

Frontier Ferment in the Local Church

By John Piper

The maturing of the frontier missions movement must manifest itself in large-hearted, well-reasoned, Biblically-saturated responses to the tensions it creates. I have in mind the tensions created in the local church when some of the leadership ignites with the incendiary vision of mobilizing the church for the cause of unreached peoples.

The aim of this article is to describe three of these tensions that have risen in our church and the kind of responses which we believe will make for maturity in the frontier missions movement. I focus on the goal of maturity not only because the movement is young but also because so many of the movers are young.

The Movement Comes to Bethelhem

Only one of our five-member pastoral staff is over 40. Three are 30 or under. In the October-December 1984 issue of *Mission Frontiers*, the bulletin of the U.S. Center for World Mission, General Manager Art McCleary said that most of the staff of the USCWM “are under 30, a few are between 55 and 75. But hardly any is between 35 and 55” (p. 25). The editorial staff of the *IJFM* and *World Christian* confirm the remarkable youthfulness of the movement.

For about two years God has been riveting our attention on the hidden peoples and igniting our affections for the majesty of God and his global purpose. Tom Steller, a graduate of Fuller Seminary and a gifted thinker, teacher and organizer, experienced a dramatic awakening to the worldwide implications of God's passion to be glorified in his creation. His zeal was contagious, and the congregation approved the transformation of his role into “Associate Pastor for Students and Missions.” Formerly his duties related to students and education.

From the 200+ students and career people that Tom leads he took 25 to Pasadena in the summer of 1984 to take the USCWM's course, “Perspectives on the World Christian Movement.” He stayed to be trained as a coordinator for the course. Then he brought the course back to Minneapolis and together with Bill Zobrist enrolled 120 people in its first offering. About half of these were from our church.

Through a series of gatherings called “Missions in the Manse” a vision called “90 by 90” was born. My wife Noel and I invited everyone in the church who was remotely considering the possibility of entering domestic or frontier missions to come to our house for prayer, worship and challenge. We promised to pray by name every day for the rest of the year for everyone who came. We prayed that 60 would come. We took all the furniture out of our living room and dining room, and 90 people came. That was March 1984.

By the end of the summer our Council of Deacons approved the vision called “90 by 90.” The goal: to send out 90 of our members by 1990 into vocational ministries at home or short-term and vocational missions abroad. The average would be 15 each year. We sent 17 in 1984. When Urbana '84 rolled around Tom Steller took a group of 60 from the church.

Ralph Winter was gracious to come to our fall missions conference in 1984. Typically, he had a computer and printer but no hat. It was an exciting week.

But when it was over it became clear that some in the church were feeling slighted. Frontier missions was so much in the air that they began to wonder whether we put value on anything else. Not only that, some of the older pillars wondered how this new movement would affect our commitment to our denominational missions program. The movement had arrived and so had the tensions.

What follows is my attempt to respond with a large heart, clear reason, and Biblical basis to three questions that were raised here--and no doubt will continue to be raised elsewhere as the movement spreads. The questions are:

1. Is this new zeal for frontier missions and enthusiasm for the USCWM a threat to our commitment to our own denominational missions program?
2. What is the relationship between diversified domestic ministries in the local church and the cause of frontier missions? Is one more important than the other?
3. How should we feel about each other when our conviction or burden is not shared by those around us in the church?

A Threat to the Denomination?

Is this new zeal for frontier missions and enthusiasm for the USCWM a threat to our commitment to our own denominational missions program?

We belong to the Baptist General Conference. The Board of World Missions of the BGC has over 100 missionaries serving on twelve fields. Our 114-year-old church was once the largest in the Conference. There are great memories in the minds of many older members. We have always been a strong supporter of the BGC. In fact, one of our former pastors, Anton Sjolund, was instrumental in the formation of the BGC Board of World Missions in the mid-forties. The overwhelming percentage of our missions budget has gone to the BGC.

Talk of frontier missions is new for most people at our church. The USCWM and Ralph Winter were virtually unknown until two years ago. Yet the wind blowing from the USCWM is a main cause of the rising tide of missions zeal at Bethlehem. It has not been caused by winds blowing from the BGC. And young people are considering short-term ventures with several other mission agencies.

All this has caused concern among some of the older pillars of the church. Is the pastoral staff committed to the Conference missions program? Will the budget commitment to the BGC be eroded? Will we no longer encourage our young people to go out under the BGC Board?

