

Eras of Mission History

Ralph D. Winter, Wednesday, June 21, 2006

W1448

It may appear that in this lesson our purpose is to tell about a period of history. That really isn't quite it. This lesson might have been called "Three New Frontiers of Mission Vision." We are going to look closely at

- the incredible unpredictability of events in the last 200 years,
- the changing insights of theologians and missionaries during that period regarding the very nature of the task remaining.
- in particular, we will take note of three major changes of perspective moving us closer to fulfilling the Gospel of the Kingdom
- We will sharpen our wits on a number of other changes and challenges to our conventional perspectives, and
- conclude with a quite different, more expansive understanding of Biblical mission, which just might be a mighty, parallel "Fourth Era."

Thus, rather than being a history lesson, this will be an exercise in discerning *unexpected vision*, and what has happened in the last 200 years when an *unexpected change of vision* gains the attention of those who seek to fulfill the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Our lesson just happens to be the most significant of all fifteen lessons. It is the capstone of the first half of the course -- which is the foundational half. Up to now we have been tracking a 4,000-year story of what could be called "Operation Abraham."

Look, this is your last chance to gain an overall view of the big story and to see where you fit into it!

This lesson is the final in that first half, and brings very special excitement. True, the first eleven chapters of Genesis refer to events prior to "Operation Abraham," but those few pages are not so much the story of an unfolding plan as they are a *backdrop* for the following story of an unfolding plan -- namely, the story of the rest of the Bible. Chapters 1 through 11 thus describe the complexity and seriousness of *the problem*. The rest of the

Bible then describes the unfolding of *the solution*, a story more rapidly unfolding today than at any previous time. Never before in history have as many pieces of the jigsaw puzzle been in place. We are getting to the end of the story. There may not be another 400-year Epoch!

This unfolding, 4,000-year story does in fact begin with Genesis 12 and Abraham, at about 2000 BC, as you have already learned. This is where we see the beginning of a new plan, the main story of the Bible, a plot to retake this planet for the Kingdom of God -- not to inform or merely educate that planet but to recover it from the possession of a retreating but hostile, ravaging power, the Evil One, the one Paul called "the god of this world," the One who created the Problem in the first place. Note well that this 40-century story is not, as it often is said to be, simply "a story to tell to the nations." It is *a kingdom, a power, and a glory to extend to the nations*. It is a military campaign. It is not a war against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers. It is a war in which God is asking for redeemed human help in the dangerous task of destroying everything which mars and damages God's glory. It looks forward to the day when,

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10-11, NIV)

Tragically, these 4,000 years are rarely seen as a single story. Sunday Schools chip away at little pieces of it -- like ants walking on the surface of an oil painting, seeing every detail without getting the picture. Even seminaries chop the story to fit into their three departments, Old Testament, New Testament, and Church History.

What is that story and what does it mean?

Granted that during those 4,000 years a number of major events do occur which may not seem to be connected, such as

The trek of Abraham to a new home.
The captivity of his lineage in Egypt.
The breakaway of his lineage from Egypt.
The conquest of the promised land.
The brilliance of Solomon's temple.

The challenge Nehemiah faced on return from exile.

Up to now, the mere survival of the nation chosen to be witnesses to the world is what we mainly see. They did not even know there was a planet.

Of course, we see the horror of the Cross and the marvel of the Resurrection.

The astounding events of the day of Pentecost, which give glimmers of mission.

The first appearance of Biblical faith in Greek and Latin garments.

The official acceptance of Christianity by the Roman empire by the year 400.

The acceptance of Christianity by the Gothic tribal basin by the year 800.

The acceptance of Christianity by the Scandinavian peoples by the year 1200.

The breakout into the whole world by the year 1600.

Note, that although the Gospel went East as well as West, and is a fascinating story, in the East the movement was to a great extent either won over or overrun by Islam or completely extinguished by figures such as Tamerlane and Genghis Khan who had utterly no regard for human life. It does not emerge as a major force in modern times.

Fireworks

These are all significant events, but now in this lesson, the last two hundred years of the fifth 400-year period following Christ, that is, in just 1800 to 2000, we see, bursting in the sky, a huge, blossoming, fireworks display without parallel as virtually the whole world as never before begins to reorganize around Christian manners, morals, virtues, and, we must admit, vices. That's right, our contemporary Christian movement is both Biblical and less than Biblical.

What evidence is there of progression?

It has been a long story. Positive change is not all that easy to see. War and pestilence kept world population down to an estimate of 27 million in Abraham's day. Not well understood is the fact that had war and pestilence been reduced back then to what it is now, world population would have grown to what it is today at 6 billion *in merely the next 321 years*.

