

Chapter 9 – Catch the Vision! See a World Full of Possibilities Through Christ!

Fact: There Is a World Full of Possibilities

Almost three billion people have no opportunity to make an intelligent decision for Jesus Christ. But the World Christian doesn't despair. We know that God is not finished yet. The Kingdom still comes! Throughout the earth God's purpose presses on, full and overflowing with possibilities for closing the Gap through His humble, obedient servants among the nations. The possibilities are as infinite as the God who gives them.

We must be careful here. A vision of possibilities—including past victories, present world trends, available personnel, money, and resources—should never overshadow the clear biblical principle that when we are weak then we are really strong because God's power is allowed full expression through our weakness (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10). The task before us should drive the Church daily to the Master in a sense of utter dependence. Our greatest "possibility" lies in our helplessness before Him. But we also need eyes to see all the ways He has prepared to release His power once we rise from our knees to go forth.

Why is it so hard for us to see the possibilities? Often we look at the persecuted church (as in Uganda in the seventies) or at the more resistant peoples of the world (like North African Muslims) and not at data on the tremendous harvestings (as in Brazil or Nigeria or Korea). Sometimes we're simply overwhelmed by the numbers to be reached, unaware of bold new strategies being developed right now to meet this challenge. On the other hand, a pessimistic outlook provides some Christians a smoke screen for non-involvement: for their unwillingness to seek what God has promised to do, for their lack of compassion, or for their fear of the sacrifices they might need to make.

Marked by its spiritual vitality, global diversity, and available options, the Church has never been better equipped to close the Gap. The time has come to double our efforts. We stand on the threshold of a new era if we but believe and obey. Together we must mobilize to meet the "sunrise of missions" before us.

Spiritual Renewal Points to the Possibilities

The Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit. Whenever He stirs up His Church He always has one historical end in view: her mission to the ends of the earth. The world waits to see what God's Spirit will do through a global Church that is renewed, surrendered, and empowered together for that mission. Today this dream may become a reality. Many believe Christians are entering a time of unequalled spiritual ferment through which God will finally complete His worldwide purpose. As revival comes to His people on a global scale, He will sweep us past the renewing changes and into the missionary impact for which He has given that renewal (see Acts 4:29-31).

We have the best news whether for tribal animists, materialistic capitalists, fervent Muslims or revolutionary Marxists.

Such revival has flamed hot in Korea for decades, with thousands joining in 5:00 A.M. prayer meetings every day. In 1980 a World Evangelization Crusade brought together one million Korean Christians for each of six evenings of challenge to worldwide outreach. On the last night thousands stood to offer themselves to go anywhere God would send them.

World Trends Point to the Possibilities

As surely as God's hand is upon His people in their global mission, even so He is at work within the great forces that are making our world what it is today. Nothing escapes His sovereign purpose to prepare the way for fulfilling the Great Commission among all nations. Just as the New Testament world was prepared for the new beginnings in Christ's global cause—Christ came “when the time had fully come” (Gal. 4:4)—so today God is preparing our world to allow the gospel its greatest opportunity for total saturation.

One trend in our modern world is rapid change, a change which produces more change; a trend that leads to more trends. In the upheaval of change, people around the earth are searching for meaning for their past, an identity for their present, and a foundation on which to build their future. At such an hour the gospel comes offering them that meaning, a new self-image, and the only sure foundation. People in the midst of change will listen as never before.

Another example is the growing cry for caring servants to identify with the poor and oppressed, to bring them to their feet with lasting, personal, and social deliverance. In Christ's love we can step forth to offer ourselves and our message of hope for a hurting world as no other human community can. What a day to win a hearing if Christians, particularly in the West, assume the radical lifestyle shifts that make us available to them and involved with their cries.

We've never had a greater hour through Christ. We have the best news whether for tribal animists, materialistic capitalists, fervent Muslims or revolutionary Marxists. So often their search is for the right things but in the wrong places. The gospel points them to the living Christ—the right place!

The Evangelistic Acceleration Points to the Possibilities

Increasingly Christianity is a force the world must reckon with. In 1790 William Carey estimated that only one-third of the countries had any gospel witness. Today all do with one or two exceptions. More people have become Christians and more churches have been planted in this century than in all the rest of Church history combined. There are almost twice as many Christians (one billion) as adherents of any other religion, except Islam (750 million). The gospel's impact is accelerating at sixty thousand new people a day claiming the name of Christ and sixteen hundred new churches opening their doors for the first time every Sunday. In 1900 most Christians were found in Europe and North America. By the end of this century projections indicate that 60 percent of all Christians will be found in the Third World.

