

## Chapter 2 – Problems with Pea-Sized Christianity

### *We Aren't Keeping Pace*

Fortunately, what happens with Western Christians doesn't ultimately determine what happens with God's plan for the nations; Christ's Church is worldwide. But unfortunately, many Christians in the West are not keeping pace with the Kingdom's worldwide expansion. Many of us are sleeping right through the sunrise of missions.

A 1980 Gallup survey indicated that though winning the world for Christ had priority for 50 percent of U.S. evangelicals (not a totally encouraging statistic itself), the sense of personal, meaningful involvement in world missions for almost all was negligible. Less than 10 percent of evangelical clergy could point to successful missions programs in their churches.

As I've travelled American campuses I've found similar trends among the Christian groups I've surveyed. Again and again the leaders of these groups have confessed to me that they and their members have little world vision and world outreach involvement; view missions as only a career option for a few, or as "threatening" or "foreign" or "something after college;" hear and read little about the global Christian cause; and are in touch with very few if any whom they feel can effectively lead them.

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### *The Greatest of All Gaps*

The problem with our pace is not a new issue, however. It has been with us a long time. Why, after two thousand years of countless possibilities for world evangelization by an international Church, are three billion people still unevangelized, most of whom have not even heard Christ's name? Our answer is unavoidable. The single greatest gap among the nations is between God's promise to fulfil world evangelization through Christ's disciples and the faith of those disciples to claim that promise and act on it. I call it the *Gap-of-unbelief*.

How does the gap-of-unbelief work? For one thing, we put limits on what we think Christ can do through us. (Can He really reach the ends of the earth through people like us at a time like this?) For another, our gap-of-unbelief makes us hesitate to take bold risks so that redemption might come to all peoples. (If we lose our lives for Christ's worldwide mission, will we ever see any lasting returns worth our investment?) Our gap-of-unbelief turns us from the many possibilities to fulfil the world missionary movement and concentrates us instead on our own self-preservation. (How can we worry about billions of unreached people when we have so many personal needs that might go unmet in the process?) Our gap-of-unbelief blinds us to the dreams, resources and strategy God would give us to bridge the other Gap, especially at its widest end.

If once aroused by Christ's mighty Spirit, what could hold us back? His presence and His mission would be so compelling that we might tend to *over*extend ourselves and so, periodically, need to seek times to reflect and regroup. If we had any problem, it would be that! Instead, down through history and in the Church today, the constant battle has remained to get Christians to push

forward—to stop resting, to wake up, stand together and take hold of the victorious cause Christ has given us for the world. This is the gap-of-unbelief. This explains why the other Gap remains.

Why has unbelief persisted to stifle the momentum of the Christian movement again and again? Underneath disinterest in world outreach, underneath small missions budgets or limited personnel and the scandal of billions yet unreached, hides a culprit I shall call “pea-sized Christianity.”

### *Boxes of Pea-Sized Christianity*

When Peter opposed Christ’s expressed mission to the cross (see Matt. 16:21-23 he was told: “Get out of my way, Satan. You are a hindrance to me. You’re approaching this mission from a human perspective, not God’s.” Peter was still in his own box of pea-sized Christianity.

Pea-sized Christianity comes in boxes of many shapes and sizes, and at least one box can fit any Christian who allows it. These boxes keep us from a discipleship and an evangelism that’s big enough to fill a world-sized Gap. You don’t find very many sunrises in a box!

For example, there is a pea-sized box called *convert Christianity*—life in Christ gets no bigger than making it safely inside the Kingdom. Or there’s *character Christianity*—life in Christ gets no bigger than pulling one’s own spiritual act together. Not far behind this follows *consumption Christianity*—which boxes up life in Christ into meeting one’s own personal needs, and that’s all.

When life in Christ is no bigger than the warm, secure fellowship I have each week with my good Christian buddies, I’m in the box of *cloister Christianity*. Or, when life in Christ is no bigger for me than getting nicely settled in a good paying job after graduation, then I’m trapped in *career Christianity*. Many of us are groping around the box of *church Christianity*—our life in Christ has grown no bigger than the Sunday School picnic, the choir’s Christmas pageant, the monthly finance committee meetings, or scouting out who’s absent from midweek prayer service.