However, instead of rising to 6 billion in the next 321 years it rose to only one thirtieth of that in the next 2,000 years. That is, it rose to 200 million at the time of Christ. Growing from 27 million to 200 million in 2,000 years is a rate of only 2/10ths of 1% per year -- almost zero.

For example, when in about 440 AD the Roman legions withdrew from an England that under the Romans had been literate for three centuries, the blood and chaos that reigned for the next 600 years prevented any population increase at all, thanks to the invasions of the vicious Anglo-Saxons and later the even more violent Vikings.

However, within all this painful confusion the Gospel of Christ was working its way. Once Gutenberg released the Bible from centuries of limited circulation, both war and pestilence began steadily to decrease and population, accordingly, steadily to pick up speed. By 1800 AD, 18 centuries after Christ, world population had grown 5 times what it was in Jesus' day. But then it grew another five times as large in just the next two final centuries of this final 1600 - 2000 AD period.

The Bible

The Bible itself, although representative mainly of a single ethnic tradition, eventually released people from that tradition, and faith began to explode. Roman Catholic missionaries had implanted a Roman version of the faith all over the world even before Gutenberg in 1450 but they had made very significant gains by the time Protestants (after rummaging through the Bible for 200 years) finally caught on to the Roman idea of establishing missionary organizations. In this lesson we see essentially the story of how the Protestants after dragging their feet for two centuries caught up in just two centuries.

The Five Renaissances

In one respect the final 400-year period is no different from each of the previous four 400-year periods. Each time we saw a flourishing of the faith in a major new cultural basin. For instance I have called the Fourth Century the *Classical* Renaissance. Other scholars have called the Eighth, the Twelfth, the Sixteenth, and the Twentieth Centuries, respectively, the Carolingian Renaissance, the Twelfth Century Renaissance. Then we come to THE Renaissance. In the final period, for this lesson, we have the Evangelical Renaissance.

In each period the final century of renaissance started a bit earlier and lasted a bit longer than the previous one. During this last 400 years the Evangelical renaissance has surpassed that of all earlier periods. In the last 200 years, for example, Protestants have almost replaced the Catholic mission movement due to the French Revolution cutting Catholic mission's financial and human resources in Europe.

Thus, in this fifth 400-year period (1600-2000) and especially in the last half of it, from roughly the year 1800 on, we step into a new, final, and unprecedented period. Note that these last four centuries are not merely crowded with many significant events. The final two centuries in our 40-century story ARE an event.

These centuries do not merely surge with smaller and totally unexpected events. They swirl with more people, more doings, more literature, more discoveries, specifically an enormously better understanding of nature, than all of the previous 3,800 years put together. Today, furthermore, we also know a hundred times more details of this period than we know of any earlier period. The chaos of history has declined and we humans, many of us redeemed, have preserved more of our own story.

Obviously it is easy to get lost in those details, fascinating though they may be, seeing the trees and not the forest. We don't want to be just loaded with interesting information. We want to know *What Is Going On!* What is really happening, *because we want to participate strategically in that story.* We are not

interested in merely "keep'n busy for Jesus." We want to know Him better, we want to do not *what we want to do* but to fit in with His plans, His purposes. We pray, "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,*" don't we?

The dynamics

So, let's step back for a moment and get a quick look at some of the dynamics of our 1800-2000 AD period.

In the first 400 years the most significant mission to peoples outside of the Mediterranean basin, were heretics expelled beyond the borders of the Roman empire.

By 800, the huge tribal sphere north of the Mediterranean was dotted with literally hundreds of what could be called mission stations -- both Celtic and Benedictine.

By 1200 AD, or shortly after the Friars were talking about planetary evangelization even if they did not know much about the planet. The founder of the Dominicans, in 1210 AD was reading to his new followers the Great Commission of Matthew 28.

However, by the beginning of the 1600-2000 period, Islam not Christianity had encompassed a third of the world, with more adherents than all Christians put together. Muslims did not think they had to educate people in theology. They simply educated them in obedience.

By 1600 Protestantism had been born, yet not only Muslims but Catholic Friars (Franciscans and Dominicans) as well as the much younger movement known as the Jesuits, were the ones who were all over the world in serious and often effective evangelization of a one type or another.

Unfortunately we must wait another 200 years to 1800 AD for Protestants to awaken to the missionary theme of the Bible.

