

Stewarding Legacies in Mission

# A Genius for God: Ralph Winter's Recasting of World Evangelization

by Harold Fickett

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**I**n the summer of 1974, Christian leaders gathered in Switzerland for the evangelical Protestant equivalent of Vatican II. Twenty-seven hundred representatives from a hundred and fifty nations at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization considered whether the whole world might be evangelized by the year 2000. Billy Graham called the congress together. England's leading evangelical, John Stott, spoke, as did East Africa's Bishop Festo Kivengere, South America's Rene Padilla, and Susumu Uda of Tokyo. Popular apologist Francis Schaeffer came down from his study center, L'Abri, in nearby Huémoz, to address the gathering. The schedule was replete with such luminaries. None made the lasting impact, though, of an idiosyncratic professor from California's Fuller Seminary named Dr. Ralph D. Winter. Winter's speech accomplished nothing less than fixing Lausanne's attention on more than 2 billion "unreached peoples," reigniting cross-cultural evangelism, while restoring to many of the delegates and their organizations a reason for being.

Winter's epoch-making speech began in the most unpromising way. He apologized, awkwardly, that his remarks might end in confusion. The texts of the plenary addresses, like Winter's, had been circulated beforehand, with several experts scheduled to speak in response. For scheduling reasons, those responding to Winter's paper actually spoke before Winter himself. His points were critiqued from the podium before he made them. In these circumstances Dr. Winter chose to respond briefly to his critics with cobbled-together remarks and then proceeded to the substance.

Ralph Winter was not quite fifty years old. In the Day-Glo 1970s, when even Billy Graham's hair trailed over his collar, Dr. Winter looked like a throwback to the black-and-white 1950s. He wore a plain, dark suit and bow tie. His was of average height, slim, mostly bald, and he wore half glasses for reading his notes. He initially spoke in an urgent deadpan, like the announcer at the beginning of early sci-fi pictures. He came across as the Caltech-trained

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engineer he had once been, a Mr. Wizard or “Bill Nye the Science Guy,” illustrating his speech with complicated charts. Here was a man born to wear a pocket protector.

Winter was far more than an entertaining popularizer, though. He belonged in that class of intrepid thinkers, populated by Buckminster Fuller, his old Caltech professor Linus Pauling, and Segway inventor Dean Kamen, who are ready to tackle any problem that attracts their attention. His peculiar genius lay in turning a first-class scientific mind to the problems of world evangelization. He referred to himself as a “social engineer.”

Despite its unpromising beginning—and the charts—Winter's speech would be interrupted twice by applause before its passionate conclusion brought down the house.

The second time applause broke out, Dr. Winter remarked, off the cuff, “Now don't clap too soon because this is a really nitty gritty question.” The audience laughed, as did Ralph. He was not above having a laugh in the midst of what would be remembered as the most important speech of his life. He had a fine appreciation of life's absurdities, and the ridiculous put a twinkle in his eye.

In its written version, his speech came to be called, “The New Macedonia: A Revolutionary New Era in Mission Begins.” In the spoken version, after acknowledging his respondents' helpful correctives, Ralph Winter summed up the position of the Christian movement vis-à-vis the rest of the world and clarified, as no one else, the nature of the task before it. He freed the delegates from false assumptions that would have made the task impossible. He spoke to their deepest suspicions and misgivings. He showed how the way forward had been anticipated in the first years of the church's existence, when the Holy Spirit revealed Christianity to be a faith at home in any culture. The faith's

strength lay in its capacity to hop from one culture to another across the centuries, as old centers lapsed into passivity and frontiers became new capitals.

At that time there were 2.7 billion people in the world who were not Christians—1 million for each delegate to the Lausanne Congress. Of these, 83 percent were Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or secular Chinese. These statistics would seem to mandate that by far the greater part of efforts in cross-cultural evangelism should have been directed toward these groups. In fact, 95 percent of evangelistic efforts were directed at the 17 percent of non-Christians who were neither Muslim, nor Hindu, nor Buddhist, nor Chinese. An enormous task had yet to be done.



