

Chapter 5 – Is the Cause Healthy For Us?

Nothing Could Be Healthier

Living in a world dimension—it all seems too big and hard and complex to manage. Couldn't we collapse trying? Is this cause truly healthy, you may wonder, for practical day-to-day growth as Christ's disciples? From my conversations with Bill you won't be surprised if I tell you I believe nothing could be healthier for us!

Of course, it would be unhealthy for anyone to try to assimilate every fact on the world situation, or to respond to every impulse to be compassionate toward the world community, or to assume personal responsibility for all the world's woes. Even contemplating a witness to all three billion unreached people could easily drive any of us insane unless there is a balanced strategy.

But despite such global-sized eruptions into our lives we can remain healthy if we have simplified the issues. For example, our great cause doesn't depend on us going at it alone. We are part of a movement of disciples from many nations who have shouldered the cause together. We can relax. We can work on our own important roles in the complex picture knowing that God sees it all and will effectively coordinate the efforts of His international team.

Furthermore, we can keep our sanity if we concentrate on one major cause at a time: closing the Gap of opportunity, fulfilling God's worldwide purpose. This is no Pollyanna cop-out on the world's myriad needs.

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Conscientious Christians, faced with the modern evangelical smorgasbord, are crying out for a style of discipleship that thrives on clarity and simplicity—and significance. The single-minded focus of standing in the Gap may be the healthiest answer of all.

What exactly is healthy discipleship anyway? It involves the gradual discipline of our characters until we become like the Saviour. It also involves the growing development of our potential to glorify the Saviour. For those standing in the Gap full discipline and full development occur the more we get fully involved in the basic cause for which Christ came – and even more, *with Christ* in that cause.

Didn't Jesus encourage this single-minded discipline and development when He summoned the Twelve to follow Him and learn to fish for others as He took them with Him into His own mission? Wasn't their quality of growth as disciples permanently affected as He helped them integrate and simplify their lives around the one cause of love in the Gap? So, eleven became healthy apostles ("sent ones"), sent out in His power to fish to the ends of the earth.

Practically speaking, healthy, quality discipleship involves learning to give away what we already have. We grow from point *A* to point *B* only as we first give away what we've received at *A*. And, the larger the giveaway the greater the growth. Discipleship is training someone to give better and farther. A mature Christian isn't one who practices the rules more. He's one whose disciplined living helps him love others better and farther. Is this the kind of discipleship you are experiencing?

This is why world evangelism is central to our health as disciples. The best we can give to others is God's love through the gospel. And, while we should love everyone we meet this way, giving the

gospel to non-Christians at the wider end of the Gap provides us opportunities to discipline our characters and develop our potential to glorify God farther and farther. Paul Little observed that:

Obedience in evangelism is one of the keys to spiritual health When we evangelize, we pray specifically, laying hold on God for victory in the spiritual struggles within the soul of an individual we care about With anticipation we watch God answer prayer Meanwhile, the Bible becomes increasingly alive and relevant as we see others responding to its truth. Passages that once seemed dry and extraneous appear practical and pertinent. And, remarkably, when we're concentrating on evangelism we don't have time to pick at other Christians and their faults.¹

What Paul Little claimed for local evangelism is doubly true for those involved in world evangelism. "Christianity does not remain healthy among those who are not actively trying to give it away to people at a cultural distance," wrote Ralph Winter.

A Healthier Prayer Life

The cause provides a healthier perspective on what we pray about and the results we expect. This healthier dimension of prayer is illustrated by Psalm 67. Here we learn that our personal requests—bless my family; strengthen the love in my small group; heal me of this disease; help me make the right decisions about a job; give me shelter from the cold winter; bring my best friend to Christ—should contain one overriding provision "that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving power among all nations" (v. 2). "Thy way" today means "that advancing of Christ's fame and reign".

When we articulate personal requests in keeping with our growing concern for revealing God's name, Kingdom, and will among all earth's people (the opening concerns of the Lord's Prayer), we are praying about the things God wants to do most. As a result He will show us great answers! When His answers to our prayers make an impact on the reaching of unreached peoples, then our praying will be truly effective. We will have asked for and received the right things. And we will be motivated to pray even more.

As we learn to pray beyond our own little worlds, for people and nations where darkness reigns and the evangelistic task remains so critical, we'll discover new vistas of faith for praying about our own needs as well. When we pray for Christ to be exalted at the widest end of the Gap, the challenges at the narrowest end won't seem so impossible anymore.

