

Chapter 10 – Catch the Vision! See a World Full of People Without Christ!

Fact: There Is a World Full of People

God's vision of the world goes beyond land mass or political boundaries. He sees a mosaic of billions of people and thousands of culture-groups.

This mosaic is not a global curio shop full of curiosity pieces nor a global warehouse full of machinery with various degrees of usefulness. Unfortunately, we humans tend to regard those who are “different” from us as either one or the other. Even our concern for people can be more with hunger than the hungry, or more with poverty than the poor, or more with evangelism than the unevangelized.

Nor may Christians rightly think of people as merely “souls,” attaching little value to their bodies or their communities. Rather, we should see a world full of “body-soul-in-community” people (to use John Stott’s phrase) with their own unique personal and cultural strengths, qualities, and contributions, as well as their weaknesses, felt needs, and sin.

World Christians, if they have God’s vision, will never become “cultural imperialists” believing that the ways of any one group of people make them more valuable than another. We maintain that the Kingdom of God is actually incomplete without those “other” people who seem so different from us, simply because they *are* people—people with tremendous capacity to glorify God with us through Jesus Christ, in their own culturally unique ways. That’s the great reason we want them to learn about Him and put their faith in Him.

Whenever you feel your heart beating, remember: by your seventy-third birthday it will beat, not 100 million times or even a billion, but almost three billion beats. That’s also how many people remain to be evangelized in today’s world. Three billion. That isn’t just a statistic. It is a world full of real people who suffer and die without hope and without God. This isn’t because they are more evil than you or I, or because they are less deserving of the gospel. They are people just like us, just as needy and just as special in God’s sight except, in most cases, they lack the opportunity to hear and believe.

And that’s why our hearts go on beating, isn’t it? Our physical life in Christ is interwoven with all of earth’s unreached—one heartbeat for each person. That’s a people-to-people world vision!

Problems with Visibility

Many are the reasons we struggle to see and care for people as God does. Among them are: the overwhelming numbers of people for us to see (over four billion); the multitude of complex human boundaries that separate us from one another (geographical, social, cultural, racial, linguistic, religious); and our own lack of information about what comprises the many thousands of culture-groups around the world.

American Christians, particularly, have problems with their vision because we master only one language, English. Many of the world’s peoples learn three or four and think nothing of it. To know someone’s language is to know their heart. As linguist Dr. Tom Brewster observes: “Americans suffer from mono-lingual myopia—a disease of the tongue that affects the vision.”

All of this can foster in us that universal human malady called “ethnocentrism.” When our whole life revolves around people who are ethnically just like us we are *ethnocentric*. When we avoid strangers simply because we can’t predict how their group works or figure out why they operate the way we do, we’re ethnocentric. When we quickly critique and judge others by our own cultural assumptions and values, instead of attempting to understand their behaviour within their own worldview, we display ethnocentrism.

We have a problem with visibility because we haven’t taken time to learn about people. Having a vision for people means learning to actually appreciate their rich potential to glorify Christ. We must cease being armchair tourists of the world. We must become its *students*, even before we become its servants. We must let people very different from us teach us how they see themselves, until we can see through their eyes. Then, and only then, can we build a strategy that loves them for Christ’s sake in ways they understand, trust, and to which they can intelligently respond.

A Vision of How We’re Similar

Human beings, wherever they are found, are similar in so many ways. Cultures differ widely but not wildly. We are similar, for example, in the symbol systems we use for verbal and nonverbal communication (words, graphics, sound, motion, spacing, timing); in our basic survival needs as human beings (food, drink, elimination, sex, security, belonging, love); in the need to adjust to major global forces around us (technological advances, energy shortages, rapid urbanization, nuclear threat); down to the built-in capacity in each of us to hear the gospel, believe in Christ, and follow Him.

People also hold in common a basic centre to their lives—what the Bible calls “heart.” It is an allegiance to something or someone or some purpose that makes sense out of life. The diversity of the human race can be uncovered by asking: “What do you think the meaning of your existence is?” There are many answers, often contradictory. But our unity is uncovered by the need of all humans to answer that question. Every person needs a way to explain, validate, and harmonize everything that goes on in their own thoughts, in their daily living and in their society.

Furthermore, all people have a heart *problem*. We experience evil from within our hearts and in our relationships with others. Separated from our Creator by sin, all of us suffer physical, psychological, social, and eternal consequences of evil. Therefore, we all share the same spiritual need: that our hearts be changed. The world’s universal sickness, called by E. Stanley Jones “homesickness,” demands the very same remedy: reconciliation to the Father through Christ.

Though we’re all sinful, we’re also all redeemable. God hasn’t declared anyone anywhere impossible of new birth. We all have a common capacity and ability to change and be changed, especially when the gospel comes with clarity.

One example of similarity important for missions is that of religious outlook. So many societies in the world hold to the following basic religious categories: a supreme being or high god, belief in an afterlife which gives meaning to the present life, a sense of moral evil, a struggle between powers of good and evil with man caught in the middle, expectations that a special deliverer will come, prayer as an act of communication and submission, and a reverence for creation with some sense of a divine purpose in it all. The gospel can speak directly to seven key issues on which all people reflect.

