

# Challenging the Church to World Mission

*Underlying the task of challenging the Church is something very basic—something that lends meaning and urgency to all other appeals. It's the perception, purpose and plan of Almighty God. Divorced from God's all-encompassing understandings and undertakings, all other appeals and challenges lose their ultimate significance and become counter productive.*

by David J. Hesselgrave

**T**he traditional word was “exhort.” In New Testament Greek it is *parakaleo*—to “call near,” i.e., to invite, invoke, entreat, beseech. But the contemporary word seems to be “to challenge.”

It has been said that church leaders have done a much better job of *challenging* Christians to good works and Christian witness than they have in *channeling* them in work and witness. Generally speaking, that is probably true. However, it may not be true when it comes to Christian missions. In evangelical circles at least, not only has the call to mission been loud and clear; opportunities for missionary involvement have been many and varied. Nevertheless, as we have come to know it, the missionary challenge cries out for reexamination.

Contemporary calls to missionary commitment usually are directed to one or more of three types of motivation: 1) obedience to the commands of Scripture (principally but not solely the Great Commission), 2) meeting the desperate needs of people (primarily spiritual but including all kinds of needs), and 3) involvement in an exciting and winning cause (being “where the action is,” participating in a cause that will ultimately triumph). Down through the years challenges of these types have been relatively effective in motivating Western churches to support Christian missions around the world. In more recent years, and largely motivated by the same kinds of appeals, many of the younger churches of the Third World

themselves have initiated significant missionary endeavors.

If, then, the call to mission has been effective both in the West and East, and North and South, we might ask, why subject it to scrutiny at this late date in the history of church and mission?

The answer is really quite simple. Underlying these challenges is something still more basic—something that lends meaning and urgency to all such appeals. Namely, the perception, purpose and plan of Almighty God. Divorced, or even temporarily separated, from HIS all-encompassing understandings and undertakings, appeals such as those mentioned lose their ultimate significance and may actually become counter productive.

Some years ago, one seminarian expressed his concern about typical missionary challenges in the following manner (as closely as I can recall):

Sometimes I grow weary of going to missionary conferences, drinking missionary firewater, and returning home to regurgitate, only to be invited to return for more firewater. Unless the Spirit speaks I sometimes fear that missionary activists will only succeed in turning me off on missions. The Spirit speaks through Scripture I am told.

Although his reaction may have been extreme, it nevertheless is worth pondering.

## **Divine Intention or Human Invention**

Perhaps the age-old question “Does the end justify the means?” pertains here. We may not see its relevance because the inherent goodness and

greatness of the church's missionary task sometimes obscure the problem.

When this happens, biblical principles yield to blatant pragmatism, divine intention to human invention. In the vast majority of cases, it is not the conscious intent of missionary recruiters and promoters to mislead the Christian public. It is just that the needs are so many, the opportunities are so great, and the time is so short that even though there may be an occasional twinge of conscience over lack of depth and objectivity in our preaching and reporting, it is quickly quieted by the assurance that God's hand is in this entire enterprise and therefore all appeals are justified.

There comes to my mind a cartoon I saw a number of years ago. It pictured a missionary speaker about to take his turn on the podium. As he left the pew he turned to a missionary colleague and queried, “Shall we tell them the truth or keep them happy?” That captures something of the dilemma, though the alternatives are not quite that stark and simple. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that missionary challenges do not always take the high road.

Consider briefly some of the ways in which human invention can obscure divine intention in communicating missionary challenges of the three types mentioned above.

## *Obedience to the Great Commission*

On the face of it, simple obedience to what our Lord has commanded may seem to be the most uncompli-

cated and purest form of motivation for participation in the world mission of the church. Even in this case, however, the command can be misrepresented or misinterpreted so as to make it subservient to our special interests and undertakings. For example, in spite of textual and exegetical problems, the Marcan statement of the Commission (Mark 16:15-20) has been used to support the notion that attesting miracles must accompany the preaching of the gospel. In spite of the emphasis on authoritative sending in the text, the Johannine statement (John 20:21) has been used to support the idea that political and social action is an equal partner with evangelism in the Great Commission. In spite of a grammatical construction that binds the whole world together as the immediate arena of mission, Acts 1:8 has been used to challenge churches to concentrate on their "Jerusalem" before considering missions "to the uttermost parts."