The period from Abraham to 1600 AD is already complex enough for neither secular nor Christian scholars to try very often to see it as a single story. But during 1600 to 2000 it is as if the civilization of Europe explodes across the planet. Christianity now emerges with twice as many followers as Islam, and curiously, despite the centuries of Islamic superiority in medicine, scholarship, com-

merce, and statesmanship, Christianity by now is moving much faster, and is now on a unique and sleek surfboard of science, education, economic power and sheer global domination.

The very extensive Catholic penetration of what is now the Southeastern USA was to disappear from sight mainly due to European diseases. The California Missions of first the Jesuits and then the Franciscans fared a little better on that score, being overrun by the Gold Rush and the seizure of California by the US Army.

Pilgrims and the Puritans in the Northeast of the USA displaced the Indians with less violence. Imagine missionary work going on in California after the State decided in 1852 to pay a bounty of \$25 (\$2,500 today) to anyone who would bring in the scalp or the ears of an Indian. That law was on the books for 50 years.

In the middle of the 1700s the Great Awakening took place leading directly to the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War. That war was not truly ended until 1812, after which, and in view of the Louisiana purchase, citizens of the new country felt they could safely stream inland and take over land permanently.

By 1850 huge revivals had encompassed the new nation, heightening consciences and leading directly to the Civil War, better called the War Between the States. That war eliminated so many men that women had to take over the farms, the businesses, and the banks, and they founded, as well, a number of colleges for women going out as missionaries, such as Wellesley, Radcliffe, Bryn Mar, Smith College, etc. By 1900 there were 40 mission agencies run by women.

By 1900 in both England and America, the Evangelical Awakening, and its aftermath in successive awakenings, had created enough honest people to allow the industrial phenomenon of mass production. In America an expanding catalog of revived and honest believers greatly accelerated commerce across the Appalachians. That catalog today is put out by Dunn and Bradstreet.

By 1900 immigration of unrevived Europeans was to double and triple the popula-

tion of the USA, spelling the end of civil and governmental involvement of Evangelicals, but not the end of missions as their minority concern. In 1900 the President of the United States gave the opening speech at a huge Carnegie Hall meeting of nationwide leaders concerned about world missions. Never again has that happened.

The last great consensus about missions on the part of the mainline denominations declined after the First World War, and was a shadow of its former self by the end of the Second World War.

Order out of chaos?

Isn't this all pretty confusing? How can we see any order, any progression in this final, renaissance of the 1600 to 2000 period? Isn't it just too complicated?

In this lesson the Three Eras we will see present a picture almost unknown to the secular world, a picture that is both simple and yet powerful. It explains more of the otherwise bewildering details than anything else, yet it is paradoxically invisible to most scholars. In this period, spectacularly, the globe has come to know what was previously unknown: literacy, schools, hospitals, universities, governmental structures, yes, even a scientific world view that derives from Biblical perspective, of a God who is the Creator of all things, and even stable, discoverable laws. Here we see an immense setback of superstition. Despite European cynicism about political morality, we see global agreement against aggression, genocide, torture and rigid, oppressive class stratification, and specifically terrorism. As the sociologist Rodney Stark says in his incredibly important book, *For the Glory of God*, every virtue in today's world came about because of people who sought the glory of God. I would urge you to believe that that is true.

Fog on the windshield

However, one reason we can't see that the Gospel is not a marginal phenomenon but the very prime mover in the world today is due to brainwashing both massive and selective. Even the much deplored colonial phenomenon essentially created the nation-states

of the non-western world. Commercial ventures and missionaries preceded the extension of European colonial authority. In most cases the "colonial afterthought" came into being reluctantly and mainly because of missionary complaints about commercial firms' mistreatment of national workers.

For example, when India converted from an industrial preserve of the British East India Company into a British colony, the British field administrators in India were for the most part striking models of integrity, widely missed today. The missionaries were the conscience. Local wars were suppressed, diseases were reduced. Population began to shoot up. Schools, hospitals, agricultural activities were introduced.

But Marxist and leftist mantras about imperialism have disguised all this.

For example, the United Nations has published a compilation the size of a telephone book entitled *Education in Africa*. It lists thousands of schools. Not one line mentions mission origins, yet virtually all of the schools in Africa are there due to missionary initiative. A full 85% are due to the direct initiative of missions. In Latin America the largest technical university was founded by missionaries. In all of Asia the largest agricultural technical center is in Allahabad, a university founded by missionaries. And, today the Allahabad stadium resounds each week with the voices of tens of thousands of Christian believers.