Because we are so similar, cross-cultural communications is not nearly so difficult. From the outset we should always have a sense of oneness with any of the earth’s unreached peoples. Humanity’s solidarity assures us that God’s grace can surmount any human barrier as it breaks through any of His people to fulfil His worldwide purpose among any other group of people.

A Vision of How We're Different

Mankind is also a large assortment of thousands of varied perspectives, experiences, and needs clothed in a great variety of cultural, racial, economic, political, and religious forms. With over nineteen thousand different cultural units worldwide (some with as few as three thousand members, others as large as 30 million), the picture is very complex. Like thousands of fingerprints these cultures differ widely. For example, there is no typical African individual or African culture. Africa's 330 million people break down into one thousand languages and dialects, with six major ethnic categories that break down into hundreds of ethnic groups or tribes. When a single country like Nigeria incorporates scores of languages and five hundred tribal groups we begin to see that human differences are far greater than a United Nation's list of 210 political boundaries.

There are many worlds in our one world. By Bishop Stephen Neill's count, we could number seven major blocks: the communist-dominated world; Eastern and Southern Asia; the Muslim world; Africa; Latin America, including the Caribbean; the Pacific world; and the free world of northwestern Europe and North America. But the earth is also diversified into various age categories, climates, class structures, and standards of living. The illiterate, the dispossessed, and the hungry each live in worlds most North Americans know nothing about. Of course, the tongue divides the human race into almost six thousand worlds or languages. And, language differences are directly tied into worldview differences, too. Finally, we might distinguish the various religious worlds: Judaism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Animism, Buddhism, and Islam, to name a few. But even within Islam, for example, there are at least five major (and sometimes internally explosive) sects.

Don't let the differences discourage you. These differences have provided God with thousands of audiovisual aids by which His eternal truths can be illustrated, visualized, comprehended, encoded, and transferred to people everywhere. Furthermore, the diversity of needs and even tragedies within the human community provides multiplied opportunities for the Body of Christ to show the world His love and convince people of their need for a Saviour. As the Church moves out to plant churches and meet those needs among such a diverse humanity, God's grace receives a multitude of new ways to demonstrate how rich and how unlimited it can be. It is within this diversity that the missionary movement and the Kingdom of God can thrive, if we're willing to expand on all fronts!

A Vision of the Many Worlds in America

Since Acts 1:8 focuses our evangelistic activity as much on the cultural as the geographical widths of the Gap, the "ends of the earth" may often be found living right next door to American Christians. The unique U.S. ethno-cultural panorama includes 120 ethnic groupings speaking over a hundred different languages. In the last census 75 million Americans classified themselves as members of ethnic subcultures. Many of these groups can only be reached when lay Christians, not merely professional missionaries, make conscious, planned, missionary-style efforts to cross major barriers to give them the gospel and plant the church among them—here—in America.

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In fact, Conservative Baptist urban missionary Mark Marchak suggests that New York City may be America's biggest missionary challenge. More people (eight million) live there than in forty-four of the fifty states, but the evangelical population is no more than 3 percent—probably much less.

And there is no strong evangelical base in the suburbs trying to plant churches within the Big Apple. Overall, the world of America's urban underclass, incorporating forty million people in all, is as needy, as difficult to reach, and as dangerous to penetrate as few foreign mission fields anywhere today.

World religions, some Eastern in origin and some strongly Muslim, are successfully recruiting followers in America. They present a unique cross-cultural opportunity right next door. Muslims in America, for example, estimated to be three million with eighty-four mosques, grew as much as 400 percent in the past ten years. This makes Islam the third major religion in the U.S., and it is finding converts, often among black Americans. Further, a University of Chicago study claims that twenty million Americans belong to "fringe religious cults" like Hare Krishna and Rev. Moon's Korean-based mixture of Bible and Eastern mysticism.

Admittedly, the predicament of most people in America is vastly different from the billions outside the U.S. who have yet to hear the gospel once, and who have absolutely no culturally-near neighbours or missionaries to tell them. Only 2 percent of the people in our country live at the widest end of the Gap. In most ways those in the Third World are much farther removed from the Christian witness than anyone here.

Still, we must not lose a vision for those next door that demand special communication efforts from American Christians if they are ever to be reached. Often they have little opportunity to hear of Christ from the tens of millions of evangelicals here, because so few of us are trying to share God's love with them in a way that makes sense within their own unique, separate worlds.

The Crucial Vision of the Hidden People

The number of those to be won to Christ in Africa and Asia has more than doubled since 1900 and will more than triple by the year 2000. Almost three billion people today have little or no knowledge about Christ and His salvation. Never has the challenge been greater for total, global missionary advance.

Most of those to be reached are often called the "Hidden People." Why? Because major cultural, racial, linguistic, social and other barriers "hide" them from the eyes and the concerned efforts of most evangelizing Christians.

