

Just Where Are the Frontiers?

Introductory comments

A few comments before I begin. Let me say first of all that I appreciate the spiritual emphasis that Ron Iwasko just made. Some of the things that we are going to share this morning are controversial, and I'd like for you to know that they are more in response to some of the things that have been written over the last couple of years than to the spirit and tone of our gathering thus far here this week.

But my comments are based on a vision—a vision that this society needs to be more than just a special focus group interested in frontier peoples like other special focus groups are interested in leprosy, or radio, or development, or whatever it might be. We as a society must be a catalytic movement that will energize missions and churches to push out to the frontiers and minister to those unreached who are least reached. That's the goal. That's the vision we share.

It's my belief that we won't be able to do that as effectively as we should unless we also pay some attention to strengthening the stakes. If you want to lengthen the cords, you have to strengthen the stakes. That's the nature of what we are talking about today. These are residual matters in one sense. This is old business, but I think there are some places where we have some cracks in our foundation and we need to address those issues and rebuild the mortar where it's needed to strengthen the foundation.

I do have papers to distribute. I'd like to ask as we go through this that you would bear with me to the end. I think it's possible to latch on to one point that I'm making and to mistakenly think that you know where I'm going. I would ask you to withhold your judgment until we go all the way through it and see where it goes. I'd also like to make plain that the issues raised and some of the concerns I am expressing about communication do not reflect defensiveness on the part of myself or SIM as a mission. In fact, a number of the concerns that I'm going to mention actually work very nicely to our advantage. Emphasis on the 10/40 Window, for example, really could have been invented by SIM's media department. It highlights very nicely where we're working. Recent issues of the International Journal of Frontier Missions have said a lot about missionary deployment in World A, World B and World C. On even a very strict definition we come out reasonably well. We've got at least 20 percent in World A on the strictest definition, and if you broaden that to include what the map includes for the 10/40 Window (with countries divided) the percentages are much higher. So, I'm not coming here to protect our turf. We share a vision and my goal in sharing these things is to strengthen the actual practical outworking of that vision.

Few questions are more timely for the missions community today than the scope and parameters in frontier missions. While on the surface the question might seem to require little more than a simple response about geography, ministry which is both Christian and strategic requires that at least two other areas must be considered—the

theological dimension and the missiological dimension. Without them, the geographical dimension has little meaning.

Over the last decade and a half an astounding shift has taken place. The concept of unreached peoples (verses unreached people) is on the lips of virtually everyone concerned with the mission of Christ's Church. The recent encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, issued by John Paul II, is elegant testimony to just how far the concept has come. This has been a remarkable boon to world evangelization, reflected in the strategic outreach planning of agencies and churches, and in the mobilization of new resources to see the task completed. It has not been without its downside, however. The downside of the unreached peoples concept is the imprecise and confusing communication which surrounds it. The all-important term "unreached peoples" itself, for example, implies a division of the world into two parts-reached peoples and unreached peoples. This is fair enough, as far as it goes. What has occurred, however, is a loss of theological and missiological clarity in the use of this term, as well as other terms dependent on it. And because "unreached" is used in so many contexts, it is no exaggeration to say confusion reigns. The fact that such basic terms as "mission" or "missions" are built on a definition of the unreached, compounds the problem further.

It is not surprising to find that when some of our most basic definitions have lacked theological and/or missiological clarity, that a number of our operating assumptions are in error. These can perhaps be most easily described in a minimizing/maximizing paradigm:

In order to maximize closure speed in missions or world evangelization (AD 2000 emphasis), this Society and others have minimized the missiological task ("evangelizing" rather than "making disciples"; assuming that any who call themselves Christians really are) and attempted to maximize the missionary task force, ("Great Commission Christians" defined as any who are interested in evangelism/mission, with little regard for the content of what they're evangelizing). This has been accomplished largely by minimizing foundational theology (especially "justification by grace through faith" as our bedrock doctrinal commitment; and, the "Great Commission"/Matthew 28:18-20 as our bedrock mandate).

I am not saying here that we do not think these commitments are important, but I am saying they have somehow dropped out of the discussion. For the sake of clarity (the absence of which in other contexts we have already bemoaned) we shall look now at the parts of the paradigm in greater detail.

Maximizing Closure Speed/ Minimizing the Missiological Task. One of the serious flaws in the AD 2000 movement (the term here is used generically, not organizationally) is that it consistently understates the disciple-making task of the Church ("baptize... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"), as outlined in the Great Commission. The teaching or "discipling" task of the Church (in the Navigators' sense of the term) is essentially ignored.

