

Perspectives™

on the World Christian Movement

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Lesson 1: The Living God is a Missionary God

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The Living God is a Missionary God

John R. W. Stott



John R.W. Stott is Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church in London. He has served as

President of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity and as an Extra Chaplain to the Queen. His many books include *Basic Christianity*, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, and *The Church and the World*. Stott has addressed five Urbana Student Missions Conventions. For 25 years he led university sponsored mission trips on five continents.

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Millions of people in today's world are extremely hostile to the Christian missionary enterprise. They regard it as politically disruptive (because it loosens the cement which binds the national culture) and religiously narrow minded (because it makes exclusive claims for Jesus), while those who are involved in it are thought to suffer from an arrogant imperialism. And the attempt to convert people to Christ is rejected as an unpardonable interference in their private lives. "My religion is my own affair," they say. "Mind your own business, and leave me alone to mind mine."

It is essential, therefore, for Christians to understand the grounds on which the Christian mission rests. Only then shall we be able to persevere in the missionary task, with courage and humility, in spite of the world's misunderstanding and opposition. More precisely, biblical Christians need biblical incentives, for we believe the Bible to be the revelation of God and of his will. So we ask: Has he revealed in Scripture that "mission" is his will for his people? Only then shall we be satisfied. For then it becomes a matter of obeying God, whatever others may think or say. Here we shall focus on the Old Testament, though the entire Bible is rich in evidence for the missionary purpose of God.

The Call of Abraham

Our story begins about four thousand years ago with a man called Abraham, or more accurately, Abram, as he was called at that time. Here is the account of God's call to Abraham.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12:1-3).

God made a promise (a composite promise, as we shall see) to Abraham. An understanding of that promise is indispensable to an understanding of the Bible and of the Christian mission. These are perhaps the most unifying verses in the Bible; the whole of God's purpose is encapsulated here.

By way of introduction we shall need to consider the setting of God's promise, the context in which it came to be given. Then we shall divide the rest of our study into two

parts. First, *the promise* (exactly what it was that God said he would do) and second—at greater length—*its fulfillment* (how God has kept and will keep his promise). We start, however, with the setting.

The Setting of God's Promise

Genesis 12 begins: "Now the LORD said to Abram." It sounds abrupt for an opening of a new chapter. We are prompted to ask: "Who is this 'Lord' who spoke to Abraham?" and "Who is this 'Abraham' to whom he spoke?" They are not introduced into the text out of the blue. A great deal lies behind these words. They are a key which opens up the whole of Scripture. The previous eleven chapters lead up to them; the rest of the Bible follows and fulfills them.

What, then, is the background to this text? It is this. "The Lord" who chose and called Abraham is the same Lord who, in the beginning, created the heavens and the earth and who climaxed his creative work by making man and woman unique creatures in his own likeness. In other words, we should never allow ourselves to forget that the Bible begins with the universe, not with the planet earth; then with the earth, not with Palestine; then with Adam the father of the human race, not with Abraham the father of the chosen race. Since, then, God is the Creator of the universe, the earth and all mankind, we must never demote him to the status of a tribal deity or petty godling like Chemosh the god of the Moabites, or Milcom (or Molech) the god of the Ammonites, or Baal the male deity, or Ashtoreth the female deity of the Canaanites. Nor must we suppose that God chose Abraham and his descendants because he had lost interest in other peoples or given them up. Election is not a synonym for elitism. On the contrary, as we shall soon see, God chose one man and his family in order, through them, to bless all the families of the earth.

We are bound, therefore, to be deeply offended when Christianity is relegated to one chapter in a book on the world's religions as if it were one option among many, or when people speak of "the Christian God"

as if there were others! No, there is only one living and true God, who has revealed himself fully and finally in his only Son Jesus Christ. Monotheism lies at the basis of mission. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5).

The Genesis record moves on from the creation of all things by the one God and of human beings in his likeness, to our rebellion against our own Creator and to God's judgment upon his rebel creatures—a judgment which is relieved, however, by his first gospel promise that one day the woman's seed would "bruise," indeed "crush," the serpent's head (3:15).

**God chose one man and his family
in order, through them, to bless
all the families of the earth.**

The following eight chapters (Gen 4-11) describe the devastating results of the Fall in terms of the progressive alienation of human beings from God and from our fellow human beings. This was the setting in which God's call and promise came to Abraham. All around was moral deterioration, darkness and dispersal. Society was steadily disintegrating. Yet God the Creator did not abandon the human beings he had made in his own likeness (Gen 9:6). Out of the prevailing godlessness, he called one man and his family and promised to bless not only them, but through them, the whole world. The scattering would not proceed unchecked; a grand process of ingathering would now begin.

THE COMPOSITE PROMISE

What then was the promise which God made to Abraham? It was a composite promise consisting of several parts. Each of these promises was elaborated in the chapters that follow Abraham's call.

The Promise of Land

God's call seems to have come to Abraham in two stages: first in Ur of the Chaldees while his father was still alive (11:31; 15:7) and then in Haran after his father had died (11:32; 12:1). Abraham was to leave his own land and, in return, God would show him another country.

After Abraham had generously allowed his nephew Lot to choose where he wanted to settle (he selected the fertile Jordan valley), God said to Abraham: "Lift up your eyes, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants forever" (13:14-15).

The Promise of Posterity

He was to go from his kindred and his father's house, and in exchange for the loss of his family God would make of him "a great nation." Later, in order to indicate this, God changed his name from Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of a multitude") because, he said to him, "I have made you the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:5).

God gave Abraham another visual aid, telling him to look now not to the earth but to the sky. On a clear, dark night he took him outside his tent and said to him, "Look toward heaven and number the stars." What a ludicrous command! Perhaps Abraham started, "1,2,3,5,10,20,30..." but he must soon have given up. It was an impossible task. Then God said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And we read, "He believed the Lord." Although he was probably by now in his eighties and although he and Sarah were still childless, he yet believed God's promise and God "reckoned it to him as righteousness." That is, because he trusted God, God accepted him as righteous in his sight (15:5-6).

The Promise of Blessing

The words *ble*ss and *ble*ssing occur five times in 12:2-3. The blessing God promised Abraham would spill over upon all mankind.

"I will bless you." Already God has accepted Abraham as righteous or (to borrow the New Testament expression) has "justified him by faith." No greater blessing is conceivable. It is the foundation blessing of the covenant of grace, which a few years later God went on to elaborate to Abraham: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you...for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you and I will be their God" (17:7-8). And he gave them circumcision as the outward and visible sign of his

gracious covenant or pledge to be their God. It is the first time in Scripture that we hear the covenant formula which is repeated many times later: "I will be their God and they shall be my people."

THE PROGRESSIVE FULFILLMENT

A land, a posterity, a blessing—but what has all that to do with mission? For that, let us turn now from the promise to the fulfillment.

The whole question of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy is a difficult one in which there is often misunderstanding and much disagreement. Of particular importance is the principle that the New Testament writers themselves understood Old Testament prophecy to have not a *single* but usually a *triple* fulfillment—past, present and future. The past fulfillment was an immediate or historical fulfillment in the life of the nation of Israel. The present is an intermediate or gospel fulfillment in Christ and his Church. The future will be an ultimate or eschatological fulfillment in the new heaven and the new earth.

Immediate Historical Fulfillment

God's promise to Abraham received an immediate historical fulfillment in his physical descendants, the people of Israel.

Posterity

God's promise to Abraham of a numerous, indeed of an innumerable, posterity was confirmed to his son, Isaac (Gen 26:4, "as the stars of heaven"), and his grandson, Jacob (32:12, "as the sand of the sea"). Gradually the promise began to come literally true. Perhaps we could pick out some of the stages in this development.

The first stage concerns the years of slavery in Egypt, of which it is written, "The descendants of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong; so that the land was filled with them" (Ex 1:7; cf. Acts 7:17). The next stage I will mention came several hundred years later when King Solomon called Israel "a great people that cannot be numbered or counted for multitude" (1 Ki 3:8). A third stage was some three hundred fifty years after Solomon; Jeremiah warned Israel of impending judgment

and captivity and then added this divine promise of restoration: "As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured so I will multiply the descendants of David my servant" (Jer 33:22).

Land

So much for Abraham's posterity; what about the land? Again we note with worship and gratitude God's faithfulness to his promise. For it was in remembrance of his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that he first rescued his people from their Egyptian slavery and gave them the territory which came on that account to be called "the promised land" (Ex 2:24; 3:6; 32:13), and then restored them to it some seven hundred years later after their captivity in Babylon. Nevertheless, neither Abraham nor his physical descendants fully inherited the land. As Hebrews 11 puts it, they "died in faith not having received what was promised." Instead, as "strangers and exiles on the earth" they "looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:8-16,39,40).

Blessing

God kept his promises about the posterity and the land, at least in part. Now what about the blessing? At Sinai God confirmed and clarified his covenant with Abraham and pledged himself to be Israel's God (e.g., Ex 19:3-6). Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God continued to bless the obedient while the disobedient fell under his judgment.

Perhaps the most dramatic example comes at the beginning of Hosea's prophecy, in which Hosea is told to give his three children names which describe God's awful and progressive judgment on Israel. His firstborn (a boy) he called "Jezreel," meaning "God will scatter." Next came a daughter "Lo-ruhamah," meaning "not pitied," for God said he would no longer pity or forgive his people. Lastly he had another son "Lo-ammi," meaning "not my people," for God said they were not now his people. What terrible names for the chosen people of God! They sound like a devastating contradiction of God's eternal promise to Abraham.

But God does not stop there. For beyond the coming judgment there would be a restoration, which is described in words which once

more echo the promise to Abraham: "Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered" (Hos 1:10). And then the judgments implicit in the names of Hosea's children would be reversed. There would be a gathering instead of a scattering ("Jezreel" is ambiguous and can imply either), "not pitied" would be pitied, and "not my people" would become "sons of the living God" (Hos 1:10-2:1).

The wonderful thing is that the apostles Paul and Peter both quote these verses from Hosea. They see their fulfillment not just in a further multiplication of Israel but in the inclusion of the Gentiles in the community of Jesus: "Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9-10; cf. Rom 9:25-26).

This New Testament perspective is essential as we read the Old Testament prophecies, for what we miss in the Old Testament is any clear explanation of just how God's promised blessing would overflow from Abraham and his descendants to "all families of the earth." Although Israel is described as "a light to lighten the nations" and has a mission to "bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa 42:1-6; 49:6), we do not actually see this happening. It is only in the Lord Jesus himself that these prophecies are fulfilled, for only in his day are the nations actually included in the redeemed community. To this we now turn.

Intermediate Gospel Fulfillment

God's promise to Abraham receives an intermediate or gospel fulfillment in Christ and his Church.

Posterity

Almost the first word of the whole New Testament is the word Abraham. Matthew's Gospel begins, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac...." So it is right back to Abraham that Matthew traces the beginning not just of the genealogy but of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He knows that what he is recording is the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to Abraham made some two thousand years previously. (See also Luke 1:45-55,67-75.)

Yet from the start Matthew recognizes that it isn't just *physical* descent from Abraham which qualifies people to inherit the promises, but a kind of *spiritual* descent, namely, repentance and faith in the coming Messiah. This was John the Baptist's message to crowds who flocked to hear him: "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8; cf. John 8:33-40). The implications of his words would have shocked his hearers since "it was the current belief that no descendant of Abraham could be lost."¹

And God has raised up children to Abraham, if not from stones, then from an equally unlikely source—namely, the Gentiles! So Matthew, although the most Jewish of all the four Gospel writers, later records Jesus as having said, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness" (Matt 8:11-12; cf. Luke 13:28-29).

It is hard for us to grasp how shocking, how completely topsy-turvy, these words would have sounded to the Jewish hearers of John the Baptist and Jesus. *They* were the descendants of Abraham, so *they* had a title to the promises which God made to Abraham. Who then were these outsiders who were to share in the promises, even apparently usurp them, while they themselves would be disqualified? They were indignant. They had quite forgotten that part of God's covenant with Abraham promised an overflow of blessing to *all* the nations. Now the Jews had to learn that it was in relation to Jesus the Messiah, who was himself Seed of Abraham, that all the nations would be blessed.

The Apostle Peter seems at least to have begun to grasp this in his second sermon, just after Pentecost. In it he addressed a Jewish crowd with the words: "You are the sons...of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant [Jesus], sent him to you first, to bless you in turning every one of you from your wickedness" (Acts 3:25-26).

It is a very notable statement because he interprets the blessing in the moral terms of repentance and righteousness and because, if Jesus was sent "first" to the Jews, he was presumably sent next to the Gentiles, whose "families of the earth" had been "far off" (cf. Acts 2:39), but were now to share in the blessing.

It was given to the apostle Paul, however, to bring this wonderful theme to its full development. For he was called and appointed to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

God has raised up children to Abraham from an unlikely source—the Gentiles!

To him was revealed God's eternal but hitherto secret purpose to make Jews and Gentiles "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3:6). Paul declares with great boldness, "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants" (Rom 9:6-7).

Who then are the true descendants of Abraham, the true beneficiaries of God's promises to him? Paul does not leave us in any doubt. They are believers in Christ of whatever race. In Romans 4 he points out that Abraham not only received justification by faith but also received this blessing *before he had been circumcised*. Therefore Abraham is the father of all those who, whether circumcised or uncircumcised (that is, Jews or Gentiles), "follow the example of [his] faith" (Rom 4:9-12). If we "share the faith of Abraham," then "he is the father of us all, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations'" (vv. 16-17). Thus neither physical descent from Abraham nor physical circumcision as a Jew makes a person a true child of Abraham, but rather faith. Abraham's real descendants are believers in Jesus Christ, whether they happen to be Jews or Gentiles.

Land

What then is the "land" which Abraham's descendants inherit? The letter to the Hebrews refers to a "rest" which God's people enter now by faith (Heb 4:3), and in a most remarkable expression Paul refers to "the promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should *inherit the world*" (Rom 4:13). One can only

assume he means the same thing as when to the Corinthians he writes that in Christ “all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours” (1 Cor 3:21-23). Christians, by God’s wonderful grace, are joint heirs with Christ of the universe.

Somewhat similar teaching, both about the nature of the promised blessing and about its beneficiaries, is given by Paul in Galatians 3. He first repeats how Abraham was justified by faith and then continues: “So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham” and who therefore “are blessed with Abraham who had faith” (vv. 6-9).

Blessing

What then is the blessing with which all the nations were to be blessed (v. 8)? In a word, it is the blessing of salvation. We were under the curse of the law, but Christ has redeemed us from it by becoming a curse in our place, in order “that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (vv. 10-14). Christ bore our curse that we might inherit Abraham’s blessing, the blessing of justification (v. 8) and of the indwelling Holy Spirit (v. 14). Paul sums it up in the last verse of the chapter (v. 29): “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

We have not quite finished yet. There is a third stage of fulfillment still to come.

Ultimate Fulfillment

God’s promise to Abraham will receive an ultimate or eschatological fulfillment in the final destiny of all the redeemed.

Posterity, Land and Blessing

In the book of Revelation there is one more reference to God’s promise to Abraham (7:9 ff.). John sees in a vision “a great multitude which no man could number.” It is an international throng, drawn “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues.” They are “standing before the throne,” the symbol of God’s kingly reign. That is, his kingdom

has finally come, and they are enjoying all the blessings of his gracious rule. He shelters them with his presence. Their wilderness days of hunger, thirst and scorching heat are over. They have entered the promised land at last, described now not as “a land flowing with milk and honey,” but as a land irrigated from “springs of living water” which never dry up. But how did they come to inherit these blessings? Partly because they have “come out of great tribulation,” but mostly because “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb;” that is, they have been cleansed from sin and clothed with righteousness through the merits of the death of Jesus Christ alone.

“Therefore are they before the throne of God.”

Speaking personally, I find it extremely moving to glimpse this final fulfillment in a future eternity of that ancient promise of God to Abraham. All the essential elements of the promise may be detected. For here are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, a “great multitude which no man could number,” as countless as the sand on the seashore and as the stars in the night sky. Here too are “all the families of the earth” being blessed, for the numberless multitude is composed of people from every nation. Here also is the promised land, namely, all the rich blessings which flow from God’s gracious rule. And here above all is Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham, who shed his blood for our redemption and who bestows his blessings on all those who call on him to be saved.

Conclusion

Let me try to summarize what we learn about God from his promise to Abraham and its fulfillment.

First, He is the God of history.

History is not a random flow of events, for God is working out in time a plan which he conceived in a past eternity and will consummate in a future eternity. In this historical process Jesus Christ, as the Seed of Abraham, is the key figure. Let’s rejoice that if we are

Now we are Abraham’s seed by faith, and the earth’s families will be blessed only if we go to them with the gospel.

Christ's disciples, we are Abraham's descendants. We belong to his spiritual lineage. If we have received the blessings of justification by faith, acceptance with God and the indwelling Spirit, then we are beneficiaries today of promises made to Abraham four thousand years ago.

Second, He is the God of the covenant.

God is gracious enough to make promises, and he always keeps the promise he makes. He is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. This is not to say that he always fulfills his promises immediately. Abraham and Sarah "died in faith *not* having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar" (Heb 11:13). That is, although Isaac was born to them in fulfillment of the promise, their seed was not yet numerous, nor was the land given to them, nor were the nations blessed. All God's promises come true, but they are inherited "through faith *and patience*" (Heb 6:12). We have to be content to wait for God's time.

Third, He is the God of blessing.

"I will bless you," he said to Abraham (Gen 12:2). "God...sent him [Jesus] to you first, to bless you," echoed Peter (Acts 3:26). God's attitude to his people is positive, constructive and enriching. Judgment is his "strange work" (Isa 28:21). His principal and characteristic work is to bless people with salvation.

Fourth, He is the God of mercy.

I have always derived much comfort from the statement of Revelation 7:9 that the company of the redeemed in heaven will be "a great multitude which no man could number." I do not profess to know how this can be, since Christians have always seemed to be a rather

small minority, but Scripture states it for our comfort. Although no biblical Christian can be a universalist (believing that all mankind will ultimately be saved), since Scripture teaches the awful reality and eternity of hell, a biblical Christian can—even must—assert that the redeemed will somehow be an international throng so immense as to be countless. For God's promise is going to be fulfilled, and Abraham's seed is going to be as innumerable as the dust of the earth, the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore.

Fifth, He is the God of mission.

The nations are not gathered in automatically. If God has promised to bless "all the families of the earth," he has promised to do so "through Abraham's seed" (Gen 12:3; 22:18). Now we are Abraham's seed by faith, and the earth's families will be blessed only if we go to them with the gospel. That is God's plain purpose.

