

An Enduring Legacy: Reflections on the Contribution of Western Protestant Missions from a Frontier Mission Perspective

by David Taylor

The impact of Western missions towards reaching unreached peoples has been considerable over the last two centuries. From the very outset, the Western missionary movement was cross-cultural in its orientation and frontier-focused, with a determination to go where the church was not. In fact, for the first century of Protestant mission, the exclusive focus of the movement was on the non-Christian peoples of the world. It was only really in the early 20th century that significant church-planting work among “Christianized” peoples such as Orthodox and Catholics commenced, and this was primarily the work of American missions. In this essay, I will examine both the strengths and weaknesses of the last two hundred years of Protestant Western Missions, anticipate what the future may look like for the movement, and finally offer recommendations to the non-Western mission movement with regard to lessons learned.

When examining something as large as Western Protestant Missions it will be necessary to make rather sweeping generalizations, which in many cases may seem to contradict one another. With hundreds of mission agencies and denominations involved in the effort, along with a wide range of missiological practices and theological positions, one can only hope to paint with broad strokes. Even so, it is often helpful to take a step backwards and see what the composite of those broad strokes reveals, to capture in a sense the big picture of what is happening (and has happened) through these contrasting shades of color that can bring definition to the movement.

Strengths of the Movement

The legacy of Western Protestant missions exists as a living testimony in every continent and country in the world. From China’s 100 million house-church members, to Latin America’s 80 million Pentecostals, to sub-Saharan Africa’s 1,200 majority Christian tribes,¹ this 200-year legacy of blood, sweat, tears and faith has demonstrated the power of the gospel in a way the world has

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never before seen; indeed, the world will never be the same.

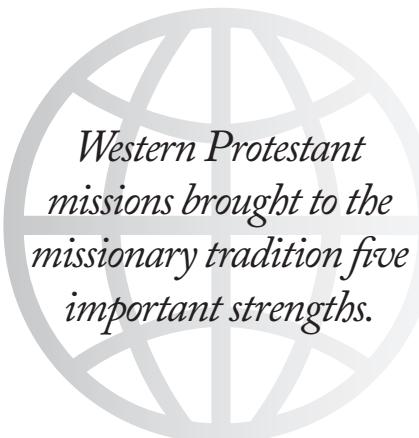
Western Protestant missions brought to the missionary tradition five important strengths, among many others, that have had (and continue to have) significant impact in pioneering frontier areas. These five strengths are: 1) an emphasis on Bible translation and study; 2) a push for indigenization; 3) the development of missiology as an academic discipline; 4) the formation of partnerships for world evangelization; and 5) the facilitation of lay involvement² in mission work.

Bible Translation and Study

With regard to Bible translation, it is fair to say that the Protestant mission movement brought about a restoration of the early Bible translation tradition of the Christian church. In the last two hundred years, the Scriptures have been published in almost 2,800 languages,³ almost all of this work being done by Western, Protestant missionaries. In contrast, fewer than 50 Bible translations were completed before the Protestant Reformation. Though it took the major Protestant groups almost three hundred years to get involved in cross-cultural missions, once they committed to the Great Commission, they brought with them a passion for Bible study and a tradition of translation into mother tongue languages. (Even so, they largely failed to see the need for mother-tongue Bible translators. Thus today, most of the world's Bible translations are actually the work of non-mother-tongue speakers. This unfortunate oversight is only now being remedied, most notably through the work of the Seed Company, a Wycliffe Bible Translators affiliate, which is focusing on training and empowering mother-tongue Bible translators.)

Protestant missions also established thousands of Bible schools around the world, which focused almost exclusively on teaching young people how to preach, teach, and exegete the Scriptures. These Bible schools became the primary engine for church-planting in

many fields, as church-planting itself was incorporated into the program. Indeed, in many schools, in order to graduate, you must start a new church! So we see that the emphasis on Bible study and knowledge contributed to the growth of so-called "parachurch" institutions which ultimately led to church growth in many fields. Interestingly, this pattern of parachurch structures powering church multiplication parallels the Celtic Missionary Movement that evangelized much of Northern Europe. However, one drawback to the contemporary Bible school method is that it has often displaced older people as candidates for leadership in the church, since such schools primarily attract unemployed, unmarried young men.