When George reads the daily paper, he prays over the front page headlines. They remind him to pray for persecuted Christians in Asia, or for a Middle East summit meeting that might influence the future of missionary work, or for a missionary in Africa who may be the next victim of guerrilla raids, or for Indian Christians to have new opportunities to show Christ's love in the midst of the century's worst monsoon.

A church in the East gathers every Saturday evening for prayer. They pray about personal and congregational needs, of course. But they also discipline themselves to give equal amounts of time to pray for the Church in other nations and for missionary outreach. In fact, they actually divide their ninety minutes of prayer into two major segments. First, prayer for revival in the Church, locally and worldwide. Then forty-five minutes is given to issues touching the Great Commission, locally and worldwide. As a result, many believe these prayer meetings are some of the most stimulating and life-changing they've ever been a part of. No wonder they keep coming back!

¹ Paul Little, *How to Give Away Your Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966), p. 25.

Healthier Bible Study

The cause changes what we look for and what we find in our Bibles. Among other things, healthy Bible study will uncover perspectives and principles that not only lead to see Christ in whole new ways but also with Him to move out to the world in whole new ways.

Clearly, Bible study that turns into a spiritual sedative isn't healthy. Instead, the Bible should stir up our faith in Christ and about His global cause, build our vision for His world, anchor our decisions to get actively involved, and equip us to stand willingly wherever the Gap needs us.

For example, as Jack has his devotions in Joshua, he looks for principles that God gave Israel for possessing the land, then he applies these to his desire to help "possess" India for Christ through his ministry to Indian students on his campus. Mary is memorizing some of the great promises of Isaiah. As she meditates on each one, she tries to picture how they could be fulfilled not only in her own life but generally among the nations who are often the direct focus for the blessings described.

On Sunday evenings First Church is enjoying a series that scans Paul's Epistles. Pastor White intends to help them see that these are also missionary letters written to churches Paul considered partners with him to reach the ends of the earth. Each week he illustrates this fact by suggesting ways the members can apply what they're learning to their own involvement with the church's missionaries.

Healthier Motives for Godliness

When we discover that each of us is personally vital to a global cause for world redemption, our motives for staying morally clean begin to change. We find ourselves wanting to flee sin and pursue righteousness for more compelling reasons than just to remain trophies of moral spotlessness. Bitterness, greed, lust, or pride can't be tolerated any longer by those who want God to make their lives count significantly for reaching the unreached. Love does fulfil the Law—particularly love for those at the widest end of the Gap.

The more we accept the fact that we are part of the hope for three billion Unreached people, the more we crush our desire to sin. The more we understand that godliness gives support to the credibility and power of the gospel's worldwide advance, the more we will flee the traps of sin. As we accept our solemn privilege to help tell all peoples that Christ can cleanse the world's sin, we will want to be righteous like the Lamb of God who takes that sin away.

I observed these healthier motives with Paul and Sally. They thought they loved each other. But their Friday night dates, one of the few times they saw each other, had turned into a steady, exclusive relationship that sometimes left them with nothing better than to drive around in Paul's car, trying to find something fun to do they hadn't done before. In time their physical attraction to one another began to overshadow every other option. They both felt empty about it but they couldn't find the strength to stop until Paul made friends with Kim, a student from Korea.

When Paul realized that Kim and many unreached people in Korea stood in the balance, he and Sally found something more compelling to fill their time than their romantic turmoils. They set their relationship into the thick of the Gap and it changed how they approached everything, including Friday night dates. They actually spent a few minutes each date praying for Kim's salvation and learning about Korea. Some Fridays they would take Kim on an outing and eventually they were able to share Christ with him.

Peter found that the more concerned he became for world missions through his weekly missions study group at church, the more he really wanted to invest some of his earnings in a specific missions project. He chose to work among recent migrants from poverty-stricken rural villages in Mexico, forced into equally discouraging housing in a shanty town outside Mexico City. Peter also found that the more he sacrificially committed personal funds to this ministry, the less willing he was to pad reimbursements from his expense account at work. Somehow that kind of “taking” couldn’t coexist with his newfound “giving” in the Gap.

A Healthier Life Together— In Smaller Groups

Warren Webster, a missionary leader who has seen the cause’s healthy impact, observes: “The spiritual vitality of any fellowship of Christians should be measured not simply by the number of believers it attracts but by the number of disciples it sends out empowered for witness and service.”

Such vitality can be found in many kinds of smaller groups. *Marriage*, for example, should result in the sending forth of two disciples newly equipped to close the Gap as “one flesh.” A couple I know willingly put their engagement before the Lord, asking that He bring them together only if it would enrich their involvement in the Gap. In this way they risked all their dreams for the sake of those who’ve never heard the gospel, as they gave time to search out God’s answer.