The resulting operational definition of the "unreached" ("without adequate numbers and resources to evangelize their own people group without outside cross-cultural assistance") is then interpreted in the same minimalist way. Though the definition is fine if understood in light of the full-orbed nature of the discipling task, it has rather consistently been downplayed in such a way as to minimize the importance of the teaching/enabling function.

This would not have been quite so bad, had the term "unreached peoples" not also often been almost exclusively identified with the particular region known as the "10/40 Window." The question is then posed, "If reaching unreached peoples is the essence of mission, and if all but the stragglers among the unreached peoples are to found within this 'window', then what in the world are mission agencies doing in the rest of the world? And aren't they almost criminal in not deploying their resources more effectively?"

While the argument may not always be stated so bluntly, the message seems to permeate almost everything published on the subject. Although it does have some strategic value as a global analysis (its communication value actually seems most prized), it minimizes the Biblical task and fails almost totally to take into account the practical considerations of God's call, temperament, and giftedness, which also influence an individual's deployment. It should come as no surprise to any of us that not everyone is capable of functioning well in the very different world of tentmaking ministry (essential to entrance into so much of the "10/40 Window"). Nor in many cases would such deployment constitute the best use of particular gifts and abilities. The problem is only compounded through triumphalistic approaches to the year AD 2000. It has even been argued that we must not revise our statistical paradigm (to reflect reality more closely) because it would mean that we would have "to stop talking about evangelizing the world by the year of 2000" (IJFM, Vol. 8:2, April 1991:66). In response one cannot help thinking of Sir Isaac Newton's timeless advice, "Keep the phenomenon; change the theory." Which deserves our allegiance, after all, our Lord's mandate for disciple-making, or our own success-oriented prognostications?

At its core the essence of the missiological problem with the current paradigm is that it sees the task of missions only in terms of evangelism, rather than the biblical standard of disciple-making. I do agree that we ought to define evangelism in terms of clear proclamation rather than conversion. Gospel proclamation is, after all, a fragrance of life unto life and a fragrance of death unto death (II Corinthians 2:14-16). Conversion, by contrast, is the effective work of God's Spirit in the lives of the elect. But Gospel proclamation (evangelism) is never the whole story as far as the Bible is concerned. It was not for Jesus, and by His command, it is not for us. The task we were assigned is "disciple-making," and not disciple-making as redefined by the Church Growth School to simply mean evangelism, but disciple-making as Jesus Himself defined it, "baptizing..." and "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded."

The missiological beauty in this latter kind of disciple-making is that it includes teaching obedience to the Great Commission itself, thus multiplying the task force available to complete the global task. I can not help wondering sometimes whether our fascination in the Western Church with the year AD 2000 does not stem at least partially from ethnocentrism. Perhaps subconsciously we see the handwriting on the wall, and because we desire so much to finish the task while our hand is still on the global mission throttle, we scale down the ultimate task to the image of our own capabilities. I also wonder if we don't tend to assume that we deserve to be the ones to finish the task and usher in the Lord's return. If there is any truth in either of these motivations, our brethren in the churches of the Two-Thirds World certainly deserve something better from us.

Maximizing the Missionary Task Force/ Minimizing foundational Theology

Far more troubling for me, however, than any minimizing of the missiological task has been the minimizing of our theological foundations. While there is still some value in pointing out the distinction between those geographic areas where people at least name the name of Christ in some fashion, and those places where they do not, this is not an adequate criterion for measuring the completion of the task. It is useful for showing where the unreached are least reached and where we need to be giving more attention, to be sure, but in no way describes the fullness of the task.

A Canadian friend recently shared with me how his government was defining success in the national railway system: success equalled achieving delivery within at least one half hour of the scheduled arrival at least 60% of the time. Using this anemic criterion of success the railway system administration felt quite good about its performance. Never mind that fewer and fewer citizens were using the trains because their understanding of success was so different. One wonders if our understanding of success in the world evangelization task may not be equally as anemic.

If we are serious about the authority of the Bible, and about the Lordship and Saviorhood of Jesus Christ as He is revealed in it (the basic tenets that have traditionally defined Evangelicals), then we cannot ignore more than a billion people simply because they call themselves "Christian." Abraham Lincoln once asked "If you call a dog's tail a leg, how many legs does he have?" The answer, of course, is four. It does not matter what you call a dog's tail, a dog has four legs. The definition of Biblical Christianity is no less clear.

We can not escape the need for theological markers in the pursuit of our task. Do not misread me. I am not talking about denominational distinctives here. I am talking about the essentials of saving faith. Fuzziness on this point has resulted in inadequate definitions of "evangelism" as it relates to the Gospel message, and of "Great Commission Christians" as it relates to the evangelism task force. Make no mistake, evangelism has not taken place unless the core message of justification through faith alone has been communicated. And neither Great Commission Christianity nor Biblical Christianity (the only kind that saves) exist where this principle

has not been embraced.