A form of pea-sized Christianity that affects all of us to some degree is *culture Christianity*. In this box our life in Christ grows no bigger than a North American, white, middle-class brand of worship and witness. We relish in our tried-and-true traditions, which we erroneously equate with the eternal ways of the Kingdom itself.

In summary, when my Christian experience expands no further than my salvation or small group, or church, or future, it’s pea-sized. When I compartmentalize my walk with Christ into neat packages of prayer, Bible study, worship, fellowship, evangelism and (somewhere off to the side) missions, it’s pea-sized. When my activities and interests don’t vitally link me to the reaching of earth’s unreached people, I’ve succumbed to pea-sized Christianity.

Of course, concentrating on missions to the neglect of our personal needs and the needs of the Christians around us, can also be a pea-sized affair. I’m not arguing that we leap from one box into another. Rather, I’m suggesting that we need a new *context* for praying, Bible study, employing spiritual gifts and even for our thinking about missions involvement. That context is the Gap. We need its world dimension for our discipleship.

### *Reasons for the Boxes*

For one thing, *we so easily succumb to the current mood of our own society*. Daniel Yankelovich in *New Rules* terms the mood “a search for self-fulfilment in a world turned upside down,” though now the trend includes the growing conviction that deeper caring relationships toward others are a way to personal satisfaction.

The world political situation is partly responsible for our narcissistic tendency. More and more we Americans are less in control of world events. We can’t seem to manage developments either in

the explosive Third-World nations or among our own allies. Vietnam, Watergate, and Iran have disgraced us internationally. We no longer maintain supremacy in energy production and appear weaker to many in military superiority. We feel intimidated by the badgering of the strongly nationalistic emerging nations. And we feel impotent even to deal with many of our own domestic issues.

Many U.S. Christians have given up on personally attempting anything significant in the Gap. The mood of our culture—narcissism, and unpredictability coupled with impotence—has spawned fear and unbelief in the Church. Some U.S. church spokesmen and others paralyze us even further by heaping on Americans the major blame for the plight of the so-called Third World and then demanding we pull back altogether. “The theory has it that the advanced nations yanked primitive peoples out of a state of innocent bliss, pressed them into labour and gutted their resources,” writes syndicated columnist Jenkin Lloyd Jones. Despite some degree of truth, this charge does not justify the feeling of guilt that British professor P.T. Bauer calls “one of America’s few remaining surplus commodities.” Jones concludes, “It’s time we quit whipping ourselves.”

A mood for whipping prevails, however, and too often it is among evangelicals.

As a result of all this, we tend to opt for an undisturbed retreat into our boxes. We rationalize, “There’s no use trying to face the complex challenges of world missions today. It’s all so far beyond ordinary people like us. Let’s concentrate instead on loving each other, or those nearest us who are easiest to love. Maybe that’s all we have a right to do.”

Another reason we’ve settled for pea-sized Christianity is because *the evangelical affluence of U.S. Christians smothers our faith for world missions*. Frankly, most of us suffer from overindulgence in the variety of spiritual food around us. There are scores of organized discipleship programs in and out of the local church on which to feast, along with a wealth of Christian books, magazines, and cassettes on every conceivable issue or personal problem. Famous personalities entertain us at deeper-life concerts and seminars. We can sample an abundance of options for local Christian ministries with all the trimmings needed to pull them off with ease. And for dessert there’s a whole menu of charities and organizations ready to help us painlessly discharge any guilt over the distant pleas of the needy.

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We become spiritually obese when we saturate ourselves with such a scrumptious input but are devoid of sufficient exercise in a worldwide missionary output! Some have described this as “nominal evangelicalism.” We act and look like we’re committed to evangelism but we are actually “nominal” when it comes to doing a lot about it.

One expression of our affluence is what I term “smorgasborditis.” So often we’re encouraged to pick and choose from the delightful array, to nibble on those things that fit our schedules, our needs, or our interests. In the process, we pass right over God’s timetable for the nations who are starving physically and spiritually right now. Smorgasborditis makes us oblivious to needs that are much greater than our own. With so many blessings to choose from at home, we aren’t too motivated to choose a sacrificial involvement in the destiny of Chinese in Brazil or Hindus in crowded Calcutta, or a village of Muslim Wolof people in Africa’s Senegambia. In fact, we’re afraid of all we suspect it will cost us.

