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# Christian Missions in the Third Millennium

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**Thursday, January 19, 2006**

Now facing its third millennium, the Christian church faces a moment of great historical importance and opportunity. The modern missionary movement is now over two centuries old. Looking back over those years, it is clear that God mobilized His people to make great strides in taking the gospel to many parts of the world.

This missionary movement has seen the evangelization of millions of persons representing thousands of ethnic and cultural groups. The Bible has been translated into hundreds of languages and dialects. Over the last several decades, new areas of the world have shown a remarkable response to the gospel, and the continent of Africa may now be the center of the world missionary enterprise. In fact, the last half of the twentieth century saw an enormous evangelistic response throughout the Pacific Rim and the African continent.

Today, the Christian church faces new challenges. Without exaggeration, we can point to the twenty-first century as a new era in Christian missions, and recognize it as a vast new opportunity.

Looking at Christian missions today, we may be seeing the birth of a new missiological movement. This new era in missions will build upon the accomplishments of the last 200 years, but it must also be adapted to the new realities of our world context.

The most important dimension of any vision for world missions is a passion to glorify God. From beginning to end, the Bible declares that God is glorifying Himself in the salvation of sinners, and that He desires to be worshipped among all the peoples of the earth. The impulse of the missionary conviction is drawn from the assurance that God saves sinners, and that He is glorifying Himself by creating a new people through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we have the glad opportunity to glorify God by declaring the Gospel to all the peoples of the earth.

As John Piper has stated, "The deepest reason why our passion for God should fuel missions is that God's passion for God fuels missions. Missions is the overflow of our delight in God because missions is the overflow of God's delight in being God." In missions, we share God's delight.

Pioneers such as William Carey gave birth to the modern missionary movement. It was Carey's sense of evangelistic passion, set upon a clear foundation of biblical truth and confidence in the gospel, that compelled him to leave the safe confines of England and go to India. The full harvest of William Carey's ministry will be known only in eternity. Most Christians are aware that he served for many years without a single convert. When many missionaries would have returned home or moved to greener pastures, Carey stayed and invested himself in India. He translated the New Testament and built bridges to the people of that great nation.

Since Carey's time, thousands of missionaries have left homes and families to take the gospel to the remotest parts of the earth. Reviewing the history of the missionary movement, it is clear that great gains were made for the gospel. At the same time, every generation has left its own imprint on the missionary task, and each generation is blind to some of the cultural baggage it takes along with the gospel. At the height of the missions movement in the Victorian era, it often

seemed that missionaries were just as intent on Westernizing native peoples as in evangelizing them. A new awareness of the global context and respect for native cultures should lead us to be careful to preach the gospel rather than Western culture.

The new vision for world missions is directed toward the reaching of people groups rather than nations. Missiological focus upon the nation-state is a remnant of the nineteenth century, when nations were conceived as singular units and national identity was paramount. This paradigm was long out of date by the end of the twentieth century. Christians now recognize that there are thousands of distinct people groups, each identifiable by culture, language, and social structure—and they are not always divided neatly by political boundaries. Each of these people groups represents a distinct missiological challenge, and each must be considered in its own right.

While it is likely that churches and denominational gatherings will continue to celebrate a parade of the flags of the nations, the reality is that each of those nations includes a collective of various people groups desperately in need of the gospel—people groups often dispersed throughout the globe.

This should bring a new humility as well as growing urgency to the church. So long as we were able to count nation-states in terms of missionary saturation, we could see a tremendous advance and what seemed to be a constant march of progress. When people groups are taken into consideration, however, we can clearly see that the greater challenge still lies before us. This means that the Christian church must develop cultural understanding and sensitivity, as well as linguistic and cultural dexterity, in the task of preaching the gospel to unreached persons.

This new vision for world missions is also remarkable in the fact that much, if not most, of the energy is coming from grassroots Christians rather than from institutional structures. Perhaps the greatest missionary advance among American churches is seen in the widespread participation of Christian laypersons in missionary trips and short-term mission projects. Churches that encourage and support this hands-on approach to missions will bear testimony to the powerful impact it has upon the participants and upon the missionary commitment of the entire congregation.

Today's Christians are looking for an experiential participation in the missionary challenge. They draw great excitement in hearing from missionaries, but even greater commitment by being participants in the missionary movement themselves. Because of this, this new vision is also congregational in its focus. Individual congregations are taking up the missionary challenge, and measuring their own faithfulness by the number of missionaries sent around the world from among their own members.

Much of this new vision is flowing out of reports from the 10/40 window—that portion of the world between latitudes 10 and 40 degrees, where most of the world's unreached peoples live. This focus on the Great Commission has led to a mobilization mentality that holds great promise for the future of the Christian church.

One missionary leader has defined this mobilization as “all of God's people reaching all the peoples of the earth.” That motto sets the issue clearly. This generation must be committed to see all of God's people together reaching all the peoples of the earth without regard to race, culture, economic reality, or geographical or political obstacles.

Over the past half-century, America has seen several generational transitions. As the new millennium dawns, the Baby Boom generation is now in mid-adulthood, and some are heading toward retirement. The GI generation that built so many of the great institutions and provided leadership in our denomination and churches is now reaching advanced years, though many in this generation continue to be active participants and well-known leaders. Behind the Baby Boomers are coming “Generation X,” the “Busters,” and the “Millennials.” How will these generations mold the missionary movement of the future?

This generation demonstrates a readiness to take on new challenges and to go where no previous generation has yet taken the gospel. They have been born into a culturally diverse world, and they are gifted with skills in intercultural communication. They are impatient with the cultural isolationism of previous generations. They see no political boundaries to the Gospel. They are ready to cross political borders and see no limitations on the Great Commission. Where previous generations wanted to *support* missions, this generation is determined to *do* missions. Incubated in an experience-driven culture, these young Christians are not interested in missions by proxy.

This new generation holds great promise, but it also demands urgent attention. The church needs to mobilize the

energy of these younger Christians and deploy their gifts in cultural translation and adaptation. Nevertheless, this generation has inherited a dwindling deposit of doctrinal and theological understanding. Our churches and seminaries must quickly be about the business of grounding this generation in biblical truth, even as they are mobilizing for world missions.

In all likelihood, these new generations will establish a missiological pattern of long duration. We may well see a tidal wave of participatory missions unlike anything seen by the Christian church since the first century. Finally, it is up to the church both to release their energy and to ground their convictions.

Our vision for world evangelization is an important barometer of spiritual and theological health. A vibrant commitment to Christ leads to a passion for the Gospel. A grand embrace of God's truth produces an enthusiasm to see God glorified as His name is proclaimed to the nations. It is time for a new generation to lead—and to point the way.

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