

Chapter 6 – An Idea Whose Time Has Come—Ages Ago!

Examples From the Past

World Christians have been around since the apostles preached on Pentecost to multitudes from most known nations under heaven; since Philip, a Jew, planted churches in Samaritan villages and then shared the gospel with an international visitor from Ethiopia; since Peter crossed the threshold between Jews and Gentiles to bring Christ to a Roman centurion and his family.

The New Testament is full of World Christians: the members of the Jerusalem church, scattered abroad by persecution, preaching the message to Jews and Greeks as well; Paul and Barnabas, sent out by the church at Antioch to establish other churches throughout Galatia; Aquila and Priscilla who formed the nucleus of a mission-minded church that evangelized all of Asia Minor in less than three years; the Thessalonian church, whose life together established a witness that reached far beyond them into Macedonia and Achaia; John, banished to an island dungeon because he proclaimed Christ in the face of great political and theological barriers, but given there a prophet's overview of the global climax of the Christian movement.

We have a whole Christ for our salvation; a whole Bible for our staff; a whole Church for our fellowship; and a whole world for our parish.

Thousands of other World Christians have preceded us in the Gap. A fourth-century World Christian, John Chrysostom, stood in the Gap for the Barbarian Goths of the Balkans, training and sending missionaries to reach them. He defined his world vision this way: “We have a whole Christ for our salvation; a whole Bible for our staff; a whole Church for our fellowship; and a whole world for our parish.”

In the thirteenth century, a youthful World Christian named Francis left his family's wealth in Assisi, Italy, to stand in the Gap. Initially he and his wandering band worked in a narrower part of the Gap in Europe, but gradually the Franciscan Order became a World Christian movement that reached around the globe!

The “father of modern missions” was an ordinary cobbler who met monthly in the late 1700's with a small group to pray for “the revival of religion and the expansion of Christ's Kingdom around the world.” William Carey caught a world vision. His own research on the Gap, entitled *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* is an explosive volume that describes his biblical focus on the supremacy of Christ as well as his findings on millions of unreached peoples who stood at its widest end. His book turned English Christians around and broke the logjam in Protestant missionary efforts that had blighted the cause since the Reformation. Eventually, Carey relocated to another part of the Gap to obey his world vision on behalf of India. He translated Scriptures into over thirty languages and planted churches around Calcutta.

Less than a century ago the Gap was flooded with thousands of World Christians issuing from the Student Volunteer Movement of the late 1800's and early 1900's. Twenty thousand college graduates sailed to most countries of the world to preach the gospel. Thousands more remained behind as the sending base, spreading the challenge of Christ's global cause throughout the churches, leading many laypeople and church leaders into the experience of World Christian discipleship.

Examples from Today

The Gap continues to close as many today have made the same discovery. Over seventy thousand Protestant missionaries from North America and Europe, standing in the Gap worldwide, are joined by over fifteen thousand additional missionaries from Third World nations sent out by over four hundred Third World missionary societies.

For some in this vanguard, being a World Christian has required tremendous courage. In 1976, for example, a friend of mine visited missionaries working in the resistant parts of the Muslim world. As he travelled from country to country and missionary to missionary, he found that the spiritual battle was so great that only where missionaries laboured long hours each day bridging the Muslim gap through intercessory prayer was there any noticeable fruit.

In America we have many examples of World Christians on the move. A church in Arizona pledged as much to world missions as they would spend on themselves when they entered a five-million-dollar building program! A Southern California church puts world vision and challenge into all their teaching programs, from Sunday school to morning worship to Bible clubs. As a result God has raised up scores of missionaries within their own congregation and hundreds more to send them. Two hundred members of a church in the San Fernando Valley sold second cars, while others mortgaged their homes, in order to give full support to a team of five couples who became missionaries to the Tonga tribe in Zambia. That was in the mid 1970's. Today that church of World Christians is responsible for bringing thousands of Tongans to Christ!

A recent development called the Episcopal Church Missionary Community is comprised of laypeople who want to help fellow Episcopalians "catch the vision." They are seeking hundreds of missions prayer cells which may eventually send out their own missionaries. Across the country, World Christian pastors and missions committee members from churches in over fifty denominations have banded together to form, for the first time, an Association of Church Missions Committees in order to help maximize the impact of local churches in the Gap.

World Christian dynamics have also surfaced in major campus movements in North America. The Navigators, with field offices for every continent, are presently reproducing disciple-makers in over thirty-four countries while increasing their ministry to international students in the U.S. Campus Crusade for Christ has almost five hundred staff working in over one hundred countries outside North America.

Operation Mobilization and Youth with a Mission (YWAM) have trained tens of thousands of young adults to serve overseas on short-term and long-term mission assignments. Many are working in some of the most difficult parts of the Gap. And those who return to the States do so with renewed vision for the greatness of Jesus and for world evangelization that fires-up their local churches.

**"We must be global Christians with a global vision
because our God is a global God."**

In addition to inviting furloughing missionaries to meet with students in its over eight hundred-fifty groups, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (the world's oldest and largest interdenominational campus ministry) is developing a reservoir of staff specialists for various kinds of cross-cultural ministries. Within the mainstream of its discipling ministry there has emerged Overseas Training Camps in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Europe, along with credit-bearing extension courses in

missions right on campus. Its Student Training in Missions program continues to gear toward six hundred or more abroad by 1985. And since 1976 the challenge of Christ's global cause has received increased visibility through its World Christian Conferences conducted nationwide.

It needs to be said again—and all these examples bear it out—that most World Christians today are not missionaries. They are like any Christian, with the same struggles, fears, and potentials for Jesus. What marks them is their discovery of a *world vision* focus on a *reigning Saviour* for whom they're reordering every facet of their lives. They've discovered the truth of John Stott's words to the seventeen thousand students at InterVarsity's triennial Urbana student mission's convention: "We must be global Christians with a global vision because our God is a global God."

