

PART TWO

A JOURNEY INTO WORLD CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

And the Lord said to me: "Rise and stand . . . I am sending you to the nations to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they might be forgiven and stand with those who have bridged the Gap through me." Wherefore, I have not been disobedient to that heavenly vision.

Acts 26:16, 18-19

author paraphrase

Chapter 8 – Catch the Vision! See God’s Worldwide Purpose in Christ

Fact: There Is a Worldwide Purpose

God’s worldwide purpose is working its way out through history and among the nations. From Adam to Abraham to Israel to the exiles who returned to rebuild the Temple, that purpose was active but often channelled through one family, one clan, or one tribe. But from Christ to the Twelve to the early Church to Paul’s missionary band and through the two-thousand year impact of the Christian movement, it has flowed widely in a global direction that might be outlined as follows:

- *Penetrate* all human cultures with the reconciling gospel and power of Jesus Christ so as to
- *Persuade* all kinds of peoples to become obedient disciples of Christ and responsible members of His Church where they live, so as to
- *Project* into every society the redemptive alternatives of God’s Kingdom against the destructive forces of evil, so as to
- *Press* the course of history toward the climactic return of the Lord Jesus to reign visibly over His victorious Kingdom, so as to
- *Permeate* the whole earth with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the seas.

It is a purpose marked by love. In one sense world missions is the extension of the love shared eternally among the three Persons of the Godhead. That same love reaches out toward His lost children at the widest end of the Gap. As we face a world of over three billion who have never clearly heard the good news of God’s purpose, we must never forget that ultimately the fulfilment of all that is in God’s heart does not depend on the limitations of their faith or ours, but on the boundlessness of His eternal love and justice (see Isa. 45:22-25).

Christ: The Centre of the Purpose

Christ’s coming isn’t one in a series of equally significant events in God’s worldwide purpose. Rather it is the fulfilment event. He came in the fullness of times, giving ultimate meaning and direction to everything else God is doing among the nations. As Abraham’s nobler heir, Christ receives God’s purpose to bless all earth’s families and is Himself its guarantee. Through Him who takes away the sin of the whole world, God’s purpose extends once and for all beyond one nation to the ends of the earth; beyond any one cultural form of the Kingdom (Israel) to break through to people everywhere. His blood will ransom sinners from every tongue, tribe, and nation.

And, since Jesus rose and lives, He continues to lead God’s worldwide purpose to its ultimate triumph: when all things are finally summed up in Him, all His enemies destroyed, and all glory given to His Father. The kingdoms of the world will become the Kingdom of our God and of His Messiah. Then, He will shine like the sun for that cosmopolitan city the Bible calls His Bride and Wife. From beginning to end—from before the foundation of the world until the New Heaven and Earth—Christ remains the centre of God’s worldwide purpose (see Col. 1:18-20).

Therefore, He is also central to our own involvement in God’s worldwide purpose. Since He gave the Great Commission, its priority has not been diminished by two thousand years of the Church’s historical ebb and flow. The fundamental basis of the Christian world missionary movement is

Christ's universal authority. As John Stott observes, His authority on earth allows us to dare to go to all the nations. His authority in heaven gives us our only hope of success. And, His presence with us ("Look! I am with you always to the climax of this age!") leaves us no other choice.

The Nations: The Target of the Purpose

Christ's Body has become the most international society in the history of mankind. This should not surprise us. Almost every book of the Bible records something of God's intentions for and actions toward the nations. Whether we look at the table of nations in Genesis 10 or the citizenship of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21, we find that God's purpose has maintained one great target throughout: the world of the nations.

Even early on, when God summoned Abraham to come out from his kindred and be a part of His purpose, it wasn't for Abraham's sake alone. All the nations were summoned with him. "I will bless you so that you can bless the families of the earth." All along God has intended to include people from every family and race in the inheritance of His dear Son.

When the Spirit came at Pentecost He hurled the Church toward God's global target, across the national, cultural, and racial boundaries, all the way to the ends of the earth.

In some cases the phrase itself—"the nations"—refers to those outside the people of God: that is, mankind in general, separated by sin from their Creator-Redeemer and His Covenant. But in a majority of cases, and often in the New Testament's use of *ta ethne* (Greek for "the nations" or "the peoples") the meaning becomes more specific. It refers to the thousands of cultural groupings around the world that make up the grand, creative, diverse community of humankind.

God desires to declare His glory in the face of Jesus Christ within every one of these societies. He desires to reach them in ways expressive of who they are and in keeping with their own unique ways of experiencing His salvation (see Eph. 3:4-11).