By contrast, virtually all non-mission efforts to rescue nations and fight poverty, whether World Bank schemes or superficial religious good works have broken down because of selfishness, dishonesty, or lack of true concern. Character and integrity generated classically by the missions is almost always the fatally missing ingredient.

The Three Eras of Mission Vision

One way to organize the complexity of these final 200 years is to note three periods each of which is set off by the stirring glimmer of new awareness of an untouched mission frontier. These new beginnings are not immediately new bursts of mission activity because each time the energizing vision only crawled into existence. However, each era is

marked off by brand new insight into what is required by mission in the Name of Christ, and *those insights are our primary concern.*

We can begin by noticing a young man named William Carey who was extremely unlikely to be a leader, from a little-known town in Northern England, and with very little education. He has already sparked into existence indirectly seven new Protestant mission agencies and he himself is at work by 1800 AD in Serampore, a Danish coastal enclave in today's India. The delay of Protestants in becoming concerned and responsible for the whole world is something we have already mentioned. Carey's vision comes at precisely the moment Protestants get control of the seas, and at precisely the moment the Roman Catholic mission movement is undercut, as mentioned, by the orgy of the French Revolution and its aftermath in the ravaging of Europe by Napoleon's armies.

The First Era

The first of our three eras, the William Carey Era, had a goal that was no more specific than to "get out there," and it can by default be characterized by the fact that its missionaries mainly dug in no further than coastal territories. Yet his book mapped out statistically the entire unreached world.

The Second Era

But by 1865, after 65 years, a new and more specific awareness of need arose as another young man, James Hudson Taylor, attempted to rally mission forces around the radical idea of going inland. He also encouraged a number of new missions to be founded -- even more successfully than Carey -- this time all of them pledged to move beyond coastal areas to the inland peoples.

But there was a problem. *Earlier* mission leaders were not happy with young Taylor's idea. He had been in China a few years. He pretty much knew what he was doing, but his idea of going inland to most people seemed crazy at that time of history. Only Catholic missionaries had done it, because they did not have wives and children. One leader sternly warned him, "Hudson, if you

take young people inland their blood will be upon your shoulders." Taylor was shocked. This stopped him. He wandered in a daze until he felt God telling him, "Hudson, you are not sending young people inland. I am."

That's all it took. He went into London and opened a bank account under the name, "China Inland Mission." Thus was born the era for Protestants that emphasized going beyond the coastlands. Earlier pioneers, of course, were not blind. It may well be that the new inland frontiers could not have as easily been penetrated earlier.

Nevertheless confusion remained. The older missions had worked beyond both the *pioneer* stage and the *paternal* stage during which expatriates were still the ones teaching national leaders. The older agencies were now sending personnel out to be equal *partners* with national leaders involved in expanding the number of existing churches, no longer in *pioneer* missions. They were even feeling forced to give up the pattern of equal *partnership* and proceed to a fourth stage where the national churches, if they wish (but only if they wish) invite expatriate workers to come and merely *participate* in a national church movement now guided entirely by national workers, no longer led by expatriates at all, even as equal *partners*. And, maybe the older-agency people could not even remember their own earlier pioneer efforts of an earlier generation. Maybe they even thought that the *pioneer* and *paternal* stages were a mistake.

(Mission Station Approach)

For example, the much maligned "Mission Station Approach" may be the only and best thing to do in certain circumstances. Donald McGavran of whom we will see more in a minute, disparaged the "Mission Station Approach," but remember he was a third-generation missionary. What he promoted in his day was not necessarily possible earlier. Early strategies are a mistake in the later stages. Later strategies are a mistake in the earlier stages.

Note that Taylor planned to go where there were no Christians at all. His work was distinctly, and of necessity, *pioneer* and *pater-*

nal, not yet *partnership* or *participation*. As other "inland" agencies facing *pioneer* and *paternal* stages were founded there came into being a whole new sphere of activity eventually dominated by the vision of the newer, "inland" agencies. Following the pattern of the China Inland Mission (today called the Overseas Mission Fellowship) there appeared the Africa Inland Mission, the Heart of Africa Mission, the Sudan Interior Mission, the Regions Beyond Missionary Union, etc. These all tended to be new, amateurish, small, mainly interdenominational, and they did some very unwise things -- just as most of the older agencies did when they started out.

In my thinking it is well to mark the year Taylor opened a bank account under the name "China Inland Mission" as the milepost beginning the 2nd Era. But that did not end the 1st Era. It has seemed to me that 45 years later is a fitting milestone marking the termination of the 1st Era -- the coastlands era. Why? That was the year of the remarkable conference in Edinburgh in 1910, the most famous mission conference in history, an historic "first." By that time the word "inland" no longer was so risky or such a shocker.