Here's How It Happened to Me

I was leading a three-day conference on World Christian discipleship. During Sunday lunch a student shared with me how she had been depressed the entire weekend. Finally she'd figured out why. As she caught a world vision that weekend, she realized she had spent the past two years as a new Christian without Christ's cause as her highest priority, and she deeply regretted the lost time. But, I told her, nothing was lost. All of her growth as Jesus' disciple would be valuable as she now took her stand with Him in the Gap. "Be grateful it was only two years," I said. "Many have laboured ten to twenty years at Christian discipleship without making this great discovery."

I was one of those. When I became a Christian my freshman year in college, I thrived on Bible study, sang my heart out with newly found hymns, drank in the fresh warmth of Christian fellowship for the first time, but ran scared from the missions study group on campus. And I kept on running! Right through undergraduate studies in religion and graduate studies in theology, successfully avoiding every missions course that was offered along the way. There was something about the whole topic that seemed dull, peculiar, and above all, threatening in my own plans for Christian service.

But the Lord Jesus wanted for me exactly what He wanted for His first disciples: that I catch a world vision and move out on it. My discovery of this began when, during my years of graduate study, He put me into an inner-city Bible club ministry in the black neighbourhoods of south Chicago. There Christ gave me His vision for people where the Gap was much wider than I had experienced before.

Next, He led me into the pastorate, where He really cracked open my pea-sized boxes. For six years He helped me discover the potential of a local congregation to make a worldwide impact on His cause. Let me tell you the story.

It so happened that our church was located near Ohio's Kent State University. Many students from Christian campus organizations attended our services. To hook up these students with our church families we began what we called our "adoption program." As the years passed God sent many of our "adopted" students into other parts of the U.S. and into the world. We woke up to this fact the year we placed a map on the wall of our educational wing and marked with flags the places our student friends came from and the places they were going.

Truly God had placed our church right in the middle of a mission-training, mission-sending ministry. The possibilities were unlimited. And, the vital link between the church as a base and the students in its worldwide extension were the families who adopted them. As students and young couples from our midst went forth in many capacities, our whole church could make a lasting contribution to the cause. The training we gave them, the quality of community life we showed

them, and the deep support of individual family units would go with them. We could become a church of World Christians.

Standing on the Commons as National Guard bullets struck down four Kent State students in May of 1970 I saw these possibilities even more clearly. For some time after the shootings people travelled from everywhere to declare their solidarity with those who died, with a life-and-death cause of international proportions. I thought: Could not a local group of World Christians have a similarly far-reaching impact on Christ's global cause?

All this created in me a longing to expand my own world vision in order to lead in our church's mission. My hunger grew as I met with concerned laymen to pray eight hours each week for six weeks about our church's future. One evidence of what God taught us those days was the motto He gave us for our church: "Applying the gospel of Christ to the world of Kent—and the world beyond."

My hunger increased in 1970 when my wife Robyne and I attended InterVarsity's Urbana Student Missions Convention. There we met with many mission agencies, heard great sermons on the world mission of the Church, and discovered through a computer printout where we could serve Christ in other parts of the world. In 1973 my hunger took a more personal turn through a loving relationship God gave me with a Buddhist Japanese student doing graduate work in the Kent State physics department.

Finally it happened. Gaining a whole new perspective about the on-going reign of Christ among the nations, turning me into a World Christian, took me out of the pastorate. The situation had created in me such a craving to know more about Christ and His global cause that I knew I wouldn't be satisfied until I found out.

Robyne and I ventured to Southern California to spend a year at Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission. God built in us the world vision we longed for. For nine months of classes I sat at the feet of leading mission strategists, furloughed missionaries, and church leaders from the Third World.

I was hit hard by statistical studies and multimedia presentations describing the one billion people who were starving physically and the two billion who had never heard the name of Christ. Why should this be? And, why wasn't I told before? Then the harder questions: Was I willing to open up to these people? What changes would this make in my life? What would it mean for *me* to stand in the Gap? And for Robyne and our marriage?

Our prayer life continues to grow in its focus on missionaries, unreached people-groups, and current international events.

Fortunately, during this time God put us with other Christians who had caught the same vision and were working through the same questions. We laboured together to build our vision, learn how to put it into practice in very practical ways, and how to pass it along to others. Many kinds of world-sized ministries sprang from that fellowship of World Christians, not the least being the U.S. Center for World Mission with its many new frontline ministries.

Since then, the global cause of the living Christ has continued to transform my life; not only in terms of occupation and ministry but even in marriage Robyne and I have seen the effects of this grand discovery. The broad sweep of world missions has become the unifying cause—the context—for our relationship.

For example, our prayer life continues to grow in its focus on missionaries, unreached people-groups, and current international events. Our new priorities have changed everything from what

magazines we take, to the kinds of social events we attend. We want to save our time and money for those things that will help us obey our world vision.

Being World Christians has influenced our hospitality ministry. Often we invite in fellow World Christians to work at building our vision together, or potential World Christians so that we can help them catch the vision. Our guests include missionaries from the front lines so that we can refresh them and learn from them, to non-Christian international students so we can love a few at the Gap's widest end, who just "happen" to live nearby. Recently three other "guests" joined us permanently: an abandoned infant from Kerala, South India named Adam; beautiful two-year-old Bethany from an orphanage near Bombay; and spunky 15 month old Benjamin from the same facility. Robyne and I adopted all three because, first of all, God set them before us, filled us with Christ's love for them and called us to embrace them as our own flesh and blood. (We were delighted to comply!)

Some people don't understand all this, or us. But stretching back two thousand years stands a great company of Jesus' disciples who do. And that's enough for now.



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).