

Eleven Frontiers of Mission

Part I: Eleven Frontiers of Perspective

by *Ralph D. Winter*

Here are the first six of eleven perspectives which have come, one at a time, after I left my professorship at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1976. These have each profoundly modified and molded at least my personal perception of the missionary task. Thus, I will speak somewhat autobiographically.

First, Note Some "Former" Frontiers

When we first set up the U. S. Center for World Mission, the rationale was derived primarily from an insight which was basically a new application of a McGavran perspective which he normally used in a different sense.

Donald Anderson McGavran was a third generation missionary from India who came to believe that in Christian work cultural factors are more important than language factors. Here's a village in India which has only one language but 50 different hermetically-sealed caste distinctions. In many ways the people in these 50 differing spheres don't have anything to do with each other and a single outreach can't penetrate more than one of their compartments; in a practical sense you can only penetrate one of them with any one form of Christianity.

And so, McGavran said if you happen to find a person in your congregation who comes from another group—even one person sitting in the back of the church—look on that person as a "bridge of God." McGavran eventually wrote his most famous book entitled *The Bridges of God*. The idea is that once you somehow break into one of these hermetically-sealed compartments, then you can go like the wind, and you can plan to "disciple to the fringes." The movement that might result he called "a people movement to Christ." The crucial event of achieving this kind of a result I have called "a missiological breakthrough." This is one of the basic ideas of what could be called the Church Growth School of Missiology. It is 100 percent McGavran.

Perspective One: Unreached Peoples

Now, however, as I was steeped in that atmosphere for ten years, I began to realize that if it is true that even minor cultural differences can separate people and keep them from going to the same congregation, etc., then this

Ralph D. Winter is a senior mission thinker who has been actively involved from the beginning of the massive mission transition from simply thinking in terms of countries or individuals to thinking in terms of peoples. He is founder of the U.S. Center for World Mission, and is currently president of William Carey International University.

fact has horrendous implications for the existing mission movement. Many missions have gone around the world—gone to a major tribal group or whatever—and then expected all the other groups in the area, despite their differences, to assimilate to that particular group chosen by the missionaries. Missions find it hard to take seriously cultural differences within a country. They do not expect nor seek to have two or more different forms of Christianity; the form that develops in their first major beachhead tends to be considered good enough for all the other groups. And so it was a major insight for McGavran to emphasize the need for “Bridges of God” into other groups.

In fact he said in effect, “If you don’t have a bridge, forget it. You can’t get into these groups. Spend your heavy time where you already have a bridge.” “Look for bridges. Don’t leave a bridge unattended,” etc. So what about the other groups for which there existed no bridge? He didn’t have a good answer. Many took offense because what he said seemed logically to lead them to give up their work if a breakthrough bridge did not already exist.

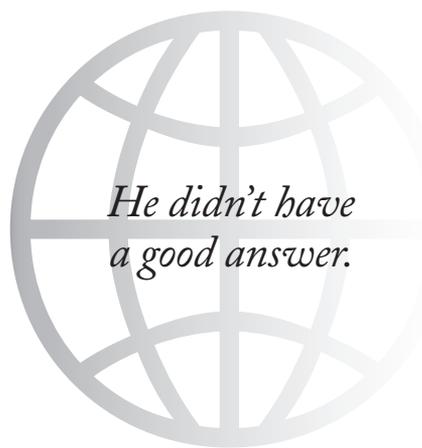
Furthermore, statistically speaking, I found that from this perspective a very large proportion of world population is sealed off, as it were. This additional, negative, insight, then, defined a huge frontier, which it took a few years for McGavran himself to accept. It meant that precisely those hermetically-sealed pockets of people around the world that had not yet had any kind of a penetration *constituted by themselves the major remaining frontier of Christian mission.*

Even though, from an extreme interpretation of McGavran’s point of view, it wasn’t practical to go after such groups without some kind of a bridge into their midst, nevertheless this was the kind of challenge, I felt, which at least required us to compile these peoples in a list and take them seriously as a cogent definition of a major aspect of the unfinished task of missions.