We thus have a 45-year "transition" between 1865 when the China Inland Mission got started to the meeting in 1910. During this transition the new pioneering agencies came up to speed despite arguments about strategy, making their case, and eventually experiencing the same third and fourth stages of mission strategy themselves.

Edinburgh 1910 was a global level meeting to which no one technically was *invited* by the conference conveners -- the only people who attended were *delegates* chosen by their own mission agencies. Both China and India had already very helpfully convened (and modeled) field level conferences of this type -- that is, constituted exclusively of mission agency people not necessarily church leaders. Those meetings got work done. They grappled with problems that would have had to be lengthily explained to church leaders.

No global Christian conference has ever generated so many scholarly studies both before and after the meeting. Not until 1980 was there another meeting like that, the

World Consultation on Frontier Missions, again at Edinburgh. A significant difference from 1910 is that by 1980 a full third of the delegates came from new Third World Missions. I am thus using the milepost of 1980 as the symbolic end of the Second, inland, era. The two reasons are that by 1980, and then also *because of* the 1980 conference, practically every agency was expected to take "unreached peoples" seriously.

You can easily wonder why after adding "inland" territories to the "coastlands" there would need to be a 3rd era. Finishing the task was on everyone's lips. Some mission societies thought that by planting a church in every country the job would be finished. But there were units smaller than countries, and some of these peoples had unintentionally been by-passed. Even in the 3rd era of the unreached peoples a few thought that "A church for every people" would complete the Great Commission, not just complete the essential "missiological breakthrough" to every people.

The Third Era

The beginning of the 3rd Era is really best symbolized by *two* men this time. Donald McGavran, at work in India discerned and explained the significance of what could be called "vertical segmentation" of societies -- in his case the caste system in India. His influence culminated in the School of World Mission at Fuller.

Cameron Townsend, on the other hand, dropped out of college to fulfill his SVM pledge. He ran into horizontally segmented tribal societies in Guatemala, and was converted by some of the older missionaries to taking their different Mayan dialects very seriously. His influence culminated in one of the largest mission agencies, the Wycliffe Bible Translators.

By contrast McGavran pointed out the more invisible reality -- social "layers," metaphorically speaking, which could not sensibly, in the beginning, be mixed in a single congregation any more than two different tribes with different languages can practically be mixed in the same congregation. It is a virtue not a vice that the Bible allows and

even encourages people to belong to a Christian fellowship which honors their language and culture, that is to say an indigenous church. Otherwise, what does it mean to take culture seriously in missions? McGavran promoted the concept of "a people movement to Christ." If a new believing community is truly indigenous those outside of it (but within the same larger people) will identify those now following Christ as still belonging to the larger community. This is a stringent test. Many missionary church plants would not qualify!

But that idea, today often called an "Insider Movement," is clearly Biblical no matter how shocking. The New Testament allowed Greeks and Romans to retain a good deal of their language and culture. It then seems only fair, and Biblical, today that we allow Muslims and Hindus to retain a good deal of their culture. In one country there are now hundreds of thousands of devout followers of Christ who still consider themselves part of a Muslim culture. In India it has gone even further. Estimates are that more than 14 million followers of Christ -- true Bible believers -- are still within Hindu society.

Do they still follow other gods? No. Do they have to call themselves *Christians*? No, although they can if they want. But note that believers in the New Testament never called themselves *Christians*. That was an outsiders' sneer word! Judging by Western forms of Christianity, would believers still within the Hindu cultural sphere enhance their spirituality and their understanding of the Bible if they were to adopt for themselves a sneer word which eventually became the official Constantinian tag for a political party?

The word *Christian* in India today is again a governmental classification which includes millions of very nominal members. Take France for an example. Something like 80% of French citizens consider themselves Christians even though the same poll shows that only 20% of the French believe in God! Does it help for them to call themselves *Christian*?

However, if Greek, Latin, German, English, Japanese, Hindu and Muslim cultures need to be taken seriously, both Townsend

and McGavran proved that thousands of smaller groups live and move and have their being within smaller cultural traditions that are every bit as crucial -- in fact far more crucial to them than it is to be a considered a Muslim or a Hindu. These smaller groups are often by-passed, overlooked, or assumed to be on their way momentarily to give up their cultural heritage for that of a trade language or a national language.

However, just as Mao Zedong was unable to get all 100 million Cantonese speakers in South China to speak his brand of Mandarin, so no national government in India has ever been able to make Hindi the native tongue of, say, those millions who speak Tamil, or Telegu in South India. In both India and China the language most avidly studied is English.