I pray that these words, "all the families of the earth," may be written on our hearts. It is this expression more than any other which reveals the living God of the Bible to be a missionary God. It is this expression, too, which condemns all our petty parochialism and narrow nationalism, our racial pride (whether white or black), our condescending paternalism and arrogant imperialism. How dare we adopt a hostile or scornful or even indifferent attitude to any person of another color or culture if our God is the God of "all the families of the earth"? We need to become global Christians with a global vision, for we have a global God.

So may God help us never to forget his four-thousand-year-old promise to Abraham: "By you and your descendants *all* the nations of the earth shall be blessed." 🌍

Endnote

1. J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, SCM Press, 1958, p. 48.

Study Questions

1. Why is it important that the biblical record begins with the Creator God instead of opening with stories about Abraham's God?
2. Describe what Stott means by God's promise having "triple fulfillment." How was the promise of a land, a posterity and a blessing fulfilled in the past? How is the promise receiving fulfillment in the present? How will God's promise to Abraham receive its final fulfillment in the future?

Israel's Missionary Call

Walter C. Kaiser



Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., is President Emeritus of Gordon-Conwell

Theological Seminary and the Colman M. Mockler Distinguished Professor of Old Testament. He previously taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Wheaton College and has served as a pastor. Among his numerous writings are *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, and *The Promise-Plan of God*.

Adapted from an address given to the students of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. Used by permission.

There is a popular misconception that the Old Testament does not have a missionary mandate and that it is a book dedicated only to the Jews and their history. However, this view does not match the claims that the Old Testament itself makes. Even if we limit our investigation to three key Old Testament texts, we will quickly see that these texts present some of the most powerful statements of missionary calling that can be found anywhere in the Bible.

We would be less quick to think that the Old Testament has no missionary challenge if we paid closer attention to how it begins. The message of the earliest chapters in Genesis is universal in scope and global in audience. Did God not deal with “all the families of the earth” when he acted in saving grace at three specific junctures in Genesis 1-11? After the fall of man, the flood of the earth and the failure of the Tower of Babel, God directed grand messages of salvation to all of humanity (Gen 3:15; 9:17; 12:1-3).

And if we doubt that God’s promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) was global in scope and universal in its offer, we should note that the “families” which were scattered throughout the earth appear in Genesis 10, in what is often called the “Table of Seventy Nations.” This listing of all the nations, languages and families is the backdrop for God’s promise to bless “all the families of the earth” in Genesis 12:3.

Old Testament Gentiles Came to Faith

The Old Testament records the phenomenon of Gentiles coming to faith in the coming “seed” or “Man of Promise.” One example is Melchizedek, priest-king over Salem or Jerusalem (Gen 14). This Gentile openly confessed his faith in Jehovah (Yahweh). Another example is Jethro, the Midianite who was Moses’ father-in-law. Jethro demonstrated his commitment to Moses’ God by sitting down in fellowship with Moses and Aaron around a sacrificial meal (Ex 18). Then there is the example of Balaam, whom none could accuse of being pro-Jewish. Balaam wanted badly to please Balak, the king of Moab, and curse the nation of Israel. Yet God spoke to and through him even though he had a very rough start—when his donkey showed keener spiritual insight than he had. Nevertheless, Balaam gave us two fantastic chapters, including the great (and only) star prophecy of the Messiah (Num 23-24).

There were times when whole Gentile cities repented at the preaching of one Jewish prophet—take for example,

Jonah and his mission to Nineveh. Jonah was more than reluctant to go to Nineveh to preach to wicked Gentiles who had massacred Jews. Only after becoming very “down-in-the-mouth” and enduring a “whale-of-an-experience” did Jonah *finally go* and preach to the Ninevites. The city came to the Lord in great numbers despite Jonah’s own hopes that it would be one sermon to which no one would respond.

Some may still be skeptical that God explicitly commissioned Israelites in Old Testament times to *go* to the *Gentiles*. Let us look at three passages in the Old Testament that settle this point.

Three Basic Texts

There are three basic texts that make clear the missionary mandate that God had designed for the whole nation of Israel: Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:4-6, and Psalm 67. It is impossible for us to understand the Old Testament accurately without examining these texts in their missionary context. In the plan and purpose of God, Israel had always been responsible for communicating the message of God’s grace to the nations. Israel was meant to be a communicating nation.

Lest we think that these three Old Testament texts provide a mandate only to the people of that time and thus have no relevance to those of us who live in the Christian era, let it be made plain that they are also God’s call to us. Arranged in outline form, we can see that God’s message to them is God’s call to us:

1. To Proclaim His Plan to Bless the Nations (Gen 12:3)
2. To Participate in His Priesthood as Agents of That Blessing (Ex 19:4-6)
3. To Prove His Purpose to Bless all the Nations (Ps 67)

The Preamble of Genesis 1-11: Promise and Purpose on a Global Scope

No one can say that the Old Testament begins in an ethnocentric way or that the God of the Old Testament was so pro-Jewish that missionary outreach did not occur until the time of the Gentiles. Genesis 1-11 clearly attests to the opposite. The scope of these chapters is worldwide in its offer of salvation for all who

would believe. The counter theme in those same chapters is the nations questing for a “name” for themselves. In both Genesis 6:4 and Genesis 11:4, the sole objective of mankind was to make a “name” for themselves

**Israel was to be God’s missionary to the world
—and so are we by virtue of our identity
as Abraham’s spiritual descendants!**

The mission has not changed.

and to advance their own reputation—at the expense of the “name” of God.

Thus the “sons of God” (whom I believe to be tyrannical and polygamous despots in the context of Gen 6) took this divine title for themselves along with its presumed privileges and rights; they distorted the means that God had set up for justice, abusing it for their own desires and lusts. This led to the great Flood, the second great failure of the pre-patriarchal era of Genesis 1-11. It was preceded by the fall of man in Genesis 3 and followed by the failure of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

Genesis 12:1-3: Proclaim His Plan

Nevertheless, for each of these three failures, our Lord had a saving word of grace: Genesis 3:15, 9:27 and 12:1-3. It is this third gracious word that is relevant here because it emphasizes God’s grace over and against the failures of men and their idolatrous questing for a “name” or reputation. Five times God said, “I will bless you,” “I will bless you,” “I will bless you,” “I will bless those blessing you,” and “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”

Clearly, the key word here is *bless* or *blessing*. This same word had characterized this whole section, beginning with the word to Adam and Eve: “He blessed them saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply,’” just as He had also graciously promised to bless the animals.

Despite these many promises of blessing, humanity continued to search for significance on its own terms by questing for a “name.” Amidst the emptiness of this quest—this vacuum of looking for social status, reputation and achievement apart from God—Genesis 12:2

suddenly announces that God would give Abraham a "name" as a blessing from above rather than as a result of his own godless striving.

Blessed so That They Might Become a Blessing

We cannot fully appreciate the significance of this grandest of all missionary texts until we realize that there are actually three promises of blessing in Genesis 12:2-3, where God promises:

1. "I will make you a great nation,"
2. "I will bless you" and
3. "I will make your name great..."

But this is immediately followed by a purpose clause: "*so that* you may be a blessing." None of these three promises of blessing were meant to simply enhance Abraham's status or ego. Indeed, he and his nation were blessed so that they might be a blessing. But to whom? And in what way? To answer these questions, we must further examine two more promises:

4. "I will bless those blessing you," and
5. "Those who curse you, I will curse."

Again, the writer of Genesis adds a purpose clause. However, he shifts the tense of the verb, so that a fuller statement of his purpose can be given. Now it was "*so that* in you all the families of the earth might be blessed."

This then explains why there was so much blessing promised to Abraham and his descendants. They were to be missionaries and channels of the truth from the very beginning.

It is exceedingly important that we recognize that the Hebrew verb in this case must be translated as a passive verb ("be blessed") and not reflexively ("bless themselves"), since all the earlier Hebrew grammars, versions and New Testament understandings insist on it. It is a matter of grace and not of works.

All the Nations to Be Blessed

The nations were to be blessed in this man's "*seed*," referring to his descendants. Indeed, the "*seed*" of the woman (Gen 3:15), the "*seed*" of Shem in whose tents God would come to "tabernacle" or dwell (Gen 9:27)

and the "*seed*" of Abraham all formed one collective whole. This collective entity was epitomized by a succession of representatives who acted as down payments of the blessing until Christ himself appeared from that same genealogical line as part of that succession and corporate entity.

The initial recipients of this blessing were the 70 nations listed as all "the families" of the earth in Genesis 10. This chapter precedes man's third failure at Babel, then leads to the sudden revelation to Abraham of God's purpose and plan to bring all the nations of the world to Himself. The word to Abraham was meant to have a great impact on all the families on the face of the earth. This is indeed a high missionary calling!

For those who remain skeptical, saying that they cannot see any gospel or mission mandate in Genesis 12:2-3, it might help to consider that Paul named Abraham the heir of the whole world (Rom 4:13). That inheritance is obviously spiritual in nature. Moreover, Paul plainly stated that Abraham had the gospel preached to him ahead of time (Gal 3:8) when he received the promise of Genesis 12:3: "in you shall all the nations be blessed." That was and still is the good news of the gospel.

Our Mission as Abraham's "Seed" in Christ

If we today believe the gospel, then we are part of Abraham's "*seed*" (Gal 3:29). The object of faith and trust is still the same. The focal point for Israel and the nations of the earth is the Man of Promise who was to come in Abraham and David's "*seed*": Jesus Christ. The whole purpose of God then was that He would make a nation, give them a "*name*," bless them *so that* they might be light to the nations and thereby be a blessing to all the nations as Abraham's seed. To shrink back would be evil on Israel's part. Israel was to be God's missionary to the world—and so are we by virtue of our identity as Abraham's spiritual descendants! The mission has not changed in our own day. Abraham and Israel were not intended to be passive transmitters of the "*seed*" any more than we are to be passive. They were to be a blessing by actively communicating God's gift to the world.

God viewed the nations differently from how He viewed Israel. However, the way God dealt with the nations was always directly related to how they reacted to the family of promise and ultimately to the Man of Promise who was to come through Israel. By choosing and calling Israel, God was not favoring Israel or rejecting the other nations. On the contrary, he intended for Israel to be the very means of blessing them all. The human quest for a "name" continues to this day despite God's offer to give us His own "name." He will still give His special "name" to those who will believe in that same "seed." It is the only means by which they and all their kindred upon the face of the earth will be blessed and made part of the family of God.

Some may agree that the object of faith was indeed to come from Abraham's stock, but they may not agree that God thereby gave Abraham and his descendants anything like our missionary mandate. Perhaps they think that Israel was meant to be entirely passive while God was the sole actor in the Old Testament. However, the following passages do not support this viewpoint.

Exodus 19: Participate in His Priesthood

In Moses' famous "Eagle's Wings Speech," God reviews with Israel how He carried them from Egypt the way an eagle transports her young who were learning to fly. Since they were the recipients of this gift of deliverance, the text pointedly says, "Now therefore..." It implies that a natural consequence ought to flow from God's miraculous aid in their escape from Egypt.

To read Exodus 19:5 without the "now therefore," and to stress the "if" in this verse is to miss the emphasis of the text. This text, like Exodus 20:1, begins in the context of grace. "I am the Lord your God who brought you up from out of the land of Egypt." The "now therefore..." follows because of the grace of God which precedes it.

Exodus 19:5-6 goes on to say: "if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my *special possession* among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be my *kingdom of priests* and a *holy nation*" (italics mine). These are the three ministries God specifies for Abraham's descendants.

A Special Possession: God's Portable Treasure

In the first place, they were to be God's *special possession* or His "peculiar people" as the older translations put it. The old English word "peculiar" came from the Latin word which meant valuables or movable goods, e.g., jewels, stocks or bonds, in contrast to real estate or goods attached to the land. The fact was that Israel was to be God's son, His people, His firstborn (Ex 4:22) and now His special treasure. The emphasis here is on the portability of God's message and the fact that God has placed such high value on people. This is exactly as Malachi 3:17 describes us: "jewels."

Kings and Priests: Mediators and Servants

Secondly, Israel was to perform the role of being kings and priests for God. The phrase "kingdom of priests" is better translated "kings and priests," "kingly priests" or "royal priests" (based on six occurrences in prose texts). It is here that Israel's missionary role became explicit if any doubt remained. The whole nation was to function on behalf of the kingdom of God as mediators between God and the nations.

This passage, in fact, became the basis for our famous New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of believers (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6-5:10). Unfortunately, Israel rejected this priesthood of all believers and urged Moses to go up to Mount Sinai as their representative. Nevertheless, even though God's original plan was frustrated and mostly delayed until New Testament times, it was not defeated, substituted or scrapped. It remained God's plan for believers. They were to have a priestly or mediatorial role!

A Holy Nation: Ambassadors

Thirdly, Israel was to be a holy nation. Holiness in the Bible is not just something ethereal which invades audiences on Sunday mornings, making them somewhat listless and passive. Holiness is wholeness. To be holy is to be wholly the Lord's.

It is regrettable that we had to divide the English word into two words: the religious word "holy" and the secular word "wholly." However, both words have the same root in Anglo-Saxon history. The same is true for the Hebrew root. Israel was to be given wholly

over to the Lord, set apart not only in their personal lives but also in their service. God called and elected them for service, and that service had been defined as early as Abraham's day.

As priests represent God and mediate his word to the people, so Israel as a holy nation was to assume two relations: one towards God and the other towards the nations. In a sense, they carried a portfolio that read, "Ambassadors of the Coming Man of Promise." They were to be a nation for all the times and for all the peoples—set apart. Instead, Israel began

Israel was to be "a light to the nations,"
just as Abraham had been told,
the writer of Exodus had exhorted,
and the psalmist had sung.

looking out for her own interests, as we often do, becoming a club of the pious and forgetting her calling to be sharers of blessing, truth, gifts and the "Seed" to the nations.

One People of God with One Purpose

I have not forgotten that there is a distinction between Israel and the Church. One can distinguish between these two entities just as one can distinguish between male and female. However, that middle wall of partition that separated Jew from Gentile in the temple complex has been knocked down by Christ's death (Eph 2:14). Maleness, femaleness, Jewishness, Gentileness, slave or free no longer matter. All who believe are one "people of God." Indeed, that has always been the term for those who belonged to the Savior throughout the ages. Peter makes this continuity explicit by calling the Gentile believers of his day "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Pet 2:9). The use of Exodus 19 is very obvious and transparent. The point is, *do we recognize the continuity of God's purpose and plan?*

Peter went on to make this point clear. God had called His people by these four titles "so that they might declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). The reason

Israel and now the Gentile believers have been named a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people of God, His chosen race, His special, movable possession, is that we might declare Him and be His witnesses and missionaries.

None of God's gifts were meant for our own consumption. They were not meant to be mere badges or titles. They were for the purpose of declaring His wonderful deeds and calling people to His marvelous light. As Peter said (borrowing from the names of Hosea's children), we were once "no people" (Lo-Ammi) and "without mercy" (Lo-Ruhamah). But now we are the people of God and now we have received His mercy and grace.

Peter is trying to show us that the people of God in all ages have been one. Even though there are distinctions within the people of God (e.g., Israel and the Church), nevertheless there is a unity of all believers throughout time. And though there are different aspects to the single plan and purpose of God to bless all the nations of the earth, we can be certain of the continuity of God's program in both Old and New Testament times. In both testaments, we were all intended by God to participate in that priesthood as agents of blessing to the nations of the earth. Exodus 19 makes it clear that this was God's plan.

Psalm 67: Prove His Purpose

Now we come to our third and final text. We have already seen how God calls us all: to *proclaim His plan* to the nations in Genesis 12, to *participate in His priesthood* as agents of blessing to all the nations in Exodus 19, and now we will see that He is calling us to *prove His purpose* to bless all the nations in Psalm 67. This Psalm comes from the Aaronic benediction found in Numbers 6:24-26:

Now may the LORD bless you and keep you;

May the LORD make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

May the LORD lift up his countenance (face) upon you and give you peace.

These words are often heard at the end of many church services today, but look closely at what the psalmist does in using this blessing in

Psalm 67. Rather than using the word Yahweh ("LORD" in English translations), which is Israel's covenantal and personal name for God, he uses Elohim ("God" in English translations), the name used when talking about God's relationship to all men, nations and creation. Thus the psalmist prayed: "May God be gracious to us and bless us."

And again, he changed the wording ever so slightly, using the words "among us" (literally) instead of "upon us." "And may he cause his face to shine among us." It is significant that this psalm has applied to all the peoples the blessing God gave through Aaron and the priests. The enlarged purpose for this greater blessing is given in verse 2: "so that your ways may be known upon the earth, your salvation among all the nations (or Gentiles)."

God's ways of covenantal love will become clear to the nations to the extent that His blessing becomes evident among His people. This global purpose is why God was gracious in blessing Israel and ultimately, to all who believe.

The sentiment of this psalm was: May God bless us, fellow Israelites. May He be pleased to benefit us. May our crops increase and our flocks produce abundantly. May our families grow large and may we prosper spiritually, so that the nations may look at us and say that God has indeed blessed us. Our abundance demonstrates that God has blessed us. Therefore, may the rest of His purpose come to pass also, that in blessing Israel, all the nations of the earth might come to know Him.

Psalm 67 has been called the Old Testament's Lord's Prayer. It has three stanzas:

1. Verses 1-3 (ending with "May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you.")
2. Verses 4-5 (ending with the same refrain)
3. Verses 6-7 (ending with "God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him.")

Three times this psalm refers to the blessing from God (vv. 1,6,7). The structure is almost an

exact replica of Genesis 12:2-3: Bless us, bless us, bless us...so that all the nations might know the Lord.

This psalm was probably sung at the Feast of Pentecost, celebrating the summer harvest of first fruits. It is all the more remarkable that Pentecost is when God later poured out

his Spirit on Jews from every nation and an unusual harvest began to take place—greater than at any previous feast. Deliberately, the psalmist refers to the gathering of the harvest as a down payment,

a symbol of the spiritual harvest from every tribe, tongue and nation. So may the Lord indeed be gracious to us and bless us.

The psalmist calls us to become the living proof of God's purposes for three reasons. These reasons follow the same structure as the psalm.

God Has Been Gracious to Us

The first reason we are to become a living demonstration of God's intentions is the experience of His gracious ways. In verses 1-3 the Psalmist testifies that we, as God's people, have experienced God's grace. The Psalmist declares that this grace is to be known among all nations. If only all the peoples of the earth would personally come to know that same grace for themselves!

