

PART ONE

ALIVE IN THE GAP

I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land.

Ezekiel 22:30 NIV

Chapter 1 – There is a Gap, You Know

The Gap Defined

It's the Gap between God and men; between God and all that He is and man and all that he is, in every respect. "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). A "mediator" implies a gap between two parties that cannot or will not accept each other.

It is also the Gap between God's original intention for humankind—to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth with people in His image and subdue it—and Jesus the Mediator's final restoration wherein a new people will fill and subdue the earth, with Him (see Rev. 5:9-10).

For God, the Gap is a very personal issue. First of all, He is one of the two parties involved. Secondly, He has given the required Mediator to stand in the Gap forever, to close the distance between His own plan for world redemption and the consummation of that plan. He has given His own dear Son. He has "a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10).

But more than that, the Mediator has actually sacrificed His own life in the Gap, falling like a seed into soil in order to bring forth fruit (John 12:23-26), to bring many people home from the other side of the Gap.

With that kind of personal investment in such a costly claim, God is deeply concerned for the billions of earth's citizens who have yet to hear that there is a Mediator, let alone believe and walk across the Gap to home. Our God is as personally committed now to reaching these billions as He was the day Christ died for them.

And that's why the Gap is a very personal issue for Christians as well. It lies between what God is doing in your life and mine—as people united forever to the Mediator—and what God still wants to do among all the nations.

Millions of us, for example, have asked the Saviour to quench their thirst with His water of life (John 7:37). But there remains a critical breakthrough in our lives if the living river that flows into the hearts of satisfied disciples like us is to ever lead toward the glorious day when that river flows *out* of us fully to complete Habakkuk's vision: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (2:14). That's why I say we Christians are right in the middle of the Gap. We have been born again for the sake of the Gap. Someday the waters of life are to cover the whole earth through us. God is committed to reaching earth's unreached people in a very personal way: The Spirit of God extending Christ's Kingdom through us who are united with the King (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11, 17).

How Wide Is the Gap?

If you measure it by the basic reason for the Gap—sin—you could say it's infinitely wide. Sin and rebellion against a just and holy Creator have set us all the same distance from Him. Jesus measured it as somewhere between darkness and light, between the power of Satan and the power of God (Acts 26:14-19). You can't get much farther apart than that!

In this sense, then, the Gap is the same width for everybody. Either you're an old creation in Adam or a new one in Christ; either you're dead or alive; either you're out of the family or you're in it.

On one side of the Gap is a bundle of sins waiting for God's forgiveness; scars waiting for God's healing; needs waiting for God's riches; and potential waiting for God's power. From the other side has come the inexhaustible, yearning grace of God available in Jesus Christ to all nations, with all the forgiveness, healing, riches, and power the human race could ever want or need.

By this measurement the Gap is as wide as sin for everyone but as crossable for all as the Son who forms the bridge is available for all. In one way, the Gap has already been closed for all because Christ has permanently stretched Himself across its chasm. "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10). "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18).

Some Are Farther Away Than Others

When you look at the Gap historically, in terms of human *experience* instead of human condition, you find the width varies greatly. Ephesians 2:17-18 notes this variance. Although the Gap is bridged in the same way for all—"through [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father"—some of us (like the Jews) may be "near" while others (like the Greeks) are "far away." For those who have never clearly heard that the access is available (as most Greeks in Paul's day), the Gap looms wide indeed. This is the disturbing *Gap of opportunity*.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus talked about this other measurement—the Gap of opportunity. When He commissioned His disciples to span the Gap, He promised them that the Spirit's power would transform their lives so that they could contribute directly to peoples' verdict about Him: "You shall be my witnesses." And He drew a map of the Gap that outlined the various widths they would face. He spoke of "Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth." In other words, the Gap would vary in at least three ways: geographically, culturally, and theologically.

The opportunity to come home would vary *geographically* for those on the other side of the Gap. Although Jerusalem and its surrounding territory, Judea, were important, the disciples would need to physically travel beyond there to Samaria in the north and eventually to the remotest areas of the Roman Empire lest these lands be forever isolated from the people of God and their witness.

Secondly, the opportunity to come home would also vary culturally for those on the other side of the Gap. Reaching those in Jerusalem and Judea would demand little in cross-cultural skills. Already Jesus had evangelized them as a Jew to Jews. Samaritans, on the other hand, had enough racial and cultural differences about them that the disciples would need to make special efforts to help them understand the message in a way that fit their own context.

When it came to the "ends of the earth"—the radically unfamiliar Gentile world—the early missionary movement faced major cultural challenges. A message given to Jews in Palestine could be transferred to Cretan, Macedonians, Asians, and Romans only as it came to these groups in relevant terms, using words and concepts that made sense to those the Jew considered "unclean and uncircumcised dogs."

Jesus sent the disciples forth to serve in the Gap, regardless of its geographical, cultural, or theological extremes.

