Is the World Flat? How Should Christians Respond in Today's Global World

Drawing from Thomas Friedman's book, The World is Flat, Kerby Anderson looks at some of the major new factors in our world which cause not only countries and companies, but also individuals to think and act globally. Most of the factors discussed are givens against which Kerby helps us to consider their impact on Christianity and the spread of the gospel on a global basis.

Introduction

Is the world flat? The question is not as crazy as it might sound in light of the book by Thomas Friedman entitled *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century.* His contention is that the global playing field has been leveled or flattened by new technologies.

In fourteen hundred and ninety-two when Columbus sailed the ocean blue, he used rudimentary navigational equipment to prove that the earth was *round*. More than 500 years later, Friedman discovered in a conversation with one of the smartest engineers in India that essentially the world was *flat*. Friedman argues that we have entered into a third era of globalization, which he calls Globalization 3.0 that has flattened the world.

The first era of globalization (he calls Globalization 1.0) lasted from when Columbus set sail until around 1800. "It shrank the world from a size large to a size medium. Globalization 1.0 was about countries and muscles."{1} The key change agent in this era was how much muscle your country had (horsepower, wind power, etc.). Driven by such factors as

imperialism and even religion, countries broke down walls and began the process of global integration.

The second era (he calls Globalization 2.0) lasted from 1800 to 2000 with interruptions during the Great Depression and World Wars I and II. “This era shrank the world from size medium to a size small. In Globalization 2.0, the key agent of change, the dynamic force driving global integration, was multinational companies.”{2} At first these were Dutch and English joint-stock companies, and later was the growth of a global economy due to computers, satellites, and even the Internet.

The dynamic force in Globalization 1.0 was *countries* globalizing, while the dynamic force in Globalization 2.0 was *companies* globalizing. Friedman contends that Globalization 3.0 will be different because it provides “the newfound power for *individuals* to collaborate and compete globally.”{3}

The players in this new world of commerce will also be different. “Globalization 1.0 and 2.0 were driven primarily by European and American individuals and businesses. . . . Because it is flattening and shrinking the world, Globalization 3.0 is going to be more and more driven not only by individuals but also by a much more diverse—non-Western, non-white—group of individuals. Individuals from every corner of the flat world are being empowered.”{4}

The Flatteners

Friedman argues in his book that the global playing field has been flattened by new technologies.

The first flattener occurred on November 9, 1989. “The fall of the Berlin Wall on 11/9/89 unleashed forces that ultimately liberated all the captive peoples of the Soviet Empire. But it actually did so much more. It tipped the balance of power across the world toward those advocating democratic,

consensual, free-market-oriented governance, and away from those advocating authoritarian rule with centrally planned economies."{5}

The economic change was even more important. The fall of the Berlin Wall encouraged the free movement of ideas, goods, and services. "When an economic or technological standard emerged and proved itself on the world stage, it was much more quickly adopted after the wall was out of the way."{6}

Thomas Friedman also makes a connection between the two dates 11/9 and 9/11. He noted that in "a world away, in Muslim lands, many thought [Osama] bin Laden and his comrades brought down the Soviet Empire and the wall with religious zeal, and millions of them were inspired to upload the past. In short, while we were celebrating 11/9, the seeds of another memorable date—9/11—were being sown."{7}

A second flattener was Netscape. This new software played a huge role in flattening the world by making the Internet truly interoperable. Until then, there were disconnected islands of information.

We used to go to the post office to send mail; now most of us send digitized mail over the Internet known as *e-mail*. We used to go to bookstores to browse and buy books, now we browse digitally. We used to buy a CD to listen to music, now many of us obtain our digitized music off the Internet and download it to a MP3 player.

A third flattener was work flow software. As the Internet developed, people wanted to do more than browse books and send e-mail. "They wanted to shape things, design things, create things, sell things, buy things, keep track of inventories, do somebody else's taxes, and read somebody else's X-rays from half a world away. And they wanted to be able to do any of these things from anywhere to anywhere and from any computer to any computer—seamlessly."{8}

All the computers needed to be interoperable not only between departments within a company but between the systems of any other company. Work flow software made this possible.

