

# Melchizedek and Abraham Walk Together in World Mission

*Why must the church today begin mission where God and the apostles began?  
Here is a biblical rationale that world mission needs to start with creation, conscience and culture.*

by W. Douglas Smith, Jr.

No truth is more overwhelming than the unyielding fact that mankind is lost. Our minds boggle at the thought of hundreds of generations of unevangelized heathen whose souls are already in hell. The vast majority of today's population will follow shortly. We sink before the immense task of dispersing the darkness which envelopes nearly 2.5 billion fellow human beings. Our feelings rebel against such a tragedy. We know our theology contradicts those feelings, but just this once we wish our theology were mute.

Christians can never give enough nor pray enough. Missionaries, no matter how zealously they work, can feel they have stretched themselves far enough. The mission executive pensively scans his map, mentally totaling the vast populations whose spiritual destiny may well hang on his decisions.

The colossal responsibility for the two and half billion weighs us down and mocks our puny efforts. Somewhere, in some missionary conference, someone told us that if we were truly obeying the Holy Spirit, the world would be saturated with the Gospel. That voice regularly reminds us how much heathen blood clings to our hands.

Yet, less than two hundred years ago the Church in England, influenced by rationalism and deism, could not have cared less. When young William Carey in 1785 proposed to a group of ministers that they discuss "The Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens," the moderator squelched him with this icy reply, "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He

will do it without your aid or ours."<sup>1</sup> In those years the Church assumed absolutely no responsibility for the lost unreached peoples of the world.

Now the pendulum has swung to the other extreme—and has hung there. The burden of world evangelization topples from heaven to earth. Our current view nearly leaves God out of the picture. Sermons, films, lectures, literature and even scholastic preparation for mission service stress the human factor so heavily that mission ceases to be regarded as a basic divine enterprise.

To be sure, God started the clock ticking, but according to many sincere mission promoters, He seems to be distant, uninvolved, watching helplessly while we botch His magnificent program of world redemption. He depends on us. We fail miserably. The unreached perish without hope. He is bitterly grieved. We go to heaven and eventually live happily ever after.

Is God frustrated? Has He been unable to reach the pagan world prior to the traditional date of the founding of Catholic and Protestant missions? Is His mighty voice stifled in the many cultures where no mission penetrates? If not, then how has God been speaking in time and space ever since creation?

## **God Speaks Through Creation**

"The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psa. 19:1). The lavish sunset colors stroked by the Master Artist on the easel of the sky communicates God's majesty, intelligence and omnipotence. The rhythm of the seasons sings of His goodness and concern for men. The fertile valleys and snow mantled

peaks echo their agreement. "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). Through nature God sings an anthem of Himself, and men universally hear. God's attributes are clearly seen. At all times God is being perceived. The message written in natural wonders strikes so forcefully that it leaves all men without excuse.

Think back to when God challenged Job to an intellectual battle (Job 38). He began, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" God then multiplied that question with several dozen more. Those questions probed into stellar space and delved into the microscopic world of the snowflake. God could not quote Scripture because Job had no Bible. He could not remind Job of laws and covenants, but He could awaken Job's conscience with a whirlwind tour of many kinds of natural phenomena.

God still speaks to cultures without the Bible through the drama of wind, cloud, storm and thunder; through the panorama of galaxies; through the miracles of birth, blossom and fruit. Do primitive cultures jumble this message by insensitiveness to the light they do have, thereby inverting God's order? Do they become oppressively subdued under a harsh creation? Answer: They worship the creation rather than the Creator. Satan abuses creation and culture for his own ends, usurping man's vice regency under God. (Rom. 1:18-32; Isa. 14:12-14)

## Melchizedek and Abraham Walk Together

### God Speaks Through Conscience

Every culture recognizes some system of right and wrong. Paul speaks of “the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending themselves (Rom. 2:15). Conscience declares that the God of creation is holy and just. As C. S. Lewis has so poignantly expressed: “when I open that particular man called myself, I find that I do not exist on my own, that I am under a law; that somebody or something wants me to behave in a certain way...we conclude that the Being behind the universe is intensely interested in right conduct, fair play, unselfishness, courage, good faith, honesty and truthfulness.”<sup>2</sup>