It is true that no Christian tradition has a monopoly on this principle, and that no tradition is so far from it that at least some of its members may not embrace it. It is also true, however, that in significant parts of the so-called "Christian" world, the percentage of true believers is so small that a lack of focused missionary endeavor would constitute nothing short of practical heresy. It is not enough to say "No church is a hundred percent Great Commission Christian and no church is zero percent Great Commission Christian," (IJFM, Vol. 8:2, April 1991:65-66), and assume that the issue is solved.

Where do we stand today?

I believe that we can no longer afford (if we ever could) the luxury of "sound-bite missiology," that majors in catchy slogans, but minimizes the realities of the task for the sake of short-term mobilization goals. What is required now is the best theological and missiological thinking we can muster. It should be generous and it should be gracious toward those who see things differently, but its first priority must be faithfulness to the Word of God and the Lordship of Christ. It must see obedience to His commands as its highest duty.

A reliance on carelessly contrived and often unstated theological and missiological assumptions has resulted in mission malaise and congregational confusion about appropriate missionary work. Please do not misunderstand me here. I have little patience with dead wood, stick-in-the-mud, never-change-anything-missions, either. I am just like the rest of you. Nor do I have any axe to grind on behalf of SIM. We have a large presence in the "10/40 Window," so that the current emphasis does good things for us. Some of the communications make us look pretty good.

Rather, the problem is that many fine mission organizations today feel they have been all but written out of the "frontier" missions script, and that their efforts are viewed as second-class at best. This is reflected, I believe, in the typically poor attendance of mission agencies at this Society's meetings. I'm happy to see some major improvement this year. That's good. At the same time, the ill effects of congregational confusion are only beginning to be felt in the form of reduced giving and recruitment for strategic ministries that do not fit the narrow profile of frontier (read: "that which is really important") missions, which has been communicated.

We as a Society have either glossed over or ignored differences related to this question for over half a decade, much to the detriment of our long-term strategic and mobilizing goals. This has been possible largely because one side of the discussion has basically stayed away, not feeling particularly understood or appreciated by the "frontier" crowd.

The time has come to face our differences squarely and seek, in a spirit of humility, a clearer vision of the way forward. What follows are some thoughts on how that might

be accomplished.

What Are Our Appropriate Responses For The International Society For Frontier Missiology?

1. Return to our moorings and affirm a fuller definition of what constitutes frontier missions; namely, taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the unreached where they are least reached-wherever in the world that is.
2. Consider resurrecting the term "hidden peoples" as a means of communicating this fuller and more global definition.
3. Affirm the full Biblical formulation of the Church's missionary task "to make disciples," rather than using minimalist "evangelism" definition for that task
4. In affirming "disciple-making" as a task, define it in Biblical terms (Matthew 28:19-20), rather than in subjective social science ones. As such it includes not only evangelism/ enfolding, ("baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"), but also "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."
5. Affirm in light of the above both the legitimacy and absolute necessity of cross-cultural missionary endeavor from all continents, to all continents. Affirm at the same time all ministries which promote partnering and an internationalization of the missionary task force.
6. Reaffirm our unashamed commitment to the foundational doctrines of evangelical theology, including the bedrock Reformation principle of "justification by grace through faith alone." Implied in this is a commitment to cease from using definitions of "Christians" or even "Great Commission Christians" in ways which minimize the watershed importance of saving faith as Biblically defined. While a broader definition of the terms may be appropriate in certain contexts, general usage of them in this way is hardly appropriate in an Evangelical group focused on the frontier of Christ's Church.
7. Define more precisely and realistically what we are trusting God to accomplish through His people in world missions by AD 2000. Given the larger task before us which we discussed above, my own feeling is that our goal ought to be to see every unreached people group effectively engaged by that year. Such a goal is achievable and it acknowledges anew that it is God alone who "gives the increase." We only plant and water.
8. Affirm the usefulness of the "10/40 Window" as a graphic display of the region where the majority of the unreached "are least reached." Encourage a focus on this area as a challenge to new workers, without denigrating the essential work going on where. Our communication should make clear that employment of properly gifted new workers, rather than redeployment of present workers, is the crucial issue. I'm not

ruling out the latter, but I'm talking about emphasis.

9. Seek the forgiveness of mission agencies hurt by unhelpful or careless rhetoric of the past, and encourage their future participation in this Society based on the new understanding being forged.

The Conclusion of the Matter

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying:

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (Revelation 7:9-12, NIV)

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