While this approach has provided the schools with a steady stream of candidates, it may have resulted in marginalizing the real change agents in society, typically older, married men with a family, source of income, and established social position. Interestingly, these were the kind of people that Paul urged Titus to appoint as elders in Crete—not single, unemployed young men.⁴

Indigenization

The second strength of the Protestant Missionary Movement was the early push for indigenization. By indigenization I mean the process of establishing indigenous churches led by indigenous leaders using contextualized worship forms. To a large

extent, the translation of the Bible into mother tongues provided the basis for indigenization. As early as the mid-nineteenth century we began to see an emphasis on indigenization, championed by such missiologists as Henry Venn and John Nevius. Hudson Taylor's agency, the China Inland Mission, was one of the first to base their entire strategy on working with indigenous evangelists. This is in contrast with Catholic missions, which for centuries imported priests into mission fields such as Latin America and Africa, and insisted that worship services be performed in Latin.

This only began to change in the latter-half of the 20th century following the Vatican II Council. Protestant missions, on the other hand, were much quicker to understand the need for an indigenous clergy preaching in the local language, and were much more efficient in encouraging the development of indigenous leaders. That is not to say that this process was altogether perfect among Protestant missions. Ralph Winter observed that the Student Volunteer Movement of the late 19th century and early 20th century actually resulted in a generational set back towards indigenization because they brought with them a Western elitist standard for formal education.⁵ Since they were college graduates from high society, many elevated the requirements for ordination, insisting upon prolonged seminary training. This significantly slowed down church-growth and crippled some movements. In fact, in general every movement throughout history which transitions over to formal education eventually begins to slow down in its growth.⁶

Missiology as a Discipline

A third contribution of Western Protestant missions was the development of missiology as an academic discipline. Although this took over 150 years to develop, by the late 1960s and 1970s graduate schools of mission were

forming in seminaries throughout the United States, beginning with the Fuller School of World Mission in 1965. Alongside this was the establishment of the American Society of Missiology, the Evangelical Missiological Society, and, later, the International Society for Frontier Missiology.

The importance of this development was twofold: first, it enabled greater introspection and research into mission practice, and second, it elevated the standards for missionary training and preparation. An added benefit here was that schools of missiology began to influence theological studies as well, such that an increasing number of pastors now graduate having taken at least one missions course. However, the ideal of seeing missions integrated throughout the entire seminary curriculum and program is still far from being achieved in the West. Additionally, in the area of frontier missions, such programs still leave much to be desired. Very few mission training programs have courses on reaching Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, or on pioneering church planting movements in frontier regions. Nonetheless, it was at the missiological level, namely from what developed at the Fuller School of World Mission, that the frontier mission focus of the Protestant Western Mission movement was revitalized and is fast becoming mainstream once again.

Inter-agency Cooperation

The fourth contribution of Western Protestant missions is another more recent development, though its roots go back all the way to William Carey. The area of inter-mission cooperation, or partnerships to finish the task, is one that has seen gentle nurturing throughout the last two hundred years and is now blossoming into a global phenomenon. William Carey was the first to suggest that all the Protestant missions might come together in a global meeting in 1810. It would take one hundred more years for his suggestion to come into fruition. At the

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Edinburgh conference in 1910 were representatives of almost all the major Protestant missions and all the major mission fields. Out of this came the International Missionary Council, which facilitated tremendous field-cooperation around the world.

Seventy years later, evangelical mission agencies began to come together around the AD2000 and Beyond Movement. From the momentum of this movement came over 500 partnerships and networks which have as their focus some crucial dimension of the unfinished task. In 2010, the Global Mission Consultation held in Tokyo gave a call for the further development of a global network of mission structures which would bring together the world's sending agencies into a global alliance to finish the task of reaching all the world's remaining unreached peoples.⁷ This concept of cooperation to fulfill the Great Commission is one that has now been taken up by the non-Western mission movement. The successful transfer of such a crucial concept to the next great wave of missions in the 21st century will prove to be one of the most important contributions of Western Protestant missions from an historical perspective.

Lay Involvement

The fifth strength of Western Protestant missions has been their employment of non-ordained laypeople, even from the earliest times. In contrast with Roman Catholic missions (which required that missionaries be highly trained professional priests or monks), Protestant missions sent out many ordinary and even uneducated persons who achieved incredible results on the field. This tradition also opened the door for non-ordained women to serve as missionaries. Their success on the field went a long way towards challenging the

notion back home that women should not preach or teach in the church. Today this tradition has morphed into new areas such as tent-making and "business as mission," which are calling upon professionals and entrepreneurs to use their skills for kingdom advance, especially in restricted-access countries. This tradition of empowering laypeople has enabled the Protestant Missionary force to send out far more missionaries than the Catholic Church, and with little risk of depleting the home ministry personnel. The tradition has also led to the phenomenon known as short-term missions. It is estimated that over 1 million Americans go out on short-term mission trips every year.⁸ Unfortunately, the funds spent on these short term trips far exceed the amount spent on long-term church planting efforts, and can often be a drain on long-term field workers who have to service these trips.

