

GOD'S NEW ENVOYS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE MANDATE FOR THE GLOBAL MISSION

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The fundamental reason for God's New Envoys is that increasingly large areas of the world are no longer accessible to the traditional missionary approaches of the past.

A century ago the situation looked much rosier. From the late 1800s through the first few years of the 1900s, many missions strategists believed the world could be evangelized before the twentieth century drew to a close. David B. Barrett in the *World Christian Encyclopedia* states:

By the year 1900, one third of humanity were Christians, and one half were aware of Christianity and had become influenced by it. Optimism for rapid completion of the task of global evangelization was high. From 1889 to 1914 the great Protestant and Anglican communions of Europe and North America promoted the Watchword that summarized this optimism in the objective "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation."¹

Sadly, these optimistic projections have not been realized. Today, nearly a century later, the total percentage of the world's

population identified as Christian has actually declined. In 1900, the best estimate of professing Christians was 34.4 per-cent of the global population, an all-time high.¹ This declined to 33.7 percent in 1970 and to 33.2 percent in 1975, still further to 32.4 percent in 1985, and is projected by Barrett to drop an additional tenth of a percentage point to 32.3 percent in the year 2000.

As we face the end of our own century, it's essential we understand why our recent missions efforts have not achieved the goals which many optimistically predicted would be attain-able well before now. Even more importantly, we need to examine the new emerging barriers which, if un-circumvented, will make global evangelism even more tenuous in the twenty first century.

But before looking into these, we need to take two other steps: first, to define our terms, so we can focus our investigation more precisely; second, to review why we should devote our time, and perhaps even our lives, to evangelizing in foreign lands.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In almost any discussion of this subject, a handful of important words tend to be used repeatedly, words describing parts of the process central to this book's purpose-bringing people outside one's homeland to faith and obedience in Christ. Brief definitions of these terms will be sufficient for us here.

The first, *evangelization*, is specifically related to proclamation of the gospel. According to the helpful definition in the *World Christian Encyclopedia*,

being evangelized refers to "the state of having the good news spread or offered; the state of being aware of Christianity, Christ and the gospel."

Evangelism, for our purposes, does *not* mean conversion. Rather, it would seem to be exactly what Jesus had in mind when He told the disciples to "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15).

An evangelized people is one in which more than half the members have had an opportunity to hear or read some of the key elements in the gospel. They have not necessarily been converted.

A second concept has to do with whether or not a people group *is reached*. To qualify as reached, there must be a viable indigenous church capable of evangelizing within that people group.

The word "indigenous" here is key. The indigenous church or Christ group is self-sufficient, and thus can continue without outside support.

Most important of all, a reached group can potentially have the local resources to maintain and expand its Christian population, even in highly restrictive environments such as those where many of God's New Envoys might work.'

The concept of a *Christ group* is used in this book to cover indigenous churches, as well as house churches and other secret gatherings of Christians which often must be the church alternatives in the "closed countries" where New Envoys will be sent.'

For our purposes, *people groups* are best defined as culturally and linguistically separate peoples (such as the Maasai tribes of Kenya or the Hmong

hill tribes of Laos). By some definitions there are 24,000 such people groups in the world today, about 17,000 of which have still not been reached. These 17,000 are the unreached people groups, or "hidden peoples," estimated in mid-1985 to comprise more than 2.5 billion human beings.'

Throughout this book, the word *closed* will be used to refer to the people groups and countries to which traditional missionaries cannot gain access without disguising their true vocation and purpose. The 77 countries and thousands of people groups which are currently closed tend to be predominantly in the Muslim and Communist world.'

Another basic concept is *conversion*. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus says, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In other cases baptism is not mentioned, and the instructions are to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, possibly through a special prayer, public proclamation of faith, or some other means.

To avoid disputes about when precisely conversion takes place, I prefer a more global concept that of *bringing people to faith and obedience in Christ*. This term is quite precise and, it seems to me, describes our objective very well. The only problem, of course, is that it is unmeasurable and unquantifiable, except of course to God. Thus, throughout this book we will some-times be forced to quantify the concept of conversion in less precise terms.

In many statistical cases, for example, we will talk about "professing" Christians-therby basing the number of Christians on the number of individuals who claim the title of Christian as their own.

Through the years we have struggled to find better ways to count Christians in comparison to the national or international population at large. *I* generally prefer to use the term *communicants* (adult church members). This category is less elastic than the term "communities," which some denominations (Roman Catholics, for example) prefer, and which includes not only adult members of a given church but also their children, who certainly tend to be influenced by their parents' religious preference.

By converting all our figures whenever possible to communicants, we avoid the error of attempting to compare incomparables.

This is probably a good time to make another distinction, necessitated by the fact that there is currently a net increase of 270 new Christian denominations throughout the world each year. As of this writing, the number of denominations and church groups totals more than 22,000, all claiming to be the best way to follow the Way of Christ.' With this broad range of sometimes competing denominations, I want to clarify that the goal of this book is to help bring more people to faith and obedience in Christ, not to any particular denomination or group of denominations within the global Body of Christ.

I am confident that once the new convert has moved to faith and obedience, she or he will be properly guided as is required, by the greatest Teacher of all. Perhaps the best recent example of this is the explosive growth of the Church in China after the expulsion of the missionaries.

This is not to say I lack personal convictions about ways of worship and interpretations of God's Word. These matters are of vital concern to me, as they

are to most Christians. The burden of this book, however, is to develop strategies that can help bring hundreds of millions more people to Christ and not to dispute about fine points of doctrine, however important, with those who are already believers.