Another kind of small group is *the family*. Family life should also result in disciples empowered to stand in the Gap. I know a father who has given ten years of his life bridging the Gap as an artist-evangelist in the Hindu world. Every night he and his wife present their three young sons before the Lord in prayer, asking that God would someday call them to be missionaries to reach more Hindus. (How many Christian parents could be comfortable praying this way?) Other families pray faithfully each night at dinner on a rotating basis for different missionaries they know personally.

The cause can also make for healthier small support groups. In contrast, any support group that nurtures self-indulgence, vague commitments and isolation from a needy world isn’t healthy at all. In fact, it’s terminal. How many support groups are no more than “retirement centres,” where the members enjoy a weekly game of “Christian shuffleboard” as they shove a few Bible verses around and talk about their latest spiritual aches and pains. How few support groups are like “caravans”—companies of disciples on the move, travelling together for protection and encouragement as they journey from where they are to touch other parts of the Gap, to serve together wherever and however God asks.

With a global life-or-death cause before it, a support group won’t settle for being just a collection of individuals. It will be a team-on-a-mission that has integrated its caring and fellowship into the worldwide mission of Christ Himself. Fellowship will be more the by-product of such a team than its purpose!

Let me illustrate this with the support group to which Tom and Dick belong. Since they want to keep the cause at the centre of their life, they call it a “World Action Team.” All the benefits of small groups are theirs, plus they attempt to place everything in the world dimension.

For example, they pray together, and not just for the personal needs within the group. They also pray for the world. Dick has a copy of a handbook on prayer needs for all the countries. Each week a member of the group is responsible to prepare a three-minute report on one country, showing its location on a map, and then leading the group in the handbook’s prayer suggestions.

Their small group frequently studies the Bible’s great passages about Christ and God’s promises in Him for the nations. Tom prepares an inductive Bible study each time. They intend to cover key Scriptures in both Old and New Testaments before the year is over.

During their two-hour meetings the group spends time sharing personal burdens and needs. They encourage or counsel each one as they share. But they also try to build up one another's faith in what God wants to do through them individually and as a team to reach the ends of the earth. They try to put all their needs into that perspective.

Let me tell you about one other support group that never stopped. It was made up of Fred, Joan, and Len (plus one or two others) who met together while they were at a university. Fred and Joan married and three years later took on a mission to an Eastern European country. The vision for that mission, however, came to the whole support group back on the campus. So a year later it was no surprise when Len joined them overseas. Two years later he also married. Now a small group lives in that country, reaching people at a much wider end of the Gap. The group is identical in many respects to what they were together in college. They're still a healthy support group because at the very beginning they made the cause their overriding concern, and that commitment has never changed. God just took them in their love for Christ, for one another, and for the world and transplanted them six thousand miles away from where they started.

A Healthier Life Together—In Churches

Larger gatherings of Christians—in churches, weekend retreats, or conferences—will be even more healthy when we conduct them for the sake of the cause. Of course, some things like joint Bible studies or bearing one another's burdens usually have their deepest value at a smaller group level. But a meeting of the whole congregation is the logical time for healthy instruction among support groups and families involved in the Gap. During these larger group meetings, Christians in the Gap cross paths to share one another's missions and reinforce one another's commitments to go on with them.

Fortunately for us, our Father led Robyne and me into a church in Madison actively pursuing this. In all honesty we all still have much to learn. But six years ago we rewrote our church objectives to incorporate three major thrusts, worship, build (discipleship), send (world ministry). Then we formed committees (we called them "components") to guide us in each thrust.

When we looked at "sending" we meant this: we were certain that if we developed a congregation of people hungry to send some of our own number into the widest end of the Gap, God would have no trouble raising up those who were hungry to be sent.

We developed a statement of purpose on our sending thrust that reads, in part:

Our church is to be a mission training and sending centre as we grow together into a church of world Christians who are wholly focused on the supremacy of God's Son. And, in all of our efforts we will give highest priority to those peoples, both locally and worldwide, currently beyond the reach of the gospel.

We seek to stress *sending* throughout by keeping the following four questions informally before us:

- *Celebration*: What has God recently accomplished for His Son through the world mission involvements of our people for which the congregation should praise God together this morning?
- *Motivation*: What will encourage our people in this worship time to move on with Christ and their world mission involvements for Him (through Bible messages, world event updates, singing about the cause, testimonials of how personal growth is taking place through a specific mission, etc.)?

- *Training:* How can our people help each other improve their effectiveness to carry out their missions-to-the-world (through up-front teaching, literature tables, reports on how others have done it, etc.)?
- *Intercession:* What are the specific needs and opportunities for our church and our missions-to-the-world that call for immediate prayer?