Weaknesses of the Movement

In spite of all the great strengths of the Western Protestant missions movement, certain enduring weaknesses have been a hindrance almost from the beginning. One or two of these weaknesses will appear to be the antithesis of an above-mentioned strength! This reality reveals the great tension within Western Protestant missions between championed ideals and what actually occurs on the field. Four weaknesses in particular will be highlighted: 1) denominational transplantation; 2) unhealthy dependency; 3) cultural imperialism in the form of Christianization; and 4) extravagant missionary lifestyles.

Denominationalism

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the Western protestant missions has been the continuation of the Catholic tradition of transplanting denominationalism around

the world, a tradition that continues to the present. Rather than work together to plant united national churches, we have exported our divisions, theological controversies, and ecclesiastical structures in every country in the world. Somehow we have exchanged the command to “go into all the world and make disciples of Jesus” into “go into all the world and make people as much like us as possible.” Yet, was this not the very thing for which Jesus rebuked the Pharisees?⁹

In my own denomination, the Church of the Nazarene, we were asked to rejoice at a recent national gathering in the United States because the “Nazarene church” was being planted in Iraq. Yet no one stopped to ask, Is this what the Iraqi people need? More importantly, what if every denomination in the world decided to plant its own franchise in Iraq? Would this result in the most effective witness to the Iraqi people? Now certainly it is true that denominationalism has lent itself to church growth in the West, following the free-market principles of Western culture. However, it is unfortunate that pride, competition and Christian tribalism would be our motivation for mission. Even so, as the Scriptures say, “We hold this treasure in jars of clay.”¹⁰ No doubt, God takes whatever he can get when it comes to mission, but for His kingdom’s sake, surely we can strive to do better. Indeed, for the sake of the remaining unreached peoples, we must.

Unhealthy Dependency

A second weakness of Western Protestant missions is in the area of unhealthy dependency, which developed from a two hundred year tradition of conducting mission from a position of power. Unhealthy dependency results from a patron-client mission relationship in which the client only engages in ministry if resources are available. If the money stops, the ministry stops. To a large extent, Western missions have handicapped and retarded the development of many indigenous churches

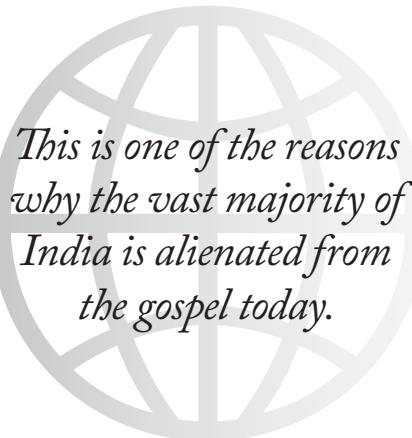
through saddling them with programs and institutions which they cannot support locally. It is only when indigenous churches are able to break free from the cycle of dependency that significant church-growth and indigenization takes place. One reason for this is that outside funding sends a message to the indigenous population that the church is a foreign entity. This is one of the reasons why the vast majority of India is alienated from the gospel today. Most of India’s missionary force is supported by Western money. One agency, Gospel for Asia, brings in tens of millions of dollars a year from the United States to evangelize Hindus.¹¹ Not surprisingly, they are only effective in reaching the “untouchable” or Dalit class in India,

of people? Remarkably, the very fact that many readers will resonate with this question reveals just how deep Western cultural imperialism lives on throughout the world!

In every mission class I teach, I always ask the question, “Is it necessary for someone to be a Christian in order to go to heaven?” In every case, ninety percent of the class will affirm this statement. Yet where is this in the Bible? It cannot be found! The reason this is significant for frontier missions is that the number one hindrance to our reaching the remaining unreached Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists today is our insistence that they become Christians in order to become followers of Jesus. Thus we unwittingly communicate to people that our faith is simply another foreign religion, and they don’t see the gospel of the Kingdom at all.¹²

“Rich” Missionaries

A fourth weakness of Western Protestant missions is the common practice of recreating one’s home lifestyle on the mission field. Western Protestant missionaries often live in a manner that far exceeds the lifestyle of those they are seeking to reach. In many ways this is a derivative of the patron-client model and even helps to establish and reinforce it. Such a practice renders incarnational ministry almost impossible. It also hinders the growth of indigenous missions by placing in the minds of people that missions is 1) for Westerners, and 2) an endeavor requiring wealth and power. The relatively “wealthy” Western missionary, who is incapable of truly integrating into the host community, also reflects a culture of individualism, the DNA of which is often transplanted into any kind of ministry the missionary establishes. The missionary communicates to the community, “I don’t need you, but you need me.” However, when Jesus sent out his missionaries in the first century, he encouraged them to go out from a position of vulnerability,



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which only represents around 15% of the population (in actual fact, they are more likely to be traditional religionists, or animists, than Hindus).