God Rules and Guides All Nations

Verses 4-5 speaks of God presiding as a great ruler. He is not a judge in a judicial, punishing sense in this context, but a royal ruler who wisely rules in righteousness (as in Isaiah 11:3ff). He is a guide for the nations as the Great Shepherd of Psalm 23. Thus the refrain is repeated: Come on, all you peoples of the earth—let's hear it! It's about time you began praising the Lord.

The Very Goodness of God

We ought to prove the purpose of God in blessing the nations because He has been so good to us. As verses 6-7 attest, the land has yielded an abundant harvest—evidence that God answered the prayer of Aaron and the

**The psalmist deeply longed for God
to be acknowledged as Lord
of all the peoples of the earth.
Should we do less?**

priests (Num 6:24-26). The power of God becomes evident in the very abundance of the harvest. The spectacle of His blessing upon His people becomes proof of His ways and glory.

That same power of God that brought material increase is available for spiritual increase. The psalmist did not mouth empty words, but he gave the psalm so that Israel and we might experience real change in our lives. If God's power were more evident in our lives and preaching, then everyone would witness the spiritual results, both in our nation and among other nations. God has blessed us so that all the ends of the earth might receive spiritual benefit. Our material blessings are only a precursor of a blessing of greater spiritual dimensions.

"God has blessed us; let all the ends of the earth fear Him" (v. 7). The word "fear" here does not mean terror or fright. Exodus 20:20 urges us not to be afraid: "Fear not, but rather, fear the Lord." To fear the Lord means to believe Him and put your whole soul's commitment on Him. Fear is one of the Old Testament words for trust and belief. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of everything: of understanding, of living, of personal holiness and of a vital personal relationship to Him. The goodness of God to Israel was meant to be one of His ways of bringing all the nations on earth to fear Him, i.e., to believe the coming Man of Promise, our Lord Jesus Christ.

God's purpose was for Israel to be a witnessing, proclaiming, evangelizing nation. The Gentiles had to be brought to the light. This purpose for Israel is also seen even more clearly in a passage that is not part of this discussion; namely, the "Servant of the Lord" passages of Isaiah 42 and 49. Israel as a whole is that Servant of the Lord, while the Messiah is the ultimate representative of the whole group of servants. As such, Israel was to be a "light to the nations" just as Abraham had been told, the writer of Exodus had exhorted and the psalmist had sung.

The psalmist deeply longed for God, the King of Israel, to be acknowledged as Lord and Savior of all the peoples of the earth. Should we do less? Does God call us to anything less than also proving, along with Israel, His purpose revealed in Psalm 67? God's challenge to Israel is also His challenge to us: we are to have a role as mediators in proclaiming His name among the nations. That is still God's purpose. Is it happening in your life?

May the flame of the gospel, encapsulated in Genesis 12:1-3, and the call to be a holy nation and a royal priesthood set us on fire for proclaiming the gospel in the days ahead. May we announce, not only in our country, but in every single nation on earth, that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father! 🌟

Study Questions

1. Kaiser asserts that God gave a missionary mandate to the people of Israel in the Old Testament. What was the basis of that mandate?
2. Why is it crucial to see that the phenomenon of blessing was not intended to be passive?
3. What is the function of a priesthood according to Kaiser? What does this function have to do with a missionary mandate?

the promise is being fulfilled by their faith as those who inherit the promise:

“It is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, ‘All the nations will be blessed in you.’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham” (Gal 3:7-9).

Christ has now ended the curse and opened the family of God. Now people from every family on earth can be part of Abraham’s family by faith in Christ. They inherit the full family heritage of being blessed in order to be a blessing to the nations.

God’s Promise Becomes Our Mandate

God’s promise to bless the nations through Abraham’s descendants carries mandate force for all who have been joined with Christ by faith. The promise so clearly reveals God’s purpose, that Christians rightly consider it to convey God’s mandate to serve as His agents

of blessing among all the peoples of the earth.² We are blessed in Christ in order to bring forth the blessing of Christ among all the nations. But what are we hoping for? What does it mean for the nations to be blessed? And how are we to pursue it? The promise of blessing shapes and integrates our mission in two important ways.

Relational Blessing: Belonging to God’s Family

The greatest blessing imaginable is the privilege of belonging to God’s people, and therefore, belonging to God as His children. Christ has opened Abraham’s family to all. We are now seeing people from every people, tribe and clan being joined with Christ by faith and enfolded into the people of God. Extending the invitation to belong to God’s family is the greater part of what it means to bring blessing to the nations. We cannot consider that the Abrahamic blessing has visited a people if the gospel of Jesus Christ has not yet been clearly conveyed to them.

The Story of Blessing: Prevailing Over Curse *Richard Bauckham*

In Genesis 12 Abraham is singled out by God immediately following the thoroughly universal narrative of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. The story brings us to the great catalogue of all the nations, 70 of them, descended from the three sons of Noah found in chapter 10. Then chapter 11 tells the story of Babel, from which the entire human race was scattered over all the earth to form the various nations, divided by language and geography. Genesis 10-11 sets, as it were, the international scene for the whole rest of the Bible’s story. Unlike the choice of Noah and his family, the singling out of Abraham is not at all to be understood as God giving up on the nations. In Abraham’s case, he is singled out precisely so that blessing may come to all the nations, to all the seventy nations God had scattered over the face of the whole earth.

Blessing is the key word in God’s promises to Abraham: Abraham himself will be blessed, in that his descendants will be a great nation, and Abraham will be a blessing, in that all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:2-3). The promise that all the nations will be blessed is repeated four more times in Genesis (18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). On the last of these occasions it is given to Abraham’s son Isaac and grandson Jacob. Moreover, even within the stories of Jacob and his sons, the blessing of the nations begins—or at least is foreshadowed—when Jacob brings blessing to Laban (30:27) and Joseph to Potiphar (39:5). Then there is the peculiarly significant scene when the aged patriarch Jacob, on his arrival in Egypt, gives his blessing to no less than the Pharaoh of Egypt (47:7).

Blessing is a rich biblical notion

that has been rather neglected in our theology. Blessing in the Bible refers to God’s characteristically generous and abundant giving of all good to his creatures and his continual renewal of the abundance of created life. Blessing is God’s provision for human flourishing. But it is also relational: to be blessed by God is not only to know God’s good gifts but to know God himself in his generous giving. Because blessing is relational, the movement of the blessing is a movement that goes out from God and returns to him. God’s blessing of people overflows in their blessing of others, and, those who experience blessing from God in turn bless God, which means that they give all that creatures really can give to God: thanksgiving and praise.

Blessing highlights the relationship between creation and salvation in a different way from other ways

Richard Bauckham is Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of St. Andrews. He has published many works in historical theology and the New Testament. From *Bible and Mission*, 2003. Used by permission of Baker Academic Books, Grand Rapids, MI.

What will it look like when this aspect of God's blessing is fulfilled? We can look forward to the day when we will see at least some from every people on earth trusting and following Christ. The blessing of the nations means much more than evangelism, but it certainly can mean no less than the evangelization of every people.

We have seen in the book of Genesis that God displayed evidence of His dynamic presence with His people. God will be no less present amidst the peoples of the earth as groups of obedient followers of Christ emerge and grow among the nations. As in the book of Genesis, the presence of God with His people in our day is the beginning of all of the more tangible aspects of blessing that God brought about. This means that evangelization has a special priority. God's promise to bless the nations is the framework in which Christ's commission makes sense. This same promise authorizes Christ's followers to hope and to work for God's life to abound in every people.

Material and Social Blessing: Abundance and Peace

We can expect the blessing of belonging to God to become a reality amidst every people. But we can look forward to so much more! We can expect to see significant displays of the abundance of God's life. We should not expect a utopian perfection. But we can work and pray with a strong hope, partly informed by what we see in the book of Genesis, that God will be with His people to bring forth significant measures of blessing among the nations.

And so we ask again, what will the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the nations look like? Of course, it will be different in every place and people, but we should expect God to bring forth every kind of blessing, such as economies that flourish with justice and righteousness, agricultures and industries that abound with plenty for all, and peace throughout communities and between peoples and races. We can expect that God will enable His people to wage war with disease, to break the vicious cycles of poverty, to

of characterizing God's activity in the world. Already on the fifth day of the creation God blesses (Gen 1:22). Blessing is the way God enables his creation to be fertile and fruitful, to grow and to flourish. It is in the most comprehensive sense God's purpose for his creation. Wherever human life enjoys the good things of creation and produces the good fruits of human activity, God is pouring out his blessing. Wherever people bless God for his blessings, to that extent God is known as the good Creator who provides for human flourishing. God's blessing is universal.

But we should not think of the idea of blessing as something that describes God's goodness in creation, but does not also help us understand his goodness in salvation. Salvation too is God's blessing, since salvation is the fulfillment of God's purposes in spite of the damage evil does to God's creation. The Abrahamic blessing is more than the blessing of creation because it is designed to contend with and to

overcome its opposite: God's curse.

With sin God's curse enters creation alongside of God's blessing. We found the universal background to God's promise to Abraham in the account of the nations in Genesis 10-11. But there is an even earlier background in Genesis 3 and 4, where the blessings of creation turn to curse (3:17; 4:11). The curse even enters into God's promise to Abraham, apparently paralleling the blessing. God says to Abraham in Genesis 12: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12:3; cf. 27:29; Num 24:9). But blessing predominates in the promise (as the difference between the plural "those who bless you" and the singular "the one who curses you" seems to suggest), and it is clearly blessing, not curse that is the goal of God's calling of Abraham. Therefore blessing has the last word in the promise: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Through the story of Israel curse continually accompanies blessing

(e.g. Deut 7:12-16; 27-28), but the ultimate goal of God's promise to Abraham is the blessing that will prevail over the curse. It does when the seed of Abraham, the singled-out descendant of Abraham, the Messiah, becomes "a curse for us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (Gal 3:13-14). This is why God's promise that the nations will be blessed is called "the gospel" by Paul (Gal 3:8). The secret of the promise is Christ's bearing of the curse so that the blessing may prevail. The gospel is that in Jesus Christ the curse has been set aside and God's creative purpose for the blessing of his creation is established beyond any possibility of reversal. God's last and effective word is his blessing. It is a particular word, spoken in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, broadcast by those who like Paul cannot but pass it on, so powerful is its effect, overflowing with blessing from those who, blessed by it, become a blessing to others.

Everyone's Question

What is God Trying to Do?

Stanley A. Ellisen

The Bible describes God as an eternal King: “The Lord is King forever” (Ps 10:16). It also declares that He is sovereign over all things (Ps 103:19). Being infinite, He is everywhere. So, at every time and place, in all the vast reaches of His universe, God has been in full control. He has never compromised this supreme prerogative of His Godhood. To do so would make Him less than God. It is essential to recognize His undiminished sovereignty if we are to have a proper view of His kingdom. His work of creation, with all the apparent risks involved, was the work of His sovereignty.

Primeval Rebellion

In the operation of His kingdom, God rules by the principle of delegated authority. He organized the angels as a hierarchy, assigning levels of responsibility and spheres of service. To act as His supreme lieutenant in directing this kingdom, God endowed one specific archangel with striking beauty, wisdom, and power (Ezek 28:12-17; Jude 9). He named him Lucifer and gave him a throne from which to rule (Isa 14:12-14). This angel ruled as God's prime minister par excellence.

How long this harmonious arrangement continued in the distant past is not recorded. Endowed with freedom of choice, the crucial test of any creature was allegiance to the will of God. That crucial test came for Lucifer when he shifted his gaze to himself and his God-given features of splendor. Dazzled by his own greatness, he asserted independence and presumed himself to be “like the Most High” (Isa 14:14). In that moment of decision he thrust himself outside the stabilizing axis of God's will and began the swirling catapult into the oblivion of a godless being. His decision was final, and he never repented.

Lucifer, however, was not alone in this choice. He evidently had a following of one-third of the angels of heaven (Rev 12:4-7), which also suggests the great allurements of his leadership. With this crowd of rebels he formed a kingdom of his own, a counterfeit kingdom of darkness. His name was changed to Satan (adversary), in keeping with his behavior. If God is sovereign, why didn't He immediately destroy this arch rebel? Why didn't He have a mass execution for the whole horde of disobedient angels? Or at least, why didn't He lock them up forever in the abyss of hell?

The answer is that God does have such a plan, but He is temporarily using these rebels to accomplish another purpose.



Stanley A. Ellisen served as Professor of Biblical Literature and Chairman of

the Division of Biblical Studies at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary in Portland, Oregon. The author of eight books and numerous articles, Ellisen also pastored and planted churches in the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest.

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In the outworking of His program, God was not locked into a one-track plan, but was able to roll with the punches, so to speak. So deep is His sovereignty, that He is able to make the wrath of men to praise Him and all His enemies to serve Him (Ps 76:10). The devastating irony of it for His enemies is that they end up serving Him in spite of themselves. Some of the fallen angels He chained until judgment; others He has allowed a limited liberty until His further purpose is accomplished.

The central fact to observe is that God did allow the formation of a kingdom of darkness. This kingdom formed through voluntary forces led by Satan, not through God's creation, as such. It thus became an opposite pole to God's kingdom of light and an alluring option for all moral creatures in their exercise of moral freedom. It is a counterfeit kingdom running concurrently with the true kingdom of righteousness. Very often it seems to be dominant, not only coercing men and women but winning them. This is partly because of its modus operandi. Contrary to many naive opinions, the devil is not a red monster with a pitchfork, but often a do-gooder. His goal in life is to counterfeit the works of God. This has been his prized ambition ever since he went into business for himself. His first recorded intention ended with the words, "I will be like the Most High" (Isa 14:14). This counterfeiting effort is his most effective ploy, for the more closely he can imitate God's work, the less likely men will be inclined to seek God or pursue His will.

God's Earthly Kingdom Inaugurated

After the fall of Satan, God began another creation: man. He likewise endowed this being with freedom of choice, dangerous though this second venture appears. Freedom of choice was essential to human personality, if man and woman were to be made in the image of God. God's grand design is to reproduce Himself in human personalities, especially His traits of love and holiness. And these divine characteristics can grow only in the soil of moral freedom. Fellowship involves moral choice.

By this freedom, God sought to establish man and woman in a wholesome relationship to His sovereignty. He sought to relate

to them by love, not coercion. The strength of love is infinitely stronger than that of muscle. With this in mind, He made Adam and Eve partners in His rule. As an initial test they were forbidden to eat of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:17). They were given a choice of compliance or disobedience, clear and simple. The tree was not put there as a teaser or trap, but as an inevitable test. It gave the couple a choice as to whether they would be loyal to God or submit to enticing alternatives presented by the serpent. Had they turned from his evil suggestion to firm commitment to God, they might have eaten of the "tree of life" and been eternally confirmed in righteousness (Gen 3:24; Rev 22:2). But they each disobeyed the direct command of God, and the fall of the human race took place.

By this deliberate action, they declared their independence from the will of God and their affiliation with Satan's kingdom of darkness. The cause of this disaster was not the tree; nor was it the serpent or the devil behind the serpent (Rev 12:9). These provided only an occasion for two individuals to express their freedom of choice with respect to the will of God. The cause of disaster was in their decision. In this test of allegiance they failed and fell, along with the previously fallen host of angels.

To all outward appearance, this second fall of God's creation seemed to dash God's high hopes of extending His kingdom in moral agents. Man was given cosmic responsibilities to have dominion over the earth—but he could not be trusted with a piece of fruit. Was the divine gift of free choice too risky? Would this endowment be the suicidal undoing of the whole race? It certainly seemed to be counterproductive to God's purpose, for sin appeared to be coming up the victor.

The Two Problems Summarized

The dilemma at this point may be summarized as two problems which God acquired in the creative process. One was the fact that His trusted lieutenant, Lucifer, defected and started a counterkingdom, stealing also the allegiance of a large contingent of the angels. The second was that man, made in God's image, also defected and fell into a state of sin and personal disintegration. Thus, God's kingdom was dissected and partially usurped.

The question is often raised as to why God bothered with a salvage operation. Why not destroy everything and start over? Of course, this was not within His sovereign plan, nor would it have been a real solution to the deep challenge the double rebellion posed. God not only rose to the insidious challenge of sin, but His great heart of grace initiated an operation that would marvelously redeem sinners. In this plan He addressed two problems: (1) how to reclaim His usurped kingdom, and (2) how to provide redemption for mankind. The solution God sought could not deal with both problems separately; He thus devised a plan whereby the victory over the counterfeit kingdom would provide salvation for mankind. It could not be achieved by a mere display of divine muscle; the answer was not to crack the whip. Cataclysmic and inclusive judgment would be postponed. It would require action with the depth and power of His greatest attribute: love.

God's Kingdom and Redemptive Programs

When Adam and Eve first sinned, God began His judgment with the serpent (Gen 3:14,15). In this judgment He also gave the proto-evangel, announcing His redemptive purpose for men. To the serpent He said,

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise Him on the heel.

This message was obviously for man as well as Satan, perhaps more so. In it God prophesied that, following a two-way enmity, two bruising or crushings would take place. The serpent's head would be crushed by the woman's seed, and the heel of the woman's seed would be bruised by the serpent. The two figures in this conflict are later declared to be Christ, who was the seed born of a woman (Gal 4:4), and Satan, called "the serpent of old" (Rev 20:2).

By analyzing these two crushings, we get a thumbnail sketch of God's program with respect to Satan and man. The first statement, "He shall bruise you on the head,"

was a prophecy that Christ would destroy the devil. Christ Himself spoke of His binding Satan, the "strong man" of this world system, and casting him out (Matt 12:29; John 12:31). Christ's death on the cross provided the ground for Satan's final destruction, for "he who builds the scaffold finally hangs

God will ultimately reclaim His total kingdom by destroying Satan and his kingdom, and He will redeem believing men in the process by the death of Christ.

thereon." And with his final judgment, the counterfeit kingdom of his making will also be destroyed. This whole process by which God reclaims His authority in all realms and forever stops all rebellion can be thought of as God's "kingdom program."

The second crushing announced in Genesis 3:15 is the heel-crushing of the seed of the woman by the serpent. This devilish assault was fulfilled on the cross, where Satan was the driving force behind the crucifixion of Christ. The heel-bruising suggests the temporary nature of Christ's death in contrast to the head-crushing of the serpent. Christ's death on the cross then became the ground for God's redemptive program, the program by which He provided salvation for men.

Thus in this proto-evangel in Eden, God introduced, in outline form, His twofold program for His kingdom and man's redemption. He would ultimately reclaim His total kingdom by destroying Satan and Satan's kingdom, and would redeem believing men in the process by the death of Christ.

