

5th International Forum for Korean Mission Leaders

What are Mission Frontiers?

by *Ralph D. Winter*

I appreciate very much the invitation to address this important body. I have been asked to talk about the nature and background of “frontier missions.” I will begin by quoting the unofficial definition of *mission frontiers* which has been used by the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*.

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, “to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.” (Acts 26:18)

Background of Mission Frontiers

The World Missionary Conference of 1910 was held at the city of Edinburgh, Scotland. It has been one of the most influential forces in the history of missions. It formed a “Continuing Committee.” It left behind many volumes of speeches and research. It founded the *International Review of Missions* (now edited by the World Council of Churches and called the *International Review of Mission*). The Continuing Committee convened a meeting in 1921 which formed the International Missionary Council. Later meetings eventually led to the formation of the World Council of Churches. Finally, in 1961 the International Missionary Council was merged into the World Council of Churches. This resulted because the national-level councils which formed the membership of the International Missionary Council had for the most part become councils of churches rather than councils of mission agency representatives.

In 1910, however, the concept of “frontiers” was mainly envisioned in terms of the number of *individuals* to be won to Christ. World population was divided into groups of 100,000 people, for example, and Presbyterians, Methodists,

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Disciples of Christ, etc. were supposed to commit themselves to winning a certain number of *individuals*.

By the end of the 20th century numbers of individuals were still taken seriously but goals were much more likely to be defined in terms of the number of human societies yet to be penetrated. The phrase “Unreached Peoples” became the basic term. Lists of Unreached Peoples became the basis for defining the remaining task of frontier missions. The key point was that planting more churches where some already exist is a task that is relatively simple and easy compared to the much more difficult task of planting churches in a society where there are not yet any Christian churches.

It has gradually become clear, however, that to plant churches among unbelieving people it is necessary to do far more than to convey to them a recipe for how to get to heaven.

In the past few years in our work we have encountered frontiers of various kinds. I have been making a list. These are simply things which we have perceived as frontiers. All of them relate directly or indirectly to glorifying God in all the earth, among all peoples.

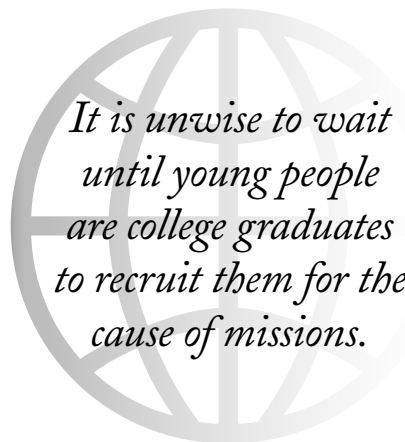
I will list these “frontiers” roughly in the order of our encountering them. Originally a two-part article in *IJFM* 20:3/20:4, it is now Chapter 10 of my recent book, *Frontiers in Mission* (William Carey International University Press, 2005), which describes each one in greater detail.

1. *Unreached Peoples*—the idea that for some groups no one has ever conveyed the Gospel effectively in their language and culture. That is, there has not yet been a “missiological breakthrough” to these groups.

(2) *The Great Commission and Abraham*—the idea that Genesis 12:1-3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4,5, and 28:14,15 actually constitute the Great Commission Jesus relayed in Matthew 28:18-20. The wording in the Greek OT for Gen 28:15 is very close to that of Matthew 28:20.

(3) *From the Unfinished Task to the Finishable Task*—the idea that the task of gaining a “missiological breakthrough” to every remaining Unreached People can be finished. This is no doubt only an intermediate goal but it is at least “finishable.” The number of Christian congregations around the world is far more than 500 times as large as the number of remaining Unreached Peoples!

(4) *Failure with the large groups and the off-setting trend to “radical contextualization”*—the idea that huge groups such as the Japanese



have not yet gained a truly indigenous fast-growing church movement, and the need to rethink our approach along more radically contextualized lines.

(5) *Reverse Contextualization, the Recontextualization of Our Own Tradition*—the idea that missionaries ought not only to “contextualize” their methods with unreached peoples but also to re-examine the extensive cultural adaptations which have been made historically in their own form of Christianity.

6. *The Reclaiming of the Gospel of the Kingdom*—the idea that for the Kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth, much more must be done than simply get individuals saved.

7. *Beyond Christianity*—the idea that missionaries may start movements which will in turn create other movements which may be far less Western in their cultural orientation, and may not even use the

word “Christian.” Today there are millions of such believers in Jesus Christ in Africa, India, and China.

8. *A Different Type of Recruitment*—the idea that it is unwise for mission agencies to wait until young people are college graduates to recruit them for the cause of missions. If they can be contacted years earlier they can be advised about the courses to take in college and the answers to intellectual problems they encounter. By the time they graduate from college, whether or not they feel led into missions, they will be far better missionaries or lay people.