When the Spirit came at Pentecost He hurled the Church toward God's global target, across the national, cultural, and racial boundaries, all the way to the ends of the earth. Today, as a result, Christianity is the only world religion without a cultural home base or headquarters, a constant reminder that God is on target. The world missionary movement is both international and intercultural, from, to, and within all six continents. No doubt about it: a day will come when people from every tongue and tribe will be gathered before the throne in praise, to reflect like a grand mosaic the Father's glory through Christ Jesus, their Saviour. And every piece of that human mosaic once it has been penetrated and purified by the fire of the gospel, will make essential contributions in creating that spectacular display.

The Gospel: The Power of the Purpose

In this moment of history, God's Kingdom demonstrates its presence and power through the impact of His Good News in Jesus Christ, proclaimed by word and deed. God's great redemptive purpose expands throughout the earth—His Kingdom breaks through into individual lives and into whole societies—as the gospel is properly understood, believed, and obeyed. Do you want to see evidence that God's Kingdom is near? Look at the spread of the gospel for almost two thousand years across numerous human barriers around the globe to create a truly worldwide community of

faith. This is more than human ingenuity or historical accident. The best explanation for all of this is the power of the message in the hands of faithful witness.

Of course, the gospel never works in a spiritual vacuum. Wherever missionary feet have trod God has prepared the way. Creation has set the stage for the message by testifying God's presence and glory and goodness (see Rom. 1). Conscience has set the mood for this message by testifying to man's sin and guilt, and his coming judgment (see Rom. 2). Both creation and conscience press mankind toward all that the gospel offers.

Furthermore, the gospel's power is inseparable from the convicting and convincing power of the Holy Spirit (see John 16). The Spirit works with the messengers, driving their witness deep into the hearers' hearts. After all of our cross-cultural skills have been plied, the Spirit translates it at the heart level, so that anyone, anywhere can believe and be saved.

But there is more. The gospel's power lies not only in its call to trust Christ for salvation, but also in its summons to believers to fulfil their destiny in Christ—it is good news about their direct involvement in His global cause. It is good news not only about what Jesus is for us and in us, but what He will be through us. The gospel invites us to both faith in Christ and a new life of concern for other unreached peoples for whom Christ died.

Submission to His Commission is a response totally consistent with submission to His Lordship. He saves us not only for Himself but for His saving mission. Properly understood, the gospel should ignite a radical obedience that thrusts us out together to follow our Saviour to the ends of the earth. The gospel is God's power to save and send (see Luke 24: 45-48).

The Church: The Agent of the Purpose

World missions cannot happen without a vital, growing, global community of disciples who burn with the fire of a world vision. Christians aren't meant to be a collection of spectators whom God asks to watch as He puts on a global extravaganza. We're not to sit by passively waiting for the Kingdom to suddenly materialize before our eyes. The Church is the agent of God's worldwide purpose. We're to be more like a caravan of ambassadors, going forth to bless the families of the earth, than a royal entourage basking in the sunlight of God's love for us.

It is just as proper, maybe even more so, to say Christ's global cause has a Church as to say Christ's Church has a global cause. Because the Church exists more for the benefit of the unreached world outside her own community than for those who are already safely inside. Citizens of Christ's unshakeable Kingdom are empowered by Him with exclusive authority to be co-workers with Him in fulfilling His global cause.

We could characterize this community as both a family and an army (See 1 Tim. 3:15-16). Married to Christ the Church has an implanted desire from God's Spirit to lovingly reproduce new children for Him within every cultural womb on earth. She wants to be the "household of God." And yet, wherever this household is found it is always a colony of settlers from another land, planted among earth's families as God's agent of Kingdom-life in their midst.

But as an army—a "bulwark"—she is equipped with grace and truth to march through the Gap, overthrowing the rule of sin in human hearts, as she carries out her role as the great change agent for the Kingdom in this world. "When we say with Paul, 'O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?' we are shouting out our battle cry as God's liberation front in the world, moving through the world freeing the captives" (John Perkins).

Missions: The Process of the Purpose

The world missionary movement is the longest sustained human enterprise in history, and today it is touching the world with unparalleled impact. What exactly is missions? Certainly it is more than the Protestant missionary machinery developed over the last two hundred years. Missions could be defined as “the intentional, sacrificial penetration of major human barriers by a global church through specially sent cross-cultural messengers of the gospel, in order to plant communities of responsible disciples of Jesus Christ among groups of people where none have existed before.” Missions focuses on the billions of unreached peoples without *culturally-near* neighbours to whom they can turn for spiritual reality. The process of missions in our generation must make expansion its goal and then move faithfully toward planting churches among the 16,700 culture-groups and in the hundreds of thousands of geographical locations where no church presently exists.