God's Twofold Program Unfolds

The rest of the Old Testament pictures the progressive development of this twofold purpose of God in the earth. The Lord chose two men of faith through whom He inaugurated these programs and set them in motion. The first was Abraham, who lived about 2000 B.C. God made a covenant with him, promising, among other things, a seed that would bless all nations. Paul identified this seed as Christ, and the blessing which was to come through

Him, Paul identified as redemption or justification (Gal 3:6-16). Abraham's seed would bring redemption to men, fulfilling the redemptive program.

To fulfill His kingdom purpose, God chose David out of the same lineage about 1000 B.C. and made a covenant about a kingdom and a royal seed (2 Sam 7:12-16). This seed of David eventually would rule over the house of Israel forever. Besides ruling over Israel, it was later revealed that this anointed One would extend His rule over the whole world (Amos 9:12; Zech 14:9). Through the seed of David, God would fulfill His kingdom program by destroying the rebels and governing the world in righteousness.

Two Typical Sons

It is also interesting to note that each of these two men was given a son who typified the seed he was promised. Abraham's son, Isaac, typified Christ in His redemptive function, being offered on Mount Moriah as a living sacrifice. David's son, Solomon, typified Christ in His royalty, being a king of glory and splendor. These two sons strikingly typified that seed of Abraham and of David who was looked for with such anticipation throughout the rest of the Old Testament period. In this light, it is no wonder that the Spirit of God begins the New Testament by introducing its central figure as "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1).

Two Typical Animals

The Old Testament also portrays the redemptive and kingdom functions of Christ by two symbolic animals. The sacrificial lamb typified Him in His redemptive work as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the

world" (John 1:29). It portrayed Him as the Lord's servant who was led "like a lamb... to slaughter" (Isa 53:7).

The other animal typifying Christ in the Old Testament is the lion (Gen 49:9,10). John, in Revelation 5:5, refers to this Old Testament metaphor when he describes Christ as the "Lion... from the tribe of Judah." As the king of the beasts, the lion represents kingly authority. The point is that out of the tribe of Judah would come a Ruler who would rule Israel and the world.

One Glorious Messiah

Though the kingdom purpose is broader, extending to the whole spiritual realm, it could not be accomplished without the redemptive program for man. Notice how John relates the two in his prophetic vision of Revelation 5. After seeing Christ as the Lion and Lamb, he hears the angelic throng loudly acclaim: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (Rev 5:12). He will have shown not only His right but His worthiness to rule as God's Lion, having been slain as God's Lamb.

Christ will finally present this reclaimed kingdom back to the Father (1 Cor 15:24). That presentation will constitute the fulfillment of His commission from the Father in His role as the seed of the woman. And, of supreme importance, the process by which He will have reclaimed that kingdom will be through His redemptive love, not His coercive might. This redemptive grace is the genius of His twofold program, and it will also constitute the basis of His eternal fellowship with men. That divine-human fellowship will not be based on fear or force, but on love. 🌟

Study Questions

1. How did God respond to the two rebellions: that of Satan and that of Adam and Eve? Describe the value of distinguishing God's responses to Satan and to mankind.
2. How does God's response to the counterfeit kingdom of Satan give us insight into God's missionary purpose?
3. How is "the Lion" still crushing Satan today? How is "the Lamb" still redeeming people today?

The Bible in World Evangelization

John R. W. Stott



John R.W. Stott is Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church in London. He has served as

President of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity and as an Extra Chaplain to the Queen. His many books include *Basic Christianity*, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, and *The Church and the World*. Stott has addressed five Urbana Student Missions Conventions. For 25 years he led university sponsored mission trips on five continents.

Adapted from an address delivered in a plenary session of the Consultation on World Evangelization at Pattaya, Thailand, in June 1980. Used by permission.

Without the Bible, world evangelization would not only be impossible but actually inconceivable. It is the Bible that lays upon us the responsibility to evangelize the world, gives us a gospel to proclaim, tells us how to proclaim it and promises us that it is God's power for salvation to every believer.

It is, moreover, an observable fact of history, both past and contemporary, that the degree of the Church's commitment to world evangelization is commensurate with the degree of its conviction about the authority of the Bible. Whenever Christians lose their confidence in the Bible, they also lose their zeal for evangelism. Conversely, whenever they are convinced about the Bible, then they are determined about evangelism.

Let me develop four reasons why the Bible is indispensable to world evangelization.

Mandate for World Evangelization

First, the Bible gives us the *mandate* for world evangelization. We certainly need one. Two phenomena are everywhere on the increase. One is religious fanaticism, and the other, religious pluralism. The fanatic displays the kind of irrational zeal which (if it could) would use force to compel belief and eradicate disbelief. Religious pluralism encourages the opposite tendency.

Whenever the spirit of religious fanaticism or of its opposite, religious indifferentism, prevails, world evangelization is bitterly resented. Fanatics refuse to countenance the rival evangelism represents, and pluralists its exclusive claims. The Christian evangelist is regarded as making an unwarrantable intrusion into other people's private affairs.

In the face of this opposition we need to be clear about the mandate the Bible gives us. It is not just the Great Commission, (important as that is), but the entire biblical revelation. Let me rehearse it briefly.

There is but one living and true God, the Creator of the universe, the Lord of the nations and the God of the spirits of all flesh. Some 4,000 years ago he called Abraham and made a covenant with him, promising not only to bless him but also through his posterity to bless all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-4). This biblical text is one of the foundation stones of the Christian mission. For Abraham's descendants (through whom all nations are being blessed) are Christ and the people of Christ. If by faith we belong to Christ, we are

Abraham's spiritual children and have a responsibility to all mankind. So, too, the Old Testament prophets foretold how God would make his Christ the heir and the light of the nations (Ps 2:8; Isa 42:6; 49:6).

When Jesus came, he endorsed these promises. True, during his own earthly ministry he was restricted "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:6; 15:24), but he prophesied that many would "come from east and west, and from north and south," and would "sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 8:11; Luke 13:29). Further, after his resurrection and in anticipation of his ascension he made the tremendous claim that "all authority in heaven and on earth" had been given to him (Matt 28:18). It was in consequence of his universal authority that he commanded his followers to make all nations his disciples, baptizing them into his new community and teaching them all his teaching (Matt 28:19).

And this, when the Holy Spirit of truth and power had come upon them, the early Christians proceeded to do. They became the witnesses of Jesus, even to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Moreover, they did it "for the sake of his name" (Rom 1:5; 3 John 7). They knew that God had superexalted Jesus, enthroning him at his right hand and bestowing upon him the highest rank, in order that every tongue should confess his lordship. They longed that Jesus should receive the honor due to his name. Besides, one day he would return in glory, to save, to judge and to reign. So what was to fill the gap between his two comings? The worldwide mission of the Church! Not till the gospel had reached the ends of the world, he said, would the end of history come (cf. Matt 24:14; 28:20; Acts 1:8). The two ends would coincide.

Our mandate for world evangelization, therefore, is the whole Bible. It is to be found in the creation of God (because of which all human beings are responsible to him), in the character of God (as outgoing, loving, compassionate, not willing that any should perish, desiring that all should come to repentance), in the promises of God (that all nations will be blessed through Abraham's seed and will become the Messiah's inheritance), in the Christ of God (now

exalted with universal authority, to receive universal acclaim), in the Spirit of God (who convicts of sin, witnesses to Christ, and impels the church to evangelize) and in the Church of God (which is a multinational, missionary community, under orders to evangelize until Christ returns).

This global dimension of the Christian mission is irresistible. Individual Christians and local churches not committed to world evangelization are contradicting (either through blindness or through disobedience) an essential part of their God-given identity. The biblical mandate for world evangelization cannot be escaped.

Message for World Evangelization

Secondly, the Bible gives us the *message* for world evangelization. The Lausanne Covenant defined evangelism in terms of the evangel. Paragraph four begins:

To evangelize is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent and believe.

Our message comes out of the Bible. As we turn to the Bible for our message, however, we are immediately confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand the message is given to us. We are not left to invent it; it has been entrusted to us as a precious "deposit," which we, like faithful stewards, are both to guard and to dispense to God's household (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12-14; 2 Cor 4:1-2). On the other hand, it has not been given to us as a single, neat, mathematical formula, but rather in a rich diversity of formulations, in which different images or metaphors are used.

So there is only one gospel, on which all the apostles agreed (1 Cor 15:11), and Paul could call down the curse of God upon anybody—including himself—who preached a "different" gospel from the original apostolic gospel of God's grace (Gal 1:6-8). Yet the apostles expressed this one gospel in various ways—now sacrificial (the shedding and sprinkling of Christ's blood), now messianic (the breaking in of God's promised

rule), now legal (the Judge pronouncing the unrighteous righteous), now personal (the Father reconciling his wayward children), now salvific (the heavenly Liberator coming to rescue the helpless), now cosmic (the universal Lord claiming universal dominion); and this is only a selection.

The gospel is thus seen to be one, yet diverse. It is "given," yet culturally adapted to its audience. Once we grasp this, we shall be saved from making two opposite mistakes. The first I will call "total fluidity." I recently heard an English church leader declare that there is no such thing as the gospel until we enter the situation in which we are to witness. We take nothing with us into the situation, he said; we discover the gospel only when we have arrived there. Now I am in full agree-

ment with the need to be sensitive to each situation, but if this was the point which the leader in question

was wanting to make, he grossly overstated it. There is such a thing as a revealed or given gospel, which we have no liberty to falsify.

The opposite mistake I will call "total rigidity." In this case the evangelist behaves as if God had given a series of precise formulas that we have to repeat more or less word for word, and certain images that we must invariably employ. This leads to bondage to either words or images or both. Some evangelists lapse into the use of stale jargon, while others feel obliged on every occasion to mention "the blood of Christ" or "justification by faith" or "the kingdom of God" or some other image.

Between these two extremes there is a third and better way. It combines commitment to the fact of revelation with commitment to the task of contextualization. It accepts that only the biblical formulations of the gospel are permanently normative, and that every attempt to proclaim the gospel in modern idiom must justify itself as an authentic expression of the biblical gospel.

But if it refuses to jettison the biblical formulations, it also refuses to recite them in a wooden and unimaginative way. On the contrary, we have to engage in the continuous struggle (by prayer, study, and discussion) to relate the given gospel to the given situation.

Since it comes from God we must guard it; since it is intended for modern men and women we must interpret it. We have to combine fidelity (constantly studying the biblical text) with sensitivity (constantly studying the contemporary scene). Only then can we hope with faithfulness and relevance to relate the Word to the world, the gospel to the context, Scripture to culture.

Model for World Evangelization

Thirdly, the Bible gives us the *model* for world evangelization. In addition to a message (what we are to say) we need a model (how we are to say it). The Bible supplies this, too: for the Bible does not just *contain* the gospel; it *is* the gospel. Through the Bible God is himself actually evangelizing, that is, com-

**In order to reveal himself, he both emptied and humbled himself.
That is the model of evangelism which the Bible supplies.**

municating the good news to the world. You will recall Paul's statement about Genesis 12:3 that "the Scripture...preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham" (Gal 3:8; *RSV*). All Scripture preaches the gospel; God evangelizes through it.

If, then, Scripture is itself divine evangelization, it stands to reason that we can learn how to preach the gospel by considering how God has done it. He has given us in the process of biblical inspiration a beautiful evangelistic model.

What strikes us immediately is the greatness of God's condescension. He had sublime truth to reveal about himself and his Christ, his mercy and his justice, and his full salvation. And he chose to make this disclosure through the vocabulary and grammar of human language, through human beings, human images and human cultures.

Yet through this lowly medium of human words and images, God was speaking of his own Word. Our evangelical doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture emphasizes its double authorship. Men spoke and God spoke. Men spoke from God (2 Pet 1:21) and God spoke through men (Heb 1:1). The words spoken and written were equally his and theirs. He decided what he wanted

to say, yet did not smother their human personalities. They used their faculties freely, yet did not distort the divine message. Christians want to assert something similar about the Incarnation, the climax of the self-communicating God. "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). That is, God's eternal Word, who from eternity was with God and was God, the agent through whom the universe was created, became a human being, with all the particularity of a first-century Palestinian Jew. He became little, weak, poor, and vulnerable. He experienced pain and hunger, and exposed himself to temptation. All this was included in the "flesh," the human being he became. Yet when he became one of us, he did not cease to be himself. He remained forever the eternal Word or Son of God.

Essentially the same principle is illustrated in both the inspiration of the Scripture and the incarnation of the Son. The Word became flesh. The divine was communicated through the human. He identified with us, though without surrendering his own identity. And this principle of "identification without loss of identity" is the model for all evangelism, especially cross-cultural evangelism.

Some of us refuse to identify with the people we claim to be serving. We remain ourselves, and do not become like them. We stay aloof. We hold on desperately to our own cultural inheritance in the mistaken notion that it is an indispensable part of our identity. We are unwilling to let it go. Not only do we maintain our own cultural practices with fierce tenacity, but we treat the cultural inheritance of the land of our adoption without the respect it deserves. We thus practice a double kind of cultural imperialism, imposing our own culture on others and despising theirs. But this was not the way of Christ, who emptied himself of his glory and humbled himself to serve.

Other cross-cultural messengers of the gospel make the opposite mistake. So determined are they to identify with the people to whom they go that they surrender even their Christian standards and values. But again this was not Christ's way, since in becoming human he remained truly divine. The

Lausanne Covenant expressed the principle in these words: "Christ's evangelists must humbly seek to empty themselves of all but their personal authenticity, in order to become the servants of others" (paragraph 10).

We have to wrestle with the reasons why people reject the gospel, and in particular give due weight to the cultural factors. Some people reject the gospel not because they perceive it to be false, but because they perceive it to be alien.

René Padilla was criticized at Lausanne [*the 1974 Congress on World Evangelization—ed.*] for saying that the gospel some European and North American missionaries have exported was a "culture-Christianity," a Christian message that is distorted by the materialistic, consumer culture of the West. It was hurtful to us to hear him say this, but of course he was quite right. All of us need to subject our gospel to more critical scrutiny, and in a cross-cultural situation, visiting evangelists need humbly to seek the help of local Christians in order to discern the cultural distortions of their message.

Others reject the gospel because they perceive it to be a threat to their own culture. Of course Christ challenges every culture. Whenever we present the gospel to Hindus or Buddhists, Jews or Muslims, secularists or Marxists, Jesus Christ confronts them with his demand to dislodge whatever has thus far secured their allegiance and replace it with himself. He is Lord of every person and every culture. That threat, that confrontation, cannot be avoided. But does the gospel we proclaim present people with other threats that are unnecessary, because it calls for the abolition of harmless customs or appears destructive of national art, architecture, music, and festivals, or because we who share it are culture-proud and culture-blind?

To sum up, when God spoke to us in Scripture he used human language, and when he spoke to us in Christ he assumed human flesh. In order to reveal himself, he both emptied and humbled himself. That is the model of evangelism which the Bible supplies. There is self-emptying and self-humbling in all authentic evangelism; without it we contradict the gospel and misrepresent the Christ we proclaim.

Power for World Evangelization

Fourthly, the Bible gives us the *power* for world evangelization. It is hardly necessary for me to emphasize our need for power, for we know how feeble our human resources are in comparison with the magnitude of the task. We also know how armor-plated are the defenses of the human heart. Worse still, we know the personal reality, malevolence and might of the Devil, and of the demonic forces at his command.

Sophisticated people may ridicule our belief, and caricature it, too, in order to make their ridicule more plausible. But we evangelical Christians are naive enough to believe what Jesus and his apostles taught. To us it is a fact of great solemnity that, in John's expression, "the whole world is in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). For until they are liberated by Jesus Christ and transferred into his kingdom, all men and women are the slaves of Satan. Moreover, we see his power in the contemporary world—in the darkness of idolatry and of the fear of spirits, in superstition and fatalism, in devotion to gods which are no gods, in the selfish materialism of the West, in the spread of atheistic communism, in the proliferation of irrational cults, in violence and aggression, and in the widespread declension from absolute standards of goodness and truth. These things are the work of him who is called in Scripture a liar, a deceiver, a slanderer and a murderer.

So Christian conversion and regeneration remain miracles of God's grace. They are the culmination of a power struggle between Christ and Satan or (in vivid apocalyptic imagery) between the Lamb and the Dragon. The plundering of the strong man's palace is possible only because he has been bound by the One who is stronger still, and who by his death and resurrection disarmed and discarded the principalities and powers of evil (Matt 12:27-29; Luke 11:20-22; Col 2:15).

How then shall we enter into Christ's victory and overthrow the Devil's power? Let Luther answer our question: *ein wörtlein will ihn fallen* ("one little word will knock him down"). There is power in the Word of God

and in the preaching of the gospel. Perhaps the most dramatic expression of this in the New Testament is to be found in 2 Corinthians 4. Paul portrays "the god of this world" as having "blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ..." (v. 4).

If human minds are blinded, how then can they ever see? Only by the creative Word of God. For it is the God who said "let light shine out of darkness" who has shone in our hearts to "give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (v. 6). The apostle thus likens the unregenerate heart to

the dark primeval chaos and attributes regeneration to the divine fiat, "Let there be light."

If then Satan blinds people's minds, and God shines into people's hearts, what can we hope to contribute to this encounter? Would it

not be more modest for us to retire from the field of conflict and leave them to fight it out? No, this is not the conclusion Paul reaches.

On the contrary, in between verses 4 and 6, which describe the activities of God and Satan, verse 5 describes the work of the evangelist: "We preach... Jesus Christ as Lord." Since the light which the Devil wants to prevent people seeing and which God shines into them is the gospel, we had better preach it! Preaching the gospel, far from being unnecessary, is indispensable. It is the God-appointed means by which the prince of darkness is defeated and the light comes streaming into people's hearts. There is power in God's gospel—his power for salvation (Rom 1:16).

We may be very weak. I sometimes wish we were weaker. Faced with the forces of evil, we are often tempted to put on a show of Christian strength and engage in a little evangelical saber rattling. But it is in our weakness that Christ's strength is made perfect and it is words of human weakness that the Spirit endorses with his power. So it is when we are weak that we are strong (1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 12:9-10).

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Let It Loose in the World!

Let us not consume all our energies arguing about the Word of God; let's start using it. It will prove its divine origin by its divine power. Let's let it loose in the world! If only every Christian missionary and evangelist proclaimed the biblical gospel with faithfulness and sensitivity, and every Christian preacher were a faithful expositor of God's Word! Then God would display his saving power.

