

Completing the Agenda for History

Grasping the significance of fulfilling the agenda for history could be the most exciting and motivating discovery for any Christian or church seeking God's purpose in the world. On the other hand we need to recognize that if we fail to believe His command then there is someone—the enemy of all God's purposes, Satan—who will be quite delighted... But for those who believe God's intention of calling out a people from every nation and mediating His plan through His People no greater incentive is needed than to concentrate all our efforts on completing the agenda for history.

by Malcolm Hunter

Yes, there is an agenda for history. Whatever political pundits and prophetic preachers may want to propose, the Lord Jesus Christ gave us a very simple and concise summary in Matt. 24:14. "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world as a witness to every nation, then shall the end come." This is both a promise and a challenge to those who seek to follow Him. It is the direction towards which He and all history are moving. "Every nation" in the English translation does not of course refer to the political nations as the UN would define them, but to every ethnic group as implied by the Greek *ta ethne*.

Reaching the Nations

There has been much debate between the missionary statisticians about how many ethnic groups there are in the world. This is really an irrelevant and impossible question to answer. We cannot say how many different ethnic entities there are since we do not know where the boundaries lie between the groups.

For those who have lived and worked on the front lines there is a more empirical conclusion—we will only know how far an ethnic group extends when the Christian church is introduced amongst them in an

attractive and appropriate manner. Once the indigenous church is established prayerfully and properly, it has within it all the power of the Holy Spirit to enable it to spread spontaneously within that ethnic group. It will keep advancing freely until it comes to a place where it will need to make a cross-cultural shift. In the jargon of missiology, E1 evangelism will operate until it comes to a boundary where E2 or E3 evangelism is needed. E2 is outreach to near neighbors which has often proved to be more difficult than E3 evangelism—remote cross-cultural witness. This is where "frontier missions" come in and we can begin to see the ethnic map emerging—the world as God sees it for His strategic purposes. The boundaries will usually be imprecise and overlapping as they take account of all the social barriers and distinctions that outsiders, especially Westerners, do not understand.

Another practical discovery for those who have seen the indigenous church in action under the power of the Holy Spirit is that external opposition, rather than deterring its advance, actually seems to stimulate its growth in breadth and depth. In fact, the only real impediments to the healthy growth of the church seem to be internal division and interference from well-meaning outsiders and

Western missionaries who want to "squeeze" them into some Western mold.

Saturation Evangelism?

There is another contemporary trend in Missions which can be very obstructive in the task of completing the agenda for history. This refers to the strategy known as *Saturation Evangelism*.

The object here appears to be to plant so many Christian churches in any particular ethnic group that nobody has to walk more than a mile or so to find one. This may be feasible in urban or densely populated parts of the world but it misses two significant points. Firstly, many of the unreached peoples of the world do not live in such areas. Many of them are thinly scattered over the arid lands which comprise about 1/3 of the earth's surface.

The other more important problem with saturation evangelism is that God never told us to plant a church on every street corner, He told us to preach the gospel to every tribe and language and people and nation—to the ends of the earth. The Lord Jesus not only gave us the clear command of Matt. 28:19 to "Go and make disciples of all nations [*ta ethne* again], it is also recorded in Luke's version that

Jesus told his disciples that “repentance and forgiveness of sins *will be preached* in His name to all nations, [ta ethne] beginning at Jerusalem.”

If we look at the advance of Christianity around the world, we will see with wonder and worship that it can now be said to have covered every continent and penetrated every country. Just in the last two years the final political barriers to the gospel have fallen in Albania and Mongolia, and Christian missionaries from many sending countries are moving in enthusiastically.

There is, of course, plenty of opposition from other philosophies which oppose missionary work. The first obvious obstacle is religious interference or anti-Western prejudice. To a remarkable degree these barriers have been breached by those prepared to pray hard and press forward gently and creatively. In many of the most militant Muslim societies the demand for high technology and the desire to send their brightest young people to the West for education has provided all sorts of opportunities for God to communicate His truth. All He needs is the availability and flexibility of His people willing to look for the openings wherever he gives them, at home or away.

We can pray that as global awareness and demand for democratic rights develop, that religious intolerance will become more and more unacceptable internationally. God can certainly use worldly powers like the United Nations and Civil Liberties movements to further His purposes. As the situation in countries like Turkey and China are demonstrating, even the most xenophobic and nationalistic regimes cannot indefinitely maintain their hostility to Christianity in the face of world demands for human rights if they want to win acceptance into the circles of so called

advanced and democratic countries. Refusal to admit Western/capitalistic missionaries may continue or even increase, but that is probably all to the good as the newly emerging third world evangelical churches take up the challenge.

Nations on God's Map

In view of the remarkable advance of Christianity throughout the world there remains an even greater need for the church to understand and act upon the command to preach the gospel to every ethnic entity—the nations

*Peoples are often
unreached not because
of geographical
isolation... but largely
by the degree of difficulty
of access to traditional
missionary approaches.*

on God's map—as they have been described. If a serious study is made of the remaining unreached peoples in the world, it will become clear that they are not limited to any particular country or continent. Rather, there are pockets of ethnic groups within which the Christian church has not yet been established. They are often unreached not because of geographical isolation as was the case previously, but largely by the degree of difficulty of access to traditional missionary approaches. Some may have received a witness from outside their own culture, but this has sometimes been so inappropriate as to be

irrelevant, or even worse, to be of negative value as a demonstration of win-some Christianity.

If we can get beyond the traditional thinking of competitive Christianity where missionary agencies color in a country if they happen to have a presence there, be it one or one hundred, we can begin to see that we need a more intelligent way of identifying and targeting the remaining unreached peoples.