Indeed, unlike the first two eras, the 3rd Era hinges not on a *geographical* definition of a new frontier but turns on much more subtle differences of language, class, and culture. This has made the cause of missions both easier and harder. Easier, on the one hand, because dealing with one single "unreached people" is much more likely to succeed than at first to expect diverse peoples to mix easily in the same congregation. On the other hand, harder because instead of having to deal with the nations (meaning the hundred or so *countries* of the world), we now have to deal with these thousands of far smaller "nations" (which are ethnically and culturally defined *groups*) -- some containing millions of people, others merely thousands, but none defined by geography.

Furthermore, as expected, once again, the older missions of the 2nd Era are still heavily involved in the 3rd and 4th stages (Partnership and Participation) while those which seek out unreached peoples are necessarily having to relearn the earlier techniques of the 1st and 2nd stages (Pioneer and Paternal).

As before, therefore, the 3rd Era has crawled into existence. But generally speaking missionaries and mission executives are some of the most alert people in the world, and the 3rd Era, the unreached-people frontier, soon came with a rush. By 1980 the new vision of by-passed small groups had been

widely understood. However, will there be a 4th Era?

A Fourth Era?

It is a bit hard to imagine that there will ever be some new insight that is as significant as these three frontiers, since together these three insights literally include every human being in the world. However, we shall see.

Cities

Some have nevertheless said that a focus on cities should be considered a 4th Era. People moving to cities does not necessarily blot out their ethnic awareness even though new "socio-peoples" do emerge enabling a very specific evangelism which will later penetrate the source people groups. Thus, even in cities missionaries usually do well to be concerned about ethnic people groups retaining their culture. Cities are to some extent simply another place where unreached peoples need to be taken seriously.

Handicapped

Others have said that the handicapped of the world, the blind, the deaf, and the disabled ought to be a 4th Era. Some have said a renewed emphasis on children is due the respect of providing a new "era" of vision and mission.

Short Terms

Still others point to the massive numbers of young and old who are going on two-week "short terms." This indeed is a phenomenon, and it is a new era of sorts. But it has little to do with a new vision or a new frontier.

It is important to note that our three eras are not necessarily eras which began with a rush of new missionaries going to the field. If that were the criterion defining these eras we would have had to mark off a new era beginning just after the Second World War, when in just five years 150 new agencies were founded. These new agencies were mainly support or service agencies giving aid to existing agencies and existing work. They did not focus on some new frontier of vision or need, and thus in our typology do not mark off a new era.

Student movements and the Eras?

It is worth noting that in all three eras student movements rose up to enhance those eras. But the students were not specifically attracted by the characteristic new vision of their eras. The student movements seem only to have happened when they did. There were some connections.

The so-called Haystack Prayer Meeting moved five students toward the field. Later, counseled by their seminary professors they successfully pushed for the founding of what has been called the first foreign mission agency organized in America (the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions).

Few who tell the haystack story explain that the reason these five students were praying outdoors in the first place was because at Williams College shortly after 1800, due to the secularistic idealism of the French Revolution, student animosity toward any kind of religious faith was quite hostile. Even when it started to rain they did not come in out of the rain. A haystack which crows have eaten around begins to look like a huge mushroom and you can in fact take refuge from the rain under its hollowed-out edges, which they did. The conditions were such that they had to write their prayer diaries in code. They formed a very low key movement called the Society for Missionary Inquiry (SMI), which proliferated to other campuses and was still in existence almost a hundred years later when the larger and even more famous Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions took over and built upon those little SMI cells on the college campuses.

Thus, the SMI fueled the 1st Era and the SVMFM (usually just SVM) fueled the 2nd Era. In the case of the 3rd Era, the SVM had already died down before it really got started, even though both Townsend and McGavran were themselves products of it. By the time they got their bearings on the field (50 years after the beginning of the SVM) and thought their new unreached peoples thoughts, the SVM was dead, due in part to faulty board structure.

J. Christy Wilson, Jr. the son of missionaries was able to persuade the InterVarsity movement to add a missionary convention to

their program. The first such conference was in Toronto in 1946. (I was at that convention). The next few years were in the university stadium at Urbana, Illinois. When they outgrew that they chose an indoor football stadium in St. Louis, Missouri.

However, InterVarsity's secondary interest in the mission movement has not at all been comparable to the power of the exclusively missionary SVM of the 2nd Era. Their student work does mutate to the Student Foreign Mission Fellowship when sponsored on the campuses of Christian Colleges, but with InterVarsity interest in mission may disappear almost entirely on the secular campuses where the vast bulk of their staff are located.