Since creation God planted a device in all men which sounds an alarm on sin. True, the device can be tampered with, as Cain did in attempting to escape responsibility for his brother. Human beings can rewire their consciences so that the alarm sounds only faintly or infrequently, as with the new moralists. Certain cultures pattern the conscience with blurry, inaccurate data concerning right and wrong. Still, because God conceived it, it works. It demands response in obedience born out of faith in Him because of the kind of person He is.<sup>3</sup>

Let us not underestimate the power of God’s voice in creation and in conscience. He speaks clearly and effectively through these media. He broadcasts the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Romans 10:18 says, “But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have: their voice has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.” We find the evidence of the same universal message in Colossians 1:23, which directs our attention to “the hope of the Gospel you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven.”

But some might protest: The Christian message had not yet permeated

the globe, nor even the Roman Empire. What does Paul mean here? The answer lies in the fact that the Gospel written on the scroll of the heavens and in the hearts of men had reached them.

Don Richardson calls this “the Melchizedek factor,” that gives men of all races, times and cultures “eternity in their hearts.” It encompasses God’s general revelation to all men everywhere, speaking as He does through their conscience, and linking it with God’s special revelation embodied in Abraham. Richardson calls the latter “the Abraham factor.”<sup>4</sup>

### Co-Laborers with God

The above indicates that God has always been evangelizing the unbelieving lost world, including the lost unreached peoples on the other side of the world in every culture. Nowhere do we ever start from scratch without God’s prior witness.<sup>5</sup>

Our listeners are never theologically blank or morally untutored. As co-laborers with God we should reemphasize what God has already said, beginning where each person is in his own culture.<sup>6</sup>

When the Church encounters the lost, two things are known:

- \* The lost know God in some way.
- \* They do not honor Him as God intends, giving Him thanks (Rom. 1:21).

When we preach in the name of our Heavenly Father, we must require men to first recognize and honor the Creator as the only, true and living God, in repentance born of the Spirit (Acts 11:18). Secondly, men must offer thanks to Him. This is the essence of repentance. Men must stop ignoring God and begin to worship Him. Men must turn from indifference and begin to praise their Maker in gratitude for life, food, family and goods, as God ordained since Adam. Martin Luther emphasized this same teaching in his ministry and writings.<sup>7</sup>

Often we try to explain the atone-

ment, somehow expecting theological understanding to inspire repentance. Sometimes it does, especially in Christianized cultures. However, the man without the Bible<sup>8</sup> seldom understands and very seldom sees the need to repent. He sees no relation at all between the message he reads in his environment and the message he sees in the missionary’s presentation. Why? We fail to build on God’s universal communication—“the Melchizedek factor.”

When the apostles confronted their pagan audiences, they zeroed in on the great truths pregnant in creation and conscience.<sup>9</sup> Paul and Barnabas asked:

Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the Gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them. He did not leave Himself without a witness, in that He did good and gave you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:15,17 NAS).

The pagan hearer is more likely to sense that he is in the presence of truth when he hears of the God who sends the rain and the crops and who made heaven and earth. He can understand the clear demand to “turn from these vain things to the living God” long before he can master the concepts of propitiation and justification (Rev. 14:6,7; Mark 13:10).

God’s revelation in the outer universe and in the inner mind unite to call for repentance, worship and thanks. Paul makes this clear from Romans 2:14, “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” With a natural and moral revelation urging men to repent specifically of their ingratitude and indifference, should our Gospel fail to do likewise? If we are co-

laborers with God, then we should join His chorus. We sing the same song and preach the same message. Notice this in Paul's address to the Athenians, "What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands ...He gives to all life and breath...He made from one all nations of mankind to live on all the face of the earth...that they should seek God" (Acts 17:23-27 NAS). We too must challenge men to respond to God, the God of whom they instinctively, and initially know. "God is now declaring to men that all, everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30)

Consider Apollos, a man mighty in the Scriptures, a Spirit-directed preacher who knew "only the baptism of John." Was he saved? Certainly! Did he have an effective ministry? Yes! What did he preach? John's message: Repent! We should not prize theological ignorance, but we must insist that it does not prevent people from being saved. The minimum requirement for salvation is a heart-felt cry for the God who is there! Watchman Nee emphasizes, "For what is it to be reckoned righteous? It is to touch God."<sup>10</sup> As men obey this summons, they call out and fulfill the divine promise, "Whosoever will call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32; Rom. 10:12, 13).

