Reaching The World That Has Come to Us

World Missions in Perspective

What images or conceptions enter your mind when you hear the phrase *world missions*? Do you think of khaki clad missionaries fighting their way through impenetrable forests? Do you think of sparsely attended meetings featuring pictures of a world totally unrelated to your day-to-day life? Or does the phrase *world missions* evoke a sense of excitement and opportunity?

Though the phrase *world missions* never appears in Scripture, the concept of penetrating every culture in the world with the message of God's gracious provision through Christ, captures one of the most important themes of the Bible! From Genesis to Revelation, world missions is at the heart of God's purpose on earth.

Immediately following the record of God's judgment at Babel, which resulted in the division of the human race into diverse nations and cultures, we read of God's selection of Abram and his descendants as His special people. God promised to make of Abram's seed "a great nation" and to "make great their name" (Gen. 12:1-2). But He made it clear that beyond His intention to bless the children of Abram, God had a multicultural purpose in view: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). It was God's design that through Israel He might reach a world that had spurned His love.

One of the most familiar passages of Scripture is found at the end of Matthew's Gospel; we call it the Great Commission. Among the final words of Jesus were his instructions to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18-20). And for the past two thousand years the church has been on a mission to

penetrate every culture with the message of God’s grace. In this way we’ve filled the role of Abram’s seed in bringing God’s blessing to “all the families of the earth” by going into all the world with the gospel.

But what of the two millennia that have transpired between God’s declaration to Abram of His multicultural purpose, and Jesus’ pronouncement of the Great Commission? How did God fulfill His purpose to bless all nations before the church existed? He did it through His people, Israel. A hint is given, I believe, in a divine statement recorded by the prophet Ezekiel: “This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her” (Ezek. 5:5). A glance at a world map will reveal that God placed Israel at the crossroads of three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. He could not have chosen a more strategic location through which to influence the entire world! As diplomats, merchants, and armies traversed the world, they inevitably passed through that tiny strip of land which God had deeded to Abram’s seed!

When King Solomon offered his prayer of dedication for the temple in Jerusalem, he included these words: “Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Thy people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Thy name’s sake (for they will hear of Thy great name and Thy mighty hand, and of Thine outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear Thou in heaven…, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to Thee, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Thy name, to fear Thee…” (1 Kings 8:41-43).

For two thousand years at least, God’s method for fulfilling His multicultural purpose, rather than sending His people to the nations of the world, was to bring the world to His people. The Great Commission, issued after two thousand years, reflected an adjustment in God’s method. But as we shall see, it did not mark an end to His practice of bringing the world to His people, wherever they might be.

World Missions In Reverse

In the fifth chapter of Revelation we read of the vision of the throne of God granted to the apostle John, and of the heavenly worship of Christ. In the course of the vision, the apostle hears sung these words: “Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). This heavenly anthem makes note of the fulfillment of a purpose which God declared nearly four thousand years ago, to extend his grace to every nation on earth.

This purpose has been fulfilled during the past two thousand years primarily through the response of faithful Christians to Jesus’ Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. But as we discussed above, the Great Commission, rather than signaling the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s multicultural purpose, simply reflected an adjustment in God’s method of carrying it out. For centuries, God had been reaching out to a spiritually needy world not primarily by sending His people to the world, but by bringing the world to His people. He did it by placing His people Israel at the crossroads of three continents, with the intent of using their influence to draw the nations of the world to Himself.

To prepare them for this special assignment, God gave His people Israel some very specific instructions with regard to how they should conduct themselves toward these “alien visitors.” First, He said, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself” (Lev. 19 33-34a). International visitors were to receive a warm and loving welcome in Israel. This alone would make Israel unique among the nations of the world!

But second, they were to give the alien an opportunity to know God, through exposure to the Scriptures. In giving instructions concerning the reading of Scripture at the Feast of Tabernacles, the Lord said, “Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, in order that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God” (Deut. 31:11-12).

What is of interest to us, however, is that even with the giving of the Great Commission to go into all the world with the gospel, God continued to bring the world to his people, wherever they might be.

This was evident, for instance, even on the day of Pentecost itself. As the Holy Spirit was giving birth to the church, it’s recorded in the book of Acts that “there were Jews living in Jerusalem…from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). At the church’s inception, God had brought the world to His people.

