

The Biblical Basis and Priority for Frontier Missions

We need to encourage those who have the gift and calling to keep moving to the peoples on the frontiers—the peoples of the earth WHO live beyond the hearing and seeing of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

by William R. O'Brien

A few years ago the *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram* carried an Etta Hume political cartoon. In each of the four squares the reader sees a poor mother with an empty bowl between her and her starving child. She speaks to the child: 1. "Whenever you have no food in your bowl at mealtime, you should think of... 2) all of the poor bureaucrats in the world who never have...3) enough imagination to figure out how to distribute food surpluses... 4) They have to go to bed with empty heads every night."

It was an indicting statement that gripped me. Beyond the physical and moral implications of the statement, I thought of its application related to Christian world mission. Can you imagine a poor lost mother saying to her child: 1) "Whenever you don't have Christ in your heart, you should always think of... 2) all the poor missiological bureaucrats in the world who never have...3) enough imagination to figure out how to distribute the gospel... 4) They have to go to bed with empty heads every night."

One of the mysterious paradoxes of the late twentieth century is the gap between the great love of our Lord confessed by those in our churches, in missions agencies, and by missionaries on the field, and their inability or unwillingness to close that gap between the Good News "haves" and Good News "have-nots." Have we missed something of the heartbeat and purpose of God? If so, does that mean we have missed something of that revealed will in the Word of God?

Is there a biblical basis for missions, on the one hand, and a different biblical foundation for frontier missions on the

other? The title of this article may say more about the age of specialization than it does about a biblical foundation and priority for frontier missions. Or, it may have more to do with the etymology of the word "frontier" than it does with missiology in general. Why bother differentiating between missions and frontier missions?

To be sure, there is but one foundation for world missions. We may not be talking so much about a difference in kind as we are a difference in degree. But in this case the "degree" is very important. To understand the crucial nature of that "degree," one must understand what we mean by "frontier." In one sense, we might say that the last great frontier in the world Christian mission is the frontier of collaboration. Certainly the task is too large for any single agency, church, denomination, or group of missionaries. The essence of covenant is the interconnectedness of all the parts. Collaboration is not compromise; it is a mark of humility in the presence of all the other gifts within the Body of Christ.

But that kind of frontier is not the one we are talking about here. Neither are we talking primarily about geographic frontiers. To speak of frontiers in terms of real estate reflects a type of arrogance that defines one's own turf as settled, familiar, and developed. To move beyond the familiar to some frontier "out there," requires a bit of pious condescension that reflects a self-serving sacrifice.

When we define "frontier missions" we do not first ask the "where" nor the "what" questions, but rather, the "WHO." Maybe we ought to coin a new

word: Who-tier missions. The "who" of frontier missions comprises any and all who still live beyond the hearing and the seeing of the gospel. Areas and peoples of the earth with no church, with few or no believers, no Bible in the written language, no Christian presence for them to see and hear the word, no broadcasts of the Good News is the focus. They are the peoples of the world with no exposure nor access to the Word of any kind, just human beings, created in the image of God, left to their own inner-longings which pass in and out of the hole in the heart, finding nothing solid on which to find repose and relief. They are the modern day "Gentiles" who are peoples "a hope not having."

William Owen Carver was perhaps a mission scholar without peers, who taught at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky from 1896-1943. His translation and interpretation of the Greek text of Ephesians led him to the following conclusion:

The promise, which became the only line of messianic hope and of divine promise, was that embodied in covenants, such as that with Abraham and the other patriarchs. It was historically a covenant with the descendants of Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Saviour. Having no share, by claim or concession, in that line, the Gentile peoples were peoples "without a hope" – literally, in emphatic construction, "a hope not having".¹

Carver talks about the Gentiles being God-less, not in the sense that we define atheists. Rather, it is those "who do not have God as he is, and must be known for salvation. Such, then, is the hopeless plight of the nations before

God came to them in the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”²

The modern Gentiles who comprise the Who-tier of missions today may be clustered in a geographic region such as the 10/40 Window. But due to migration patterns that have already reached staggering proportions on a global scale things have changed—many of those beyond the hearing and seeing of the gospel, have moved next door! We distinguish them within population segments, like people groups, limited access nations, and even unreached cities. So back to the original question: What is the biblical basis and priority for engaging in Who-tier/Frontier missions focused on the unreached or unevangelized peoples of the earth?