9. *A Trojan Horse?*—the idea that school books in both Christian schools and secular schools are very misleading, but that there is a way to directly impact what is taught. It would seem urgent for churches and missions to work together to develop supplemental booklets that will augment and contradict the books used in schools. Such supplementary booklets could then be employed 1) in Christian schools, 2) in home-school contexts, 3) by Christians teaching in public schools, 4) very importantly by Sunday Schools, 5) but most importantly by concerned parents (who may not be able to count on any of the first four).

10. *Needed: a Revolution in Pastoral Training*—the idea that young people are not the right ones to fill our pastoral training schools around the world. It is better if pastoral selection is made after people grow up and prove their maturity and leadership gifts. Only then is it more likely that the right people are being trained. Otherwise, those who become pastors are young people who may be smart and well trained but not gifted. The result is that the churches suffer from such pastors. As it is all around the world, our seminaries are training the wrong students, with the wrong curriculum (no science), and with the wrong degree names.

11. *The religion of Science*—the idea that God has given us two “books” of revelation 1) the Bible which is His Book of Scripture, and 2) nature, which is His Book

of Creation. He does not want us to slight either one. Yet the sad situation is that, in general, millions of intelligent people (the scientific community) are studying the second and despising the first, and millions of church and mission leaders are studying the first and ignoring or rejecting the second. We cannot win people to Christ whose own knowledge of nature is denied by the church.

12. *The Challenge of the Evil One*—the idea that our present theological tradition is more influenced by Augustine than by any other theologian. Augustine started out Manichaean and eventually reacted so violently against it that he essentially banished references to an Evil One. In his writings, as in Neo-Platonism in general, all things are to be seen in terms of God's often mysterious purposes. For Augustine, facing tragedy and harm and disease is simply a case for us to trust God not only to work things out for good but to trust that God had some good reason to bring it to pass in the first place.

Much could be said about this, but for me the key point is that if God does everything and we do not employ both of the Biblical perspectives about the work of God and Satan we see in the Bible, we will find ourselves unable to fight against the causes of evil for, in that case, we would be fighting against God. John Calvin did not know about deadly germs. Even if he had known about them he might not have seen them as having been designed by Satan. Now that we know about deadly germs we have no theology to fight them and no mission to destroy them. We let people get sick and then try to make them well. As Christians we sense no mission mandate to glorify God by destroying the works of the Devil.

This is not a comprehensive list of mission frontiers but it can serve the purpose of illustrating the concept. All of these relate directly or indirectly to the winning of Unreached Peoples.

However, there are also certain strata of society which need special attention.

Intellectual frontiers are just as important to the Christian Mission as geographical frontiers, cultural frontiers or linguistic frontiers.

Special Unreached People Problems

Some social units within all people groups, usually including leaders, present special problems. People within these spheres cannot readily be won by the evangelistic message we ordinarily use. Some strata in societies, some spheres of activity—such as the realm of the scientists around the world, or that of business leaders—are environments in which people want to know more than a formula for getting to heaven. They are struggling with various questions our traditional evangelism is not answering.

These questions may be considered intellectual frontiers. They are just as important to the Christian Mission as geographical frontiers, cultural frontiers, or linguistic frontiers.

1. Some scientists, business leaders, and university professors are perhaps alarmed to hear reports that the Bible teaches that the world is only six thousand years old.

2. Such people may be concerned to hear that Christians don't believe in medical approaches to disease, just prayer. They may think Christians believe that first century knowledge about healing is all we need to know, on the basis of the Biblical statement that "Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

3. Such people may be worried by the idea that the God of the Evangelical Christians does not care or isn't very eager to help in fighting disease despite the fact that diseases around the world cause both the suffering and premature death of almost all human beings even in the industrialized countries.

4. Worse still, such people may hear that the Bible teaches that God is the author of all bad things—but that He has mysterious reasons. For example, Evangelical proponents of seeing "intelligent design" in nature are now

being faced with Harvard professors asking why God would design a parasite that blinds millions of people.

Such questions are frontier barriers for key leaders in all parts of the world today, keeping them from believing in Christ. Rural uneducated people we can still win. Rural people and poor people may still be willing to leave such questions unanswered. They may have nothing to lose if they accept an entirely new religious culture. But, such questions are constantly making young people, college students and thinking adults lose their faith. Thousands of American Evangelicals may have already lost their faith. They may still go to church and appear outwardly to be believers, but they now live in two separate worlds intellectually.

I personally have no such double mind in such matters for I have had many more years to think about these questions than people who are 20 or 30 or 60 years younger than I am at 80.

I can, in fact, briefly explain my own answers to these four intellectual frontiers.