#### *Meeting the needs of humankind*

I recall the stirring address of a prominent evangelical professor upon his return from Africa several years ago. He related how Africans had crowded around the airplane as he was about to take off. One mother especially was pressing toward the window and pointing to her sickly child. With great passion he explained how, after taking off, he had said to the pilot, "I've just seen Jesus. I've just seen Jesus." Then, referring to Jesus' words to the effect that when we care for these little ones we care for Jesus himself (Matt. 25:40), he made an impassioned appeal for funds for medical work in that African country. Of course, the cause itself was legitimate and the use of Matthew 25 for this kind of appeal is a common one. But careful exegesis simply will not sustain it. (See John Amstutz article "Humanitarianism with a Point" in *IJFM* Vol. 9:4. 1992)

This brings to mind the results of some recent research by James F. Engel and his associates. According to

this research, whereas their forebears had an abiding concern for evangelism and church-planting in the "regions beyond," baby boomers tend to favor a "holistic" mission that is more socially oriented and starts "right here at home." This indicates that there will be an increasing problem when it comes to raising support for missions among baby-boomers. Engel's solution is to make a corresponding adjustment in the way we view and promote missions in the future (James F. Engel "We are the World" *Christianity Today* 34, no 13, 1990, pp 32-34). From a pragmatic perspective, that solution seems incontrovertible. However, lest we mistake God's priorities, perhaps both baby-boomers and their elders together should take a more careful look at the biblical text!

#### *3) An exciting and winning cause*

Make no mistake about it. From a Christian perspective no cause is greater than that of proclaiming the gospel to our world and inviting its peoples to become citizens of the Kingdom of God. Nor does any cause have an outcome that is more hopeful and certain. Unfortunately those truths are easily transmuted into appeals that are suspect. The missionary volunteer who responded to a short-term opportunity in Eastern Europe by exclaiming "I think I'll go. It sounds like fun" was misled in the same way as the recruit who signs on with the Navy after viewing the sign "Join the Navy and see the world."

So are all those who are overly impressed by statistics which point to the great growth of the church worldwide. Growth there is, but statistics can conceal as much as they reveal. Over a decade ago some church growth analysts projected general population and church growth rates of sub-Saharan Africa into the future and confidently predicted that Africa would be a Christian continent by the year 2000. For a while all eyes were trained on Africa. Optimism and enthusiasm were everywhere evident. Africa as a mission field

was elevated on the agenda of churches and missions. However, today we know more about the problems of both the nations and the churches of Africa. Inter-tribal strife is everywhere evident. Even many evangelical churches are plagued by lingering ties to questionable tribal customs and witchcraft. As a result, churches and missions in Africa receive much less attention though the challenge is greater than ever! Bandwagons are not recommended conveyances if one really wants to go somewhere.

A word of caution: By no means are the above lines to be interpreted as questioning the necessity of obedience to Christ and responding to human need, or as an indictment of short-term missions and statistical analysis. Not at all! However, there is a better way to challenge the church. There is a missionary motivation that holds more potential and promise. There is an understanding of both church and mission that runs deeper. To that we now turn.

#### **The Supremacy and Glory of God**

Not a few church and mission leaders have based the missionary calling and motivation in the nature of God and the church as revealed in Scripture. Writings of Johannes Verkuyl, J. Robertson McQuilkin, Arthur Glasser, Herbert J. Kane, Don Richardson and Steven Hawthorne, among others, readily come to mind. That is all to the good. But it must be admitted that when it comes to the world mission of the church, all too often pastors and leaders of our congregations leave the task of instructing and challenging God's people to others. That in itself is quite discouraging. But the problem is compounded when mission people who inherit that opportunity by default are not given the time, or do not have the ability or inclination, to go about it in the best way.

Happily, there are many exceptions to this state of affairs. One such is

Minneapolis's Bethlehem Baptist Church where John Piper is senior pastor. I stress "pastor" because that fact in itself is important to my present purpose.

Piper is no ordinary pastor and Bethlehem Baptist is not your average church. Piper has a doctorate in theology from the University of Munich. He and his family (in fact, most of the church staff) live within walking distance of their inner-city church. Piper has been actively involved in writing, in lecturing and preaching elsewhere, and in anti-abortion and other social causes in Minneapolis, in addition to ministering to the local congregation. At the heart of all that he does in writing, preaching and ministering is a concern for the supremacy of God in church and mission. Perhaps a part of the secret to understanding both Piper's mind and heart is to be found in his own words:

I have to admit that most of my soul's food comes from very old books. I find the atmosphere of my own century far too dense with man and distant from the sweet sovereignty of God (Piper 1991:14).