One example of this is sub-Sahara Africa. In the past twenty years Christians there have increased by thirty million. It took a thousand years for the gospel to do that in Europe! There were four million African Christians in 1900 (3 percent of the population). The projection for A.D. 2000 is 351 million (46 percent of the population). The church in Africa is growing four times faster than the population at large—by sixteen thousand every day—making it the largest Christian community on any continent. The story of the Maguzawa people, in northern Nigeria, is typical. There the numbers of converts are responding so fast that church leaders claim they have lost all count!

In many parts of the earth there is an unprecedented receptivity to the Lord Jesus. More individuals and more segments of population may be open to Him than at any other time in history. In it all we can trace the sovereign hand of our God on the hearts of the nations as well as on the revived remnant who boldly serve Christ's cause at any cost to reach them.

Of course, not every response can be measured as a legitimate new birth into the Kingdom; nor does every newly planted church truly seek to follow Christ. But statistics indicate an acceleration in the evangelistic *penetration* of the ends of the earth. More people are able to render an intelligent verdict for Christ than ever before. The number of churches planted worldwide speaks of new beachheads within which God's Spirit can work to renew and mobilize Christ's witnesses among all nations, to close the Gap as never before.

Available Personnel Point to the Possibilities

Ours is not a post-missionary era. As never before the Spirit is multiplying potential labourers for the harvest. If they would all suddenly decide to become cross-cultural missionaries, for example, there might be enough evangelical Christians in South Korea alone to close the Gap within the next twenty years!

Some mission strategists have estimated that over a fifteen-year period one missionary couple can effectively learn the language and culture, share the gospel and plant a vital, witnessing church among a group of 5,000 people. If this is so, we would need 600,000 more missionaries to complete the task of total world evangelization in this century. It is further estimated that evangelical Protestants alone field a worldwide body of over 75 million able, Spirit-filled witnesses committed to sharing Jesus Christ with the unreached. Certainly, out of that Body God's Spirit can raise up the needed 600,000 cross-cultural witnesses for the other 74.4 million evangelicals to send out!

This potential can be seen in the North American church where World Vision International estimates that out of the current evangelical ferment over 200,000 new missionaries could be mobilized within the next two decades, with a little more planning and effort.

It can also be seen in the increase of Third World missionaries. More than four hundred Third World mission societies in forty-four countries have sent out over 15, 000. By 1979 India had 2, 208, Mowed by Nigeria's 850, 600 from Brazil, 450 from Third World ethnic groups in the U.S., 300 from the Philippines, 140 from Japan and 100 from Korea. Missionaries have gone from Singaporean churches to the Philippines, Thailand, New Zealand, and Africa. Japanese missionaries (sent out by eleven societies) are witnessing in South America and Indonesia. Koreans are helping reach India. Africans are sending missionaries within their own continent, from one tribal or language group to another. The Aymara Indians of Bolivia (who themselves were reached only recently with the gospel) have formed a missionary association to send their own workers to Navajo Indians in the U.S.!

**The Church throbs worldwide with a creative potential that's
intrinsic to her very life in the Spirit.**

As never before, Christians who learn to serve one another internationally can join together under the Lordship of Christ to reach an unreached world. The human resources within His worldwide Church are immeasurable. World missionary strategy, effort, and personnel should spring from an internationally shouldered enterprise, consisting of hundreds of thousands of local churches that develop an army of mobile missionaries, mission societies, and mission teams, sent from all nations to all nations.

Modern Resources Point to the Possibilities

The Church throbs worldwide with a creative potential that's intrinsic to her very life in the Spirit. This fact alone should spur us on to be creative, responsible stewards of all the modern technical advances within our world community. Twentieth-century tools have extended our voices, our time, our minds, and our bodies. Of course, evangelism is basically a meeting of persons. And, world missions is the meeting of persons across major human barriers. But many contemporary resources, tools, and methodologies provide new ways of creating more opportunities under the Lordship of Christ to make this meeting of persons happen more quickly and more effectively.

Take, for example, the tool of radio. Over sixty-five radio stations are owned and operated by Christian missions in the Third World. The first missionary radio station in Africa, ELWA, was founded more than thirty years ago. Beginning with only four-and-a-half broadcast hours a day, it now carries programming in forty-five languages, with forty-three transmission hours a day covering most of west, north and central Africa. HCJB in Quito, Ecuador, is one of the most listened to shortwave stations in the world. Rated by International Shortwave Club of London as one of the top ten, its correspondence in 1978 showed a total of 170,000 letters and reports from 131 different countries. Their Japanese department received the most—63,000 pieces of mail.

Another example of modern resources is the growing international discipline called "missiology," the science of the strategy of the Christian mission. Knowledge from many other disciplines—anthropology, sociology, geography, linguistics, computer technology, statistical analysis, ethno-history, ethno-theology, ethno-psychology, management theory—has provided immeasurable insights to increase our effectiveness at communications, evangelistic strategy and church planting. Joining these modern resources to the recorded lessons gleaned from two millennia of composite missionary experience gives us renewed hope, under Christ, for fulfilling the Great Commission.