The concerns were expressed in respectful and hopeful tones. Our response was offered in the same spirit:

1. *For young people denominational support does not come from below but from above.* Ethnic or family roots are negligible. At least at our church, missions zeal has come down like a river from the mountain of worship. The glory of God took us captive. Then his purpose to fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory gripped us. Then the vision of persons "from every tongue and tribe and people and nation" before the throne clarified our focus. The thrill of being involved

in the final thrust to find and evangelize those people moved us to strategize. And only then did the issue of “which agency” arise.

In spite of the fact that our wider interest has made some of the denominational enthusiasts nervous, the actual result has been *increased* interest and support for the BGC Board of World Missions. Our giving to the BGC has tripled in the last four years. And last year we sent four of our most promising college graduates on year-long missions projects under our Conference Board.

The inescapable fact for us has been that the broader vision of global missions gave birth to a renewed commitment to the denomination. It did not happen in the other direction.

Is there a lesson here for the denominations and churches? Could it be that the broader non-denominational frontier missions movement is not so much a threat as an opportunity? Most young people today are virtually immune to appeals for denominational loyalty. Enthusiasm for the denomination will not kindle enthusiasm for missions. It must go in the other direction. Today God is using the vision of the frontier missions movement to ignite the hopes of the younger generation of world Christians. Only then will they get excited about particular denominational structures to help realize the larger dream.

2. The cause of frontier missions has given us a desire to shape, not forsake our Conference mission strategy.

We want to learn from the directors of our denominational mission first. They are the experts. We are green. As much as we would like to influence the Conference, we know we must come to them as learning partners in a dialogue.

So Tom Steller called our denominational office and asked if they would give us four hours if we would fly to Chicago and buy dinner for them. They were enthusiastic. No church had ever done this before. So Tom and I went and began what we hope will be an exciting partnership and dialogue--especially regarding the unreached peoples.

In answer, then, to the first question, the new zeal for frontier missions and for the USCWM has not threatened our denominational commitments. Just the reverse: it has awakened our young people to the work of our World Missions Board, multiplied our support, and opened a new partnership and dialogue.

Domestic Ministries vs. Frontier Missions?

What is the relationship between diversified domestic ministries in the local church and the cause of frontier missions? Is one more important than the other?

First, some working definitions:

By *frontier missions* I mean the effort of the church to penetrate an unreached people with the gospel and establish there an ongoing, indigenous church which will apply the love and justice of Christ to that culture. By *domestic ministries* I mean the diversified efforts of a local church to apply the love and justice of Christ to its own culture. (I am not concerned here with “regular” cross-cultural missions among established churches.)

Many people in our church are pouring their energy into significant domestic ministries. The heavy dose of frontier missions during our annual conference left some of them wondering whether we regard their ministry as unimportant. They are not anti-missions. It was a legitimate question: How should we describe the relationship between domestic ministries and frontier missions?

The ultimate goal of the church is not frontier missions. The ultimate goal of the church is to reflect and display the glory and worth of God. Missions is a means, not an end. Missions exist because worship and obedience do not. In the age to come there will be no missions. It is not our ultimate end. It is a means.

But there are other means to that end as well. Indeed, there are almost as many different means as there are different people. If our hearts are gripped by the love of Christ and our sense of justice is shaped by the will of God, then there are innumerable ways to apply his love and justice to our own sin-sick culture for the glory of God--ways that are not frontier missions but are crucial in the ultimate goal to glorify God.

The Holy Spirit might burden a group to engage itself in the issues of poverty, medical care, hunger, abortion, unwed mothers, runaway kids, pornography, family disintegration, child abuse, divorce, hygiene, education, drug abuse and alcoholism, environmental concerns, nuclear proliferation, the peace movement, terrorism, moral abuses in the media and business and politics.

The Lord might lead someone to devote his time to a ministry of promoting and encouraging prayer or Bible study or friendship evangelism. He might move someone to pour time into junior high boys in Sunday School or music ministries or visitation of the shut-ins or the rescue mission. And that just scratches the surface of the kinds of domestic ministries in which a believer can display the love and justice of Christ to the glory of God.

Now what is the relationship between these crucial domestic ministries and the cause of frontier missions? Is one more important than the other? Is one a means to the other?

The surprising answer is that domestic ministries in the local church are both the *means* to frontier missions and the *goal* of frontier missions.