Principles Inherent in Scripture

There are “golden texts” within the Bible that are often used on “Missions Sundays”, like Matthew 28, Acts 1, Romans 10, etc. They are so obvious they stand out as proof of the world mission mandate. But proof texts can be used like a hammer to create guilt or to intimidate. When used to instruct and inspire, the focus on isolated texts separates those very “proofs” from the larger body of literature that reveals the nature and purpose of God. David Bosch says “one of the main reasons for the existence of this body of literature is the missionary self-understanding and involvement of the people who gave birth to it.”³ Or, it may be that in looking for a biblical basis for mission, missionary advocates as a matter of course took it for granted that it was the enterprise they knew and were engaged in that had to be justified biblically.

William Owen Carver used to ask students in his introductory mission course, “What’s the Bible all about? Is it ALL about ANYTHING?” The remainder of the course was the unfolding of the whole of Scripture as the basis for understanding the mission of God. Bosch helps us at this point in focus-

ing on four cardinal missionary motifs in Scripture: compassion, *martyria*, God’s mission, and history. One could say, then, that through the whole of Scripture we view mission from the standpoint of the nature of God, *modus operandi*, ownership, and location.

Compassion

God’s nature is that of compassion. The all-encompassing compassion of God for the cosmos and all its contents evidences itself in a litany that includes: accounts of creation, inclusion of Adam and Eve in the plan, protection of fallen humanity in removing them from the presence of the Tree of Life, guarding Cain by placing a mark on his forehead, the call to Abram and shaping of a covenant community, denouncing boundaries of narrow ethnocentrism through the Jonah experience, and the ultimate word of compassion in Jesus the Christ. These few examples are magnified greatly when one reads the whole Bible sensitive to how the compassionate God wills and acts, “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)

Martyria

This Greek word for “witness” encompasses both definition and style, or *modus operandi*. It obviously gives us the English word, “martyr.” How contrary is this concept to much of the style of Western Protestant mission endeavors manifested in strategy, strength, and triumph. Biblically speaking things are different: the strength of the task flows through weakness. The mind of Christ is to be the mind of mission, which willingly empties itself and takes the form of servant. Increasingly in this century we see servanthood taking on more of the suffering qualities, even unto death.

God’s Mission

The Church has no mission primarily its own. God is the author of mission. Again, David Bosch: “Mission is what God is doing to and through the Ser-

vant, not what the Servant does.”⁴ As loving and obedient children, the more we understand mission as God’s work, the more we as his children want to get involved with it. Divine and human activity must be held in countertension. Bosch warns that if we separate God’s activity from human involvement we land in one of two untenable positions: either we become fatalists because we overemphasize God’s activity or we go the other extreme and focus on human endeavor and become fanatics.

4. History

The mission of God happens in real time, among real people, in real places. The Bible contains the most important drama ever staged, and the reader is in front-row center. The God who acts in real time, real place has come among us. The risen, reigning Christ still acts among the 1.2 billion who do not know anything about him. He still acts in the earthly arena characterized by migration, urbanization, poverty, tribalization, violence, AIDS, and martyrdom. Christ-followers, by definition, neither sit still nor retreat into safe havens. They follow the Lord of the harvest to all those places where Christ still acts in real time and real places to accomplish and complete His redemptive purpose and plan for the world.

A Scriptural Model

Do we need now to look at some specifics from within the larger context of Scripture that would give us a clue about concern for the unreached peoples of the world? The Spirit speaking through Isaiah reminded Israel that the task of the covenant community was far greater than raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the survivors of Israel. God would give them as a light to the nations (Gentiles, i.e., ethnic peoples) that God’s salvation might reach to the end of the earth (Isaiah 49:6).