Thus, the Center in Pasadena was founded on the idea that a huge number of people languished in

pockets that had not yet been penetrated, often right alongside some existing church movement. Too often the feeling had been that because we had planted a church, say, in Pakistan, we could assume that this church was good enough for everyone in Pakistan.

It’s interesting, though, that when we first started, we hadn’t even attempted to count the number of pockets not yet penetrated. I confess that I had only estimated the total number of *individuals* that were in such pockets. Finally, we published a chart which estimated that there remained a total of 16,750 unreached peoples



and gave estimates of the *number of unreached peoples* in the major spheres such as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Chinese, Tribals.

Incidentally, the kind of goal stated as “A Church for Every People” was never more than an intermediate objective. Unfortunately, it was so simple to understand, and involved so significant a breakthrough, that many began to talk as though it involved the completion of the Great Commission rather than a substantial stage of advance toward that larger but undefinable goal.

Perspective Two: The Great Commission and Abraham

The second major new insight that we picked up along the way had to do with the Bible. My wife and I began writing a series of columns in *Mission Frontiers* called “Missions in the Bible.” We began with the Torah—the first five books of the Bible—and we moved on down through the his-

tory of the formation of the canon of the Old Testament, and talked about the presence or the absence of mission vision in each of those periods. You can go back and read those early pages of *Mission Frontiers* if you want. You will see not only that change of perspective but also the radically new idea that the Great Commission was right there in Genesis 12. This latter was, for me, a revolutionary thought. I had actually toyed with the thought when I was still at Fuller, but it really came home to me as we began to write this series of articles, month after month.

This perspective came to a head when the first *Perspectives Reader* was going to press. This was in 1981. I was the only one who thought we ought to stick this idea into the book, and I was being out voted by everybody, particularly Steve Hawthorne and Jay Gary who are very bright, competent people. “No way,” they said, “no one else sees things this way, and so we can’t put it in.” I had to agree.

But, by Providence, just pure Providence, I happened to be asked to be one of the many speakers at the dedication of the Billy Graham Center—that was in 1980—and when I went back to that meeting I ran into Walter Kaiser, Jr. (now President of Gordon-Conwell Seminary) who spoke every morning. I had been looking at one of his books even before going to the meeting and between sessions questioned him about the way he was titling his chapters. He put into every chapter-title of his book on the Old Testament the phrase “The Promise.” I said, “Dr. Kaiser, isn’t that simply a Jewish misunderstanding of what was actually a *mandate*, a command? It wasn’t just a promise; it was more than that. Maybe they reduced it down to a promise.” I was very upset about that.

He calmly replied, “Well, the reason I used the word *promise* is because Paul did. Paul referred to Genesis 12:1-3 as *the Promise*.” I kind of staggered back fumbling for words and said, “Well, yeah, but Paul was only using the term because it was common among his hearers. Surely it isn’t that he agreed

with his listeners that the Abrahamic Covenant was only a promise.”

Then he said to me—and I’ll never forget this—he looked right at me and said, “Well, you can call Genesis 12:1-3 the Great Commission if you want.” And again I staggered back and I said “Oh, now wait a minute. I can’t go around saying that Genesis 12 is the Great Commission. I would get thrown out of a church. I don’t have the Biblical credentials. I’m not a Hebrew professor. I need to be able to quote someone who is. Do you have that statement in print—I would like to quote you?” So then, for the third time I staggered back when he answered, “Well, look, go ahead and quote me and I’ll get it in print.”

So I came back to Steve Hawthorne and Jay Gary and all the others here who were working away on the final stages of the new *Perspectives Reader*, and I said to them, “Look, Kaiser agrees with us here. We can quote him.” But even that didn’t make much difference—I had nothing to prove this. In a few weeks, however, the mail brought a cassette which was a chapel talk Kaiser had just given at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. I turned it over to Steve Hawthorne. His wife had it all typed off by the next morning. We laid the pages out and poured over them. Sure enough Kaiser did in fact get it in print—at least printed magnetically on tape! What he had sent became a chapter in that first *Reader*, and is now Chapter 2 in the 3rd Edition.