"Closed Doors" and a Vision of the Possibilities

Right now there are enough open doors to claim the attention of tens of thousands of new missionaries around the world. We must fight with hard facts the inaccurate picture that missionaries are not wanted or needed. Close to 90 percent of the nations are presently open to some form of cross-cultural evangelism—generally more so than in any previous era of the Christian movement.

Open countries are our responsibility. These we must never neglect. There are hundreds of millions of unreached people to whom missionaries can be sent. For example, over 200 million unreached peoples are still accessible throughout East Asia to direct missionary outreach. As the Church moves on these waiting fields, fervently praying for God to open new fields and new channels for outreach, He will not fail to respond.

Present missionary outreach from the U.S. is alive and well and planting churches all around the globe.

Actually, what we sometimes interpret as "closed" may be better understood as people and places we have neglected. More concentrated effort on a closed area, in faith, could turn the tide. For example, in the U.S. we have one pastor for every six hundred people. In Central America there is one missionary or strong national leader for every fifteen thousand. But in the supposedly closed or resistant Muslim world there is less than one missionary for every 500 thousand! What if the

worldwide Church attempted to pour the same intensity of prayer, manpower, research, money and literature into reaching Turkey or the seventy-one million Muslims in India as we put into reaching North or Central America? What doors might God open?

Of course, there are legitimate illustrations of “closed doors.” Often that means no more, however, than that a particular nation doesn't grant visas to Western missionaries. Even so, there are many “back doors” which any Christian can use to reach people in such a country, if we have eyes to see those doors. For example, there are alternative approaches through literature and Scripture distribution, radio, and through self-supporting missionary personnel like businessmen, teachers, tourists, and exchange students.

Closed doors have always been temporary. The dramatic and unexpected change in attitude of the People's Republic of China verifies that any door can suddenly open to us. Today, China is permitting Bibles to be brought in by visitors. And, she is asking for 500 thousand teachers of English, German, French and Spanish, the greatest emphasis being on English. The need for native speakers of English to do the teaching is apparent. How many English-speaking Christians are ready to walk through the open door?

The American Church's Involvement in the Possibilities

The American missions movement has worked its way out of many jobs but certainly never out of the main job: persuading unreached peoples to become disciples of Christ and responsible members of His church where they live. Even so, present missionary outreach from the U.S. is alive and well and planting churches all around the globe.

The positive contributions of the American missionary movement suggest God's willingness to continue to use us if we are faithful and obedient to Christ alone. As African mission leader, Patrick Johnstone, notes: “Much of the burden for world evangelization rests on believers in the t U.S.A.— about 63 percent of all missionaries, and 90 percent of all funds.” Campus Crusade for Christ estimates that 80 percent of the world's trained Christians and 70 percent of the evangelical church's material resources can be found in our country. The *fact* of this reservoir holds great promise for worldwide evangelization wherever its supply is released through humble, responsible World Christians.

Surveying this reservoir, Gordon-Conwell church historian Richard Lovelace has caught a vision of the possibilities spiritual renewal could give the American church. It demands serious reflection:

While the broad mass of the laity in American churches continue to be exhaustingly absorbed in the rat race of business life, at least a portion of their finances is being diverted to furnish a substantial economic foundation for a remarkable missionary program abroad. One cannot help but wonder what the result would be if this mass of lay people could be spiritually released from their servitude in the American success system and reoriented to channel their major energies toward building the kingdom of God. Foreign missions would be enriched with a new flow of personnel and resources

If America were . . . to be “born again” for a generation as England was “born again” during the Second Awakening; if America were to become a showcase of justice as well as liberty; if Christian opinion were visibly to compel the sharing of America's resources to feed and train the whole human community; if the network of multi-national corporations were tanned and brought into service as a rail service for the gospel, as the Clapham leaders tamed the British

empire and used it for world mission; then “the Great Century” of missionary expansion, the nineteenth, would in all likelihood yield to an even greater successor.¹

Of course, America’s involvement in the possibilities must not permit a disguised resurgence of the nineteenth century’s “manifest destiny.” The new reality is *partnership*: missionaries from all nations to all nations; and missionaries within a nation in partnership with the Christians already involved there in the total evangelization for their countrymen.

We need to maintain a right balance in this picture. As one Third World missionary views this partnership: “World outreach must marry the missions experience of the West and the suffering experience of the East to effectively evangelize the world.”

Wherever they come from, there is one kind of missionary everyone wants: one who will identify with the people, love them, and serve them for Christ’s sake. This possibility belongs as much to missionaries from the American church as it does to all of God’s people.



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).

¹ Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 151, 425.