Campus Crusade, by comparison, not only works on foreign campuses but in its Jesus-Film ministry has a major thrust of mission outreach to populations other than students around the world. Even so, the relatively few of their staff who join standard agencies may accomplish as much or more than their magnificent but transient forays with the Jesus film.

Thus, in all three eras student movements have been helpfully involved. However in no case have those movements created the new mission vision characterizing and defining one of the Three Eras. Sad to say, both the Student Volunteer movement and today's Short Term movement have been generally oblivious to authentic missiological issues. The SVM people did not study the advanced insights of the 19th Century and took thirty or more years to relearn those earlier insights -- about the indigenous church for example. Short termers, a small percentage of them, do work with missionaries, and, if they don't go in groups, and if they stay longer than two weeks, are of some help. Otherwise most short termers learn a great deal but not about missions, and in general do not become missionaries. Their trips abroad may even make them more fearful than ever about a call to mission service.

Thus, student movements have not in themselves ever constituted a new era, although they have to some extent fueled the various eras.

Furthermore, today, in general, the esti-

mated 700,000 short termers a year probably drain more funds than all of the serious long-term work combined. This factor alone must be considered a serious drag on formal mission efforts. Worse still, when intelligent people visit "the mission field" unacquainted or unadjusted to some of the scary or inconvenient things, and without understanding the many factors that don't meet the eye, they may actually acquire negative thoughts about any thought of long term service in a cross-cultural situation, and wonder subconsciously about the feasibility of cross-cultural mission activity in general.

However, even if there might at first not seem to be any single huge new insight which could create a "4th Era," (I will mention one in a minute) there have been a number of elements within the mission movement which could reasonably be called minor frontiers, obstacles, roadblocks, unsolved problems.

Several of these problems have, for the most part, been deterrents, "sand in the machinery" within one or more of the Three Eras. Doing something about these minor frontiers is just as much a part of the *cause* of missions as being a *career* missionary. Some of them have been and are being dealt with by people who don't actually become career missionaries in the usual sense.

I will just list a few of these breakthroughs in understanding with which we have grappled directly or indirectly at the U.S. Center for World Mission.

1 Unreached Peoples

The U.S. Center for World Mission was founded, in part, on the discovery that many people groups still have no viable, indigenous church community in their midst – and require pioneering, cross-cultural outreach.

2 The Great Commission and Abraham

Early on we recognized that the Great Commission first appears in Genesis 12, so that missions is clearly the basis of the entire Bible. Thus we will likely read and apply the Bible in radically new ways.

3 From the Unfinished Task to the Finishable Task

We later realized that, though a large challenge, it is a relatively small task to reach all unreached peoples – in view of the enormous

global community of Christians and the many churches available to reach each people.

4 Failure with Large Blocs and the Offsetting Trend to "Radical Contextualization"

We also began to realize that it's not just how many unreached peoples are left, but also that some large blocs of peoples are superficially touched by gospel witness – and that some "reached" peoples aren't really reached.

5 Reverse Contextualization -- the Re-contextualization of Our Own Traditions

We have also sensed the necessity, before we can successfully contextualize the Bible for others, of acknowledging major philosophical or theological flaws in our own traditions.

6 The Reclaiming of the Gospel of the Kingdom

Latter-day Evangelicals have often substituted a mere "Gospel of salvation" for the full-fledged Gospel of the Kingdom so vividly portrayed in the Bible.

7 Beyond "Christianity"

We will often need to go beyond radical contextualization – to recognize that some people around the world will choose to go beyond current expressions of biblical faith now recognized as "Christianity."

8 A Different Type of Missionary Recruitment

A pattern of pre-graduation "enlisting and guiding" is clearly superior to waiting until students have completed university degrees and are weighed down by heavy debt and poor curriculum choices.

9 A Trojan Horse in Education?

We can make creative, strategic choices to stem the tide of secularization in public and private schools.

10 Needed: a Revolution in Pastoral Training

Training is often focused on the wrong students, the wrong curriculum, or the wrong (degree) packaging.

11 The Religion of Science

The Book of Scripture and the "Book" of Creation have each spawned a huge, global community of faith. Our challenge is to bridge the divide between science and religion and to declare the manifest glory of both His Word and His Works.

12 The Challenge of the Evil One

An intelligent Evil One hides behind disease pathogens and other scourges often blamed on God. We must vigorously oppose Satan, seek in that way to glorify God, and enlist in the service of the Son of God who "came to destroy the works of the devil." .