A while later we read that a man had come to Jerusalem to worship, who “was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure” (Acts 8:27). As he was returning to Ethiopia, he was intercepted by Philip, whom God had directed across his path. As the church was growing, God continued to bring the world to His people.

A bit later we read of “a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort” (Acts 10:1). Through a series of extraordinary circumstances, God led Peter to Cornelius’ house to explain to him the gospel through which he came to know Christ.

Throughout the church’s history, God has continued to fulfill His purpose to extend His grace to every nation, not only by sending His people to the world, but also by bringing the world to His people. And the instructions He gave to Israel

concerning their treatment of the international visitor are as valid for us today in our own situation as they were for them so many centuries ago!

The World at Our Doorstep

Most Christians have a sincere desire to be involved in the work of world missions, and faithfully pray for and contribute to those missions that God has laid on their hearts. Yet few of us realize that it's possible to be involved in the world's most exciting enterprise in an even more direct way, by befriending and ministering to the world of international students whom God has brought to us!

Every year approximately half a million students from virtually every nation on earth are enrolled in the colleges and universities of the U.S., more than in any other country! And I agree with Rev. Billy Graham when he said that the presence of these future world leaders constitutes one of the most strategic missions opportunities for the church today. Consider for a moment just a few facts about this group of international students.

First, more than half of these students generally come from countries that restrict or prohibit traditional Christian ministry within their borders. It's difficult to carry on the work of Christian ministry in countries like China, Malaysia, or Nepal. Yet each of these countries sends many students to the U.S. every year. In fact, approximately sixty percent of the international students in the U.S. come from what is known as the "10/40 Window." This is the group of countries located in the area between the 10th and 40th degree northern parallels, in which 90 percent of the world's "unreached peoples" reside! As one person has put it, "The door into these countries may be closed or barely open, but the door out is wide open!"

The second fact about these international students is that

they compose the pool from which many of the world's future leaders will emerge. Mark Hanna, in a talk delivered at Park Street Church in Boston in 1975, said that one-third to one-half of the world's top positions in politics, business, education and the military would be filled in the following twenty-five years by foreign students then attending colleges and universities in the United States.{1} How much more could this be true today! Consider this list of just a few of the scores of international leaders who received their college education in the U.S.: Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador studied at Notre Dame; Corazon Aquino studied at the College of Mount St. Vincent in New York; Ingvar Carlsson of Sweden studied at Northwestern; Andreas Papandreou of Greece studied at Harvard, as did King Birendra Bir Bikram Shad Dev of Nepal. As recently as 1987, some forty heads of state were educated in America.

Not only do many international students originate from countries that restrict Christian ministry, and not only are many of them destined to fill positions of leadership in their home countries, but while they are here they're generally more receptive to considering new ideas than they would be at home. And not only this, but these students are invariably in need of genuine friendship during their stay in the U.S.

Some time ago a study was done to determine the factors which contributed to the adjustment of international students to their stay in America. It was found that those who were best adjusted to their sojourn in the U.S. had two things in common. First, they had a close friend from their home country. And second, they had forged a close friendship with an American. Yet it was also found that no more than twenty percent of international students have such a friendship with an American, and fewer still have ever stepped foot inside an American home!

Students Among Us

In the 1950s a young man from Ethiopia came for military training to Aberdeen, Maryland. During the course of his stay, as the result of unfortunate experiences, he became embittered against America, and against the Christian faith. After his training here he returned to Ethiopia, and in 1974 participated as a key figure in the military coup which resulted in the establishment of a Marxist regime. Among his actions as head of state over the new government, were the launching of a campaign to root out “alien” religion in Ethiopia. In a speech to the nation, he named missionaries as the number one source of “imperialist infiltration” in Ethiopia. Many missionaries were expelled, and many national Christians were imprisoned. Churches were closed, and the formerly Christian radio station was converted into a voice for Marxist propaganda. The student’s name was Mengistu Mariam.

About the time Mengistu was returning to Ethiopia, another student by the name of Tuisem Shishak arrived in Chicago from India, and later completed his Ph.D. in education at the State University of New York-Buffalo. While he was here Christian friends encouraged Tuisem in his faith, and encouraged him in his vision to return to India to establish a Christian college. In 1974 he did exactly that, founding Patkai Christian College, the first Christian liberal arts college in India. Since then, hundreds of graduates have entered India’s society to fill positions of leadership in business, government, agriculture, the arts, and Christian ministry.