This substantiated for us a major insight—giving us a whole new Bible. This element in the Perspectives course is one of the biggest jolts which especially seminary students get when they take the Perspectives course. The idea that the Great Commission is the backbone of the whole Bible—not just one of the teachings of the NT—is a truly major shift in perspective. I have a feeling this was the same thing Paul was puzzling over for three years in Arabia. We used to joke—and Steve Hawthorne picked this up and used it widely—that we would from now on refuse to speak on the *Biblical basis of missions*. If anyone asks us to talk on that topic we’d say No, no, no—but we

will be willing to talk on *Missions as the Basis of the Bible*. That is, whether missions is just one topic in the Bible, or the ONE topic of the Bible, is a pretty important question. The stories in the Bible are great, but the story of the Bible is even more important.

Luther’s commentary on Genesis observes that Abraham in his day was to convey a blessing to other peoples, and Luther names off nine peoples so blessed. Luther in turn may have gotten this idea from a French commentator. Gradually we learned that many people (besides Kaiser) had already taught what we are saying about the Great Commission in Genesis 12.

Perspective Three: From the Unfinished Task to the Finishable Task

In my growing awareness the third perspective emerged when we began to realize that it is actually a relatively small task to reach all these thousands of unreached peoples—once you take into account how large the global community of Christians now is and how many congregations there are to reach the unreached peoples! That is, it is a relatively *small* job, not a relatively *large* job. Of course, it’s still a somewhat *new* job, because some people don’t yet think in these terms. Last I heard there are well over 500 congregations to reach every one of the unreached peoples.

We still must point out that the task is larger than just establishing a Christian outpost in every *country*. For example, someone may say “We now have a church in Pakistan; so cross off Pakistan.” We tell them that Pakistan is not the goal—it’s the many *peoples* in Pakistan. And so, in this respect we are still making the job bigger. But now we also promote the idea that *relatively speaking* it is a finishable job to make a missiological breakthrough into every people group on the planet. So here comes, you know, the very idea of “A church for every people by the year 2,000.” And, relatively speaking, this *intermediate goal* is relatively concrete and measurable and it is a task that is relatively *small*, not hopelessly *large*!

Now, much to my dismay as late as 1987, in our own Last Thousand Dollar Campaign, we put out a wonderful, rather expensive booklet to give to big donors or prospective big donors, and in that booklet there still appeared the earlier perspective of how big the job is, and it was almost too late to change anything in the booklet. We finally were able to change just a little to reflect the fact that we are no longer saying how big the job is but we are saying “Hey, let’s get going. It’s a relatively small job. It’s a *finishable* job.” But this new optimistic outlook didn’t really get into that booklet very completely. This shows, however, how there can be a lag in perspective, even in a fairly close knit team.

There is also the problem that various organizations are independently reducing estimates of how many unreached peoples there are. Of course, we in Pasadena certainly have no inherent authority to veto other definitions of things. We at least continue to insist that an approach which only lists groups which are 10,000 or larger in population is one that inevitably omits some 4,000 groups that are smaller. That, however does not totally negate the relative smallness of the task overall. Incidentally, I recently calculated that there are only 1.5 million people within the 4,000 groups that are smaller than 10,000 in population.

Perspective Four: Failure with the Large Groups and the Off-setting Trend to “Radical Contextualization”

The fourth shift had to do with the fact that all along our eyes had been peeled on mainly smaller groups around the world. This was because all the major groups already had been, supposedly, breached by Christianity in one form or another. We had beachheads, but, in the main, the major groups were continuing to be rather awesomely unfriendly to Christianity. For example, Hinduism as a whole, and Islam as a whole just aren’t breached in any major way at all. We have only relatively small beachheads in these blocs. So we began to think, “Well, maybe we’ve

got the wrong approach; we're not *contextualizing* sufficiently."