About 300 million of the world's unreached people can be reached by their Christian neighbours. But 400 million can only be reached by missionaries prepared to bridge medium cultural differences. And more than two billion can only be reached by significant new efforts to cross complex cultural and other human barriers. The latter two groups—the two and a half billion Hidden People—consist of the Hindus of Southeast Asia (656 million); the Muslims, primarily in the Middle East, North Africa and Indonesia (750 million); the Buddhist and Confucian peoples of south and southeast Asia, including almost one billion mainland Chinese; and the almost 265 million unreached animists or tribal peoples, scattered around the globe, but very evident in Africa.

Where can some of these Hidden People be found?

Consider just a few illustrations:

- In *Japan* the total Christian population is only 1 percent, most of whom live in the cities. But in the thousands of towns and fishing villages there is absolutely no Christian witness, and no missionaries to reach them. They are hidden.

- The Baptist church in *Burma* is very strong, but its membership is entirely tribes people. The 28 million Burmese who are Buddhists are practically untouched after 160 years of Christian witness.
- For every 10,000 villages in *India*, 9,950 have no Christian community whatsoever. Furthermore, less than 10 of its 3,000 castes and tribes have any Christians in them. And who is reaching the 490 thousand Indians living and working in the Arab Gulf states?
- In the *Soviet Union* only 60 percent of the people are Russians. The rest are minority groups, scattered throughout. Bibles in the Russian language are scarce, but they are nonexistent for the fifty million who belong to these ethnic and linguistic minorities.

We must not be misled by the statement that in many countries “the church has been planted.” The Christian movement in a nation may hold only a token presence. Within many countries we find numerous cultural and linguistic groups in which no church or missionary is at work. Often, as it turns out, the “planted” churches within a country exist within small ethnic pockets, like ethnic islands surrounded by oceans of men and women who, as yet, have heard nothing of God’s love—the Hidden People.

The gospel message itself remains forever the same, but the keys to unlock each piece of the human mosaic to the gospel differ vastly.

“Oceans of Hidden People” expresses both an extent of need and a *depth* of need. These billions (the extent) have little sense of their lostness unless the Light of the World Himself penetrates their darkness with the gospel in the hands of cross-cultural messengers. Truly they dwell at the widest end of the gap of opportunity. And unless major new efforts are made immediately to cross the barriers that separate them from the gospel, they will die in their darkness (the depth of their need).

A Vision of Strategies that Fit the Mosaic

A strategy for total world evangelization must be sensitive to earth’s beautiful mosaic of peoples. We must keep the uniqueness of individuals and their culture-groups in clear focus and learn to love them in their own contexts. People are lost within their own socio-cultural context. They are lost as members of a particular group, and this is also how they must be reached. Therefore, every piece of the world’s mosaic—every single one of the twenty-five thousand culture groups—requires uniquely designed strategies, methods and emphases that clearly fit that piece if the message is to make sense to them. This is especially true of the groups among the two and a half billion Hidden People where no church has yet been planted and where our witness, in many ways, must begin from scratch.

The gospel message itself remains forever the same, but the keys to unlock each piece of the human mosaic to the gospel differ vastly. The challenge before the world missionary movement today is to design keys that fit thousands of different locks, especially within the diversities of Asia.

We need sharp insight into the special ways each culture approaches its own language, art, technology, education, economic system, marriage, and family patterns, definitions of status and roles, laws and taboos, and its religious beliefs and rituals. True, what we learn in designing a key for one culture-group may help us with another. But in many ways, cultures do not duplicate one another. Each lock demands special attention. This is the challenge of cross-cultural communication.

For example, the mosaic in Taiwan consists of nine million Taiwanese-speaking peoples, both urban and rural, three million Mandarin-speaking, one million Hakka-speaking, plus two hundred

thousand aboriginal highlanders in six main tribes, speaking six major dialects. Each piece of the Taiwanese mosaic demands a specially-built key or evangelistic strategy to unlock it for Christ.

Our missionary objective is to make our message understandable and accessible among all peoples. The witness-bearer, therefore, is as important a link in the strategy as the one who receives that witness. If we want our gospel to get through we must look seriously at ourselves as the communicators.

Like two mountains, two cultures may never meet, but people who live on those mountains—who belong to separate cultures—can meet. One person can make himself and the good things he has to share fit into the world of the other. As Christians, we are called off our mountains to become bridges which others confidently use to come to Christ. Our effectiveness in this will determine whether or not strategies of communication are built in our generation to span the gulf for cultures at the widest end of the Gap, where over half the human race waits to hear of Christ for the first time.



Update Note: To explore how my thinking has expanded the past thirty years – in terms of how I see Christ, His global cause, the hope He sets before the nations, what it means to be a World Christian in today’s world, how to mobilize a renewed missions movement – be sure to look at my most recent book (by visiting www.ProclaimHope.com): **CHRIST IS ALL! A Joyful Manifesto On The Supremacy of God’s Son** (New Providence Publishers).