Without the Bible world evangelization

is impossible. For without the Bible we have no gospel to take to the nations, no warrant to take it to them, no idea of how to set about the task, and no hope of any success. It is the Bible that gives us the mandate, the message, the model and the power we need for world evangelization. So let's seek to repossess it by diligent study and meditation. Let's heed its summons, grasp its message, follow its directions and trust its power. Let's lift up our voices and make it known. 🌐

Study Questions

1. How does Stott support his idea that the whole Bible is the mandate for world evangelization?
2. In the section referring to "the message" of world evangelization, Stott clarifies his point by identifying a range of mistakes: "total fluidity" and "total rigidity." Compare these extremes with the similar description of mistakes of identification in the section referring to "the model."
3. What is the connection between the power of God and the weakness of God's human servants in overcoming evil?

Blessing as Transformation

Sarita D. Gallagher and Steven C. Hawthorne



Sarita D. Gallagher is an Adjunct Professor in Global Studies at Azusa Pacific

University. She has served in both Australia and Papua New Guinea teaching Theology and Intercultural Studies in local universities and Bible Schools. Her focus is on the missiological significance of the Abrahamic blessing in Scripture.



Steven C. Hawthorne is Director of WayMakers, a mission and prayer

mobilization ministry. After co-editing the *Perspectives* course and book in 1981, he launched “Joshua Project,” a series of research expeditions among unreached peoples in Asia and the Middle East. He also co-authored *Prayerwalking: Praying on Site with Insight* with Graham Kendrick.

God’s promise to Abraham was effectively a promise to the world. In Genesis 12:1-2, God declared that He would not only bless Abram (his name at that time), but that Abram would become a blessing. The next verse reveals the amazing magnitude of that blessing: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” How was it possible that one man would become a blessing to all of the families throughout the earth?

Even though Abram obeyed God, it’s unlikely that he grasped the global implications right away. The complete promise, as Abraham heard it repeated in the years to come, had three parts: land, family and blessing. The first two parts about land and family probably made some sense right away. But what probably remained a mystery was the promise that somehow through his family, blessing would come upon every nation on earth.

While years passed without receiving the promised land or sons, Abraham must have pondered just what the fulfillment of God’s promise would look like. We would do well to ponder it as well. The promise that “all nations will be blessed” is still being fulfilled in our day. What does it mean for a nation or people to be blessed? What should we be looking for as stewards of Abraham’s promised blessing by faith in Christ?

What Does “Blessing” Mean?

If our only source were the book of Genesis, we would learn a great deal about the idea of blessing. In Genesis, the word “blessing” is used in two distinct ways. First, we see the term blessing used to describe a pronouncement or endowment of blessing. It is an act in which a future destiny or goodness is spoken, and thus bestowed upon the person or entity being blessed. Second, the term blessing is used to describe the fulfillment of what was promised, whether material or otherwise. The word blessing, then, refers both to the giving of blessing as well as to the gifts that blessing brings forth.

Blessing as Endowment

God pronounced blessing as early as the fifth day of creation. After He created the first animal life, He declared the creatures of the sea and birds of the air as “good.” Immediately He went on to bless them, empowering them to fulfill the mandate He gave them, to “be fruitful and multiply and fill” their respective domains. By blessing them, God had made them more

than merely good. His blessing endowed them with a fruitfulness and a fullness that would surely unfold. On the sixth day of creation, God created animals and humans. Once again all that God created on that day was declared to be "good." He then blessed humanity, endowing man with the mandate and enablement to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Throughout the rest of Scripture the idea of blessing remains linked to the idea of life flourishing toward an intended fullness. When blessing is fulfilled in creatures, people, households or nations, they are enabled to move toward their intended destiny. That change may be slow or rapid. Blessing is never seen as magical, but rather a dynamic of God's life. Blessing is God's goodness made "gooder."

Further on in the record of Genesis, we see more occasions in which words of blessing are pronounced. Jacob's struggle with Esau to obtain his father's pronouncement of blessing is the most prominent instance (Gen 27). His struggle with an angel (or with God?) to obtain a pronouncement of blessing is noteworthy: "I will not let go unless you bless me." (32:26-29). In every case, this verbal giving of blessing was understood as far more than words, but as an irrevocable transfer of God's special enablement and abundance.

Blessing as Fulfillment

In Genesis we also see clear references to how the promise of blessing was fulfilled in tangible ways. Near the close of Abraham's life we read that God "had blessed Abraham in every way" (24:1). What exactly were these diverse ways that Abraham had been blessed?

We can find three broad categories of blessing in the Genesis story. First, we see blessing as material wealth and fruitfulness. Second, we see blessing as favored relationship with God and the experience of His presence. And third, we see blessing bringing about a measure of peace amidst families and peoples.

1. Material Wealth and Fruitfulness

Abraham's servant lists the ways God had blessed Abraham: "The LORD has greatly blessed my master, so that he has become rich; and He has given him flocks and herds, and silver and gold, and servants and maids, and camels and donkeys" (24:35). Note the

expression, "The LORD has...blessed...so that..." It was obvious to this servant that the material wealth was the result of God's blessing.

God also blessed Isaac in material ways. "After the death of Abraham...God blessed his son Isaac" (25:11). The account describes the quintessential act of blessing: turning barrenness to fruitfulness. "Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived" (25:21). Isaac's blessing abounded in material wealth: "Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the LORD blessed him, and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; for he had possessions of flocks and herds and a great household" (26:12-14). God gave Isaac a plentiful water supply which to him meant that "we will be fruitful in the land." The onlooking Philistines surmised that the supply of water was evidence that Isaac was "blessed of the Lord" (26:15-22).

The same kind of material abundance was described as blessing in the life of Abraham's grandson, Jacob. After he had labored in Laban's extended household, Laban said to Jacob that his financial and material success was directly connected to Jacob, "The LORD has blessed me because of you" (30:27). Jacob agreed, telling Laban that God has "blessed you wherever I turned" (30:30).

It's important to note that in many parts of the world blessing is commonly thought of as a magical force or a mystical power by which someone can obtain desired benefits. In this mentality, blessing is not much more than luck or fortune that can sometimes be manipulated with procedures or by people believed to have special powers. Advocates of the so-called "prosperity gospel" may have more in common with this worldview which reduces blessing to a method of obtaining wealth from God.

2. More than Material Wealth: God's Presence

Blessing was more than abounding fruitfulness and riches. Neighboring nations recognized some intangible aspects of blessing. Most notable was God's presence with Abraham. His neighbors said to him, "God is with you in all that you do" (21:22). With people of the city of Sodom looking on, no less a figure than

Melchizedek publicly celebrated Abram's favor with God, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High...who has delivered your enemies into your hand" (14:19-20). Similarly, Isaac's neighbors said, "We see plainly that the Lord has been with you" (26:22).

3. More than Covenant with God: Peace Amidst the Peoples

Recognizing the extraordinary presence of God with Abraham, his Philistine neighbors approached him in order to work out a covenant of peace (21:22-23). This brought peace to a dispute about water usage and the outcome that "Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days" enjoying prolonged good will (21:24-34). Years later in Isaac's time, the relationship with the Philistines became strained again. The Philistines attempted to push Isaac's household out of their territory (26:12-17). God helped Isaac discover sources of water again and again. Eventually there was such an abundance of water for everyone that the Philistines approached Isaac to "make a covenant" of peace with him. The Philistines finally declared to Isaac, "You are now the blessed of the Lord" (26:18-29).

Blessing Beyond Abraham's Family

We've seen what it meant for Abraham and his family to be blessed. But do we also see the nations blessed in the stories of Abraham's family in Genesis?

Less than Blessed

Abraham and his household sojourned twice to live in foreign nations, and twice he lied about his wife (in Genesis 12 and again in chapter 20). Each time, Sarai (her name at the time) was taken to be the wife of the king, which brought judgment to the host nation. In the second instance, when the king realized that God's wrath was about to fall upon his entire people, he confronted Abraham saying, "How have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done" (20:9). Even though Abraham prayed for the king's household so that God restored the capacity to bear children, it's hard to consider the entire event as an act of blessing to another nation.

Spilling Over to Neighbors and Nations

Despite these and other events, God did bring help to other nations through Abraham and his descendants. For example, Abraham came to the rescue of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 14), which had been taken captive by raiding armies that had seized "all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food supply" (14:11). Not long after this, Abraham prayed that God would spare the entire city of Sodom (no doubt including some who he had already rescued from captivity). He argued his case before God, not just for Lot and his family, but for "the whole city" (19:28). Even though the city was destroyed, the point is that Abraham initiated intercession to save the entire city.

The previously mentioned water for the Philistines by Isaac's well-digging (26:12-22) and blessing on Laban's business through Jacob (30:27) are additional examples of blessing on surrounding nations and households.

It is significant that near the end of Genesis, we see Abraham's grandson Jacob pronouncing a blessing upon the Pharaoh himself. The exact words aren't recorded, but there was a formal occasion in which "Jacob blessed Pharaoh" (47:7,10).

The crescendo of Genesis is the story of Joseph. Like Abraham and Isaac before him, the incredible productivity of Joseph's work caused watching foreigners to conclude that God's presence with Joseph had brought a surprising abundance. "The LORD was with him and ... the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand" (Gen 39:3). His master recognized that "the LORD'S blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field" (39:5) because of Joseph.

Blessing Egypt and the People of All the Earth

God gave Joseph an interpretation of a dream that predicted a seven-year famine. Pharaoh acknowledged Joseph's wisdom as coming from God and declared, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt" and further, "Without your permission, no one shall raise his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt" (41:41, 44). When the famine came, its devastation "spread over all the face of the earth" (41:56). Joseph was positioned to extend blessing to many nations, as "the people of all the earth came to buy grain from Joseph" (41:57).

In the second year of the seven-year famine, Joseph distributed food in exchange for money and livestock (47:14-17). As the final year of the famine came, he had arranged for the survival of the people of Egypt. In exchange for state ownership of land and a 20 percent tax (a very generous arrangement compared to most feudal systems), he offered grain to be used as seed for planting as a way of restarting agricultural cycles after the famine (47:18-24). As the famine ends with hope for long-term survival, the statement of the people is telling: "You have saved our lives!" (47:25).¹

Later Will Be Greater: Fulfillment in Descendants

Did Abraham comprehend the blessing to the nations that God was promising, especially the eventual magnitude of it? In each of the five times that God promised blessing to the nations, notice how God amplified and clarified how His promise would be fulfilled.

Three Times to Abraham

In the initial call and promise, God told Abram that he would become "a great nation." The promise was framed as if in one person "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (12:3).

In the second announcement, the promise seems almost identical. In one great person, "all the nations of the earth will be blessed" (18:18). But the next verse adds that God would bring about "what had been spoken" to Abraham referring to the promise, in connection with "the righteousness and justice" lived out by "his children and his household after him." From this point forward the promise would emphasize what would happen in Abraham's descendants.

In the drama of the third announcement in Genesis 22 we find a significant shift. Abraham obeyed God by offering his son Isaac. God provided a substitute sacrifice and immediately repeated the promise, but with a significant difference. No longer is the promise of blessing to be fulfilled during the lifetime of Abraham, but instead, in the days of his children yet to come. "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (22:18). The singular word "seed" is a generic term describing the generations of Abraham's future descendants. God promised this with the surprising gravity of solemnly swearing with an oath, "By Myself

I have sworn..." (22:16) The purpose of the oath was to assure future generations that God would not fail to fulfill His promise to bless all nations, and that He would do this amazing thing through them.

Again to Isaac and Yet Again to Jacob

God gave the promise a fourth time, this time directly to Isaac. Once again He said that "in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (26:4). The word "seed" is amplified, spoken of as descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (15:5, 22:17). In the fifth declaration, God promised Jacob that his descendants would be numerous and would "spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south" (28:14). At the time, Jacob may have thought that the geographic expansion was nothing more than populating the immediate land of promise. But it is possible that the vigorous geographic expansion is related to the eventual global fulfillment of the promise.

The Promise Fulfilled in Christ

Most Christians have been taught well about Jesus Christ coming to provide a way for people to be adopted as sons and daughters into the family of God. In the book of Galatians, Paul says that "when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son... that we might receive" adoption as children of God (Gal 4:4-5). But a few verses earlier in the same book Paul says that those who believe in Christ have been joined with Christ in such a way that they become part of Abraham's family. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29).

The way the promise was given to Abraham, blessing would be fulfilled in the "seed" of Abraham. This word is often used as a "collective singular," speaking of many seeds. Thus, the term can refer to one descendent or to a multitude of descendants. Which is it?

Paul answers the question this way: Both are true. There is one pre-eminent son of Abraham: "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Christ" (Gal 3:29). Christ is the one seed of Abraham, but Paul also declares that since people become sons and daughters of Abraham's family by faith,

the promise is being fulfilled by their faith as those who inherit the promise:

“It is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, ‘All the nations will be blessed in you.’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham” (Gal 3:7-9).

Christ has now ended the curse and opened the family of God. Now people from every family on earth can be part of Abraham’s family by faith in Christ. They inherit the full family heritage of being blessed in order to be a blessing to the nations.

God’s Promise Becomes Our Mandate

God’s promise to bless the nations through Abraham’s descendants carries mandate force for all who have been joined with Christ by faith. The promise so clearly reveals God’s purpose, that Christians rightly consider it to convey God’s mandate to serve as His agents

of blessing among all the peoples of the earth.² We are blessed in Christ in order to bring forth the blessing of Christ among all the nations. But what are we hoping for? What does it mean for the nations to be blessed? And how are we to pursue it? The promise of blessing shapes and integrates our mission in two important ways.

Relational Blessing: Belonging to God’s Family

The greatest blessing imaginable is the privilege of belonging to God’s people, and therefore, belonging to God as His children. Christ has opened Abraham’s family to all. We are now seeing people from every people, tribe and clan being joined with Christ by faith and enfolded into the people of God. Extending the invitation to belong to God’s family is the greater part of what it means to bring blessing to the nations. We cannot consider that the Abrahamic blessing has visited a people if the gospel of Jesus Christ has not yet been clearly conveyed to them.

The Story of Blessing: Prevailing Over Curse *Richard Bauckham*

In Genesis 12 Abraham is singled out by God immediately following the thoroughly universal narrative of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. The story brings us to the great catalogue of all the nations, 70 of them, descended from the three sons of Noah found in chapter 10. Then chapter 11 tells the story of Babel, from which the entire human race was scattered over all the earth to form the various nations, divided by language and geography. Genesis 10-11 sets, as it were, the international scene for the whole rest of the Bible’s story. Unlike the choice of Noah and his family, the singling out of Abraham is not at all to be understood as God giving up on the nations. In Abraham’s case, he is singled out precisely so that blessing may come to all the nations, to all the seventy nations God had scattered over the face of the whole earth.

Blessing is the key word in God’s promises to Abraham: Abraham himself will be blessed, in that his descendants will be a great nation, and Abraham will be a blessing, in that all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:2-3). The promise that all the nations will be blessed is repeated four more times in Genesis (18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). On the last of these occasions it is given to Abraham’s son Isaac and grandson Jacob. Moreover, even within the stories of Jacob and his sons, the blessing of the nations begins—or at least is foreshadowed—when Jacob brings blessing to Laban (30:27) and Joseph to Potiphar (39:5). Then there is the peculiarly significant scene when the aged patriarch Jacob, on his arrival in Egypt, gives his blessing to no less than the Pharaoh of Egypt (47:7).

Blessing is a rich biblical notion

that has been rather neglected in our theology. Blessing in the Bible refers to God’s characteristically generous and abundant giving of all good to his creatures and his continual renewal of the abundance of created life. Blessing is God’s provision for human flourishing. But it is also relational: to be blessed by God is not only to know God’s good gifts but to know God himself in his generous giving. Because blessing is relational, the movement of the blessing is a movement that goes out from God and returns to him. God’s blessing of people overflows in their blessing of others, and, those who experience blessing from God in turn bless God, which means that they give all that creatures really can give to God: thanksgiving and praise.

Blessing highlights the relationship between creation and salvation in a different way from other ways

Richard Bauckham is Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of St. Andrews. He has published many works in historical theology and the New Testament. From *Bible and Mission*, 2003. Used by permission of Baker Academic Books, Grand Rapids, MI.

What will it look like when this aspect of God's blessing is fulfilled? We can look forward to the day when we will see at least some from every people on earth trusting and following Christ. The blessing of the nations means much more than evangelism, but it certainly can mean no less than the evangelization of every people.

We have seen in the book of Genesis that God displayed evidence of His dynamic presence with His people. God will be no less present amidst the peoples of the earth as groups of obedient followers of Christ emerge and grow among the nations. As in the book of Genesis, the presence of God with His people in our day is the beginning of all of the more tangible aspects of blessing that God brought about. This means that evangelization has a special priority. God's promise to bless the nations is the framework in which Christ's commission makes sense. This same promise authorizes Christ's followers to hope and to work for God's life to abound in every people.

Material and Social Blessing: Abundance and Peace

We can expect the blessing of belonging to God to become a reality amidst every people. But we can look forward to so much more! We can expect to see significant displays of the abundance of God's life. We should not expect a utopian perfection. But we can work and pray with a strong hope, partly informed by what we see in the book of Genesis, that God will be with His people to bring forth significant measures of blessing among the nations.

And so we ask again, what will the fulfillment of God's promise to bless the nations look like? Of course, it will be different in every place and people, but we should expect God to bring forth every kind of blessing, such as economies that flourish with justice and righteousness, agricultures and industries that abound with plenty for all, and peace throughout communities and between peoples and races. We can expect that God will enable His people to wage war with disease, to break the vicious cycles of poverty, to

of characterizing God's activity in the world. Already on the fifth day of the creation God blesses (Gen 1:22). Blessing is the way God enables his creation to be fertile and fruitful, to grow and to flourish. It is in the most comprehensive sense God's purpose for his creation. Wherever human life enjoys the good things of creation and produces the good fruits of human activity, God is pouring out his blessing. Wherever people bless God for his blessings, to that extent God is known as the good Creator who provides for human flourishing. God's blessing is universal.

But we should not think of the idea of blessing as something that describes God's goodness in creation, but does not also help us understand his goodness in salvation. Salvation too is God's blessing, since salvation is the fulfillment of God's purposes in spite of the damage evil does to God's creation. The Abrahamic blessing is more than the blessing of creation because it is designed to contend with and to

overcome its opposite: God's curse.