The gospel was universal. The Resurrection remained central to it, as did the Cross. But how Paul, for example, spelled out his message with peasants in Lystra or jailers in Philippi or private clubs in Athens differed noticeably from his preaching to Jewish enclaves in Antioch and Rome. Unless the message “fit” people and their felt needs as family-groups and as cultures their opportunity to genuinely respond to Christ would be very limited indeed.

For some the opportunity to come home would be “near” theologically while for others it would be “far away.” Jesus taught that “salvation is of the Jews.” His message tied directly into the Scriptures and ceremonies that marked the Covenant and its people. All that the Hebrews held so dear, revealed directly by God to His prophets, found its ultimate meaning in Christ Himself who transformed the Covenant and made it new.

The Samaritans, on the other hand, were not quite so “theologically aware.” Despite their reverence for the books of Moses and their worship of one God, they held prejudice toward many other covenant doctrines and had incorporated new ones of their own. Still the Gap wasn’t that great. At the well of Sychar with Jesus and in Philip’s preaching in Acts 8, we see a common ground of moral law and messianic expectations that allowed the good news to find spiritual affinity in the Samaritan soil.

For Gentiles, however, caught in the worship of Roman and Greek deities with little or no exposure to the Old Testament, for whom a covenant-keeping Creator was “unknown” (Acts 17:23), the gap between a biblical witness and the Gentiles’ own theological currency presented a major challenge. To give pagans and philosophers alike a just opportunity to cross this gap forced the early Church to face this complex need with clarity and relevance (as John does, for example, in writing his Gospel for a broader Greek audience).

Spanning the Gap

Yes. There is a Gap. Measured by the human condition of sin, it is the same for all of us. Measured by the divine provision of a Mediator, it could be closed for all of us. But measured by *the human experience of opportunity* to know that the sin problem has been bridged, and to respond with faith in the mediator, the Gap differs widely around the globe.

Yet Jesus sent the disciples forth to serve in the Gap, regardless of its geographical, cultural, or theological extremes, that they might reconcile lost sinners to God through faith in the Mediator.

Today the strategy remains the same. Over three billion people stand apart from the Mediator, blocked from an effective, loving witness by geographical or cultural or theological or other human barriers. It is for them Christ still calls and empowers Christians to stand in the Gap, especially at its widest end where there is little or no opportunity to believe and come home.

The harvesting of people for the Kingdom of God is accelerating on a scale never before witnessed in the history of the Church.

If we would try to close the widest end of the Gap by herding fifty thousand of its people into a great stadium every day, and if a team of African, Asian, Latin American, and North American evangelists were to preach with cultural and theological sensitivity to a totally different crowd every day, it still would take more than 165 years to let all those billions hear the gospel clearly just one time. In the meantime, billions more would be born. That’s a peek at how immense and complex the Gap is at its widest end.

It is in *this* Gap that the Church of Jesus Christ worldwide must stand with Him.

We must not run from it, especially from its widest end. Instead, we must stand in it to close it until all have had a chance to see, hear, believe, and come home. Especially for the 2.5 billion Hindus, Muslims, Chinese, Buddhists and Tribals—those farthest away in every respect from most witnessing Christians—for their sakes, we must span the widest end of the Gap.

Sunrise over the Gap

Fortunately this Gap need not remain the “valley of the shadow of death” that it is. Already shadows are dissipating at the dawn of what some mission strategists call the “sunrise of missions.”

Sunrise of missions does not mean that the world itself is getting better and better or that the sin-problem that created the Gap has ceased to plague us. Rather, it says that the harvesting of people for the Kingdom of God—the opening of opportunity to believe the gospel around the world—is accelerating on a scale never before witnessed in the history of the Church; that the impact of the gospel in the Gap today looks like the sun just breaking over the horizon of God’s purpose for all nations.

If this sunrise is complemented by renewal within the Church so that together our life-perspectives, life-decisions, and life-directions reflect a *world* dimension in discipleship and evangelism, we may see the fulfilment of the Great Commission in our lifetime. We may see the closing of the Gap at its widest end!

This sunrise over the Gap shines out in so many ways! The number of Christians in Asia and Africa, for example, are increasing four times faster than the population at large. Over 90 percent of the world’s nations are presently accessible to some type of Christian witness coming from the outside. (All of them are if you take into account various forms of media evangelism.) At least 200 million, for example, are accessible to direct missionary outreach in southeast Asia alone.

Yes, there is a Gap. But there is also a brilliant sunrise streaming into that Gap. It is shining down on a world where approximately one billion call themselves Christians. Of these possibly 200 million (according to the U.S. Center for World Missions) are committed to Christ enough that they want to share Him with others—they want to stand in the Gap. And what if one million of these “evangelicals” (one for each five thousand to be evangelized in the next twenty years) joined the present world missionary force, to cross over major geographical, cultural and theological barriers to reach those at the Gap’s widest end? What if the 199 million other evangelicals supported them by sharing the same intense concern for people with no opportunity to hear of Christ, while maintaining a clear witness to those who live nearby? What if a new movement of world Christians was born? What could God do in our generation if we would fully, unconditionally invest our lives for Christ’s sake and for His Gospel (Mark 8)?



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).