Little wonder that, according to *World Pulse* (Vol. 28, No.5; Feb. 12, 1993), Bethlehem Baptist is ranked seventh in the list of the top twenty missions churches in the United States; has an organized group of some fifty or sixty people who meet regularly with an eye to missionary service; devotes one-third of its budget to support the missionary program; is a center for those who want to enroll in the Perspectives World Christian Movement course inaugurated by the U.S. Center for World Mission. That is not to say that the church has had no problems. On the contrary, one might expect that Satan will take aim on a church with this kind of vision and outreach. At the same time, the success of the church and its pastoral staff has been outstanding even in the kind of geographical location being vacated by many churches.

#### Let the Nations be Glad!

As a theologian-pastor, John

Piper has written on a variety of topics, like the art of preaching, the doctrine of justification, the basics of Christian living, the teaching of the Synoptics and more. But for our purposes perhaps the most revealing work is a recent one entitled *Let the Nations be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (1993). In the preface of that book, Piper

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**I am fully persuaded  
that the farther  
our runaway world  
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opens his heart and mind to the scrutiny of his readers. What he writes cannot be expressed in a more poignant way than he has already expressed it:

This book is a partial payment of a debt I owe to the nations... To those culturally near me and those culturally far I am a debtor. Not because they gave me anything that I must pay back, but because God gave me what can't be paid back. He gave me the all satisfying pleasure of knowing him and being loved by him through his Son Jesus Christ.

I have said to the missionaries of our church, "Your devotion has a tremendous power in my life. Your leaving is a means of my staying. Your strengths make up for my weaknesses. Your absence empowers my presence. So I thank God for you. May God make the reciprocity of our motivation more and more effective in the years to come." But the [this] book is not just for missionaries. It's for pastors who (like me) want to connect their fragile, momentary, local labors to God's invincible, eternal, global purposes. It's for lay people who want a bigger motivation for being world Christians than they get from statistics. It's for college and seminary classes on the theology of

missions that really want to be theological as well as anthropological, methodological and technological. And it's for leaders who need the flickering wick of their vocation fanned into flame again with a focus on *the Supremacy of God in missions*. (Piper 1993: 7-8; emphasis his.)

What a word that is! How humbling to even those of us who have devoted years to the mission field and taught in the mission classroom!

But it is not so much the testimony in the preface but the substance of the book itself that is crucial to our thesis here. Namely, that it is *the Word of God itself that provides the basic context, content, and correctives that the Spirit uses to guide and guard us in global mission*. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive categories. They intertwine considerably so that, at times, any one of them becomes inextricable from the others. But they do furnish us with one way of getting at what Piper says and does in this book so I will employ them here.

#### *The Context*

The Bible is the context of mission. I know that that sounds strange. It is not Piper's phrase, it is mine. To be sure, the context of mission is the world, but it is the world as that world is seen by God—the world first of all in joyful subjection to its Creator, then in rebellion and conflict, and, ultimately, the world restored to a glad relationship with its Sovereign God. It is not the world as worldlings view the world that is really the context of mission. It is not even the world as we Christians might be tempted to view the world. It is the world as God views the world that is missions' real context—the world defined and described in the Bible, the biblical world of which our contemporary world is an extension.

The primary question in missions, then, is not "What in the *world* is God doing?" but "What in the *Word* is God doing?" What he is doing in the world is what we find him doing first

in the Word. Piper understands that, though he does not express it in this way. Why do I say it that way? Because, by my calculations there are well over 600 Scripture references in this book of but 228 pages. Of course, even that can be misleading. Gustavo Gutierrez has about 425 Bible references in his book *Liberation Theology* but the picture he paints of the world, and its problem and its solution, is still very different from that which is revealed in the Bible. So it is important to add that Piper does not just *refer* to Scripture, he responds to it. He does not *wrest* from the text, but *rests* in the text.

That makes for both a world of difference and a different world because, as we have said, the biblical world is a world that begins and ends with God—with both the supremacy of God and the worship of him. So, though we have not always looked at things that way, Piper is essentially correct when he writes:

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists [sic] because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal in missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God. "The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the many coast lands be glad." (Psalm 97:1). "Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy!" (Psalm 67:3-4) (Piper 1993, 11; emphasis his).

So if we begin with a beneficent but benign God looking down at a wayward world and compassionately considering what he might do to rescue his creatures and creation, we've got the wrong starting point for understanding world mission. Mission begins with the supremacy and glory of a "God in

relentless pursuit of praise and honor from creation to consummation" (Piper 1993:17). The God of the Bible looks on his world as a jealous God who will not share his glory with another. Jealous, not as though he needs us. Jealous because only when God is God to all his creatures can the world be put on its true axis.