With sin God's curse enters creation alongside of God's blessing. We found the universal background to God's promise to Abraham in the account of the nations in Genesis 10-11. But there is an even earlier background in Genesis 3 and 4, where the blessings of creation turn to curse (3:17; 4:11). The curse even enters into God's promise to Abraham, apparently paralleling the blessing. God says to Abraham in Genesis 12: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12:3; cf. 27:29; Num 24:9). But blessing predominates in the promise (as the difference between the plural "those who bless you" and the singular "the one who curses you" seems to suggest), and it is clearly blessing, not curse that is the goal of God's calling of Abraham. Therefore blessing has the last word in the promise: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Through the story of Israel curse continually accompanies blessing

(e.g. Deut 7:12-16; 27-28), but the ultimate goal of God's promise to Abraham is the blessing that will prevail over the curse. It does when the seed of Abraham, the singled-out descendant of Abraham, the Messiah, becomes "a curse for us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (Gal 3:13-14). This is why God's promise that the nations will be blessed is called "the gospel" by Paul (Gal 3:8). The secret of the promise is Christ's bearing of the curse so that the blessing may prevail. The gospel is that in Jesus Christ the curse has been set aside and God's creative purpose for the blessing of his creation is established beyond any possibility of reversal. God's last and effective word is his blessing. It is a particular word, spoken in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, broadcast by those who like Paul cannot but pass it on, so powerful is its effect, overflowing with blessing from those who, blessed by it, become a blessing to others.

provide water in desert lands, and to be present with healing in the midst of catastrophe.

We should expect that some of Abraham's children by faith will be used by God to preserve life after the example of Joseph. We are probably seeing now in many cities an answer to Abraham's prayer for the city of Sodom in Genesis 18. In that prayer God said that an entire city would be spared the immediate consequences of their sin because of the righteousness of a few. In Abraham's day there were less than ten. Now there are millions of his faith family spread throughout many of the cities of the earth.

Blessing as Transformation

Recently the term "transformation" has helped many express hope that Christian mission can be directed beyond successful evangelism to also seek lasting changes in society which reflect the justice and character of Christ. The biblical ground for integrating evangelism with social action is usually found in numerous biblical texts dealing with the hope and reality of the kingdom of God. It could be that we have been overlooking a body of biblical truth that supports a robust and strategic holism. God's ancient promise of blessing provides a vivid, rich and powerful framework for integrating the pursuit of societal transformation and the completion of world evangelization.

Here are six reasons why the Abrahamic promise of blessing provides a framework for us to pray, plan and co-labor for the evangelization of all the peoples of the earth with hope that there will be significant transformation.

1. God Works with and through His People

God's people work with intentionality, strategy and hope, using all of the grace, skills and resources God has entrusted to them. But at the same time, God infuses the work of His people with His power and life. Blessing is a function of the work of people and the presence of God. Blessing is always more than the sum of all human efforts.

2. Increase and Fullness, but Never Perfection or Utopia

A blessed city or people is not a perfect society. Instead, hope for blessing gives us courage to pray and to work toward societies that flourish in every way—spiritually,

relationally, physically, economically, aesthetically and environmentally.

3. Not Exclusive to God's People

While God's people are distinctively blessed, God intends that blessing extend beyond His people. The well-being of entire cities and nations can be pursued without respect to how the gospel may have been received or rejected.

4. Growth Rather than Redistribution

Generosity is certainly a virtue of anyone who would desire to be a blessing in a biblical sense. But being a blessing means something other than merely sharing wealth with equality in view. The basic idea of blessing is that God's life multiplies and comes to an abundance or fullness by God's doing.

5. Blessing Even From the Poor and Powerless

Throughout Genesis, God brought about great blessing through weak, comparatively poor or powerless people. Being a blessing in God's hand is never the exclusive privilege of those who are wealthy or well-positioned by global standards.

6. Blessing is Variable, Slow-Forming and Long-Lasting

Changes that can be attributed to God's blessing often take place over a period of years or even generations. The fruition of blessing appears in comparable, but never identical ways in every people or place.

Co-Workers with God to Bring Blessing

We find in the Genesis account a remarkably clear prophetic sketch of the broad scope of God's purpose for His people. Since God's promise to Abraham embodies His purpose and our mission, then we are right to expect that our mission will lead to social and material change or transformation. But the main lesson to be learned is not that God's mission includes concerns for social and physical issues. The greatest lessons we may find are those which show us how to co-work with God to bring forth His blessing. To be God's blessing among all the peoples will require our utmost effort somehow blended with the exertion of God's miraculous, life-giving power.

As God continues the fulfillment of His promise in our day, we can learn important lessons about how we can co-work with God from the lives of Abraham's family. Perhaps the person in Genesis that exemplifies the mystery of God at work with His people to bring forth blessing is Abraham's great-grandson Joseph.

1. Co-working With God

Joseph worked with God and God worked through Joseph. When Potiphar's household was blessed, the miraculous increase was said to be "the Lord's blessing." But the abundance multiplied in extraordinary ways because of the diligence and wisdom of Joseph's efforts. We see God at work in supernatural ways by giving Joseph abilities to interpret dreams. But it was Joseph's skill and wisdom, given by God, that put together a long range plan to help the people of Egypt survive the famine and to restore economic and agricultural abundance.

2. Working Faithfully Regardless of Position

When Joseph worked as a slave, he worked diligently so that blessing abounded throughout all of his master's affairs. Even while in Pharaoh's dungeon as a prisoner, he proved trustworthy and was put in charge of running the prison because "whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper" (Gen 39:23). He was promoted to the highest pinnacle of power in an extensive empire. In that position he was used to save many lives and to restore the fertile agricultural economy of Egypt.

3. Serving as One Sent by God

Joseph gradually came to understand that he had been sent by God. He could have lived out a story-line of victimization as someone who had been brutalized by his family, unjustly treated as a slave, wrongly accused and

forgotten in prison. But instead, he recognized that God was aiming at something far beyond his own well-being. God was using circumstances intended for evil and turning them toward good (50:20). Joseph told his brothers, "God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5). Joseph is the first person in the story of Scripture who is said to have been expressly sent by God to accomplish mission of any kind.

4. Accomplishing God's Purpose

As Joseph stated it, the purpose God sent him to accomplish was simply to "preserve life." Joseph preserved the lives of his own family, but the grateful exclamation of the Egyptian people tells the greater story of lives saved throughout Egypt and Canaan: "You have saved our lives!" (47:25).

Without clarity about God's greater purpose unfolding over many years, it's doubtful that Joseph would have recognized that God had sent him at all. Joseph could have arranged that his remains would have been entombed in grand Egyptian style. Instead, he insisted that his remains be carried back to the land that God had promised Abraham (Gen 50:25, Heb 11:22). Joseph realized that he was pursuing a purpose that would be fulfilled beyond his own life span.

You Have Been Long Awaited

We know that Abraham gazed at the sky, counting the stars, believing that his family would number in the billions. But according to Jesus, Abraham saw more than the sky at night. He saw the day. The day of Christ. A day in which billions of his children would be blessed and be a blessing among all the peoples of earth. No wonder he was moved with joy.

Jesus said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). 🌟

Endnotes

1. Some observers have interpreted Joseph's action as a shrewd act of oppression denying impoverished people ownership of land. The account emphasizes that many lives were saved. When viewed in light of most famines that wiped out millions of people in the ancient world along the likelihood that many regimes would have allowed much of the population to slowly starve, it is possible to see Joseph's work as a work of salvation. But because there was a restoring of agricultural abundance, it should be considered an act of blessing.
2. In Genesis 12:2, the Hebrew expression "be a blessing" is in the imperative mood. Taken by itself this verb could be considered to be a clear command to Abram to somehow become a blessing. But even though the word itself is in the imperative mood, the grammar of the entire expression frames this phrase as a forceful way to express the purpose of the three cohortative Hebrew verbs immediately before it (to make Abram a great nation, to bless him, and to make his name great).

Mission and God's Earth

Christopher J. H. Wright



Christopher J. H. Wright is International Director of the Langham Partnership

International (known in the US as John Stott Ministries). Formerly he taught Old Testament at the Union Biblical Seminary in Pune, India, and then served as Principal of All Nations Christian College in Ware, England. He also serves as the Chair of the Lausanne Theology Working Group and is a member of the staff of All Souls Church, London, UK.

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To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. — Deut 10: 14

This bold claim that the God of Israel owns the whole universe is echoed in the familiar assertion of Psalm 24:1: “To the Lord belongs the earth and its fullness,” and in the less-familiar claim God makes to Job: “Everything under heaven belongs to me” (Job 41:11).

The Earth is the Lord's

The earth, then, belongs to God because God made it. We do not own this planet, even if our behavior tends to boast that we think we do. No, God is the earth's landlord and we are God's tenants. God has given the earth into our resident *possession* (Ps 115:16), but we do not hold the title deed of ultimate ownership. As in any landlord-tenant relationship, God holds us accountable for how we treat his property. Thus, God's ownership of the earth has significant ethical and missional implications.

The Goodness of Creation

That the creation is good is one of the most emphatic points of Genesis 1 through 2.¹ Six times in the narrative God declares his work to be “good.” This resoundingly simple affirmation tells us two things.

1. A Good Creation Can Only Be the Work of a Good God

The Hebrew account of creation contrasts with other ancient Near Eastern accounts, in which powers and gods of the natural world are portrayed in various degrees of malevolence, and in which aspects of the natural order are explained as the outcome of this malevolence. In the Old Testament, the natural order is fundamentally good, as the work of the single good God, Yahweh. Biblical testimony to the goodness of creation reflects the good character of the God who made it (e.g., Pss 19; 29; 50:6; 65; 104; 148; Job 12:7-9; Acts 14:17; 17:27; Rom 1:20).

2. Creation is Intrinsically Good

In the creation narratives, the affirmation, “it is good,” was not made by Adam and Eve, but by God himself. Creation's goodness is theologically and chronologically prior to human

observation. It is not merely a human reflexive response to a pleasant view, nor is it an instrumental goodness because it exists for human benefit. Rather, God's affirmation of the goodness of creation is his seal of *divine* approval on the whole universe. He declares "it is good" at every phase of creation—from the creation of light, water and land, sun and moon, and vegetation, to fish, birds and animals. All of these created orders were present in all their divinely affirmed goodness before humanity arrived on the scene.

So the earth has *intrinsic* value—that is to say, it is valued by God, who is the source of all value. God values the earth because he made it and owns it. It is not enough merely to say that the earth is *valuable to us*. Accordingly, we need to be careful to locate an ecological dimension of mission not primarily in the need-supplying value of the earth to us, but in the glory-giving value of the earth to God.

The Sanctity (but Not Divinity) of Creation

The Bible makes a clear distinction between God the Creator and all things created. Nothing in creation is in itself *divine*. This rules out *nature* polytheism, which was prevalent in the religious environment surrounding Israel. In these religious systems, the different forces of nature were regarded as *divine* beings (or under the control of *divine* beings). Many religious rituals functioned to placate or persuade these nature gods or goddesses into agriculturally beneficial action.

In the faith of Israel, however, the great realities of the natural world had no inherent *divine* existence. Such power as they had, which may have seemed to be great, was entirely the work of God the Creator and under his command. The Hebrew Bible, therefore, while it certainly teaches respect and care for the nonhuman creation, resists and reverses the human tendency to divinize or personalize the natural order, or to imbue it with any power independent of its personal Creator.

The Old Testament constantly presents creation *in relation to God*. The created order

obeys God, submits to God's commands, reveals God's glory, benefits from God's sustaining and providing and serves God's purposes. There is a fundamental difference between treating creation as *sacred* and treating it as *divine*. The laws, worship and

prophecy of Israel honored the sacredness of the nonhuman created order, as should we, but to *worship* nature in any of its manifestations is to exchange the Creator for the created. Israel

was repeatedly warned against this form of idolatry (e.g., Deut 4:15-20 cf. Job 31:26-28), and Paul links such idolatry with humanity's willful rebellion and social evil (Rom 1:25 and the surrounding context).

God's Glory as the Goal of Creation

"What is the chief end of man?" asks the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession, regarding the meaning and purpose of human existence. It answers with glorious biblical simplicity: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." It would be equally biblical to ask exactly the same question about the whole of creation and to give exactly the same answer. Creation exists for the praise and glory of its Creator God, and for mutual enjoyment between the Creator and the created. The God-focused goal of human life is not something that sets us *apart* from the rest of creation. Rather, it is something we *share* with the rest of creation. Glorifying and enjoying God is the chief end of *all* creation.

We human beings glorify our Creator in uniquely human ways, as befits our unique status as the one creature made in God's image. So, as humans we praise God with hearts and hands and voices, with rationality as well as emotion, with language, art, music and craft—with all that reflects the God in whose image we were made.

The rest of creation already praises God and is summoned, repeatedly, to do so (Pss 145:10,21; 148; 150:6). There is a response of gratitude that befits not just human beneficiaries of God's generosity but is attributed to the nonhuman creatures as well (Ps 104:27-28). We may not be able to explain *how* it is

The earth has *intrinsic* value—it is valued by God, who is the source of all value. God values the earth because he made it and owns it.

that creation praises its Maker—since we know only the reality of our personhood, and what it means for *us* to praise God. However, just because we cannot articulate the *how* of creation's praise to God, or the *how* of God's receiving this praise, we should not deny *that* creation praises God. It is affirmed throughout the Bible with overwhelming conviction.

This response of gratitude is a fundamental feature of creaturely being that is shared by all the creatures of the earth, humans and animals, landscapes, seas and mountains, earth, wind, fire and rain. The Psalmist charges all things with the first moral duty of the creation, to worship and praise the creator.... In the Hebrew perspective, humanity and the cosmos have moral significance, and both are required to make a moral response to the creator, a response to God which reflects his glory and offers the return of gratitude, praise and worship (Ps 150).²

Eventually, the whole of creation will join in the joy and thanksgiving that will accompany the Lord when he comes as king to put all things right (i.e., to judge the earth, e.g., Pss 96:10-13; 98:7-9).

Hope for the Redemption of the Whole Creation

We have considered how important it is to include the Bible's doctrine of creation in our thinking about the earth. Yet looking back to Genesis and affirming its great truths about our world is not enough. You cannot drive a car looking only in the rear view mirror. You have to look ahead toward your destination. Likewise, the Bible teaches us to value the earth because of whom it came from, but also because of its ultimate destiny. We need both a creational as well as an eschatological foundation for our ecological ethics and ecological dimensions of Christian mission.

New Heavens and a New Earth: Isaiah's Vision

One of the richest places in the Old Testament to find such a foundation is the book of Isaiah. We could begin with the glorious vision of Isaiah 11:1-9, in which the just rule of the messianic king will result in harmony and peace within the created order. Similarly

transforming expectations for the created order attend the return of the redeemed to Zion in Isaiah 35. However, the climax of Old Testament eschatological vision regarding creation is found in Isaiah 65, a wonderful section that has to be read in full.

Behold, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.
Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days, or an
old man who does not live out his years;
he who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere youth;
he who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.

They will build houses and dwell in them;
they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
No longer will they build houses
and others live in them,
or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands.
They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
they and their descendants with them.
Before they call I will answer;
while they are still speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
but dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD. (Is 65:17-25)

This inspiring vision portrays God's new creation as a place that will be joyful, free from grief and tears, life-fulfilling, with guaranteed work satisfaction, free from the curses of frustrated labor and environmentally safe! It is a vision that puts most New Age dreams in the shade.

Such passages are the Old Testament foundation for the New Testament hope, which, far



I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth. It shall come about, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow will be seen in the cloud, and I will remember My covenant, which is between Me and you and every living creature of all flesh. — Genesis 9:13-15

from rejecting or denying the earth as such or envisioning us floating off to some other place, looks forward likewise to a new, redeemed creation (Rom 8:18-21), in which righteousness will dwell (2 Pet 3:10-13), because God himself will dwell there with his people (Rev 21:1-4).

Looking Forward to a New Creation

Most of what we find in both Old and New Testaments regarding an eschatological vision for creation is overwhelmingly positive. This must affect how we understand the equally biblical portrayal of final and fiery destruction that awaits the present world order. Second Peter 3:10 says, “The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”

I prefer the textual reading of the final word in this verse that the earth “will be found” (which is adopted by the NIV, “will be laid bare”; NRSV, “will be disclosed”; REB, “will be brought to judgment”) to the textual reading reflected in some other English translations (e.g., KJV and NASB, “will be burned up”).³ I also find Richard Bauckham’s interpretation of this convincing: that the earth and everything in it will be “found out,” that is, exposed and laid bare before God’s judgment so that the wicked and all their works will no longer be able to hide or find any protection.⁴ In other words, the purpose of the conflagration described in these verses is not the *obliteration of the cosmos itself* but rather the *purging of the sinful world order we live in*, through the consuming destruction of all that is evil within

creation, so as to establish the new creation.

This fits with the previous picture of the judgment of the flood in 2 Peter 3:6-7, used explicitly as an historical precedent for the final judgment: “By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word, the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.”

A world of wickedness was wiped out in the flood, but the world as God’s creation was preserved. Similarly, by analogy, the world of all evil and wickedness in creation will be wiped out in God’s cataclysmic judgment, but the creation itself will be renewed as the dwelling place of God with redeemed humanity.

This gloriously earthy biblical hope adds an important dimension to our ecological ethics. It is not just a matter of looking back to the initial creation but of looking forward to the new creation. This means that our motivation has a double force—a kind of push-pull effect. There is a goal in sight. Granted it lies only in the power of God to ultimately achieve it, but, as is the case with other aspects of biblical eschatology, what we hope for from God affects how we are to live now and what our own objectives should be.

Why Creation Care is Part of Biblical Mission

A biblical theology of mission, flowing from the mission of God himself, must include the ecological sphere within its scope and see practical environmental action as a legitimate part of biblical mission. Among many others,

here are four ways that creation care should be considered a part of how Christians participate in God's mission.

1. Creation Care Continues the Mission of Humanity

Humanity was put on the earth with a mission—to rule over, to keep and to care for the rest of creation. God instructed the human species not only to fill the earth (an instruction also given to the other creatures) but also to subdue (Hebrew: *kabas*) it and to rule over (Hebrew: *rada*) the rest of the creatures (Gen 1:28). The words *kabas* and *rada* are strong words, implying both exertion and effort, and the imposing of will upon another. However,

Creation exists for the praise and glory of its Creator God, and for mutual enjoyment between the Creator and the created.

they are not, as contemporary ecological mythology likes to caricature, terms that imply violence or abuse. The idea that these words could ever imply violent abuse and exploitation, and the implied accusation that Christianity is

therefore an intrinsically eco-hostile religion, is relatively recent.⁵ By far the dominant interpretation of these words in both Jewish and Christian tradition has been that they entail benevolent care for the rest of creation as entrusted into human custodianship.⁶

On one level, the first term, *kabas*, authorizes humans to do what every other species on earth does, which is to utilize its environment for life and survival. *All* species in some way or another “subdue the earth” to the degrees necessary for their own prospering. That is the nature of life on earth. As applied to humans in Genesis 1:28, *kabas* probably implies no more than the task of agriculture. That humans have developed tools and technology to pursue their own form of subduing the earth for their own benefit is no different in principle from what other species do, though vastly different in degree and impact on the ecosphere.

