

## Chapter 7 – Needed: A Great Awakening in the Gap

For two thousand years the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ has spread like ocean waves over sands of peoples, languages and cultures (compare Habbakuk 2:14 with 2 Cor. 2:5-6). Some day Christ will be adored in every part of the earth. Throughout past centuries, however, the gospel's advance along this beach has fluctuated. But, currently we see God's Spirit stirring up fresh waves of global outreach thundering farther up the shore than ever before. Church historians call some of these seasons of Spirit-unleashed missionary activity "Great Awakenings." During the past two hundred years, concurrent with the greatest missionary advance in two millennia, there have been at least three such mighty Kingdom surges. A host of mission strategists today believe we're on the crest of another Great Awakening, called by some the "sunrise of missions." C. Peter Wagner's *On the Crest of the Wave* puts hard facts behind this claim.

### *What Does a Great Awakening Look Like?*

One of the foremost authorities on these waves of awakening, J. Edwin Orr, described them in three distinct phases: (1) A spontaneous outpouring of the Holy Spirit revives Christians to the point that they band together in fervent prayer. (2) Out of united prayer meetings spring cooperative evangelism, increased lay leadership in the churches and a new zeal for present missions activity, both at home and abroad. (3) Rising from the first two phases the church mobilizes the talents and energies of its best trained men and women to carry forward the missionary advance with unparalleled results.

Personally, I've settled on the phrase "a Christ-awakening movement" to define the phenomenon – defining it this way: *"When God's Spirit uses God's Word to re-convert God's people back to God's Son for ALL that He is."* Every legitimate Christ-awakening accelerates Christ's global cause and extends His rule among peoples where it has never been embraced before.

Can it be that awakenings similar to those in the days of William Carey and the Student Volunteer Movement are upon us again? Since World War II, a new crest of spiritual ferment has erupted worldwide. Much of this is seen in the formation of 250 new North American Protestant missionary societies since 1945 and of 400 more in the Third World. Consultations on world evangelization at the national and international levels, including Lausanne's 1980 worldwide consultation in Thailand, Amsterdam '83 for itinerant evangelists, and the Korea '84 International Prayer Assembly are also evidence of the crest.

As in past awakenings, people of many denominations are coming together in the Gap to seek all God wants to do through them, to throw off all unbelief, and to commit themselves to serve the cause. In the past thirty-five years many in the church have moved through phases one and two as described by Dr. Orr. What remains is the explosion of this spiritual ferment into an awakening of all God's people in the Gap, so that we mobilize every resource to fill the widest end of the Gap in this generation.

Missionary and seminary professor J. Christy Wilson remarked to me one morning on our way to breakfast: "I believe we've entered the fourth Great Awakening—it has already started—and it may be the last one. Because in this awakening, God can complete His plan for the nations." I, too, we have entered its early phases.

What will another awakening mean for Christians like you and me? Primarily, we'll experience a world-sized answer to Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:18-23:

[I pray that you may have] the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; . . . and has made him head over all things.

What is the world-sized awakening Paul expects God to do for every believer?

Prior to this, in verses 1-17 we learn who Paul prays for: the Church. He describes it as "destined and appointed to live for the praise of [God's] glory . . . according to the counsel of his will" (v. 12, 11). The counsel of His will is "a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in [Christ] things in heaven and things on earth" (v. 10). To put it another way, Paul is praying for a Christ-awakening among those destined and appointed by Him to stand in the Gap with Him.

When the hearts of such people are able to really *see*, they will make an extraordinary discovery in three important areas, and awakening will happen! Paul asks God to awaken us to (1) the hope of our calling in Christ (v. 18)—the contemporary as well as the eternal victories awaiting those "destined" to stand in the Gap; (2) God's resources in the saints (v. 18)—Christ's global Body, adequately equipped by Him as the Head to bring praise to God's grace among all the nations; (3) God's power at work in us (v. 19-23)—the very power that raised Christ from death and is right now summing up all things under Him as Lord, doing so through His people around the world.

