan for the wind-up of human history? These are questions that are worth pondering. *However we might answer them, there is no doubt whatsoever*

that the churches and missions of South America and Asia will become increasingly important as the 21st century unfolds.

I close with a reminder that the Lord Jesus Christ may come in this 21st century. In fact, he may come very soon. That's why Hanson Sensei's May 29 reminder of the importance of the premillennial return of Jesus Christ to the history of the Evangelical Free Church and its world mission was, and is, so important. As a matter of fact, the history of the Protestant churches in Japan during the 20th century also confirms the critical importance of biblical teaching concerning the Second Coming of Christ.

The ministry of early missionaries and pastors of the Japan Evangelical Free Church is now over, or almost over. But as you pastors and our contemporary missionaries minister during this challenging 21st century, I would encourage you to emulate the life and ministry of the founders and leaders of the Evangelical Free Church in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One of the most prominent of them, Missionary Fredrik Franson, is reported to have prayed every morning, "Lord Jesus, I know that you may come today. Please help me to be ready!" To which the apostle John would add, "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 20:20).

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