Winter's assertion contradicted what most accepted or feared true. It was the settled wisdom of the missions community that Christianity never truly takes hold in a country until that nation has a thriving church run by nationals. There must be a Korean church for the Koreans; a Nigerian church for the Nigerians. The remarkable success of both these national churches proved this true, whereas the failure of the Japanese church to become something more than a Western import kept it small and without much influence. At the time of the Lausanne Congress almost all of the world's *nations* had Christian churches—of one denominational

stripe or another. Even an overwhelming and at-times ruthless Muslim nation like Afghanistan had a fledgling church—one Ralph Winter had done much to encourage by helping to send J. Christy Wilson and dozens of others there. (Ralph's interest in Afghanistan grew as a result of his family hosting Ali Askar from Afghanistan for a year when Ralph was in high school.) It appeared that the era of cross-cultural evangelism—the era of India's William Carey and China's Hudson Taylor—had come to an end.

Further, most mission agencies were all too conscious of how missionaries had at times abetted the predations of colonialism and wanted to get out of the business of carrying on “the white man's burden,” as Rudyard Kipling put it. Twenty years before, when Ralph Winter and his wife had first gone to Guatemala as missionaries, they had been called “fraternal workers,” as were all Presbyterian missionaries, implying they were only in the country to assist the indigenous church, not run it. Western Christian leaders feared that “missions work” had too often been confused with meddling in other people's national churches.

In his written paper—and in the body of his work that many of the delegates already knew—Winter established that every nation had its national church only if nationality were defined in the often-arbitrary way of geographic borders. Within China, for example, many “nations” existed, in the sense of distinct peoples, each with its own language and culture. These nations or people groups often lived in close proximity to one another and yet were as different as American white Anglo-Saxon Protestants are from Bengalis.

Winter's understanding of “people groups” came from the groundbreaking work of his colleagues at Fuller Theological Seminary, Donald McGavran and Alan Tippett. The three Fuller professors recognized that the true dimensions of the task of evangelization

would never be recognized unless the Christian world began to think in terms of people groups rather than geographical nations. Each people group should have its own independently thriving church in order to be considered adequately evangelized.

If one looked at the world in terms of people groups rather than modern nations, Winter argued, some 2.3 billion people and their succeeding generations would remain unevangelized if the extremely difficult task of cross-cultural evangelism did not become the church's highest priority.

Winter devoted much of his written paper to distinguishing three types of evangelism. Most commonly, people are called upon to present Christ's message and embody his love to their neighbors—people with whom they share a common language, culture, and similar social status.

Others traverse borders of language, culture, and social position but remain within the same civilization, as when an American minister in Europe or parts of the world that have been Westernized.

The most difficult evangelism takes the missionary out of his own culture. It often involves learning a language that has no common foundation with a missionary's mother tongue—or even a written basis or grammar. (Winter crossed these frontiers earlier in his career when he ministered to the Mam people in Guatemala.) Truly cross-cultural evangelism places a missionary in societies whose language, ethnicity, and worldview are profoundly distinct from the missionary's home culture.

Evangelism that takes a missionary from one civilization into another may be so difficult that one of Winter's respondents raised the possibility that it should not be attempted at all. Winter understood it was best for someone from within a community to evangelize a people whenever possible. He insisted, though, that obedience to Christ demands crossing every type of

**M**ost remember this moment in his life. More than a few make the mistake of presuming it his greatest achievement.

frontier and boundary when there are no other options.

One might think this to be an unexceptionable point for the gathering in Lausanne. Many resisted Winter's analysis, however, because they truly believed there was no longer any need for Westerners to evangelize "the heathen."

The missions community had jumped to this conclusion because it aligned its stance with the American civil-rights movement. Public institutions, and certainly the church, should be "integrated" whenever possible, expressing the unity we have in Christ. Every nation should have but one church, and the proliferation of denominations—different types of churches—should be resisted on principle.

In practice this meant that once a "national church" had been established, different peoples who lived within that nation were left to be evangelized by their countrymen.

Winter pointed out that national boundaries were often artificial constructions that included different peoples who were furthest removed from each other culturally, separated by language, social organization, and status—as different as Hindu Brahmins from Boston Brahmins. In fact, Hindu Brahmins were so different culturally from other castes in India, like the Dalits (untouchables), that they were more open to being evangelized by Westerners than other castes. Like it or not, this was simply the case.

Looking through the distorting lens of national churches, 83 percent of the world's non-Christians had become effectively invisible to the missions community. (This is why the term "hidden peoples" was initially used for "unreached peoples.")