**Today's Christian students are key to helping the whole American church break through the logjam of pea-sized Christianity.**

Paul carefully notes in his prayer that only the Holy Spirit can bring this awakening to pass. He alone can give us new eyes for the world. As Paul prays further in Ephesians 3, the Spirit strengthens God's people in their inner being with the mighty love of Christ, which, in turn, can fill the height, depth, width, and length of the whole Gap through them (v. 14-19).

Could we desire any more than that God would give His people such an experience? What if this prayer were answered in your Bible study group or your church—and in groups like yours around the whole world?

#### *Watch It Surface in the Student World*

If such an awakening is imminent, look for it to surface dramatically among those usually more open and more mobile—the student world. From the campus can come a movement that renews the Church and provides the thrust for fulfilling the Great Commission. As so often in the past, today's Christian students are key to helping the whole American church break through the logjam of pea-sized Christianity. They could set a new pace for all of us in aggressive concern for the world's unevangelized.

In his book *Student Power in World Missions*, David Howard reviews a number of student movements for missions, including the one begun at the rainy afternoon "haystack meeting" in Massachusetts in 1806 when Williams College students prayed about the world and their place in

reaching it. Those students helped found the first American Protestant foreign missionary society. Similar campus awakenings lead Howard to this observation:

God's concern is world-wide. How the Church has responded to that mandate is also clear in the light of history. All too frequently the Church has fallen into lethargy in relation to its world-wide obligations. But God does not leave Himself without a witness. Whether it be a Nicolas Von Zinzendorf, a Samuel J. Mills, a C.T. Studd, a Robert Wilder, a John R. Mott, a Jim Elliot or a hundred others who could be named, God singles out a man to prophecy to His Church. And with remarkable frequency that man has been a student.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Student Volunteer Movement*

The coming awakening could well follow the pattern of the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). It began when one hundred students volunteered for missionary service in 1886 at a Bible conference led by evangelist Dwight Moody, himself a product of the Great Awakening of 1858. The movement experienced growth for the next forty years. It placed twenty thousand new missionaries overseas and tens of thousands more missions-minded laymen in the Church around the world. By 1920 about 70 percent of the total North American missionary force came from the SVM.

Although they called themselves "Volunteers," not World Christians, they gladly took the same kind of stand in the Gap. By signing a pledge that read, "It is my purpose, if God permit, to become a foreign missionary," a student became a Volunteer. Even those who never travelled overseas maintained a strong commitment to their world vision by supporting those who went. Many full-time Christian workers at home, both on campuses and with ministries in the church and society, first found their calling as Volunteers and continued to obey that vision where they were.

The SVM had dramatic repercussions on the Church at large. It mobilized the vision of laypeople through extensive study programs on world missions and directly through the Laymen's Missions Movement. It disseminated literature on missions and influenced Christian periodicals to feature missions in a fresh and vital way. It convinced many Christians that such a stupendous enterprise as world evangelization was feasible through the resources available to them. Local churches found a new faith for missions through their personal interactions with enthused Volunteers. Whole denominations were inspired to increase the efforts of their own missions boards. Giving to missions increased sharply.

Nominal Christians were renewed and unbelievers won to Christ as society became aware that Christianity was a present-day, vital, worldwide, world-changing movement, sufficient for the needs of people everywhere. Christians were moved to aggressive evangelism at home by their growing commitment to it abroad.

### *Is the Time Ripe?*

Can it happen again? Are Christian students today looking for a cause this big, this compelling, this life-changing? Or has the campus mood changed significantly enough from the SVM days to make such a movement unlikely?

Noted campus watcher and UCLA psychologist, Alexander Astin, says today's students have given up on campus demonstrations and protests, but they are still firmly anti-establishment and anti-regulation. They want to move and act freely. He claims that "activism" could be easily revived if

---

<sup>1</sup> David M. Howard, ed., *Student Power in World Missions*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), pp. 109-110.

the right cause came along. Students might get involved in things that change the world, but only in a people-to-people context; and they want something that works.