Cultural Imperialism

A third weakness of Western Protestant missions has been a legacy of cultural imperialism, which has come in many forms. The most important form from a frontier mission perspective has been the tradition of exporting a Westernized version of the church in the form of the Christian religion. At first it may seem quite strange to characterize cultural imperialism in this way. After all, isn’t the purpose of the Great Commission to go into all the world and make Christians out

allowing the community to take the responsibility for their care.¹³ While this may seem impractical—and almost impossible—for Westerners today, non-Western missionaries who come from a position of powerlessness may find they have a better opportunity to achieve the ideal of incarnational ministry, and thus produce lasting community-owned change.

Looking to the Future

Mission by its very nature is drawn to frontiers, of which there are many. The most obvious frontiers are geographic, cultural and linguistic. But what will happen when these obvious frontiers are gone? When there are no more areas of the world without churches? No more unreached peoples left to reach? Certainly, for some countries this reality has already happened, and hundreds of unreached people groups are being engaged for the first time every year. At some point in this century, it is very likely that there will be no more “obvious” or “classic” frontiers. Every language group will have access to the Bible, every social group will have a witness within them, and every culture will have a contextualized disciple-making movement. At this prospect we can all rejoice.

Will mission then be over? If Christ should tarry, the answer is quite obviously no. The church will always need new forms of mission because new frontiers for evangelism will always present themselves in ever-changing societies. However, without a compelling need to send out foreign missionaries, the vast sums of money and the difficulty required in sending workers to far-away lands will likely result in a change of mission priorities. This has certainly happened in the West. Though the Western Church continues to send out a larger number of missionaries, the overall perception is that the day of foreign mission sending is passing. For this reason, among others, Western missions has leveled-off in its sending of long-term workers for the first time in two hundred years.¹⁴

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Interestingly, this trend probably would have happened much sooner had it not been for the unreached peoples movement (beginning in the 1970s), which revitalized missionary sending. With this in mind, it is imperative for Western missions, as well as other foreign missionary sending nations, to take a second deep look at the role of foreign missions today. What are the priority places and the priority ministry roles for foreign, cross-cultural workers? This has to be thought through very carefully, and a strong case has to be made for why it is better to fund a foreign worker rather than 50 national workers with the same funds. Without such a case, and with the dangers of sending money overseas to nationals becoming more apparent, there is a risk that churches in the West will simply begin to shut down their foreign mission giving altogether.

However, such a view is looking very far into the future, perhaps thirty or forty years down the line, perhaps even further. In the immediate future of the next decade or so, missions from the West will continue to make a significant contribution to the overall global effort. However, it will do so as one player among many. In the last decade, non-Western cross-cultural missionaries surpassed Western missionaries in overall numbers for the first time in Protestant mission history.¹⁵ The West continues to lead in terms of foreign missionaries, but only by a slim margin, and this lead will quickly disappear in the next decade. All this is to the good. The diversification of the global missions movement is the single most important factor that will lead to the goal of world evangelization. The overall impact of the church in the world will be greater as its witness becomes more authentic through diversification. No longer will Christianity be seen as a Western religion, but as a global faith. In many ways,

Christianity is the first religion that can make a real claim to being truly global. Though Islam is predicted to surpass Christianity this century as the world’s largest religion, it has not made significant inroads in the Americas, Europe or East Asia. Christianity, on the contrary, will be found in significant numbers in every people group on earth by the end of this century if current trends continue.

Recommendations

What lessons can the non-Western missions movement learn from the strengths and Weaknesses of the West? There are obviously many important ones. Three in particular stand out as especially relevant for our times. I would like to present these in the form of a challenge. The first is a challenge to rediscover incarnational missions, the second is to reintegrate mission into the very fabric of the church, and the third is to seek greater unity at every level in our shared kingdom mission to fulfill the Great Commission in our generation.

I see the first challenge as being of paramount importance because, to a large extent, non-Western foreign missions have followed the same pattern as their Western counterparts. In the early centuries of mission, much missionary activity was from the powerless to the powerful. Today, it is primarily the reverse and, for the most part, we cannot envision mission any other way. Our natural tendency is to go to people who are less economically privileged than we are, thus our heavy reliance on leveraging our position of economic power for the sake of mission. This is often at the expense of supernatural power and cultivating missionaries who are regarded as spiritual men and women of God by the community.