The latter word, *rada*, is more distinctive. It describes a role for human beings given to no other species—the function of ruling or exercising dominion. It seems clear that in

Genesis 1:28, God is passing on to human hands a delegated form of his own kingly authority over the whole of his creation. Kings and emperors in ancient times would set up an image of themselves in far-flung corners of their domains to signify their sovereignty over that territory and its people. The image represented the authority of the king. Similarly, God installs the human species as the image, within creation, of the authority that finally belongs to God, Creator and Owner of the earth. The natural assumption is that a creature made in the image of God will reflect godly qualities in carrying out the mandate of delegated dominion. The exercise of this *human* dominion must reflect the character and values of *God's* own kingship.

The ‘image’ is a kingly pattern, and the kind of rule which God entrusted to human kind is that proper to the ideals of kingship. *The ideals*, not the abuses or failures: not tyranny or arbitrary manipulation and exploitation of subjects, but a rule governed by justice, mercy and true concern for the welfare of all.⁷

If this is how God acts, then how much more is it incumbent on us, made in his image and commanded to be like him, to exhibit the same solicitous care for the creation he has entrusted to our rule?

This understanding turns our supremacism upside down, for if we resemble God in that we have dominion, we must be called to be “imitators of God” (Eph 5:1) in the way we exercise this dominion. Indeed, far from giving us a free hand on the earth, the *imago Dei* constrains us. We must be kings, not tyrants; if we become the latter we deny and even destroy the image in us. How then does God exercise dominion? Psalm 145 tells us that God is gracious, compassionate, good, faithful, loving, generous, and protective, not to humankind only but to “all he has made.” God’s characteristic act is to bless, and it is God’s constant care that ensures that the cattle, the lions, and even the birds are fed and watered (Ps 104; Matt 6:26).⁸

2. Creation Care Embodies a Biblical Balance of Compassion and Justice

Creation care embodies *compassion* because to care for God’s creation is essentially an unselfish form of love, exercised for the sake

of creatures that cannot thank or repay us. In this respect it reflects the same quality in the love of God—not only in the sense that God loves human beings in spite of our unlovable enmity toward him but also in the wider sense that “the LORD has compassion/is loving toward *all that he has made*” (Ps 145:9,13,17, *author’s translation*). Again, Jesus used God’s loving care for birds and adornment of grasses and flowers as a model for God’s even greater love for his human children. If God cares with such minute compassion for his nonhuman creation, how much more should those who wish to emulate him?

Creation care embodies *justice* because environmental action is a form of defending the weak against the strong, the defenseless against the powerful, the violated against the attacker and the voiceless against the stridency of the greedy. These, too, are features of the character of God as expressed in his exercise of justice. Psalm 145 includes God’s provision for all his creatures in its definition of his *righteousness* as well as his love (Ps 145:13-17). In fact, it places God’s care for creation in precise parallel with his liberating and vindicating acts of justice for his people—thus bringing the creational and redemptive traditions of the Old Testament together in beautiful harmony.

3. Creation Care Contends with Other Ideologies

If the church awakens to the need to address the ecological crisis and does so within a biblical framework, it will engage in conflict with at least two other ideologies, and doubtless many more.

Destructive Global Capitalism and the Greed that Fuels It

There is no doubt that a major contributor to contemporary environmental damage is global capitalism’s insatiable demand for “more.” The biblical truth relevant here is that covetousness is idolatry and the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. There is greed for the following:

- Minerals and oil, at any cost,
- Land to graze cattle for meat,
- Exotic animals and birds, to meet obscene human fashions in clothes, toys, ornaments and aphrodisiacs,

- Commercial or tourist exploitation of fragile and irreplaceable habitats, and
- Market domination through practices that produce the goods at least cost to the exploiter and maximum cost to the country and people exploited.

For the Church to get involved in environmental protection, it must be prepared to tackle the forces of greed and economic power, to confront vested interests and political machination and to recognize that more is at stake than being kind to animals and nice to people. The Church must do the scientific research to make its case credible. It must be willing for the long hard road that the struggle for justice and compassion in a fallen world demands in this, as in all other fields of mission.

Pantheistic, Neo-pagan and New Age Spiritualities

We may often find that people attracted to pantheistic, neo-pagan and New Age philosophies are passionate about the natural order, but from a very different perspective. The Church in its mission must bear witness to the great biblical claim that the earth is the Lord’s. The earth is not Gaia or Mother Earth. It does not have independent potency. It is not a self-sustaining sentient being. It is not to be worshiped, feared or even loved in a way that usurps the sole deity of the one living and personal Creator God. Our environmental mission is never romantic or mystical. We are not called to “union with nature” but to care for the earth as an act of love and obedience to its Creator and Redeemer.

4. Creation Care Springs from the Mission of God

The starting point and finishing point in our biblical theology of mission must be the mission of God himself. What is the overarching mission to which God has committed himself and the whole outworking of history? It is not only the salvation of human beings but also the redemption of the whole creation. God is establishing a new creation through the transformation and renewal of creation in a manner analogous to the resurrection of his Son, and as a habitation for the resurrection bodies of his redeemed people.

Holistic mission, then, is not truly holistic if it includes only human beings (even if it includes them holistically!) and excludes the rest of the creation for whose reconciliation Christ shed his blood (Col 1:20). Those Christians who have responded to God's call to serve him through serving his nonhuman creatures in ecological projects are engaged in a specialized form of mission that has its rightful place within the broad framework of all that God's mission has as its goal. Their motivation flows from an awareness of God's own heart for his creation.

Caring for Creation as God Does

All of these points are built on the *intrinsic* value of creation to God and the mandate of God that we should care for creation as he does. They do not depend on any other utility or consequence of such action, such as human benefit or evangelistic fruitfulness. We are to care for the earth because it belongs to God and he told us to. That is enough in itself.

There is no doubt that what benefits creation

is ultimately good for human beings in the long term. Furthermore, since the suffering of creation is bound up with human wickedness, that which is good news for the earth is part of that which is good news for people. The gospel is indeed good news for the whole of creation.

Christian environmental action is also evangelistically fruitful, not because it is any kind of cover for "real mission," but simply because it declares in word and deed the Creator's limitless love for the whole of his creation (which of course includes his love for his human creatures) and makes no secret of the biblical story of the cost the Creator paid to redeem both. Such action is a missional embodiment of the biblical truths that the Lord is loving toward all that he has made, and that this same God so loved the world that he gave his only Son not only so that believers should not perish but ultimately so that *all things in heaven and earth* should be reconciled to God through the blood of the cross. For God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself. 🌍

Endnotes

1. Ron Elsdon makes the theme of the goodness of creation the thread running through his survey of biblical material in both Testaments on this issue in his book *Green House Theology: Biblical Perspectives on Caring for Creation* (Tunbridge Wells, U.K.: Monarch, 1992).
2. Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 180-81.
3. The reference to "textual readings" speaks of slight variations of wording found in different ancient manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. Different translation teams must choose which reading they feel is the wording intended by the original author. NIV refers to the New International Version; NRSV refers to the New Revised Standard Version; REB refers to the Revised English Bible; KJV refers to the King James Version; and NASB refers to the New American Standard Bible.
4. Richard J. Bauckham, *2 Peter and Jude, Word Biblical Commentary 50* (Waco, TX.: Word, 1983), pp. 316-22.
5. The source of this widespread idea that Christianity bears major responsibility for our ecological crisis because of its instrumentalist view of nature, allegedly rooted in Genesis 1:28, goes back to the frequently reproduced and much-quoted article by Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-7, 1967. It has been answered by many others since, and it has been shown to be based on a misunderstanding of the Hebrew text of Genesis. James Barr, for example, in 1972, showed that "Man's 'dominion' contains no markedly exploitative aspect; it approximates to the well-known Oriental idea of the Shepherd King.... The Jewish-Christian doctrine of creation is therefore much less responsible for the ecological crisis than is suggested by arguments such as those of Lynn White. On the contrary, the biblical foundations of that doctrine would tend in the opposite direction, away from a licence to exploit and towards a duty to respect and to protect." See James Barr, "Man and Nature—the Ecological controversy and the Old Testament," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester* 55 (1972), pp. 22,30.
6. For a thorough survey of representative expressions of this view down through Christian history, see James A. Nash, "The Ecological Complaint Against Christianity," in *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), pp. 68-92.
7. Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1992), p. 98.
8. Huw Spanner, "Tyrants, Stewards—or Just Kings?" in *Animals on the Agenda: Questions About Animals for Theology and Ethics*, ed. Linzey Andrew and Dorothy Yamamoto (London: SCM Press, 1998), p. 222.

Study Questions

1. Explain the important distinction between the sanctity and divinity of creation. Why is it important?
2. What are the reasons Wright gives for including creation care as a dimension of Christian mission?

The Biblical Foundation for the Worldwide Mission Mandate

Johannes Verkuyl

The 20th century has produced a steady stream of literature which regards the Old Testament as an indispensable and irreplaceable base for the Church's missionary task among the nations and peoples of this world. As one who has made frequent use of the literature, I wish to look at four motifs in the Old Testament which form the indispensable basis for the New Testament call to the Church to engage in worldwide mission work: the universal motif, the motif of rescue and saving, the missionary motif and the antagonistic motif.

The Universal Motif

The God who in the Old Testament identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and who discloses to Moses his personal name, Yahweh, is the God of the whole world. The experience of a few patriarchs and later the one nation of Israel with this God expands to include the horizon of the entire world. We shall cite only a few of the Old Testament passages to illustrate this universal motif.

The Table of Nations in Genesis 10

Genesis 10, with its passage listing the table of nations, is important for understanding the universal motif of the Old Testament. Gerhard von Rad described it as the conclusion to the history of the Creation. All of the nations issue forth from the creative hand of God and stand under his watchful eye of patience and judgment. The nations are not mere decorations incidental to the real drama between God and man; rather, the nations—that is, mankind as a whole—are part of the drama itself. God's work and activity are directed at the whole of humanity.

This is one of the fundamental truths of Genesis 1-11, the record of history's beginning; it is also found in the moving account of history's end, the book of John's Revelation. The very God who revealed himself to Israel and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ identifies himself as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending. He does not lay down his work until "every tongue and nation" and "a multitude without number" have been gathered round his throne (Rev 5:9-10; 7:9-17). God is cutting a path directly through the weary and plodding activities of men in history in order to achieve his goals among the nations.



Johannes Verkuyl was formerly Professor and Head of the Department of

Missiology and Evangelism at the Free University of Amsterdam.

In 1940, he went to Indonesia and served as a missionary for many years. When Japan invaded during WWII, he refused to leave and spent three years in a Japanese concentration camp. He has authored over 250 books and articles.

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God's Election of Israel with His Eye on the Nations

After the Bible finishes its account of God's judgment of the nations, so graphically described in the Genesis passage about the Tower of Babel, it shifts in chapter 12 to God's call to Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees. The "God of the whole earth" seems at first glance to narrow his interests to the private history of one family and tribe only, but in actuality, nothing could be farther from the truth. In de Groot's words, "Israel is the opening word in God's proclaiming salvation, not the Amen."¹ For a time Israel,

God chose Israel
with the intention
that she would speak
to the other nations.

the "people of Abraham," is separated from the other nations (Ex 19:3ff.; Deut 7:14ff.), but only so that through Israel God can pave the way toward achieving his world-embracing goals. In choosing Israel as a segment of all humanity, God never took his eye off the other nations; Israel was a minority called to serve the majority.²

God's election of Abraham and Israel concerns the whole world. He deals so intensely with Israel precisely because he is maintaining his personal claim on the whole world. To speak to this world in the fullness of time, he needed a people. Countless recent studies are emphasizing this very point: God chose Israel in preparation for the complete unwrapping and disclosure of his universal intentions.

God chose Israel with the intention that she would speak to the other nations. Whenever Israel forgot this and turned away from the nations in introverted pride, prophets like Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah lashed out at the people's ethnocentric pretension and charged them with subverting God's actual intentions (see especially Amos 9:9-10).

The Breakthrough of the Universal Motif in the Exile

Israel's experiences during the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. opened her eyes to God's universal intentions. As Israel passed through her catastrophic experience of being trounced by the Babylonians and carted off into exile,

the prophets came to see how closely the career of Israel was tied in with the history of the nations. Out of the judgment which Israel was feeling, there blossomed the eager hope of a new covenant, a new exodus, another Son of David. Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah all saw the horizon expanding and bore witness that all nations now fall within the spotlight of God's promises. The apocalyptic vision of Daniel predicts the coming of the Son of Man whose kingdom shall put an end to the brutish kingdoms of the world and whose domain shall include all peoples (Dan 7:1-29).

The Motif of Rescue and Liberation

Yahweh, the Redeemer of Israel

The soteriological (having to do with salvation) theme of the Bible, that is, God's work of rescuing and saving both Israel and the other nations, is tied closely to the theme of universalism. Yahweh, the God of all the earth, displayed his love and kept his word to Israel by freeing her from the bonds of slavery with his strong and outstretched arm (see Deut 9:26; 13:5; 15:15; 24:18). This was a basic part of Israel's credo and crucial to understanding the first commandment. This God—the one who saves and frees—alone is God. "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20). This credo transformed Israel from being merely one nation among others into the chosen community which owes its very existence to God's act of deliverance and returns its praises to him in psalms and prayers of thanksgiving.

Yahweh, the Redeemer of the Nations

The prophets of Israel grew increasingly aware that not only Israel would share in God's acts of redemption. God would break in to restore his liberating Lordship over the entire world of the nations.

The other nations make their pilgrimage back to Zion, the mountain of the Lord. The prophets picture the people of the other nations as returning to Jerusalem, where the God of Israel shall appear as the God of all the peoples (see Isa 2:1-4; Jer 3:17; Isa 25:6-9; Isa 60; Zech 8:20ff).

Several psalms chant this theme, too. Psalm 87 proclaims Jerusalem as the ecumenical city whose citizens shall some day

include inhabitants of the various nations, even from those nations who once most ardently opposed the God of Israel. They shall join in celebrating God's restored fellowship with the peoples.

God's Method of Achieving Liberation

The Bible also describes the means God is using to bring salvation to Israel and the nations. No other Old Testament passage probes more deeply into this matter than the so-called "Servant" songs of Isaiah 40-55. These Servant songs make unmistakable reference to the spread of salvation through the whole world. The Servant shall carry it to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6), and he will not stop until righteousness prevails throughout the earth. The coastlands are awaiting his instruction (Isa 42:4).

The fourth Servant song in chapter 53 uncovers the secret of *how* the Servant of the Lord shall discharge his mission. This deeply moving passage depicts the Servant becoming a victim of the most savage human butchery. Every kind of mistreatment human minds can devise shall be done to him. However, the Servant also at that point shall be acting as a substitute who is incurring the judgment of God which was properly due not only to Israel but to all peoples and nations. Moreover, this passage describes the nations as Yahweh's gifts to the Servant in return for his willing obedience to suffer death. He achieved the right to bring salvation and healing to all people.

The Missionary Motif

Connected with the other two Old Testament motifs mentioned previously is the missionary motif. The prophets never tire of reminding Israel that her election is not a privilege which she may selfishly keep for herself; election is a call to service. It involves a duty to witness among the nations. Israel must be a sign to the other nations that Yahweh is both Creator and Liberator. One Servant song (Isa 49:6) refers to Israel's mandate to become a light to the nations.

Virtually every author who attempts to explain this call to Israel comes up with the concept of presence. Chosen by God to become the special recipients of his mercy

and justice, Israel now has the corresponding duty to live as the people of God among the other nations in order to show them his grace, mercy, justice, and liberating power. Time and time again the prophets recorded their deep disappointment over Israel's continual sabotage of her divine calling. But however hot their righteous anger burned against Israel's disobedience, the prophets kept on reminding Israel to the very end of her mandate to be present among the people as distinct people and a royal priesthood.

It is worth noting that since the Second World War, a number of missiologists have urged Christian presence as one of the leading methods of engaging in today's mission work. For a variety of reasons and in a variety of manners, they claim that the most suitable form of witness lies in simply being a specific kind of people while living among other people. This is not the place to develop this idea further but only to point out that the idea that presence is witness has deep roots in the Old Testament. The prophets continually claimed that by her very act of living out her divine appointment to serve, Israel becomes a sign and bridge for the other nations.

However, I do not believe it is correct to view the missionary motif only in terms of the concept of presence. I simply do not understand why various writers make such a point of avowing that the Old Testament makes absolutely no mention of a missionary mandate.

Then there is that striking number of individuals who left their heathen origins and by word-and-deed witness were won over to trust and serve the living God who had shown them mercy. The stories of Melchizedek, Ruth, Job, the people of Nineveh described in the book of Jonah, and many others in the Old Testament are windows, as it were, through which we may look out on the vast expanse of people outside the nation of Israel and hear the faint strains of the missionary call to all people already sounding forth.

The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is similar in both form and content to both Greek and Egyptian cultures. Without doubt, her own literature served Israel as a means of communicating her beliefs to the other nations.

Moreover, there is no other way of explaining the powerful missionary impact of Judaism during the Diaspora³ than to affirm that those dispersed Jews *from their earliest days* had heard and understood their call to witness directly as well as by their presence.

The Motif of Antagonism

The above list of Old Testament missionary motifs is incomplete. Intricately connected with each of those mentioned above is the antagonistic motif, that is, Yahweh's powerful wrestling against those powers and forces which oppose his liberating and gracious authority.

The whole Old Testament (and the New Testament as well) is filled with descriptions of how Yahweh-Adonai, the covenant God of Israel, is waging war against those forces which try to thwart and subvert his plans for his creation. He battles against those false gods which human beings have fashioned from the created world, idolized, and used for their own purposes. Think, for example, of the Baals and the Ashtaroth, whose worshipers elevated nature, the tribe, the state and the nation to a divine status. God fights against magic and astrology which, according to Deuteronomy, bend the line between God and his creation. He contends against every form of social injustice and pulls off every cloak under which it seeks to hide (see Amos and Jeremiah, for example).