Best-seller *Megatrends* by futurologist John Naisbitt, describes one fascinating trend for American society over the next two decades: the revolutionary change of outlook from thinking nationally and acting selfishly to thinking globally while acting on it locally. In other words, having a world vision will lead to corporate and very interpersonal action within local communities. Certainly such widespread volunteerism can, therefore, be anticipated not only among churches, and especially in society at large, but even more in local campus fellowships. In fact, it may be the young, as emerging leadership for the twenty-first century, who set the pace for all of us. This has happened repeatedly in former generations.

**Christ's great desire is to awaken students to the world-sized vision of Acts 1:8 and its fulfilment in this generation.**

One strong indication that the Spirit of God may be challenging today's student with a new vision for Christ's global cause is the tremendous response to world missions at the InterVarsity Urbana Student Missions Conventions, held every three years during the Christmas holidays at the University of Illinois. Students who indicated in writing their willingness to seriously explore how they might volunteer to stand in the Gap rose from 8 percent of twelve thousand delegates in 1970, to 28 percent of fifteen thousand in 1973, to 55 percent of seventeen thousand at Urbana 79. *Time* magazine correctly predicted Urbana's statistics: "The U.S. Protestant missionary movement has depended on collegiate enthusiasm, and that enthusiasm is increasing at a remarkable rate . . . The Evangelical movement clearly treats overseas missions as a growth industry."<sup>2</sup>

Christ's great desire is to awaken our students to the world-sized vision of Acts 1:8 and its fulfilment in this generation through them, and through the churches who obey that vision with them.

None of this emphasis on students is intended to lessen the significance of the local church in missions. As someone has said, "It's the local church that changes the world." Illustrations of local churches mobilized for mission action abound today as never before.

But the fact remains, the commitment and godly zeal of young people is the future of the local church. And further, history proves that when God has mobilized the youth as World Christians, local churches themselves find renewed determination to be the discipling, sending base of operations for the new mission surge at their doorstep. We might call a revived student mission movement the "firstfruits" of the mighty mission revival God is preparing for the whole Church.

Clearly, today God is reviving a new movement of student involvement in world missions. This new movement will not exactly duplicate previous ones. The issues are broader and the possibilities far greater than before. But the *fact* and the *spirit* of this movement will be consistent with God's ways through students in the past.

Look with me as the "sunrise of missions" hits our campuses:

- As the past ten years witnesses the largest student missions conventions of their kind in the history of the Church, followed by scores of local missions training weekends involving as many as five thousand at key locations around the nation.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Time* Magazine, January 10, 1977, p. 56.

- In a small action group of six men in the Midwest that justifies its existence by their regular ministry to international students on their campus.
- As InterVarsity, Campus Crusade, Navigators, and International Students Incorporated jointly sponsor “Operation Prayer” to mobilize all their students in a common effort of prayer, to intercede together each day for the same country of the world, using a “prayer diary.”
- As a New England black student is commissioned by his white friends to begin an evangelistic Bible study in the black fraternity among students who are cut off from the witness of most white Christians by cultural and prejudicial barriers.
- As over 250 students, after four weekends of intensive cross-cultural training, go to serve with missionaries in sixty foreign countries through Student Training in Missions (STIM) program, and return to share expanded world visions with their own groups.
- As a group at a southern California school organizes its own conferences on world evangelization and accommodates hundreds of other students who share the weekend with them.
- As 185 students and student workers, representing various campus Christian movements in twenty-six nations, meet in Scotland for consultation on mobilizing students and churches in their various countries to reach the two and one-half billion people at the widest end of the Gap.

That’s the stuff Great Awakenings are made of! It can be dramatically multiplied in the near future, by God’s grace, if we will seek it, ask for it, and receive it; then let it flow through us, through the campus, through the church, and out to the ends of the earth. That’s precisely what the Christian movement needs at this critical hour!



**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).