Domestic ministries as a means to frontier missions

There are at least three senses in which domestic ministries are a means to frontier missions.

First, domestic ministries provide *authenticity and credibility* for the cause of frontier missions. Ralph Winter sat at my kitchen table during our missions conference and, as he looked out the window toward the city, he said, "You know, the best thing you might be able to do for frontier missions is remake Minneapolis." What he meant was that it is very hard to take a gospel message from America to an unreached people if America has the reputation of being just as corrupt as other countries. The engagement of the church in the transformation of its own domestic front may go a long way to creating some credibility for the messengers we send to the frontiers with a transforming gospel.

If the gospel makes no impact on our culture, why should we try to send it to unreached cultures? And the gospel *will not* make an impact on the people and practices of our culture if no one is called to domestic ministries. The authenticity and credibility of the frontier missions movement

depends on many people in our churches devoting themselves joyfully and sacrificially to the array of domestic needs around us.

Second, domestic ministries provide much of the *personnel and training* for the frontier missions movement. Domestic ministries is the place where converts are made, babes are nurtured, and the mature discover and strengthen their spiritual gifts.

Usefulness on the frontiers does not come out of nowhere. It comes out of someone's experience of a domestic ministry. It may be that many of our domestic strategies need dramatic overhauling (e.g., our educational system), but they are essential nevertheless as a source of recruits and training for the frontiers.

Third, if we encourage our people to see their secular jobs as ministry--that is, as occasions for applying the love and justice of Christ to people and processes for God's glory--then these domestic ministries become the *source of funds* for frontier missions.

When Paul headed for the frontier of Spain via Jerusalem, he sent out the greatest deputation letter that has ever been written--the book of Romans. His aim was to have Rome as his support base for the western frontier--"where Christ has not already been named." He said, "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain and to be sped on my journey there by you" (Rom. 15:24). The Greek word behind "be sped on my journey" (*propempe*) is rendered by Bauer's lexicon as "help on one's journey with food, money, by arranging for companions, by means of travel, etc." This is confirmed by Titus 3:13, "Speed Zenas and Apollos on their way; *see that they lack nothing.*"

But where were these supplies for Paul's frontier mission supposed to come from? I can only imagine that they were to come from the earnings of the church members. Therefore I conclude that secular jobs of Christians are the main source of funds for the frontier missions movement. And to the extent that we see these jobs as unique domestic ministries, we can say that domestic ministries are the source of funds for frontier missions.

In summary then, domestic ministries relate to frontier missions as means to end: they are a source of authenticity and credibility, a source of personnel and training, and a source of funds. And therefore they are crucial.

Domestic ministries as the goal of frontier missions

If we stopped here, our picture of the relationship between domestic ministries and frontier missions would be very distorted. Domestic ministries are not merely the servant of frontier missions. The reverse is also true. Frontier missions is the servant of domestic ministries.

Recall our definition of frontier missions: the effort of the church to penetrate an unreached people with the gospel and establish there an ongoing indigenous church which will apply the love and justice of Christ to that culture. In other words, the goal of frontier missions is domestic ministries. The goal of a missionary is to help plant a church that will do in its own culture all the life-changing domestic ministries that the American church ought to be doing in America.

To put it another way, frontier missions is the transportation and adaptation of (Christ-saturated!) domestic ministries to people groups where they don't exist because Christ is not known. So the

surprising conclusion is that frontier missions is the servant of domestic ministries, and domestic ministries are the real business of the church.

This cuts both ways. It means that young zealots for the cause of frontier missions should not demean domestic ministries, since frontier missionaries are simply the servants and promoters of domestic ministries in new places. But it also means that people who are earnestly engaged in American domestic ministries should be among the strongest supporters of frontier missions. For surely the same Christian impulse that breaks their heart for the needs of people at home would also break their hearts when they consider a hidden people who have no Christian advocates for these same domestic ministries. The same love of Christ and sense of justice that burdens a person for housing and unemployment and hunger and health care in Minneapolis should also burden a person for these very same needs in people groups where no Christian impulse exists at all.

In summary, then, domestic ministries are not merely the servant of frontier missions. They are also the goal. Frontier missions exist for the sake of domestic ministries--that is, for the sake of causing them to flourish in people groups where they can't yet flourish because there is no indigenous, ministering church.