For a start we can recognize that for the last 200 years most Western missionary work has been directed at sedentary people. The most fruitful has definitely been amongst the rural, cultivating people. That is where most of the large scale people-movements in the third world have taken place.

Great strides have also been made since the war in penetrating the islands and jungles of the world to locate and evangelize the thousands of small ethnic groups usually known as Tribals. At the same time, with the movement of millions of rural people to the cities, urban evangelism has been growing rapidly on every continent with outstanding results in many places. It is salutary to note that lessons learned on one continent in urban ministry seem to be carried with good effort to urban centres on other continents.

However, a closer look at the world of unreached peoples will reveal that there is another strata of human society where the church has not yet begun to make any real progress. This is a category of people groups for whom the major obstacle to their hearing the gospel appears to be the difficulty missionaries have living amongst them and understanding them. Some of them live within national boundaries where Christian missionaries are not welcome but most are unreached chiefly because they live in conditions which are

regarded as being unhealthy and uncongenial to Western missionaries. They live in lands which are classified as arid or semi-arid, in very thinly populated deserts.

To add to the difficulty for missionaries in physically reaching these people they are usually nomadic or semi-nomadic, of necessity having to adopt this lifestyle to find sufficient grazing and water for the animals on which they depend. This socio-economic system, known as nomadic pastoralism, makes them particularly unattractive for Western missionaries. Not only do they live in nasty, hot and uncongenial areas but most of them don't stay put if he goes to the trouble of building himself a mission station amongst them. There may be a few who have lost all their animals who will stay around the mission station and wait for whatever food or work the white man has to offer, but in practice they usually don't prove to be a very hopeful or fruitful bunch to work with—either in terms of spiritual or physical efforts. It is this sort of situation that requires a lot more serious and strategic thinking on the part of the whole Christian missionary enterprise.

To grasp the significance of fulfilling "the Agenda for History" could be the most exciting and motivating discovery for any Christian or Church seeking God's purpose in the world. On the other hand we need to recognize that if we fail to believe His command and obey, then there is someone who will be quite delighted. This, of course, is the old enemy of all God's purposes, Satan himself. But in thwarting God in this area he has a very high personal interest. He knows that when this agenda is complete his time on earth is over and his fate is sealed. This is, of course, a perfectly adequate reason for him to delay the inevitable finale as long as possible. He also knows that he cannot stop

God's people from wanting to be active in the world, so it is entirely consistent with his character to do all that he can in deceiving and confusing the church in their desire to be obedient. If he cannot discourage their enthusiasm for missions, then his last delaying tactic could be to misdirect that enthusiasm to do anything but concentrate on the final items on the agenda.

For those outside or even inside the Church who do not see an eternal cosmic conflict between God and Satan, nor take seriously the implications in human society of this warfare, then this view of the ultimate event in history is of course meaningless—nothing more than a foolish delusion. But for those who believe that God has already started His intention of calling out a people from every nation and declared His plan to achieve it though His People, we need no greater incentive than to concentrate all our efforts on completing the Agenda for History.

In Summary

1. There is an agenda for history according to Mt. 24:14 which clearly states, "This gospel shall be preached in all the world as a witness to every nation [ethnic group or people] then shall the end come.

2. We cannot tell how many ethnic groups there are until we know where the boundaries are within which the gospel can spread freely. Frontier Missions are needed where a cultural boundary has to be crossed.

3. The only real impediment to the spread of an indigenous Church in any society seems to be the threat of internal division and interference from "outsiders" not excluding missionaries.

4. Saturation Evangelism in the mission context misses the point that the gospel is intended to be preached to every tribe and nation, not to try to

plant churches on every street corner.

5. Opposition to Christianity is often based on anti-Western feelings. This may be over-come by the newly emerging third world missionary movements.

6. There is a crucial need to identify and target the pockets of unreached ethnic groups in a world now largely covered by Christianity in terms of continents and countries.

7. There also is a great value of differentiating the three main strata of missionary work, urban, rural-settled and rural-nomadic, each requiring different mission approaches.

8. It is paramount that the Church recognize who is most interested in opposing the completion of God's agenda. If Satan cannot deter enthusiasm for missions in the Church then his final delaying tactic could be to misdirect it, deceiving and confusing genuine Christian concern.

9. Indeed the great incentive and unifying motivation for God's People is to complete God's agenda of history.

Photo
here
of
Hunter

Dr. Malcolm Hunter did his doctoral studies on nomadic and pastoralist peoples. He founded the Nomadic

Research Program. He has served as a missionary in Niger, Benin, Burkina Faso. He has served the Lord with SIM since 1963

**This half page ad is by the
USCWM.
It is to be divided into two parts.**

**This part, the left side of the ad,
should promote the
“WORLD VIEW VIDEO LIBRARY”**

(See ad on p. 12 in our last issue.)

**This half page ad is by the
USCWM.
It is to be divided into two parts.**

**This part, the right side of the ad,
should promote the
“VISION FOR THE NATIONS”**

(See ad on p. 12 in our last issue.)

Products of the USCWM. To order send cheque or money order in US funds to: William Carey Library, PO Box 40129, Pasadena, CA 91114. USA. California residents add 7.25% for tax. L.A. county add 8.25%. For orders under \$50.00 add \$4.50 for S&H. Orders over \$50.00 add 11% for S&H. Call 800-MISSION to order by credit card. All others call 626-798-0819.

**Half page ad here
by
William Carey Library**

**This ad should highlight the
new Perspectives Reader
and Study Guide**