### Touching God in Repentance

When the publican cried, "God be merciful to me a sinner," his prayer reached the heart of God. The man was saved! We are not told how much theological knowledge he possessed. Certainly, it was less than that of the pharisee. But we do know that the publican went down to his house justified (Luke 18:13,14).

The thief on the cross prayed, "Remember me." The Lord Jesus might have used this opportunity to explain

the plan of salvation, or expounded on the significance of His death. Rather, He simply promised, "This day thou shalt be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42,43).

Are there heathen who are ready to touch God? Do some individuals and whole unreached people groups ripen under the influence of God's sermons in the cosmos? History clearly answers in the affirmative.

In the last century a young Japanese lad named Neesima renounced idolatry at an early age and began to search for God. Later, after reading Genesis 1:1, he prayed, "Oh, if You have eyes, look upon me; if You have ears, listen to me."<sup>11</sup> Neesima became one of Japan's mightiest evangelists.

Nee records meeting a man who at the age of twelve, while worshipping an idol, began to think to himself, "You are too ugly and too dirty to be worshipped! What is the sense of worshipping you?" The boy slipped away to touch the true and living God. Finding an open space, he poured out this prayer, "O God, whoever You are, I do not believe You can dwell in that shrine. You are too big, and it is too small and dirty for You. You surely must dwell right up there in the heavens. I do not know how to find You, but I put myself in Your hands; for sin is very strong and the world pulls. I commit myself to You wherever You may be."<sup>12</sup>

Entire peoples become receptive in a similar fashion. When an animistic Ayore tribe of Bolivia was reached by missionary, Bill Pencille, a large number trusted Christ. The Ayore chief told Pencille that missionary effort would have failed with an earlier generation. "They would have killed you." But the chief's prior observation of the marvelous majesty and rhythm of the seasons stirred him to cry out, "Oh God of creation, reveal Yourself to me". He dreamt that a white man would come with that very revelation. As his tribe searched and waited, his generation ripened to a new receptivity.<sup>13</sup> Christ

promised, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asks receives and he that seeks finds; and to him that knocks it shall be opened" (Luke 11:9,10).

### The Decision Making Process

Individuals and groups of people as described above go through various steps in coming to Christ and deepening their discipleship. It appears that the Great Commission imperative of "make disciples" can be broken down into four basic participles: 1. Going 2) Teaching, 3) Equipping 4) Sending. Part of the problem with gathering in the harvest among the *ethne* comes from failing to discern where the audience is in this mission process.

Every receptor appears some were along this continuum. All peoples have some awareness of the Supreme Being through God's general revelation in creation and conscience. However, at this stage there is no effective awareness of the Good News of the possibility of forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. Other receptors will have an awareness and grasp of the implications of the Gospel from exposure to Christian proclamation. When awareness is accompanied by a strong felt need for change, designated as personal problem recognition, does the individual open his life to Christ. Prior to this moment of truth, there in neither sufficient understanding nor the felt need to allow a valid response. Once a person is persuaded to receive Christ, he enters a process of spiritual growth through obedience to the Word under the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

### The Pendulum of Responsibility

To summarize, we may ask, "How swings the pendulum of responsibility for evangelizing the lost?" The same sustaining God of creation who causes the fields to ripen, wants to guide us to the repentant seekers, as He did with Carey, poring over his crude

## Melchizedek and Abraham Walk Together

maps and charts of the world. When we arrive we must coordinate our mission to confirm and emphasize what God has been saying and doing prior to our arrival. We must call out, "Turn to the true and living God," knowing well that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses the sin of the ignorant as well as that of the scholar. Whoever truly cries out and touches God in repentance will be justified, even if he has never understood the doctrine of justification. Thus, every responsible witness must capture the universal message of the Innocent dying and rising again for the guilty. This is the supracultural significance of blood sacrifice (Gen. 3:21; Lev. 17:11).

