

NEW INSIGHT FROM

Three Eras OF Mission History

Reflections on the Nature of God's Mission for His Church

By Robby Butler

Tremendous Progress

When the *Perspectives* course was first developed, half of the world's population was "hidden" in cultures without a church movement in their midst.

Over the last 30 years God has used many factors, including the *Perspectives* course and this *Mission Frontiers* bulletin to awaken His Church to the urgent priority of the darkest and hardest places on earth.

As a result, among an additional sixth of the world's population the church is now accessible within their own culture, proclaiming God's Word in terms they can understand and accept, and capable of demonstrating that the kingdom of God is at hand.

Many encouraging trends suggest that the complex "missionary task" of crossing all the remaining "barriers of understanding or acceptance" may yet be completed in our generation! This isn't all that Jesus commanded in Mt 28:19–20, but it is an important step in that direction.

Yet amidst such dramatic progress, some troubling trends have also emerged, prompting careful reconsideration of our mission strategies and challenging naive assumptions regarding what God expects of His people. The 2009 revision to the *Perspectives Reader* thus incorporates a variety of urgent new insights.

One such insight is woven by Dr. Ralph Winter into an update to his classic article on the Three Eras of Protestant Mission. (See the November–December 1997 edition of *Mission Frontiers* for a summary of the earlier chapter.)

Robby Butler worked with the USCWM for 24 years, and is now developing a movement of "lay" believers to seek first God's Kingdom through their vocations. He would welcome feedback on this article at RobbyQButler@gmail.com

That updated chapter compares the roots and results of two alternate approaches to *mission*, concluding that as the Church pursues God's broader Kingdom purposes in combatting evil it is empowered to more effectively reach unreached peoples.

Following a review of the new insight in that chapter, this article outlines my reflection regarding obstacles to our pursuit of God's Kingdom purpose and the danger of thinking we are simply engaged in completing a task when we are in a battle against an evil intelligence who actively works to polarize the Church between two emphases which should collaborate rather than compete.

While the Bible does not dwell on Satan, it discreetly refers to our adversary by various names in enough detail to provide a fairly clear picture of what we are up against. We ignore or overspiritualize the devil's activity at our peril, and at the expense of our effectiveness.

Four Men, Three Eras

Most *Perspectives* alumni are familiar with Winter's identification of three overlapping eras of Protestant mission outreach over the past 200 years:

In the First, Coastland Era, *William Carey's* "Enquiry" provoked the first *broad*, organized efforts among Protestants to "go," reaching out to the *coastlands* of the world from 1800 to 1910.

In the Second, Inland Era, *Hudson Taylor's* appeal for the interior of China brought new emphasis on "all [places and countries]," sending a fresh wave of outreach to *inland* areas from 1865 to 1980.

In the Third, Unreached Peoples Era, *Cameron Townsend* and *Donald McGavran* brought Biblical understanding to "nations" (Greek *ethne*) as ethnic groupings *rather than countries*, prompting the present focus on *unreached peoples* which began developing around 1935.

A Disturbing Trend Toward Shallowness

These Three Eras resulted in an amazing period of global growth for the Church. Yet a disturbing trend toward shallowness emerged among some Second and Third Era mission fields, leaving them worse off in some ways than before they embraced the gospel. Such fields stand in stark contrast to the impact of God's Kingdom in Britain and its American colonies through the Evangelical Awakening of the 1700s.

This Kingdom impact protected England against the revolutionary spirit that engulfed France, and

laid the necessary groundwork for the development of the industrial revolution. Many mission fields where the Gospel was embraced eagerly but shallowly are, by contrast, still rampant today with corruption, oppression, immorality and disease.

Winter's new insight

takes direct aim at the roots of this trend.

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Two Approaches to Mission

Winter explains his insight in terms of two mission approaches which Evangelicals have pursued alternately during these three eras, and which remain in tension today. Both give top priority to expanding the church among every people group—where the church exists and especially where it doesn't. But "*Church Mission*" focuses on expanding the church, whereas "*Kingdom Mission*" expands *Church Mission* to include proclaiming and demonstrating God's Kingdom.

Kingdom Mission views the Church as God's primary instrument for His larger purpose of extending His Kingdom to destroy the full range of the devil's works (1 Jn 3:8). *Kingdom Mission* also sees combatting the devil's works as an essential component of our *witness* to God's Kingdom, by which the Church is built. While it pursues the eternal salvation of individuals, it also seeks to enlist them in seeking God's Kingdom.

Where variants of *Kingdom Mission* may be tempted to neglect building the Church, *Church Mission* is tempted to view combatting the devil's works as a distraction and to focus on building the Church solely by getting individuals saved and sanctified.

Kingdom Mission differs from *social action* in that it actively recognizes evil intelligence behind, for example, at least some diseases and natural disasters, rather than simply encouraging individual good

deeds or mopping up consequences without regard to the source (for example, dealing with sickness and not attempting to eradicate the pathogens causing the sickness).