Where will this lead? Consider this likely scenario. When you want to make a dentist appointment, your computer translates your voice into a digital instruction. Then it will check your calendar against the available dates on the dentist's calendar. It will offer you three choices, and you will click on the preferred date and hour. Then a week before your appointment, the dentist's calendar will send you an e-mail reminding you of the appointment. The night before your appointment, a computer-generated voice message will remind you.

The fourth flattener is open-sourcing. Open-source comes from the idea that groups would make available online the source code for software and then let anyone who has something to contribute improve it and let millions of others download it for free.

One example of open-source software is Apache which currently powers about two-thirds of the websites in the world. Another example of open-sourcing is blogging. Bloggers are often one-person online commentators linked to others by their common commitments. They have created essentially an open-source newsroom.

News bloggers were responsible for exposing the bogus documents use by CBS and Dan Rather in a report about President Bush's Air National Guard service. Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* wrote (Sept 20, 2004): "It was like throwing a match on kerosene-soaked wood. The ensuing blaze ripped through the media establishment as previously obscure bloggers managed to put the network of Murrow and Cronkite on the defensive."

Another example of open-sourcing is the Wikipedia project

which has become perhaps the most popular online encyclopedia in the world. Linux is another example. It offers a family of operating systems that can be adapted to small desktop computers or laptops all the way up to large supercomputers.

A fifth flattener is outsourcing. In many ways, this was made possible when American companies laid fiber-optic cable to India. Ultimately, India became the beneficiary.

India has become very good at producing brain power, especially in the sciences, engineering, and medicine. There are a limited number of Indian Institutes within a population of one billion people. The resulting competition produces a phenomenal knowledge meritocracy. Until India was connected, many of the graduates would come to America. "It was as if someone installed a brain drain that filled up in New Delhi and emptied in Palo Alto."{9}

Fiber-optic cable became the ocean crosser. You no longer need to leave India to be a professional because you can plug into the world from India.

A sixth flattener was offshoring. Offshoring is when a company takes one of its factories that is operating in Canton, Ohio and moves the whole factory to Canton, China.

When China joined the World Trade Organization, it took Beijing and the rest of the world to a new level of offshoring. Companies began to shift production offshore and integrate their products and services into their global supply chains.

The more attractive China makes itself offshoring, the more attractive other developed and developing countries have to make themselves. This created a process of competitive flattening and a scramble to give companies the best tax breaks and subsidies.

How does this affect the United States? "According to the U.S.

Department of Commerce, nearly 90 percent of the output from U.S.-owned offshore factories is sold to foreign consumers. But this actually stimulates American exports. There is a variety of studies indicating that every dollar a company invests overseas in an offshore factory yields additional exports for its home country, because roughly one-third of global trade today is within multi-national companies."{10}

The seventh flattener is supply chaining. "No company has been more efficient at improving its supply chain (and thereby flattening the world) than Wal-Mart; and no company epitomizes the tension the supply chains evoke between the consumer in us and the worker in us than Wal-Mart."{11}

Thomas Friedman calls Wal-Mart "the China of companies" because it can use its leverage to grind down any supplier to the last halfpenny. And speaking of China, if Wal-Mart were an individual economy, it would rank as China's eighth-biggest trading partner, ahead of Russia, Australia and Canada.

An eighth flattener is what Friedman calls *insourcing*. A good example of this is UPS. UPS is not just delivering packages, the company is doing logistics. Their slogan is Your World Synchronized. The company is synchronizing global supply chains.

For example, if you own a Toshiba laptop computer under warranty that you need fixed, you call Toshiba. What you probably don't know is that UPS will pick up your laptop and repair it at their own UPS-run workshop dedicated to computer and printer repair. They fix it and return it in much less time than it would take to send it all the way to Toshiba.