1. As to the accusation that the Bible teaches that the world is only six thousand years old, I would point out that the very conservative Evangelical Bible scholar, Merrill Unger (taught at Dallas Seminary), and also the famous C. I. Scofield, have in their writings acknowledged or insisted on the same thing: the possibility of the great ages of the old earth preceding the events of Genesis 1, thus giving room for both the "Old Earth" and the "Young Earth" positions.

2. In regard to the Christian faith restricting itself to the healing methods of the first century, it may well be a widespread tendency but the Bible surely does not lend itself to this kind of an interpretation. The Bible, by contrast, urges us to know all we can about God's creation and to employ that knowledge to do His will.

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3. Unfortunately, the accusation that Christians do not have a theology for fighting against evil in the form of deadly germs is true to some extent. Too many of us have assumed that commercial processes would deal with disease. But it is plain that the huge global pharmaceutical industry is first concerned for profits. This does not lead them seriously to combat disease pathogens but mainly to produce medicines they can sell to people who are already sick.

However, if a substantial new Biblical vision among Evangelicals can be created, and if that new vision will go on to effectively promote the necessary efforts for the conquest of disease origins (not just sickness), Christians can set a much better example. We need to encourage young people not just to be “missionaries” but to accept the mission of Christ to “destroy the works of the Devil (1 Jn 3:8).”

4. In the fourth case I must admit that to whatever extent we teach a theology which ignores the ongoing power of Satan to destroy and distort God’s creation, that will inevitably expose us to the accusation that we worship a cruel God. It is not enough to explain suffering and tragedy as merely the result of “God’s mysterious purposes.” We must acknowledge that Augustine allowed Neo-Platonism to obscure his understanding of the on-going activity of Satan. And we must recognize that God expects Christians, not just secular scientists, to join forces in the war against “the works of Satan.”

This last frontier leads to two further considerations, two massive frontiers which are a much bigger subject than can be properly addressed at this time. I can at least point them out.

1. American churches usually sponsor “Sunday Schools,” and sometimes grade schools on their church property. But what they teach is often totally unrelated to what their youth from 1st grade through graduate school are learning. Students at any level are unable to find answers at church week by week. Children learn about Darwinism during the week and learn about David slaying Goliath

on Sunday. College students no longer attend their home churches and even if they did there is no relationship between what they are taught and what the more balanced Christian perspective might be.

The future of missions is dangerously damaged as long as all our young people are raised without proper exposure to the Christian answer to the problems that come up almost every day in their school classrooms. Keeping them in Christian schools is not the answer. They need to know the problems and they also need to know the answers.

2. A second, equally serious frontier is the fact that all of our lay people who are now out of school are working at least 40 hours a week in many different jobs. We want them to be good people and to witness for Christ, but we do not, as a church or mission, assist them to see Christian meaning in the work they do. They may not realize that “getting saved” is just the beginning. God is not asking them to seek the highest paying job. He is asking them to do whatever is the most urgent contribution to the Kingdom.

Preachers may be happy for their lay people to earn lots of money and be generous in giving their time and money to the church. Do preachers ever tell their lay people that they ought to seek another job because the work they are doing is not an important contribution to the coming of God’s Kingdom on earth? The very famous book *Purpose Driven Life* makes not the slightest reference to the holiness of the 40-hour week.

For example, do we ordinarily discuss in church the work which Samsung does? Is the work that corporate giant does something which God approves? Can the many different tasks Samsung performs be for all its workers “a holy calling”?

Surely cell phones and TV sets are a helpful contribution to conquering evil on a global level. But huge TV screens in private homes may burn up the Lord’s money in ways that subtract from more important uses of

money. Many computer games are as harmful as addictive drugs and are destroying future generations of missionaries and mission leaders.

The theology of the Puritans evaluated every human endeavor to make sure it constituted “a warrantable calling.” For them, for all believers, our work must be our ministry and our ministry must be our work. It is not just a way of earning money to live. It is our main contribution. We live to work. We do not work to live. And the needs of the Kingdom must define the choices we can make in our work. I don’t see either pastors or missionaries emphasizing this truth.

The Bible tells us that “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the Devil (1 John 3:8).” Jesus also said, “In the way my Father has sent me, in that same way I send you (John 20:21).” This is the Biblical definition of our mission. Most believers have not yet discovered that they are all called of God to fight the works of darkness and thus to glorify God. “Let your light shine in this way: your good works will glorify your Father in heaven (Matt 5:16).”

I am not talking about individual good works. I am not referring merely to people of morality and integrity, as important as those things are. I am talking about teams of people working together, mission societies, mission agencies accepting responsibility for engaging major evils in the Name of Christ.

The tragedy is that, if fighting evil is a divine mandate, this mandate today is actually being carried out by many thousands of earnest and intelligent non-Christian people in the world, not by members of the church. This ought not to be. **IJFM**