So here comes the idea of *radical* contextualization, and all of a sudden our eyes are opened to what is already happening. In Africa, 52 million people in the African Initiated Churches movement have radically contextualized. Or, take India. According to the Missouri-Synod Lutheran theologian/missionary, Herbert Hoefler, in his book *Churchless Christianity*, in the largest city of South India maybe four times as many Hindus are devout followers of Christ as the number of devout believers who are affiliated with the official Christian churches. In China, the swath of 50 or more million people in the so-called unofficial churches does not fit the pattern that we would consider normal Christianity. And in Japan, you know, we haven't gotten anywhere. We are told that Christianity now includes only 300,000 people out of 130 million people in the country. Forget it. We apparently haven't even got a truly Japanese church yet. I remember Phil Foxwell (a retired missionary from Japan) showing me an editorial written by a secular sociologist saying that there is not yet a truly Japanese church. What is there is just a Western church.

Thus, the idea of *radical contextualization* is an incredibly new frontier. It's not just how many minority peoples are left. It's how many large blocs are still untouched or unchosen. It's how many peoples which are supposedly already "reached" that are not really reached.

Well, is it possible that within these large blocs of humanity we have achieved (with trumpets blaring) only a form of Christianity that ranges from "sturdy and valid but foreign," to maybe "superficial or phony"? Do we have a church movement which from the point of view of these large blocs has been acceptable only to a minority and is not going anyplace? What is the meaning of the oft-quoted statement that Christianity in Africa is "a mile wide and an inch deep?"

Here is something to think about: Isn't it getting clearer that we're never ever going to persuade all

the Muslims to call themselves Christians? Can't we recognize that it's not important, nor helpful—not merely impossible—to expect very many Muslims to identify with the cultural stream called "Christianity." If someone is a born again believer in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, isn't that enough?

Take for example, the 19th Century Protestants in this country. As the Catholics from southern Europe streamed into this country after 1870, the Protestant churches over the next 50 years spent something like \$500,000,000 to win Catholics and yet after all that sincere home mission work only won a handful of families. That is, we can't realistically set out to win over people to a new faith *if we also require them to identify with a different community in a substantially different culture*—which is truly not a Biblical requirement. Thus, we can make Catholics into Protestants as soon as the everyday culture of the two become very similar. For the same reason, apart from those who want to be Westernized, we can't readily make Muslims or Hindus into believers in Jesus Christ if we also require them to come over into the cultural form of our Christianity.

This gives rise to the idea of a "Third Reformation." The first reformation was the shift from Jewish clothing to Greek and Latin clothing. The second happened when our faith went from Latin Christianity to German Christianity. Of course the latter Reformation" is THE Reformation that everyone talks about.

But now Western Christianity, if it really wants to give away its faith, is poised to recognize (and to become sensibly involved with) something already happening under our noses—a Third Reformation. Sorry to say, as before (both in the time of Paul and in the Reformation), this rising phenomenon probably will involve antagonisms. We have seen profound antagonisms between Jewish and Greek forms of the faith, and between Latin and German forms of the faith. In each case the burning question has been "Just how essential to Biblical faith is any particular one of these

various cultural vehicles of the faith?" That, in turn, leads us to the fifth shift of perspective.

Perspective Five: Reverse Contextualization, the Recontextualization of Our Own Tradition

Okay. That was radical contextualization for *others* to contend with in *other* lands. However, as I thought about this, for me anyway, it became ominous and even suspicious that our own form of Christianity has been unthinkingly assumed to be the main balanced, Biblical, total, properly contextualized thing. Think about it. Do we need to know how to decontextualize our own Christianity before we can ever very successfully contextualize the Bible for somebody else?

Why? Let's assume for a moment that our best understanding of the word *contextualization* is not that of seeking indigenous forms to make our faith, our form of Christianity, more acceptable to others, but is a word that also means trying to make sure that existing indigenous forms employed by our own people are accurate carrier vehicles for a true, balanced, Biblical faith. In that case we need to be doubly sure what Biblical faith really is.

As I look back at our own Christianity, I have been helped a great deal by a serious book published by Intervarsity called *God at War*. It was written by a professor at Bethel Seminary in Minneapolis, who points out that clear back in the Fourth Century our Christianity imbibed a terrible syncretism, a very tragic theological misunderstanding, a theological pollution. And, for the next 1600 years our Western, Latinized Christianity has been a carrier vehicle for a form of faith which is both Biblical but also pagan in the area of Neoplatonism's passivity toward evil. This means we are running around the world telling people (by our actions not our words), "Our God can get you to heaven but He can't cure your malaria because He apparently does not know or care or have power in that sphere." Thus, being invisibly and unconsciously saddled with this theology, we can't

do anything about malaria either, and since very few others are concerned, we should just pray about it, help those who already have it, and let it go at that. That is, for our part we pray, but rely on Jewish or secular doctors and researchers to do the rest. Our Christianity does not call us to fight the origins of disease, not since Augustine.