Our goal is to build up the Body of Christ and to expand His Church, not to weaken it through additional factional squabbles at a time when the salvation of billions depends on our working as one. Together as His Church, the Body of all faithful believers, we are charged to pursue *the Church's mission*: to proclaim Christ and bring as many people possible to faith and obedience in Him (Romans 16:26).

RATIONALE FOR EVANGELISM ABROAD

Now that necessary definitions have been briefly spelled out, it's time to take the next step: to explore why we should be so audacious, and often so self-sacrificing, as to leave the comfort and security of our homelands to pursue evangelism abroad.

Many of the reasons for this are very old. Others are quite new, necessitated in recent years by changes in populations and governments. Although these reasons are written here primarily for an audience in the more developed world, it should be noted that most of them will also have relevance to the less developed world, which is now expanding its own Christian missions out-reach at a very rapid rate. i0

Here are eight basic reasons for continuing and expanding our evangelism abroad--or, if you prefer, our *global mission*:

1. Because Christ mandated the global mission-in Acts 1:8, Mark 16:15, and Matthew 28:19-20. Elsewhere He rein-forces these instructions in different words:

Come, follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men. (Matthew 4:19)

The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name *to all nations*. (Luke 24:46-47)

I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. (John 4:35)

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. (John 20:21) And finally, the instructions to Peter:

Feed my lambs.... Take care of my sheep.... Feed my sheep. (John 21:15-17)

2. Because our Lord appears to establish global evangelism as a precondition of His return. In Matthew 24:14 He says,

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, *and then the end will come*.

Later, in Revelation 5:9-10, the risen Lord Jesus is addressed as one who purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

3. *Because as Christians we have received a precious gift which must be shared as widely as possible.* Put simply, if we are called to share our food, our cloaks, our shelter -which are only temporal things----how much more should we be called to share our greatest gift, the faith which provides eternal life?

Because every individual is important . . . and every

4. *Individual's spiritual hunger deserves to be met.* Clearly John 3:16 emphasizes this divine intent of universal access to salvation:

For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

As long as we are alive and have breath in our lungs, those of us who have already heard the good news must continue to expend a portion of that breath to witness, so more of God's children can be saved.

5. *Because if we don't win those of our global neighbors who hunger for change, other less desirable forces will.* Increasingly we see human hunger and need providing an opening for evil forces to move in. To see this truth, we need only to look at the rapid fashion that Communism and non-Christian religions filled the spiritual vacuum in many former colonial African nations since 1960.

Spiritual hunger, in my opinion, is basic to the human condition. God Himself creates spiritual hunger in every person. The Lord God says in Amos 8:11, "The time is surely coming ... when I will send a famine on the land-not a famine of bread or water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (*Living Bible*). Once that hunger is aroused, or-more accurately-once a person is made aware of its existence, the need will be filled somehow, by whichever religion or ideology is most persuasively represented to the person who hungers. Conversely, if Christianity is not effectively represented in the area when that hunger is experienced, the opening may pass forever.

Because Christianity's adversaries are increasingly ruthless. If you are a resident of Canada, Europe, Japan, the United States, or some other more developed, democratic nation, it's frequently hard to grasp the true evil of some of the alternatives to Christianity-religions and quasi-religions which also vie for uncommitted hearts and souls. For many parts of the world, this alternative "religion" is Communism.

Elsewhere it may be voodoo, or religions that subject adherents to drastic forms of discrimination and even direct physical abuse.

In recent history, the wanton murder of hundreds of thousands of Christians in Uganda by Idi Amin, and the systematic torture and cruel imprisonment of the faithful in Vietnam under the guise of "reeducation" show the steps hostile governments are willing to take regardless of public opinion.

7. *Because only changed lives can change society, and only a changed global society can truly live in peace.* This is a personal favorite of mine, because it relates to my conviction since my conversion three decades ago that we can achieve "horizontal" peace in the world only as we increasingly, one-by-one, achieve "vertical" peace with God. On a practical level, there is surely no doubt that some of Christianity's strongest global competitors teach violence and strife: militant, fundamentalist Islam, dictatorial Communism, anarchism, and of course the many quasi-religious forms of terrorism which permeate our world.

8. *Because Christian missionary work, in its many forms, is still one of the satisfying adventures of all.* Never doubt the sheer excitement of working in foreign countries to help others find salvation.

These then are the eight reasons, any of which would be sufficient justification for pursuing global evangelization through our financial support, through our prayers, and through actual service abroad.

To summarize: We need to reach out to the non-Christian population abroad .

- because it's biblically right.
- because we care about these people and their salvation.
- because if we delay, billions of non-Christians may lose not only their chance of eternal salvation, but their opportunities for more satisfying lives here and now.

These, then, are the reasons all Christians should support the most vigorous possible evangelization effort to all parts of the world.

Next question: Is that goal being achieved?

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND REVIEW

- Why are New Envoys needed at this time?
- What's the difference between the "unreached" people and "unreachable" people (those living in restricted-access countries)?

- Give five

reasons

why you feel global evangelism is required.

Documentation and Notes

1. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, p. 3.
2. By A.D. 500, 22.4 percent of the world is believed to have been Christian. This dropped to 19 percent in 1500, then rose to 23.1 percent in 1800.
3. Barrett, p. 4.
4. Barren, p. 826.
5. John A. Holzmann, "1.3 Billion 'UNEVANGELIZED' or 2.4 Billion 'UNREACHED,'" in *Mission Frontiers*, August/September 1985, p. 21.
6. The concept of "openness" and ways it can be measured will be discussed in some detail in chapter 6.
7. Ralph D. Winter, *Mission Frontiers*, August/September 1985, p. 3.

8. The total numbers of closed countries and closed people groups vary from source to source. A list of restricted-access countries which is current as of this writing is included in chapter 2.

9. Barrett, p. 17.

10. Barrett, p. 17.

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