In the great “resurrection seminar” Jesus held with his disciples during

the last forty days on earth, he “opened their minds” so they could understand the Scriptures and all that was written about him in Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Then, specifically, as recorded by Luke, Jesus said, “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” Again, the “all nations” is not speaking of nation-states, but all the ethnic peoples of the world (Luke 24:44-49). Since various groups hold to differing definitions of what constitutes unreached peoples, the numbers range anywhere from 1685 to 6000 or beyond. However, and this is the point to drive home, even if 4,000 of those ethnic people groups have never heard the Good News of Jesus, it must mean the hands and the feet of the Body are not moving the same direction as the Head intends them to go!

As believers moved out of Judea and Samaria because of persecution, other ethnic groups besides Jews were evangelized and were added to the Church. The church at Antioch affirmed the “*apostolos*” gifts of Paul and Barnabas and “sent” them to still other *ethne* (ethnic groups) beyond the reach of existing churches.

To a new group of believers Paul wrote his most comprehensive word on the nature of God’s calling to the Church and the churches. In Ephesians Paul prayed that believers in that area might “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ...” To grasp the width of the love of God is to say that the scope of God’s love is all inclusive of all the peoples and comprehensive of the whole world.

But how will they know they are included if our actions as his people virtually exclude them? It seems that our actions, money, and placement of missionary personnel narrows the “width of God’s love” to include only those nearby and easy to reach. Furthermore,

our apathy toward the totality of the mission reflects the assumption that God would never allow anyone to live in eternal lostness.

Paul never thought in those terms. In fact he shared with believers in Rome his joy at the opportunity to preach the gospel all the way from Jerusalem around to Illyricum, or modern-day Albania. Then he said, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation” (Romans 15:20). Paul went so far as to tell them that he had no more place to work, and therefore, would be moving on. The reason he might be able to visit the believers in Rome was not because Rome was his destination or even his next mission assignment. Rather, it would be a stopping-off place on his way to Spain where Christ was not known. In his great closing doxology to the Romans Paul indicates the reason that the mystery hidden for long ages was now an open secret and none other than “that all nations (ethnic peoples) might believe and obey him (God)” (Romans 16:26). We note that Paul certainly planned to do his share in helping all the Good News “have-nots” to get God’s Word firsthand and without delay. Knowing Paul’s spirit, I doubt he even saw Spain as an end in itself.

When Paul indicated there was no more work to do in the vast region where he worked it did not mean that everyone had become a believer and was active in a new church, nor that unbelievers in Antioch, or anywhere else, were unimportant, nor that no more churches needed be planted. However, the question of the matching of spiritual gifts and calling with needs and opportunities is a crucial matter that must be kept in proper balance. And here is the imbalance: When 99% of all missions dollars and personnel continue to work in areas where over and over the gospel is proclaimed and already received it can only mean the hands and the feet of the

Body are not in sync with the Head.

Conclusion

In light of the above, the matter of degree and priority of missions becomes increasingly important. Through the mission of the compassionate suffering-Servant, God acts in behalf of all creation, all peoples, and all humanity. If almost twenty-five percent of all that humanity has never heard the Good News of God’s love, the fault does not lie with God.

It is time for the whole Church to work together to find ways to express compassionate, suffering service in real time and difficult places to those WHO have never heard. Since there is such imbalance in the stewardship of human and financial resources as applied to Christian world mission, the Church and the churches must readjust their priorities to give a greater equalizing focus to this larger part of the unfinished task. The Church must give greater encouragement to those who continuously stay out beyond the reach of the already reached—of existing planted churches. We need to encourage those who have the gift and calling to keep moving to the peoples on the frontiers WHO live beyond the hearing and seeing of the gospel of Jesus Christ. After all, there is a biblical basis, a biblical model as well as a biblical priority for doing so!

End Notes

1. Carver, William Owen, *The Glory of God in the Christian Calling*, Broadman Press, Nashville, 1979, p. 93
2. *Ibid.* p. 93
3. Phillips and Coote, *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, Orbis, 1993, p. 178
4. *Ibid.* p. 184

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