#### *The Content*

Without even the thought of doing justice to the content of a book absolutely crammed with the really solid stuff on missions, I would simply point again to the central theme of the supremacy of God in the Word and world and provide two intimations of how the text of the Bible informs the content of Piper's book.

The content of *Let the Nations Be Glad* is first of all *extensive*. The grand sweep of the biblical perspective on mission is both prescribed and preserved. The blurb on the back cover says that Piper deals with key biblical texts. He does that. But he does more than deal with important, but unconnected, texts. He literally marches through four solid pages of biblical texts to show how, at all times and in every situation, God has demonstrated zeal for his own glory (Piper 1993: 17-21). When Piper sets out to show how the early church called upon God in prayer to the end that God be glorified in his world, he devotes almost five solid pages to make his case (Piper 1993: 56-61). Of course, no author can simply pile up verse upon verse (not just the reference, but also the text). Nevertheless, the Bible itself supplies a great part of the content of this book quantitatively.

The content is also *intensive*. Over and over, Piper faces really tough and contemporary missiological questions such as those having to do with the meaning of *ethne*, the definition of "unreached peoples," the complementarity of the various statements of the Great Commission, and the necessity of repenting and believing in Christ.

These and similar issues are met head-on and analyzed biblically and intensively. This is not accomplished by a missiologist as such but by a pastor-theologian. Not for the seminary classroom alone but is for all God's people who all are, or should be, concerned for God's work in the world.

So here we have both breadth and depth of content. Could it be that too many of us underestimate the capacity of too many of God's people too much of the time? It would seem so from a reading of this book.

#### *The Correctives*

David Wells charges that evangelicals have lost the power of dissent (1992: 288). Not Piper. He refuses to capitulate to cliches like "Missions work is the greatest activity in the world" and "Prayer is THE work of missions." He does not run away from themes like suffering and judgment. He takes issue with the proposals of prominent people, like the universalism of George MacDonald and the pluralism of John Rick. He even takes issue with the conclusions of some fellow evangelicals. Piper is thorough-going in his criticism of Clark Pinnock, John Stott and Edward Fudge for defining hell, not as a place of eternal punishment, but as an "event of annihilation." He takes issue with Millard Erickson and Norman Anderson who have espoused the idea that people can be saved apart from conscious knowledge and belief in Jesus.

By the way, it is important to note that Piper does not oppose these scholars on the basis that such teachings cut the umbilical cord of missions and rob the church of missionary motivation. No, he opposes them on the basis that their views do not square with the biblical text. He does so courteously and christianly as well as (many will be persuaded) conclusively. In the process Piper rescues significant motivations for world mission. But he does so almost as a byproduct of loyalty to the text itself.

### Conclusion

If it were true that Piper is falling on his face as a pastor, or that he were not in demand as a preacher and teacher, or that his writings had little market and impact, then I might at least waver in my confidence not in the potential of the Word to convict and challenge God's people, but in the capacity of contemporary congregations to hear and respond to it. But Piper's record lead in another direction. I am fully persuaded that the farther our runaway world gets from the Bible the closer the church and mission must get to it—not just for information, but for sustenance and strength!

I have learned that there is no better way to get on track, perhaps no other way exists, than placing missions squarely in the context of Scripture. Piper points us in that direction. If and when other visions move us in the wrong direction, or point us to less worthy pursuits, we could do no better than join Piper in a reconsideration of the biblical text and see again that which supersedes all of "our" worlds, both ancient, modern, postmodern, because

God is pressing us further into the humblest and deepest experience of his grace, and weaning us more and more from our ingrained pride. In doing this he is preparing for himself a people from all the peoples of the earth who will be able to worship him with free and white-hot admiration.

Therefore the church is bound to engage with the Lord of Glory in his cause. It is our unspeakable privilege to be caught up with him in the greatest movement in history—the ingathering of the elect "from all tribes and tongues and peoples and nations" until the full number of Gentiles come in, and all Israel is saved, and the Son of Man descends with power and great glory as King of Kings and Lord of Lords and the earth is full of the knowledge of his glory as the waters cover the sea for ever and ever. Then the supremacy of Christ will be manifest to all and he will deliver the kingdom to God the Father and God will be all in all (Piper 1993: 223).

*Dr. David Hesselgrave served as a missionary to Japan for twelve years. Currently he is professor emeritus of the School of World Missions at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School located in Dearfield, Ill.*

[Editors note: With minor revisions, this article is a reprint of Chapter 9 from Dr. Hesselgrave's recent book *Scripture and Strategy: The Use of the Bible in Postmodern Church and Mission*, 1994, William Carey Library. Used with permission.