Our missionaries enter cultures more like economic powerbrokers than they

do mystics, faith-healers, and intercessors. Such a missionary paradigm and practice is a lost art. But what if we sent missionaries whose first question is not, “Where can we best spend our money here?” but rather “What can I ask my God for on your behalf?” What if our missionaries were known more for their prayers, their intimacy with God, and their spiritual wisdom than their programs and their resources? Some are calling this the return to the apostolic way of mission, by which they mean the simplicity and the power of the early missionaries of the first century. This was mission from a position of vulnerability (and yet was it not more effective?), mission that had to prove its value to the community over time, not buy its way into acceptance as quickly as possible.

The second challenge has to do with how we view the Great Commission. For many centuries the Great Commission was something we commissioned people to do in far-away places. The Great Commission was out there, not here at home. To a large extent, this derived, I submit, from a misunderstanding of the very nature of the Great Commission, and, somewhat ironically, from mistranslating the final instructions of Jesus to his church. Matthew 28:19-20 is a mandate to “disciple all nations, teaching them to obey everything” Jesus commanded. In other words, the “them” in the Great Commission refers to the nations, not to individuals. Yet, tragically, in just about every modern translation of this verse, it is translated “make disciples of all nations,” which puts our Westernized individualistic spin on what Jesus commanded us to do. How presumptuous!

Unfortunately this mistranslation of the Great Commission has found its way into many of the world’s Bibles, which have been translated by Westerners. It is up to the non-Western church to rediscover the Great Commission, and when they do, they will realize that the mandate of “discipling” nations is something that has been given to every believer—and that is

the whole point. Without the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world, the Great Commission cannot be completed as Jesus intended.

Finally, with the third and final challenge, it cannot be emphasized enough that today there are still 3,000 unreached people groups without any known missionary work. There are an additional 2,000 unreached groups where missionaries have gone, but no breakthrough has yet occurred.¹⁶ If we are going to reach them effectively we will need to work together in a greater spirit of unity and concerted cooperation than we have ever seen in the past. We need to listen to one another, share resources, and collectively own the responsibility of deploying personnel to fully engage the remaining unreached

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peoples of the world. To do this we will need a global network of all the world’s agencies working together to gather intelligence, encourage best practices, and fill in the gaps of any missing infrastructure required to see church-planting breakthroughs among every nation, tribe, people and language. I believe we will be the generation to reach this incredible milestone. By the grace of God and according to his providence, we will all reach it together as a global church. What an exciting time to be alive! **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ *Global Mission Database*, USCWM Research Department.

² The phrase “lay involvement” is not intended to endorse the lay-clergy divide in

the Church. It is simply a recognition of the historical reality that Protestants began to send “non-ordained” workers to the mission field, unlike their Catholic counterparts.

³ 1005 portions, 1275 NewTestaments, and 518 complete Bibles as of late 2012. See wycliffe.net/resources/scriptureaccessstatistics/tabid/99/Default.aspx.

⁴ Titus 1:5-9

⁵ Winter, Ralph. “The Amateurization of Mission,” *Mission Frontiers*, March 1, 2004.

⁶ For more of Ralph Winter’s thoughts on this see, “The Largest Stumbling Block to Leadership Development in the Global Church,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 20:3 Fall 2003.

⁷ In 2005, over a dozen major mission organizations met in Amsterdam to form a global network of mission structures. The first task of this network was to help organize a global gathering of mission agencies in 2010 to commemorate Edinburgh 1910. Here at this meeting held in Tokyo the global mission community affirmed the need to develop a global network for mission cooperation in the Tokyo 2010 Declaration (see www.gnms.net for the full text).

⁸ Robert Priest, “Are Short-Term Missions Good Stewardship?” *Christianity Today*, July 2005.

⁹ Matt. 23:5

¹⁰ 2 Cor. 4:7

¹¹ Evangelical Missions Information Service, *2009 North American Mission Handbook*.

¹² This reality reveals a kind of syncretism in our thinking. We attribute “being a Christian” with “being born-again.” Thus without realizing it, we are communicating that to be saved you must be a part of the Christian religion.

¹³ Luke 9:3-4

¹⁴ Evangelical Missions Information Service (*North American Missions Handbook surveys every three years*).

¹⁵ *Global Mission Database*, USCWM Research Dept. Our research indicates that this took place around the middle of the last decade, with the token demarcation assigned to the year 2005. In the year 2000, Western cross-cultural missionaries made up 59% of the total. Today, almost the reverse has taken place, with non-Western cross-cultural missionaries making up 63% of the global total.

¹⁶ Global Research Department, International Mission Board.