Church Mission calls for most disciples to be simply beneficiaries and supporters of ministry within the Church and of gospel proclamation to extend the Church. *Kingdom Mission* abolishes false dichotomies between secular/sacred, clergy/laity, and evangelism/social action, and seeks to actively engage the full resources of all disciples in multifaceted large-scale efforts to proclaim and demonstrate God's Kingdom. As *Kingdom Mission* involves many more disciples *through* their full-time vocations—as well as their prayers, witness, giving and after-hours service—the additional breadth of activity involved in *Kingdom Mission* is undergirded by a much greater release of additional manpower and other resources.

Kingdom Mission and Church Mission in the Three Eras

In his updated chapter, Winter observes that Evangelicals' perception of what God has empowered them to do influences them toward either *Church Mission* or *Kingdom Mission*. Thus missionaries of the First Era, during which Evangelicals had influence at all levels of society, complemented their church-planting efforts with sweeping efforts to impact the surrounding society. This is in contrast with the *Church Mission* of the Second Era, during which Evangelicals had spread widely among the working classes but lost most of their presence in the leadership of society and thus "tended to de-emphasize, almost to the point of total exclusion, ideas of social reform."

Kingdom Mission characterized the First Era as Carey and those he inspired carried the influence of the first Evangelical Awakening with them to fight infanticide and widow burning while establishing universities and hospitals as an integral part of their strategy to extend the church. The Second Awakening in America, still during this First Era, "fostered the most extensive positive transformation any country has ever experienced in history."

By Hudson Taylor's day, however, the sending base and most Second Era missionaries, including Hudson Taylor himself, had shifted from *Kingdom Mission* to *Church Mission*. Taylor, for example, called for a thousand missionaries to evangelize all of China by each witnessing to 50 people per day for 1,000 days. So as not to be slowed down, Taylor directed these missionaries not to even establish churches.

In place of Jesus' "gospel of the Kingdom" (Mt

24:14), the *Church Mission* of this Second Era spread a “gospel of salvation” resulting in the shallowness mentioned above. Affected mission fields, such as most of Christian Africa, have a form of Christianity that has been described as “a mile wide and an inch deep.”

In this analysis, the Third (current) Era inherited *Church Mission* amidst a strong polarization that viewed evangelism and social action as competing priorities rather than essential partners. In arguing against such polarization, Winter asserts that “evangelism in **word**, if supported by ‘demonstration’ in **deed**, is actually empowered evangelism.”

Encouragingly, the growing presence of Evangelicals at leadership levels throughout the world is fueling a recovery of *Kingdom Mission*, thus bringing increasing effectiveness in the missionary task and reversing the trend toward mission field shallowness. An increasing number of voices within the Church, such as Rick Warren with his P.E.A.C.E. plan and Luis Bush through Transform World, are advocating *Kingdom Mission*, although not necessarily by that name.

Does God expect His Church in each generation to glorify Him *through and according to the influence and resources He has entrusted to them*? If so, then the dramatic increase of Evangelical *capacities* in recent decades should lift our understanding of God’s *Kingdom Mission* for our day. God may be calling various members of His body to again collaborate in combatting slavery and oppression in His name, and in working toward the eradication of malaria and heart disease.

While advocating *Kingdom Mission* as the most effective path toward completing the missionary task, Winter continues to emphasize the central priority which *Kingdom Mission* shares with *Church Mission*:

It seems obvious that the highest priority should be to go where the darkness is deepest. That, in turn, means clearly to go to those places where Jesus is not yet known. That, then, means we are still talking about the priority of reaching out to the thousands of remaining ‘Unreached Peoples.’

Ditches on Both Sides and an Intelligent Opponent

(My own reflection)

The path toward discipling all nations runs between variants of two major ditches. Too often our adversary successfully draws segments of the Church into one of these ditches, often in reaction against an awareness that another segment of the Church has fallen into the opposite ditch.

The Ditches of Church Mission

Transforming Individuals Alone

It is sometimes stated that “transformed individuals will transform society,” and that we should thus seek only to transform individuals *rather than* also seeking to organize efforts to fight evil in society.

Unfortunately many “transformed” individuals have assumed, been taught, or learned from the example of others to make false dichotomies between sacred/secular, as if God were concerned for one and not the other, and clergy/laity, as if God wants only to involve one and not the other. Such transformed individuals may thus believe that the only thing God cares about is saving souls, and/or that the only people God wants to use are “professional” Christian workers. As a result such individuals excuse themselves from working to change this world, and instead simply seek their own salvation and (perhaps) the salvation of others.

Such individuals have not properly been taught that all of Jesus’ disciples are to obey His commands to seek God’s Kingdom (Mt 6:33, Lk 12:31) and to glorify their Father in heaven through their good works done before men (Mt 5:16). They have not discovered how God is glorified and His Kingdom extended as we follow Jesus’ example of “doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil” (Acts 10:38).