A ninth flattener is in-forming. A good example of that is Google. Google has been the ultimate equalizer. Whether you are a university professor with a high speed Internet connection or a poor kid in Asia with access to an Internet café, you have the same basic access to research information.

Google puts an enormous amount of information at our fingertips. Essentially, all of the information on the Internet is available to anyone, anywhere, at anytime.

Friedman says that, "In-forming is the ability to build and deploy your own personal supply chain—a supply chain of information, knowledge, and entertainment. In-forming is about self-collaboration—becoming your own self-directed and self-empowered researcher, editor, and selector of entertainment, without having to go to the library or movie theater or through network television."{12}

A tenth flattener is what he calls "the steroids." These are all the things that speed the process (computer speed, wireless).

For example, the increased speed of computers is dazzling. The Intel 4004 microprocessor (in 1971) produced 60,000 instructions per second. Today's Intel Pentium 4 Extreme has a maximum of 10.8 billion instructions per second.

The wireless revolution allows anyone portable access to everything that has been digitized anywhere in the world. When I was at graduate school at Yale University, all of us were tied to a single mainframe computer. In order to use the computer, I had to hand computer cards to someone in the computer lab in order to input data or extract information. Now thanks to digitization, miniaturization, and wireless I can do all of that and much more from my home, office, coffee shop, airport—you name it.

Biblical Perspective

Although futurists have long talked about globalization and a global village, many of these forces have made that a reality. At this point it might be valuable to distinguish between *globalization* and *globalism*. Although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, I want to draw some important

distinctions. Globalization is used to describe the changes taking place in society and the world due to economic and technological forces. Essentially, we have a global economy and live in the global village.

Globalism is the attempt to draw us together into a new world order with a one world government and one world economy. Sometimes this even involves a desire to develop a one world religion. In a previous article ("Globalism and Foreign Policy"), I addressed many of the legitimate concerns about this push towards global government. We should be concerned about political attempts to form a new world order.

On the other hand, we should also recognize that globalization is already taking place. *The World is Flat* focuses on many of the positive aspects of this phenomenon, even though there are many critics would believe it may be harmful.

Some believe that it will benefit the rich at the expense of the poor. Some believe it will diminish the role of nations in deference to world government. These are important issues that we will attempt to address in future articles.

For now, let's look at some important implications of a flat world. First, we should prepare our children and grandchild for global competition. Thomas Friedman says that when he was growing up his parents would tell him "Finish your dinner. People in China and India are starving." Today he tells his daughters, "Girls, finish your homework—people in China and India are starving for your jobs."{13}

Another implication is the growing influence of the two countries with the largest populations: China and India. Major companies are looking to these countries for research and development. The twentieth century was called "the American Century." It is likely that the twenty-first century will be "the Asian Century."

These two countries represent one-third of the world's

population. They will no doubt transform the entire global economy and political landscape.

Students of biblical prophecy wonder if these two countries represent the "Kings of the East" (Rev. 16:12). In the past, most of the focus was only on China. Perhaps the Kings (plural) represent both China and India.

A final implication is that this flattened world has opened up ministry through the Internet and subsequent travel to these countries. Probe Ministries, for example, now has a global ministry. In the past, it was the occasional letter we received from a foreign country. We now interact daily with people from countries around the world.

Last month the Probe website had nearly a quarter of a million visitors from over 140 countries. These online contacts open up additional opportunities for speaking and ministry overseas.

The flattening of the world may have its downsides, but it has also opened up ministry in ways that were unimaginable just a few years ago. Welcome to the flat world.

Notes

1. Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 9.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 10.
4. Ibid., 11.
5. Ibid., 49.
6. Ibid., 52.
7. Ibid., 55.
8. Ibid., 73.
9. Ibid., 105.
10. Ibid., 123.

11. Ibid., 129.
12. Ibid., 153.
13. Ibid, 237.

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