Winter said that he had grown up with similarly misleading assumptions. He saw cultural differences among nations as a nuisance and the lack of homogeneity within his own culture as a positive evil. Winter had long awaited the time when everyone, whether black, Chicano, or an Asian emigrant, would worship in places and ways with which he was familiar. But he had since thought better of this. He now saw the church and its various expressions as a grand orchestra. People should not be invited into the church and all commanded to play the violin. Rather, they should be invited to come and play their own instruments—worshiping in a way that fit their own social customs—as long as everyone played from the score of God's word.

Winter pointed out that it was never his intention to exclude anyone for any reason from a given church. He thought that our unity in Christ should not be equated, though, with uniformity in worship and lifestyle.

He based his argument largely on Paul's mission to the Gentiles. Paul, as the first "cross-cultural missionary," was all things to all men that he might win some. He argued continually in his epistles for the freedom of the Greek churches to continue in their own way of life, countering the "Judaizers" who tried to persuade the Greek Christians that they must adopt Jewish customs.

Winter developed an interesting parallel between the question of meat eating in the New Testament and the contemporary situation in India. The Greeks felt free to eat meat (offered to idols) while Jewish Christians thought this an abomination. Paul defended the freedom of the Greeks to eat meat while counseling them not to exercise it in a scandalous way. Winter pointed

out that Indian Brahmins who became Christians might remain reluctant to eat meat—since their caste practiced vegetarianism—while most Christians in India included meat in their diet. Why not allow Brahmins to have a church of their own where they would not be under pressure to renounce their traditional dietary habits?

In the most passionate moments of Dr. Winter's speech, he pressed the point home. If God gathered the whole world into a single congregation Sunday after Sunday, there would inevitably be a great loss of the Christian tradition's rich diversity. "Does God want this?" Winter asked.

Do we want this? *Christ died for these people* . . . He didn't die to make Muslims stop praying five times a day or to make Brahmins eat meat. Can't we hear Paul the evangelist say that we must go to these people within the system in which they operate? This is the cry of a cross-cultural evangelist.

Winter finished with a charge to the congress:

We must have radically new efforts of cross-cultural evangelism in order to effectively witness to these twenty-three hundred eighty-seven million [2.387 billion] people. And we cannot believe that we should continue virtually to ignore this highest priority.<sup>1</sup>

With this declaration and the crashing waves of applause it received throughout the world, Ralph Winter became the most renowned theoretician of evangelical missions.

Most who know about Ralph Winter remember this moment in his life.

More than a few make the mistake of presuming it his greatest achievement.

Standing at the podium in Lausanne, Winter was only on the cusp of the most interesting and productive period of his life. Everything that had come before would turn out to be only a preparation for the huge risks he would soon take in service of what he had called "this highest priority." As he

often pointed out, the speech he gave at Lausanne was as much the product of his colleagues' thinking as his own.

Winter's years of experience and study had yet to coalesce into his fully mature understanding of the Christian faith itself. He had applied his inventive, scientific mind to many of the organizational and technical challenges faced by evangelical missions, but he had yet to grasp fully the mission at Christianity's core and its implications for the world's greatest intellectual challenges and practical problems. His fully mature thinking, which came surprisingly late in life, sketches out a road map for the Christian movement's direction in the twenty-first century, just as his remarks at Lausanne influenced the final years of the twentieth. Just as Winter was unafraid to risk his reputation to challenge conventional thinking in order to turn the world of missiology upside down at Lausanne, so he would boldly challenge made-up minds on theology in his later years.

At Lausanne, the drama of Winter's life might be said only to have begun. At Lausanne he had risked criticism and disagreement. When he struck out in new theological directions a few years later, he put the meaning of his life at risk and soon faced ridicule, active opposition, and even vicious, personal attacks. Yet Winter was a visionary who sought to wed pragmatism with truth, even at great personal cost. He believed that the success of the kingdom of God was of paramount importance.

The story of Ralph Winter's life, which provides a wonderful basis for examining his thinking, was a long, adventure-filled process of discovery, with the California engineer always ready to ask probing questions and follow wherever the evidence led. It began much in the way it ended, with a boy who influenced everyone around him and was always recruiting people into his plans. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For the full text of the speech, see Ralph D. Winter, "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1975), 213ff.