A third reason we have stayed in boxes of pea-sized Christianity is *our own basic ignorance of the facts*. This blindness may be our fundamental problem.

In tests administered to three thousand students in 185 campuses by the Council on Learning, it was discovered that more than one-third indicated they couldn't care less about other nations and world affairs. Their lack of caring was matched by their lack of the facts. The 1981 report concluded: "America's college students are ill-equipped to become national leaders because they are profoundly ignorant of international events, figures and relationships." Council director George Bonham observed that our nation is still poorly equipped in its ability to deal with its innumerable global obligations.

Tragically, many Christians fall under indictment of the same disease, blindness. Only a small percentage is ready to take leadership as God's redemptive agents, to face the global complexities of our generation for Christ's sake.

In a promotional brochure for a conference in Florida on "The Challenge Before Us," Sid McCollum made this honest evaluation:

Let's face it . . . 99% of us (maybe more) are scared silly of the word "missions." We really like the idea of someone "forsaking all for Christ and the Gospel" . . . as long as that someone is someone else. "God, you can take my life and use me anywhere you want," we might say. "Anywhere except Africa . . . and Asia . . . and South America . . . and Antarctica . . . and Australia. But Hawaii would be OK, God."

What's our problem? In a nutshell, it's this: we see the world differently than God does. We haven't quite caught His plan, His vision, His hope for this world. And until we do, we'll never fully understand what our role can be in the challenge He's set before us.

Honestly now, how many of us even know we're living in the Gap? How often is our vision and courage for the world missionary movement ever stirred by what we've learned concerning its past or future?

Writing in *The Essential Components for World Evangelization: Goals for 1984*, Ralph Winter expresses his personal dismay at this situation:

Students need a special education just to know the uncensored facts of our world today. The cause of missions is not a simple phenomenon. Common impressions are mainly wrong . . . He may be able to get a course on the history of jazz, but very few state universities or secular colleges (or even Christian liberal arts colleges) offer a course precisely on the history of the Christian mission . . . I am almost more concerned about what the schools do not teach rather than what they do teach. Attacks and criticisms we can grapple with, but the total absence of data is much more subtle and difficult to handle . . . There is no way that evangelicalism in America has any serious future if 90% of its younger generation is being undermined on a wholesale basis year after year into the future.<sup>1</sup>

In his opening address at the 1974 Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelization, Billy Graham noted this deficiency in our facts:

Many sincere Christians around the world are concerned for evangelism. They are delighted at evangelizing in their own communities and even in their own countries. But they do not see God's big picture of "world need" and the "global responsibility" that He has put upon

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Winter, *The Essential Components for World Evangelisation: Goals for 1984* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1980), pp. 12-14.

the Church in His world. The Christians in Nigeria are not just to evangelize Nigeria, nor the Christians in Peru just the people in Peru. God’s heartbeat is for the world.

Lacking facts on what Graham calls the “big picture” allows Christians to form all kinds of justifications for not standing in the widest end of the Gap. We could call these justifications our *myths about missions*.

For example, some think the Gap is pretty well closed already (a sad lack of facts, to say the least). Others think the Gap is too wide to ever be closed, and so give up (equally sad). Some opt for the Second Coming as God’s way to close it (they only have part of the biblical facts). Others are concerned that too much attention on the Gap will disrupt good, solid spiritual growth right where we live (they need to know some historical facts). One myth says that when God is ready to close the Gap He will do it without much help from any of us. Another claims that some Christians stand in the Gap, while the rest of us “work for a living.” Of course, there’s always the myth that only super-spiritual people would even dare to stand there, and that these are few and far between.

He who gave His own Son to close the sin-gap yearns for a people who will effectively keep pace with the critical hour in which He has placed us. He’s looking right now for a global church with the courage to embrace the sunrise of missions and to stand by faith before Christ in its light until, by His sovereign reign among us advancing His Kingdom through us, the Gap of opportunity is closed throughout the earth.



**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](http://www.ProclaimHope.com)): **CHRIST IS ALL! A Joyful Manifesto On The Supremacy of God’s Son** (New Providence Publishers).