Results? One example. Recently some members insisted that once a month we set aside forty-five minutes after the worship service for any who could remain behind to join in additional intercession for expanded mission thrusts resulting from church renewal. In light of the increasing numbers of young and old alike volunteering for ministry among the unreached (locally and overseas) they sensed a desperate need for united prayer as part of our Sunday experience.

Anytime a local church's corporate life produces that kind of response, wouldn't you consider Christ's global cause a very healthy focus?

Enlarged Scope of Outreach

No more obvious evidence of spiritual health occurs than when someone's witness for Christ reaches to more and more people. Wherever you find people who make the Gap their life concern, you will find their outreach expanding, where they are and beyond.

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it will naturally overflow toward those around us.**

It will expand at the local level for a number of reasons. First, the challenge of billions of unreached people demands that outreach in general be given highest priority in our lives. If we live with a sense of urgency about worldwide evangelization, it will naturally overflow toward those around us. Second, most of those yet to be reached are vastly different from us, culturally and in many other ways. Concern with reaching them will require of us an increased sensitivity to these differences. In turn, this will stretch us to be more sensitive to those around us who are like us. In the same vein, missionaries depend on cross-cultural communication skills. So, the more we learn from them about what it takes to clearly communicate the gospel across major human barriers, the more skilful we will be in relating to those where the barriers are minor. Finally, concern for the cause puts evangelism and the sovereignty of God into perspective. A global challenge demands that we learn to trust God's grace and power in new ways. All of this can't help but increase our confidence and boldness in evangelism right where we live.

Outreach will also expand beyond those around us to those at the widest end of the Gap. Look at some of the many examples of how the cause is so healthy in this way. David Wilkerson, a one-time rural preacher from Pennsylvania, began standing in the Gap for teenage gangs in New York City, and many teenagers since, even outside our nation, have been changed as a result. John Perkins not only stands in the Gap for poor blacks and whites in Pasadena, California, he also stood in the Gap for many years previously in Mississippi through his Voice of Calvary ministry where he established an International Study Centre to help reproduce his approach to evangelism in other parts of the world.

Mother Teresa, an Albanian, went to India to serve Christ in a convent and made the Gap between the gospel and the "poorest of the poor" (as she calls them) her life cause. She and her Missionaries of Charity have spent over twenty-five years revealing the love of Christ among the dis-

inherited on the crowded, dirty streets of Calcutta, and in major cities throughout India and around the globe, including New York City, Detroit, and Los Angeles.

Tom Brewster was paralyzed from the neck down in a swimming accident when he was eighteen, yet he refused to abandon the Gap. In time God gave him a skill in linguistics, and a wife with similar training and concerns. Tom became a language trainer for hundreds of missionaries. Sometimes Tom travels to over sixty countries a year to equip people serving at the widest end of the Gap. Keeping this cause central has been healthy for Tom. It has enlarged the scope of his outreach. What could be “healthier” than something that frees a paralytic’s abilities and his spirit to help glorify Christ around the world?

Healthy World Christians

What shall we call this distinct group of Christians who have taken a stand that says:

We want to accept personal responsibility for reaching some of earth’s unreached, especially from among the billions at the widest end of the Gap who can only be reached through major new efforts by God’s people. Among every culture-group where there is no vital, evangelizing Christian community there should be one, there must be one, there shall be one. Together we want to help make this happen.

For a moment, let’s call them **World Christians**. The term “World Christian” may have been coined first by Daniel Fleming in a 1920 YMCA book entitled *Marks of a World Christian*. More recently the term has appeared in publications of such groups as Worldteam, Conservative Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, United Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies, Overseas Missionary Fellowship, National Prayer Committee, and United States Center for World Mission, as well as Campus Crusade for Christ and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Of course, we mustn’t forget the periodical, considered by many to be the *National Geographic* of missions magazines—*World Christian* magazine.

A World Christian isn’t better than other Christians. But by God’s grace, he has made a discovery so important that life can never be the same again. He has discovered the truth about the Gap, the fact that he is already in it, and the call of Christ to believe, think, plan, and act accordingly. By faith, he has chosen to stand in the Gap as a result.

Some World Christians are missionaries who stand in the Gap by physically crossing major human barriers (cultural, political, etc.) to bring the gospel to those who can hear no other way. But every Christian is meant to be a World Christian, whether you physically “go,” or “stay at home” to provide the sacrificial love, prayers, training, money, and quality of corporate life that backs the witness of those who “go.”

All of true Christians have been born-again into the Gap – united to Christ in order to live at the center of Who He is, where He is headed, what He is doing and how He gets blessed.



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).