A Real Fourth Era?

In conclusion I will mention one other frontier which is significant enough to create a 4th Era if it is ever recognized as a crucial dimension in the cause of missions.

Like the other Eras, this fourth insight augments the earlier eras. It does not deny or conflict with their validity. Call it the Military Era. It acknowledges of all the wonderful things we constantly say about Salvation, both temporal and eternal, Salvation being the necessary basis on which we are called. But we are called urgently not merely to get others "saved" but also to get them involved in the work of the Kingdom, which clearly involves a war against "the works of the Devil." It views Christians world wide as a vast army already in uniform but unaware of any very demanding, global war.

The biggest problem in explaining this additional dimension of our reconciliation with God is our ominous inability to see what the enemy is doing. For example, many believers customarily take for granted all kinds of true horrors as if they are "just the way it is," or worse still, as if these horrors are just part of "God's mysterious will."

A lurid example of this kind of confusion can be seen in Jonathan Edwards' case when in his missionary period he sought earnestly to try out smallpox vaccine so as to save his Native American charges from annual, horrible scourges of smallpox.

Amazingly, the pastors of Massachusetts with one accord (except for Cotton Mather) opposed his idea claiming that in fighting smallpox he would be "interfering with Divine Providence." However, he went ahead and tried the primitive vaccine on himself and died of smallpox the very year he was installed as the President of what is today Princeton University.

In other words, a major problem we face in order to make this case is that few people are clear about the source of all evil. The Bible sometimes talks as if God initiates evil and suffering. In other places it is plain that while God works all things for good, much of the time, as in Job's case, He is making something good out of something evil Satan has done in his free will or something man has done in his free will.

For example, the Intelligent Design people rightly see evidence of intelligence in nature but do not talk of any evidence of evil design, thus allowing a Harvard professor quite logically to say, "If the god of the Intelligent Design people exists he is a divine sadist who creates parasites that blind millions of people." If the current efforts of the Intelligent Design movement lead logically to the existence of an ugly, vicious god, is that better than no god at all?

It is embarrassingly true that since Calvin did not know about germs we have, even today, no theology of germs. We cannot logically or theologically seek to destroy dangerous pathogens if we are not clear that it is our Divine mandate. Thus, it would appear that the many Orthodox Jewish doctors who are at the forefront of microbiological research must be employing an intuitive theology that is superior to our formal theology!

How can we ever win intelligent, educated people to Christ, or hold them in belief, if we as followers of Christ are not known for fighting against those things which otherwise logically tear down God's glory?

Contrary to popular belief, the medical world and the pharmaceutical world are focused on helping sick people not on eradicating the pathogens that make them sick. Contrary to popular belief recent insights from university researchers indicate that far more diseases are the result of infections than has been understood by the healing professions, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's, and schizophrenia.

Even if these killer diseases had not been discovered to be infections by pathogens, there is already a list of 25 eradicable diseases which no identifiable Christian organization in the world that I know of is seeking to eradicate. Christian initiative has built thousands of hospitals and clinics, and that is well, but joint, group-Christian initiative which fights evil at the level of eradicating the pathogens themselves is non-existent. We seem to be blind in this area. Is this blindness itself a work of Satan?

We seem to be blind in other ways. We have mounted a multi-billion dollar cam-

paign to fight terrorists who killed 3,000 people in one day, yet we are hardly lifting finger against just two diseases that kill 6,000 Americans *every day 365 days a year*. And, when someone gets cancer or heart disease we usually chalk it up to one of God's mysterious actions. In the sphere of devastating disease germs Evangelicals acknowledge no war, nothing that would require a public, all-out effort to fight. Yet leader after Christian leader, both at home and abroad is pulled down prematurely because of disease.

Worse still, as mentioned, evil in this dimension is not only clearer than ever but is routinely attributed to the initiative of God Himself. This is the central problem: under these circumstances we today cannot expect truly honest, educated people to believe or to believe for very long. The Biblical emphasis on bringing glory to God has been transformed into an Evangelical drive merely to get human beings saved. It may seem quite humanistic to be preoccupied with human salvation rather than the glorification of God.

Ironically, we can only bring rural or uneducated people to salvation unless those who are already saved focus not only on their salvation but on restoring the glory of God by working together in the name of Christ to identify and destroy the works of the Devil. That is what 1 John 3:8 says, "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the Devil." Is this part of the full meaning of our prayer that "His Kingdom come and His will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"?

Could this frontier mark the beginning of a Fourth Era?