This view of the interrelationship of domestic ministries and frontier missions has gone a long way in our church toward freeing the zealots on both sides to affirm the value of each other's work. They can now more easily see themselves as a team with a unified ultimate purpose--the future global glorification of God by members of "every tongue and tribe and people and nation" as a result of frontier missions and domestic ministries that have authenticated the reality and sufficiency of Christ.

Living with Diversity

One final point of tension remains. How should we feel about each other when our conviction or burden is not shared by those around us in the church? This tension exists all the time in the church, but it becomes acute when a zealous movement is under way. We have found the principles of Romans 14 helpful in handling this tension.

According to Romans 14, there were at least three tense points of diversity in the church at Rome.

One was that some Christians in the church felt free to eat anything, probably including certain foods that the Old Testament had forbidden, or foods that had been offered to idols. Others in the church only felt free to eat vegetables. Verse 2: "One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables."

A *second* point of diversity in the church was that some of the believers were strongly in favor of keeping certain holy days while others felt no need to set off special days since all days were holy in Christ. Verse 5: "One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike."

The *third* point of diversity was that some evidently felt free to drink wine, while others thought it was not God's will for them. Verses 20-21: "Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make others fall by what he eats; it is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble."

Meat eating, wine drinking, and day keeping were all points of tense diversity in the church at Rome. So Paul was writing to instruct them how to handle this kind of diversity.

There are at least five principles that emerge for our guidance.

First, diversity in understanding God's will for our lives exists and will continue to exist in the church. The reason I say it will continue to exist is that Paul makes no effort to obliterate it. Instead he gives instructions on how to live with it in love, for Christ's sake.

Second, not all diversity must be understood in terms of good and evil. That is, your conviction about what you should eat and drink and how you should spend your Christmas holiday does not force you to call someone else's customs bad.

It is true that Paul calls one habit “weak” and one “strong.” But he refuses to treat these differences the way he treated the disagreement in Galatians. There the nature of saving faith was at issue. Here he believes that both convictions are coming from saving faith. One person's faith frees him to eat meat, while another person's faith expresses itself in a more rigorous interpretation of what God requires of his children.

Paul thinks that the freeing faith is the stronger, but he will not condemn the behavior of the weaker brother. Both behaviors come from faith and are therefore expressions of the Lordship of Christ. Verse 23: “But he who has doubts is condemned, if he eats, because he does not act from faith, for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” So Paul will not call either side of this disagreement “sin” because sin is what does not come from faith. There is a way to talk about much of our diversity without charging each other with sin.

Third, therefore we must not despise or condemn our brothers and sisters who sense the leading of the Lord differently than we do in matters where the word of God is not decisive. Verse 3: “Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls.”

Fourth, every one of us should go hard after God until we can be fully persuaded in our own mind that our choice is a genuine expression of trust in him and obedience of his word. God does not want his people to be immobilized by the fear of doing something wrong. Yes, Paul thinks some decisions are the result of being weak in faith, but notice his challenge in verse 5: “One man esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. *Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind.*”

He does not say: Watch out lest you make a choice from weak faith and do something that is less than perfect! He says: I know you are going to choose differently, but by all means be confident in what you choose. Be settled. Don't be forever tilting back and forth.

Indecisiveness is a bad thing in Paul's mind. Verses 22-23 give some reason why: “The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God; happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves ... for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” People who can't come to a settled conviction about what God wants them to do are ever subject to a guilty conscience. They are in

constant danger of acting against their conscience and thus sinning. So principle four is to pray and study until you arrive at a settled conviction about your course of action.

Finally, do everything you do for the honor of Christ and with a heart full of thanksgiving to him.

Verse 6: "He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God." In other words, God accepts a range of different choices on an issue as obedience if the choices really aim at the honor of Christ and come from a thankful heart.

When we put these five Biblical principles together with our understanding of the relationship between frontier missions and domestic ministries, there is a powerful incentive for patience and mutual respect and support.

Our desire at Bethlehem is for the maturing of the frontier missions movement. To that end we pray

--that more and more churches will catch the frontier vision and enter into respectful dialogue and partnership with their denominational mission boards,

--that enthusiasts for domestic ministries and frontier missions will joyfully affirm their crucial interdependence,

--and that we will not despise or condemn each other, but rather be fully persuaded of our own calling and do everything in reliance on Christ's power and for his glory.