We should certainly seek to transform individuals and, as God blesses our efforts, to engage them in obeying all that Jesus commanded. This will lead them, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance and empowering, into working with others both to declare and demonstrate God’s Kingdom. Meanwhile we who teach must also seek God’s guidance and empowering to obey all that Jesus commanded; otherwise our example will contradict our teaching, or our teaching itself will be in error.

Personal Salvation Alone

Similarly, an exclusive emphasis on saving souls produces “Christians” who neglect to “seek God’s Kingdom” and instead simply await their rescue from this life (into heaven). When such individuals do reach outside the Church, it is only to urge others to join them in such withdrawal.

As evangelist Ray Comfort documents in his talk *Hell’s Best Kept Secret*, a fundamental change in evangelistic approach in the late 1800s yielded a precipitous drop in evangelistic effectiveness. (This corresponds with the shift from *Kingdom Mission* to *Church Mission*.) Whereas 80% and more of converts “remained” long-term in the Church under the preaching of Wesley, Whitefield, Spurgeon, Finney and others, less than 20% of today’s converts “remain” in the church under our modern evangelistic methods.

Comfort relates this change in effectiveness to a change in approach—from that of Jesus, who proclaimed God’s Kingdom and the moral demands of God’s law *before* offering God’s grace and forgiveness (only to the humble and repentant),—to an approach that is much more comfortable for *us*—telling people that God loves them and wants to offer them His free gift of eternal life through His Son Jesus Christ so that God can begin blessing them.

Unfortunately, this modern evangelistic approach may yield a positive response without deep conviction of sin leading to genuine repentance. As

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Comfort notes, this has resulted in congregations loaded with unrepentant people seeking God’s blessings rather than His Kingdom.

Note: In his materials, Comfort only notes the absence of God’s law from our proclamation of the good news. The general

absence of God’s Kingdom purpose from our witness is my own observation.

The Ditches of Kingdom Mission devoid of Church Mission

Winter’s concept of *Kingdom Mission* is centered on *Church Mission*. But various ditches lie on the side of neglecting the *Church Mission* component of *Kingdom Mission*.

The ditch of “social activism”

Congregations loaded with unrepentant people can pour tremendous energies into trying to fix the world. But such efforts are fruitless without God’s power and direction. Individuals *do* need to be transformed before seeking God’s will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven.

The ditch of “busyness in doing good things”

Even *transformed individuals* who are pursuing *Kingdom Mission* are susceptible to variants of this ditch:

- *Task orientation* can lead to ignoring or underestimating the intelligent opposition we face to God’s Kingdom. Simply working harder or even smarter will not prevail against “principalities and powers” and the ruler of this world. To be effective we must fix our eyes on Jesus while praying and working together in dependence on the Holy Spirit’s guidance and empowering.
- *Dryness* can quickly afflict any who neglect to meditate day and night on God’s word (Josh 1:8, Ps 1:2–3),

or who fail to wait for the empowering of the Holy Spirit (Lk 24:49).

- *Individualism* can so limit our vision that we can only see needs that we can solve or contribute to independently. Individualism also undermines our witness and makes us much more vulnerable to the enemy’s attacks. God’s word calls for us to guard and watch out for each other as well as for ourselves.
- *Pleasing others* can lead to overextending ourselves. We must seek to please God alone (Gal 1:10), otherwise we may squander the resources which God has entrusted to us on needs He intended *someone else* to address.
- *Busyness* can also render us ineffective, and increase our vulnerability and blindness to Satan’s schemes. The soldier, athlete and farmer of 2 Tim 2:4–6 speak of our need to focus to build our capacity and resources to do what God created us for. Furthermore, God ordains times of reduced activity during which we can build our capacity for what He has called us to accomplish. If we fill such times with activity that He didn’t intend, we limit our full life potential to fulfill what God designed us to do.
- *Misalignment* with God’s purposes may occur when our decisions are not rooted in a clear understanding of God’s priorities in the battle taking place against His Kingdom. We must continue prayerfully seeking God’s guidance for the most important thing that we can do for His Kingdom that others can’t do or won’t do. But without a clear understanding of God’s Kingdom purposes, we may turn for guidance to circumstances, or to subjective indicators such as what we are best at or what we want to do.
- *Duty* can, especially when we become chronically busy, substitute for or even replace the heart motivation that God requires—faith expressing itself through love (Gal 5:6). When this happens, all of our labors become useless (1 Cor 13:1–3).

My Conclusion

God is not just offering salvation, He is enlisting participants in battle. The *Church* is not called simply to perpetuate itself, but to pursue God’s will on earth as it is done in heaven. This involves prayer (Mt 6:10, Lk 11:2), proclamation (Mt 4:17, Mk 1:15) and action/battle (Mt 6:33, Lk 12:31, 1 Jn 2:14). To free His people to give themselves to this battle, God has promised eternal and abundant life to all who unite themselves with Him in love and in purpose. With alertness to our adversary, we can avoid the ditches and aggressively and effectively collaborate to advance His Kingdom and His Church and to complete the missionary task in our day. 🌐