Of course, the process of missions requires more than just preaching the gospel at people. The missionary enterprise confronts all levels of human need. But top priority must be given to the undiminished tragedy of billions of people unreconciled to the Father and also unaware of how this could happen.

Today five out of six non-Christians in our world have no hope unless missionaries come to them and plant the church among them. Every day eighty thousand of these die without having any contact with a church of their kind that could make the gospel intelligible in their language and within their culture. That’s why missionary strategy must concentrate on cross-cultural evangelism and church-planting. All other Christian ministries and good deeds should be balanced with this great effort, so that maximum finding of lost sinners takes place.

And who are “missionaries”? They are the specialists who fulfil the task of missions by actually working with people at wider parts of the Gap. “Missionary” is less an adjective (like “missionary doctor”) and more a noun to indicate one who penetrates major frontiers in order to plant the church where none previously existed (see Acts 11:19-21, 13:1-3).

But these specialists can never stand alone. Every missions *extension* (through societies and teams) must have a mission *movement* behind it, through local churches and Christians who pray and sacrifice. Although this process can happen by the spontaneous response of God’s people to opportunities God lays directly before us, it often rises from the planned efforts of experienced, mobile missionary groups sent out by the Body of Christ in response to His clear command, and to the pressing challenge of specific people isolated from the gospel.

Multiplied Congregations: The Strategy of the Purpose

God’s worldwide purpose has a more specific strategy than just the vague objective of “reaching the unreached.” His strategy is to multiply congregations—living models of the Kingdom of God—among all the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic groupings of the world, which in turn will carry out the reaching of their own people around them. In fact, in most places of the world, each congregation must not only be culturally like those they desire to reach around them, but must also be geographically accessible, within walking distance. Ultimately the world won’t be evangelized by multiplying the number of times evangelistic invitations are given or evangelistic activities and programs conducted, nor even by multiplying individual disciples. Ultimately the purpose will be fulfilled by multiplying obedient, evangelizing congregations of disciples, who can invite those around them to Christ and to a taste of His Kingdom in their midst.

Every congregation is potentially like a time-bomb within its own culture-group, ready to explode with Kingdom-style changes as new Christians grow and reach out to their friends and

neighbours. No matter how poor or talentless a local church may appear it is still God's base of operation within its locality. In that congregation dwells the living Christ in all His fullness. And out of His fullness they can penetrate their society with His grace and truth until the ultimate transformations emerge.

The Scriptures continue to emphasize that numerical growth—the winning of many peoples to Christ—is one key evidence that God's worldwide purpose is being fulfilled.

But our strategy goes one step further. God desires to multiply not only sensitive, evangelizing, transforming congregations, but also missions-minded ones. They are to become the new sending bases who commission their own people to cross other cultural frontiers into wider parts of the Gap. For God's strategy to have its fullest expression, missions must spring from the concern of thousands of new churches worldwide, committed to fulfilling Christ's global cause.

Numerical Growth: A Measure of the Purpose

To Abraham God gave the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven. As the Bible ends we are confronted with an international throng that can't be numbered, gathered from every people-group of earth to praise the Lamb forever (see Rev. 7:9-10). And between the beginning and the end of time the Scriptures continue to emphasize that numerical growth—the winning of many peoples to Christ—is one key evidence that God's worldwide purpose is being fulfilled.

Growth in quality must be matched by growth in quantity. Without numerical growth no one will be around through whom the purpose can be fulfilled any qualitative way. Christ works among the nations through *countable* people saved to obey and serve Him. Note that numbers are not an end in themselves. This emphasis on quantity is not an encouragement to pad our personal tally of converts. The numbers are *people*, redeemed people who in turn can love other people. If the billions unreached today are to hear of Christ there must be a visible swelling of responsible disciples and congregations of disciples throughout the world.

This measurement gives us a whole new set of questions to ask about God's purpose. In Nigeria, for example, our question isn't just: Is the Nigerian church healthy? We must also ask: How many churches are in Nigeria? How many people in each church? Are Nigerians coming to Christ within a few tribal groups or within each of the almost five hundred tribes? And, what percentage of the total population are the Christians within each tribal group?

God is not willing to settle for a "token presence" in each of over two hundred countries, satisfied with a few sheaves of gathered wheat, while ignoring the massive harvest still standing in the fields. If large numerical growth is possible anywhere it should be aimed for everywhere. Wherever culture-groups are accessible and ready to hear and respond, missionaries must be immediately deployed. One measure of the Kingdom's advance and of the faithfulness of us its citizens is the growth of the Church by conversions, conserved within vital, evangelizing congregations.