### Conclusion

God shoulders the burden for world evangelization through us. Our responsibility is to obey the Lord of the harvest. He plants us where He wants us as we will lift up our eyes to go to His fields. He does not depend on our frenzied efforts. God works through obedient followers who conscientiously disciple those whom God has ripened to faith and repentance. We share with God in evangelizing the two and half billion. Responsible believers like Philip, Peter, William Carey and Bill Pencille are lead by the Holy Spirit in their daily "going, baptizing and teaching" (Matt. 28:19,20; Acts 8 and 10).<sup>13</sup>

The responsibility never was, nor ever will be, ours alone. Moreover, our failures and mistakes do not stymie God's program of redemption. We can and must harmonize with Him in His harvest to disciple the lost whom He wants to save.

Every few years International Congresses on World Evangelization focus on mission strategy and the dynamic process of reaping the harvest among the remaining unreached peoples of the earth. In that light, no strategy is sufficient which does not begin

with what God is saying and doing through cosmological media to reach each man, woman and child where they are. World evangelization can be speeded; reaping can be accelerated when the Church understands God's prior ministry in every culture. Will we, like William Carey, learn to discern the discontinuous cultural assumptions from the continuous, biblical universals? Will we begin with "the Melchizedek factor" to introduce "the Abrahamic factor" especially among the unreached?

It is time for the Christian Church to recognize the biblical basis for her responsibility to the lost, especially the lost with no access to the Good News. We must not minimize or exaggerate our duties. We must not think of our guilt more solemnly than we ought to think. We have some theological repenting to do which will make us feel better, as well as live healthier and work more fruitfully with God as His co-laborers. It is time to nudge the pendulum of Christian responsibility gently back into balance with what God has always been saying and doing. He is a jealous God. Until Christ's soon return, may we be found moving in rhythm with Him as we become more responsible in discipling the unreached peoples of the world as His co-laborers until completion around the Lamb's throne. (Rev. 5:9).

### End Notes

1. Glover, Robert Hall, 1953:101, *The Process of World-Wide Missions*. New York, Harper and Bros, (Fourth edition).
2. Lewis, C.S. 1959:32-36, *Mere Christianity*. London, Fontana, (Sixth edition).
3. Uda, Susumu, 1974:90 "Biblical Authority and Evangelism." ICOWE, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*. J.D. Douglas, ed., 1975, 88-93, Minneapolis, World Wide Publishers.

4. Richardson, Don, 1984:31-32, *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Ventura, Calif. Regal Books.
5. Freytag, Walter, 1957:15, *The Gospel and the Religions*. London, SCM Press.
6. Kraft, C.H., 1973:113 "Toward a Christian Ethnotheology." *God, Man and Church Growth*. A.R. Tippett, ed., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans.
7. Forell, George Wolfgang, 1954:67 *Faith Active in Love*. Minneapolis, Augsburg.
8. Schaeffer, Robert H., 1969:91-105 *Death in the City*. Chicago, Inter Varsity Press.
9. Glasser, A.F. 1976:3 "Theology of Mission". SWM Course M610 notes, Winter Quarter, Jan.-Mar., Pasadena, Fuller Theological Seminary.
10. Nee, Watchman, 1961:41 *What Shall This Man Do?* London, Victory Press.
11. Glover Robert Hall, 1953:165 *The Process of World-Wide Mission*. New York, Harper and Bros, (Fourth edition.)
12. Nee, Watchman, 1961:43 *What Shall This Man Do?* London, Victory Press.
13. See Morris Leon, 1960:78-80 *The Spirit of the Living God*. Chicago, Inter Varsity Press.

*Dr. Douglas Smith has served in Bolivia as a missionary for many years. Currently he directs the Institute of Latin American Studies located in Pasadena, California. He is the author of Towards Continuous Mission: Strategizing for the Evangelization of Bolivia, and also Bendecidos Para Bendecir (Blessed to be a Blessing).*