Thus arises the idea of *the decontextualization of our own tradition, or reverse contextualization*, which means being willing to find major philosophic or Biblical or theological flaws in our own tradition. It really isn't the same as asking if the as-is Christianity of our stripe will ever fit into the Hindu tradition. It's a different tack requiring us to can talk about the proper contextualization of the Gospel in two directions: 1) into the field culture and even before that, 2) into our home culture.

Perspective Six: The Reclaiming of the Gospel of the Kingdom

Closely aligned with this last point, or perhaps merely a specific application of it, is an historically more recent syncretism that has emerged in Western Christianity, especially within the Evangelical tradition. It may today have become one of the distinctive heresies of the Evangelical as we have become known as specialists in getting people into heaven. The seeds of this heresy were planted even before the Reformation as the Roman church sought ways to raise money for its ecclesiastical endeavors, build cathedrals, etc.

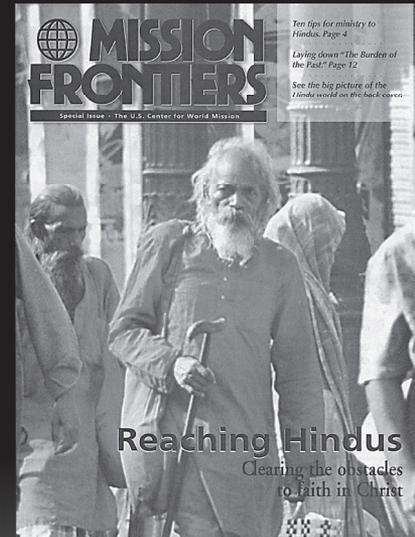
The idea was that if you can sell people something which doesn't cost you anything and someone else "delivers," this will be the best way to create income for the church. Thus were developed a whole array of services that were offered to people for a price, principal among them was a ticket to gain entrance into heaven.

The Reformers, being non-Roman, were not so impressed by the financial need to build St. Peter's in Rome, and they felt they could short-circuit the Roman plan of salvation, which involved payment of funds to build

St. Peter's. They gave a better answer to the question of how to get to heaven. But in so doing focused on the wrong question, the current Catholic question, or at least not the main question. The Bible does not talk so much about how to get people into heaven as about how to get heaven into people. We have made "faith" purely intellectual and unwittingly detached it from the heart obedience the Bible clearly defines it to be.

Nevertheless, latter day Evangelicals have run with their answer and made their "Gospel of salvation" a nearly total substitute for the Gospel of the Kingdom. Nineteenth century Evangelicals were very socially conscious compared to Evangelicals in the 20th century. Sub-Saharan Africa is 80% Christian, but has been described as having a faith that is, as we have already noted, a mile wide and one inch deep. Apart from otherworldly assurances the avowedly Christian structures contribute very little to "Thy will be done on earth" as Jesus asked us to pray. Missionaries are not normally trained nor well-equipped to take on the social, commercial, medical and political problems of Africa. Neither are the national pastors. This vast array of problems is not part of our Gospel of Salvation even though it is definitely part of the Gospel of the Kingdom. We leave these problems to the "secular world." In a word, we think of ourselves more often as *survivors* than as *soldiers*. It is as if we signed up in the first place to "survive" not to "soldier"—we did not think we were getting into a battle with evil. We only thought that we were saving our souls. **IJFM**

reaching hindus:



Clearing the Obstacles to faith in christ

To obtain a free copy
of this special,
24-page issue of
Mission Frontiers with
seven key articles, call
1-626-398-2249
or write
dan.eddy@uscwm.org.

 **MISSION
FRONTIERS**

is a publication of the
U.S. Center for World Mission.