Compassion: The Pulse of the Purpose

Compassion is caring deeply enough about people's needs to meet those needs. The world missionary movement has been driven with compassion—caring not only about other peoples'

discontents (which can often be unholy), but about their deepest longings and their real need for Christ and His Kingdom (whether they realize it or not). Compassion sees people as whole people, and cares about everything that truly concerns them. Compassion acts! God's compassion moves the Church to proclaim the gospel, and plant congregations where none presently exist, so that a base of operations can be established within specific groups from which all other needs can be met.

A missionary isn't sent to direct a social revolution. But his work will lay a foundation for one.

Considering the plight of billions of unreached people today, most of whom are in the Third World, compassion morally obligates us to speak out and live out what we know to be the source of life and liberation for all peoples. It must lead us into acts of love and justice that help ease the unreached out from under the heavy loads (whether physical, psychological, social, economic, political, or demonic) that strangle the joyful reality of the message we bring them. Acts of compassion become major steps in establishing trust, so that the people we desire to reach will trust us enough to investigate who we are, what we stand for, and what we offer in Christ. Not that our compassion is conditional, depending on how favourably they respond. But as we touch people who are hurting, we will naturally build bridges over which the supreme act of compassion can reach them: reconciliation to the Father by faith in Christ Jesus (see Isa. 61:1, 4, 11).

Cultural Transformation: The Impact of the Purpose

God's worldwide purpose will create an impact on both individuals and the community to which they belong. This will spring from the influence of faithful disciples whose living faith leads them to active, daily obedience where they are. Through the gospel, God incorporates new believers into local congregations where they learn obedience, experience personal liberation, and engage in creative evangelism that liberates others. World missions and a biblical transformation of earth's approximately twenty-five thousand cultural groups go together.

A missionary isn't sent to direct a social revolution. But his work will lay a foundation for one. By bringing God's message of reconciliation and new life, he creates the opportunity for the Kingdom to break through in concrete ways, and for lives and societies to be transformed. As he teaches the implications of the Kingdom and invites new Christians to live out their allegiance to Christ, he creates the conditions for righteousness, justice, and love to eventually permeate the whole society. Since sin touches all aspects of who people are and of their cultures, God's redeeming work in Christ should not be expected to do less on either level. A new allegiance to Christ as Lord through the gospel becomes the standard by which the believers can interpret everything else in the culture and then accept or reject or transform what they find.

One example of this impact can be seen in Nigeria. Through 140 years of missionary outreach, the Bible's transforming work has brought forth over thirty million Christians with a government that is asking right now for thousands of expatriates to come to their country as Bible-knowledge teachers in government schools. There religious instruction is a compulsory subject at the secondary and teacher-training levels. Not only has past cultural transformation opened the door, but this biblical moulding of Nigeria's future leaders holds promise of even greater changes ahead. A ripe opportunity awaits evangelicals, even from the U.S., to share in the impact of God's purpose there, if we act now.

Satan: The Enemy of the Purpose

God has not abandoned our age to the powers of evil. But the Old Age is still hostile to any world missions activity, and its citizens won't allow us unalloyed success. We are engaged in constant spiritual warfare with Satan's hosts, who oppose and attempt to frustrate the world missionary advance. Those willing to follow Christ into the widest part of the Gap can't avoid the conflict of this age-long battle.

There is no neutral territory. Among the nations God is at work calling citizens in the kingdom of darkness to a verdict about His dear Son through the gospel. Every advance in missions, especially where the Church has never been planted before, will be marked by a "fight" with the Enemy of our souls. When a person or a people-group gives allegiance to Christ as Lord, enemy held territory (see Luke 4:5-6) is "captured." Accordingly, Satan's only alternative is to set himself against those most deeply involved in the sending/going process of missions. The temptations, oppressions, and persecutions that these Christians experience often come from aggressively operating in the whirlpool created by the convergence of two diametrically opposed spiritual powers, one of which knows his time is very short and one of which is assured of ultimate victory (see Rev. 12:9, 11).

Of course we need to be careful not to label every resistance to the gospel as satanic. Whenever the missionary movement is rejected or opposed we must first ask: Are they really opposed to Christ Himself? Or, do they, misunderstand my communication about Him? Is my nationality or my culture suspect? Are they reacting to my insensitivity or lack of evident love? In other words, is the problem with the hearer or the speaker? Should I assume part of the responsibility for the problem rather than blame/ the devil?

But when we're faced with Satan's most threatening activities we can always have hope. Actually, growth of the opposition forces remains a clear indication of the even stronger growth of God's kingdom, not of its retreat. Scripture teaches that evil is to grow concurrently with good as God's purpose reaches its climax. Many believe the book of Revelation details this final global clash between both Kingdoms over a global missionary movement. As Satan is threatened with an accelerated worldwide harvesting he will have no choice but to deploy his forces in one last onslaught against the Church that has brought it to pass.



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).