About the time Tuisem Shishak was returning to India, a Muslim student from Afghanistan arrived to study at an east coast university. In 1980 he received his Ph.D. in education. While he was here, as the result of being befriended by a Christian family, he came to faith in Christ. This student went on to translate Christian educational materials into his native

tongue of Dari, and to record gospel broadcasts transmitted into Afghanistan, Pakistan, and southern Russia.

A number of years ago, Hal Guffey (former president of International Students, Inc.) was speaking to a group of Christians about the opportunity to befriend international students. At the end of his talk a young lady from another country approached him. She told him that though her father had not become a Christian as a result of his student days in the U.S., nonetheless he had returned home with a favorable impression of Christians. Many years later he found himself in a position to decide whether Christian missionaries should be allowed to remain in his country. He decided they should be allowed to stay.

These are just a few of the thousands of similar stories that could be told about students who have come to America, and have returned to make a contribution in their home countries. While they were here, their attitudes toward the U.S. and toward American Christianity were indelibly shaped by their personal experiences. Some of them returned with an attitude that could be characterized as less than friendly. Others have returned with at least a positive impression of America and American Christians. And not a few have taken with them a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, as a result of their encounter with Christian friends.

Reaching Out

We've noted that at least half of these students come from countries that restrict or prohibit Christian ministry. We've also noted that at least 80 percent of these international students eventually return home, many of them to fill positions of leadership in their home countries—whether in business, education, government, or some other field. Some believe that as many as half of the world's future leaders are studying at American universities today.

We also recounted some of the stories of international students who have studied among us, and who returned home with attitudes that determined their future actions toward the work of Christ. Some returned to do much harm. Others returned, not only as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus, but as effective leaders in Christian ministry in their own country.

In the case of the latter, God invariably used an American Christian who was willing to invest a little of his time in befriending and encouraging an international student in his pursuit of a relationship with God. In surveying international students who have come to know Christ during their stay in the U.S., two elements were voiced over and over again. The first was that they had enjoyed more than a merely surface relationship with a Christian friend. Someone had taken the initiative to express real love and concern to them, and had demonstrated a life of Christian integrity. Not that they had attempted to project an image of perfection or an impeccable spiritual life. But in some way a life of genuine love and faith had made an impact they could not forget. Several years ago, in the wake of the bloody incident at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, American Christians acted to assist students from China in the U.S. who had extraordinary needs. I remember one student who said in my presence, “You Christians really care about us, don’t you.” Another student who was from India stated publicly that though he had not yet become a Christian, nonetheless Christians had expressed the most genuine concern to him and he counted them as his closest friends. He has since come to faith in Christ.

The other element God used in drawing these students to Himself was a careful exposure to the Scriptures. In many cases, we may be surprised to learn that our international friend has never even opened a Bible before we invite him or her to study it with us. I recall one Chinese student who stated to me at the outset of a personal study, “This is my first exposure to the Bible.” Another student agreed to meet

over lunch once a week to study the Scriptures. He told me as we began our series of studies, “I’m open to God.” Several months later, after completing an overview of the life of Christ, I asked him who he believed Jesus Christ to be. He said to me, “Jesus is the Son of God. And He is my Savior.”

A number of years ago, a Muslim student from Jordan was studying at a major university in southern California. He was befriended by a Christian worker on his campus, who shared with him the message of the gospel. At first, this student said he was not interested. But over time, and as a result of this Christian’s consistent love toward this student, he came to know Jesus Christ in a personal way. Later, this student decided to attend an evangelical seminary here in the U.S., and eventually returned to found the first evangelical seminary in Jordan. What made the difference in this student’s life, and in the future of the church in Jordan? The faithful love and witness of one Christian in southern California.

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Notes

1. Lawson Lau, *The World at Your Doorstep* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 13.

Resources

Andrews, Dick and Stacey Bieler. *China at Your Doorstep*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987.

Lau, Lawson. *The World at Your Doorstep*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984.

To learn more about ministry to international students, we

highly recommend that you write to International Students, Inc., requesting information on how to launch such a ministry in your home church (or just on a personal basis), and for a list of their published materials. You can contact them at:

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