The whole of the Old Testament burns with a feverish desire to defeat these opposing powers. There are grand visions of that coming kingdom where every relationship is properly restored and when the whole of creation—people, animals, plants, and every other creature—will be in perfect accord with God's intentions for it (see Isa 2, Mic 4, and Isa 65). The Old Testament longs for this kingdom's final revealing and categorically states its promise that Yahweh shall indeed finally overcome. This too is a highly significant theme for missionary participation. To participate in mission is quite impossible unless one also wages war against every form of opposition to God's intentions wherever it be found, whether in churches, the world of the nations, or one's own life.

The Old Testament ties the antagonistic motif closely with the doxological theme: the glory of Yahweh-Adonai shall be revealed among all peoples. Then every human being shall come to know him as he really is, the "gracious and merciful God, slow to get angry, full of kindness, and always willing to turn back from meting out disaster" (Jonah 4:1-2).

The Book of Jonah

The book of Jonah is so significant for understanding the biblical basis of mission because it treats God's mandate to his people regarding the Gentile peoples and thus serves as the preparatory step to the missionary mandate of the New Testament. But it is also important for catching a glimpse of the deep resistance this mandate encounters from the very servant Yahweh has chosen to discharge his worldwide work.

Today there is much talk and writing about "educating the congregation" and "educating personnel" for mission. Jonah is a lesson in educating a person to be a missionary: it reveals the need for a radical conversion of one's natural tendencies and a complete restructuring of his life to make it serviceable for mission.

Background of the Book

The title of the book is the personal name of the unwilling prophet, Jonah, and harks back to the days of King Jeroboam II (787-746 B.C.), when a prophet named Jonah ben Amittai was living. The author uses this personal name to portray for his readers a missionary who has no heart for the Gentiles and who, like the later Pharisees, cannot tolerate a God who shows them mercy. In the words of the Dutch author Miskotte, "the writer intends to picture a person who is the exact opposite of an apostle." The author of Jonah warns his readers against this intolerant attitude and sets before each of them the question of whether he or she is willing to be transformed into a servant who works to accomplish the mandates of God.

As the author sees it, Israel has become so preoccupied with herself that she no longer directs her eyes toward the world of the nations. Israel, the recipient of all God's revelation, refuses to set foot in alien territory to tell the other peoples God's message of

judgment and liberation. But the message of the book also is addressed to the New Testament congregation which tries various ways of evading her Lord's command to speak his message to the world.

Jonah's crafty evasion efforts represent a lazy and unfaithful Church which does not heed its Lord's command. God has to wrestle against Israel's narrow ethnocentrism which tries to restrict his activity to the boundaries of Israel alone and against the Church's ecclesiocentric refusal to go out into the world to proclaim God's message and do his work. The writer is bent on convincing his readers that the radius of God's liberating activity is wide enough to cover both Israel and the Gentiles.

It is a miracle that Jonah, with its strong warning against ethnocentrism, ever made its way into the canon of Scripture. It squarely sets forth man's attempt to sabotage God's worldwide plans so that its readers—Israel, the New Testament Church, and us—can hear what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell them through the medium of this little book.

A Short Review of the Book's Eight Scenes

The first scene opens with Jonah receiving the command to go to Nineveh. While the Old Testament usually appeals to the other nations to *come* to Zion, the mountain of God, Jonah, like the disciples of the New Testament (cf. Matt 28:18-20), is told to *go*! The Septuagint translation (an early version of the Old Testament in Greek) of Jonah uses the word *poreuomai* (Greek term for "go") in 1:2-3 and again in 3:2-3, the very same verb used by Jesus in his Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28.

Where must Jonah go? To Nineveh, of all places. Nineveh, a very center of totalitarianism, brutality, and warlike attitudes. To Nineveh, notorious for the shameful hounding, vicious torture, and imperialist brazenness it reserved for those who chose to oppose its policies. God wants his servant to warn Nineveh of impending judgment and to call her to repentance. He wants to save *Nineveh!*

But Jonah refuses. He prepares himself, to be sure, but only to *flee* from the face of God who is Lord over all.

In the second scene, God responds to Jonah's flight by sending a mighty storm (1:4-16). The wind obeys Yahweh's commands,

but the disobedient Jonah sleeps in the bottom of the boat, oblivious of the fact that the storm is directed at him. At times the Church, too, sleeps right through the storm of God's judgment passing over the world, assuring herself that the wind outside has nothing to do with her. While the crew vainly searches for the storm's cause, Jonah confesses that he worships and fears the God who made both the sea and the dry land, the one God who is above all nations. This God, he claims, is bringing a charge against him, and the only way to quiet the waters is to throw him into the sea. In this scene the crew represents the Gentiles, a people for whom Jonah is totally unconcerned, and yet who themselves are interested in sparing his life. After a second order from Jonah, they throw him overboard and the storm ceases. Scarcely able to believe their eyes, the sailors break forth in praise to the God of Jonah. Their obedience surpasses that of the saboteur Jonah: they are more open to God than the very prophet himself.

The third scene (1:17) describes a large fish which, at Yahweh's instructions, opens its mouth to swallow Jonah and spew him onto the shore at the appropriate time. Jonah simply cannot escape God's missionary mandate. The God who whipped up the stormy winds and directed the sailors to accomplish his purposes now guides a fish as part of his plan to save Nineveh. Yahweh continues his work of reforming and preparing his missionary to be a fit instrument in his plans.

In the fourth scene (2:1-10), Jonah implores God to rescue him from the belly of the fish. He who had no mercy on the Gentiles and refused to acknowledge that God's promises extended to them now appeals for divine mercy, and by quoting lines from various psalms, pants after those promises claimed by worshipers in God's temple.

Yahweh reacts. He speaks to the brute beast and Jonah lands on shore safe and sound. By his very rescue, Jonah was unwittingly a witness of God's saving mercy. Though covered with seaweed, Jonah was nonetheless a testimony that God takes no delight in the death of sinners and saboteurs but rather rejoices in their conversion.

In the fifth scene (3:1-4), God repeats his order to the man whose very life affirms the

truth of what he confessed in the belly of the fish: "Salvation is from Yahweh." The Septuagint uses the term *kerygma* in 3:1-2ff. That single word summarizes Jonah's mission: he must *proclaim* that Nineveh, however godless she may be, is still the object of God's concern, and unless she repents, she will be destroyed. His message must be one of threat as well as promise, of judgment as well as gospel.

In the sixth scene (3:5-10), Nineveh responds to Jonah's appeal to repent. The proud, despotic king steps down from his royal throne, exchanges his robes for dust and ashes, and enjoins every man and animal to follow his example.

What Israel continually refused to do the heathen Gentiles did do: the cruel king of Nineveh stands as anti-type to the disobedient kings of Judah.

The people join the king in repenting. They cease all their devilish work and the terrifying and coercing engines of political injustice come to a halt. In deep penitence they turn away from idols to serve the God who is Lord of every nation and all creation. All this becomes possible because Yahweh is God. The world of the heathen is a potentially productive mission field for no other reason than this: He alone is God.

The curtain closes on this scene with these amazing words: "God saw what they did, and how they abandoned their wicked ways, and he repented and did not bring upon them the disaster he had threatened." Yahweh is faithful to his promises. Still today his will for Moscow and Peking, for London and Amsterdam is no less "gracious and full of mercy" than it was for Nineveh. To borrow from Luther, who loved to preach from the book of Jonah, the left hand of God's wrath is replaced by his right hand of blessing and freedom.

The seventh scene (4:1-4) recounts the fact that the greatest hurdle to overcome in discharging the missionary mandate was not the sailors, nor the fish, nor Nineveh's king and citizenry, but rather Jonah himself—the recalcitrant and narrow-minded Church. Chapter 4 describes Jonah, who has long since departed the city to find shelter east of the borders.

The forty-day period of repentance has passed, but since God has changed his mind about destroying it, the city continues to be nourished by Yahweh's grace and mercy. Jonah is furious that God has extended his mercy beyond the borders of Israel to the Gentiles. He wanted a God cut according to his own pattern: a cold, hard, cruel-natured god with an unbending will set against the heathen. He cannot stand to think of the Gentiles as part of salvation history.

This is Jonah's sin—the sin of a missionary

Yahweh is faithful to his promises. Still today his will for Moscow and Peking, for London and Amsterdam is no less "gracious and full of mercy" than it was for Nineveh.

whose heart is not in it. He who once pleaded with God for mercy from the desolate isolation of a fish's belly now is angry that this God shows mercy to the nations. He vents his fury in the form of a prayer found in 4:2, the key text of the whole book: "And he prayed to the Lord, 'This, O Lord, is what I feared when I was in my own country, and to forestall it I tried to escape to Tarshish: I knew that thou art a gracious and compassionate God, long-suffering and ever constant, and always willing to repent of the disaster.'" Part of the text comes from an ancient Israelite liturgy which every Israelite knew by heart and could rattle off in worship at the temple or synagogue while half-asleep (cf. Ex 34:6; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Neh 9:17). But Jonah cannot stand to think that this liturgy is true not only for Jerusalem, the location of God's temple, but for other places as well—Nineveh, Sao Paulo, Nairobi, New York and Paris.

Why is Jonah really so angry? For no other reason than that God is treating those outside his covenant the same as he is those within. But Jonah's anger in effect is putting himself outside the covenant, for he obstinately refuses to acknowledge the covenant's purpose—to bring salvation to the heathen. He had not yet learned that Israel could not presume upon some special favors from God. Both Israel and the Gentiles alike live by the grace which the Creator gives to all of his creatures. So God comes to his prophet, but no longer as a covenant partner; he comes as the Creator and asks his creature: "Do you have a right to be so angry?"

In the eighth and last scene (4:5-11), one can see God still working to teach his thick-skulled missionary his lessons. He did not catch the point of the storm, the sailors, the fish, and Nineveh's conversion because he did not want to. Now Yahweh tries one more approach—the miraculous tree. A climbing gourd springs up quickly, offers Jonah protection against the beating sun, but as quickly withers and dies, the victim of an attacking worm. Jonah is peeved.

At that point God again turns to his missionary-student, using the tree as his object lesson. The very God who directs the whole course of history, rules the wind and waves and turned Nineveh's millions to repentance now asks tenderly: "Are you so angry over the gourd? You are sorry about the gourd, though you had nothing to do with growing it, a plant which came up in a night and withered in a night. And should not I be sorry for the great city of Nineveh, with its 120,000 who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and cattle without number?"

God spares and rescues. Jerusalem's God is Nineveh's as well. Unlike Jonah, he has no "Gentile complex." And while he never forces any one of us, he tenderly asks us to put our whole heart and soul into the work of mission. God is still interested in transforming obstinate, irritable, depressive, peevish Jonahs into heralds of the Good News which brings freedom.

The book ends with an unsettling question which is never answered: "God reached his goal with Nineveh, but what about Jonah?" No one knows. The question of Israel and the Church

and their obedience is still an open one.

The question is one which every generation of Christians must answer for itself. Jacques Ellul closes his book, *The Judgment of Jonah*, with these words: "The Book of Jonah has no conclusion, and the final question of the book has no answer, except from the one who realizes the fullness of the mercy of God and who factually and not just mythically accomplishes the salvation of the world."³

The New Testament Church must pay close heed to the message of Jonah's book. Jesus Christ is "One greater than Jonah" (Matt 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32). His death on the cross with its awful cry of God-forsakenness and his resurrection with its jubilant shout of victory are signs of Jonah for us, pointing to the profound meaning of his whole life and clearly attesting that God loved the whole world so much. If a person draws his lifeblood from the one greater than Jonah and yet declines to spread the Good News among others, in effect, he is sabotaging the aims of God himself. Jonah is father to all those Christians who desire the benefits and blessings of election but refuse its responsibility. Thomas Carlisle's poem, "You Jonah," closes with these lines:

And Jonah stalked
to his shaded seat
and waited for God
to come around
to his way of thinking.
And God is still waiting for a host of Jonahs
in their comfortable houses
to come around
to his way of loving. 🌿

Endnotes

1. A. de Groot, *De Bijbel over het Heil der Volken* (Roermond: Romens, 1964).
2. See J. Verkuyl, *Break Down the Walls*, trans. and ed. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 40.
3. Editors Note: The term "Diaspora" refers to a period marked by the voluntary and involuntary scattering or dispersion of the Jewish people into other nations between the destruction of the first temple in 581 B.C. and the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. The Diaspora synagogues were eager to attract converts to Judaism. Many Jewish scribes were funded to travel to enlist and to instruct new proselytes from Gentile backgrounds as described by Jesus in Matt 23:15.
4. Jacques Ellul, *The Judgment of Jonah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 103.

Study Questions

1. Explain the four motifs in the Old Testament that, according to Verkuyl, form the basis for the New Testament call to worldwide mission: the universal motif, the motif of rescue and saving, the missionary motif, and the antagonistic motif. Give examples of each.
2. Verkuyl calls the book of Jonah a lesson in educating a person to be a missionary. Explain what he means, and give examples from the story of Jonah.

The Kingdom Strikes Back

Ralph D. Winter



Ralph D. Winter is the General Director of the Frontier Mission Fellowship (FMF) in

Pasadena, CA. After serving ten years as a missionary among Mayan Indians in the highlands of Guatemala, he was called to be a Professor of Missions at the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. Ten years later, he and his late wife, Roberta, founded the mission society called the Frontier Mission Fellowship. This in turn birthed the U.S. Center for World Mission and the William Carey International University, both of which serve those working at the frontiers of mission.

Man has virtually erased his own story. Human beings as far back as we have any paleological record have been fighting each other so much that they have destroyed well over 90 percent of their own handiwork. Their libraries, their literature, their cities, their works of art are mostly gone. Even the little that remains from the distant past is riddled with evidences of a strange and pervasive evil that has grotesquely distorted man's potential. This is strange because apparently no other species treats its own with such deadly hatred. The oldest skulls bear mute witness that they were bashed in and roasted to deliver their contents as food for other human beings.

An incredible array of disease germs also cuts down population growth. World population in Abraham's day is estimated at 27 million—less than the population of California in A.D. 2000. But, the small slow-growing population of Abraham's day is ominous evidence of the devastating combination of war and pestilence, both testifying to the relentless impact of the Evil One. The world population growth rate back then was one-sixteenth of today's global rate. As hatred and disease are conquered, world population instantly picks up speed. If today's relatively slow global growth rate were to have happened in Abraham's day, our present world population (of 6 billion) would have been reached back then in just 321 years! Thus, in those days, life-destroying evil must have been much more rampant than now. We are not surprised, then, to find that the explanation for this strange evil comes up in the oldest detailed written records—surviving documents that are respected by Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, whose adherents make up more than half of the world's population. These documents called “the Torah,” by Jews, the “Books of the Law” by Christians, and “the Taurat” by Muslims; not only explain the strange source of evil but also describe a counter-campaign, and then they follow the progress of that campaign through many centuries.

To be specific, the first eleven chapters of Genesis constitute an “introduction” to the entire problem, indeed, to the plot of the entire Bible. Those few pages describe three things: (1) a glorious and “good” original creation; (2) the entrance of a rebellious and destructive evil—a superhuman, demonic person—resulting in (3) humanity caught up in that rebellion and brought under the power of that evil person.

The rest of the Bible is not simply a bundle of divergent, unrelated stories as it is sometimes taught in Sunday School. Rather, the Bible consists of a single drama: the entrance of the Kingdom, the power, and the glory of the living God in this enemy-occupied territory. From Genesis 12 to the end of the Bible, and indeed until the end of time, there unfolds the single, coherent drama of the Kingdom striking back. This would make a good title for the Bible itself were it to be printed in modern dress (with Gen 1-11 as the introduction to the whole Bible). In this unfolding drama we see the gradual but irresistible power of God re-conquering and redeeming His fallen creation through the giving of His own Son at the very center of the 4000-year period beginning in 2000 B.C. This is tersely summed up: "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil" (1 Jn 3:8).

This counterattack against the Evil One clearly does not await the appearance of the Person in the center of the story. Indeed, it seems to me that there are five identifiable epochs of advance *prior* to the appearance of Christ as well as five after. The purpose of this chapter is mainly to describe the five epochs *after* Christ. However, in order for those later epochs to be seen as part of a single ten-epoch 4,000-year unfolding story, we will note a few clues about the first five epochs. The theme that links all ten epochs is the grace of God intervening in a "world which lies in the power of the Evil One" (1 Jn 5:19), contesting an enemy who temporarily is "the god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4) so that the nations will praise God's name. His plan for doing this is to reach all peoples by conferring an unusual "blessing" on Abraham and Abraham's seed (Abraham's children-by-faith), even as we pray "Thy Kingdom come." By contrast, the Evil One's plan is to bring reproach on the Name of God. The Evil One stirs up hate, authors suffering and destruction of God's good creation, perhaps even distorting DNA sequences. Satan's devices may very well include devising virulent

germs in order to tear down confidence in God's loving character.

God's counter-attack is effected through blessing. The English word *blessing* is not an

ideal translation. We see the word in use where Isaac confers his "blessing" on Jacob and not on Esau. It was not "blessings" but "a blessing," the conferral of a family name, responsibility,

The Bible consists of a single drama: the entrance of the Kingdom, the power and the glory of the living God in this enemy-occupied territory.

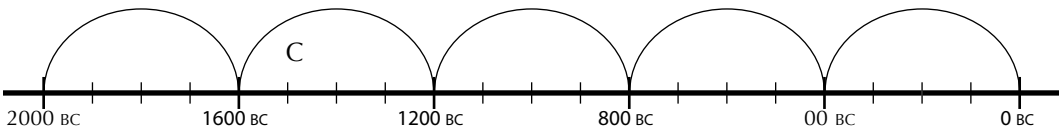
obligation, and privilege. It is not something you can receive or get like a box of chocolates you can run off with and eat by yourself in a cave, or a new personal power you can show off like rippling muscles. It is something you *become* in a permanent *relationship and fellowship* with your Father in Heaven. It returns "families," that is, *nations* to His household, to the Kingdom of God, so that the nations "will declare His glory."

The nations do not declare God's glory because they lack evidence of God's ability to cope with evil. If the Son of God appeared to destroy the works of the Devil, then what are the Son of God's followers and "joint heirs" supposed to do to bring honor to His Name? Those who like Abraham receive it in faith and subject themselves to God's will represent the extension of His Kingdom and authority within and over all nations and peoples. God's blessing brings with it an inherent responsibility, in accordance with the original meaning of "blessing," which we will trace through the ages.

The First Half of the 4,000-Year Story

The story of the "strike back" as we see it in Genesis 12 begins in about 2000 B.C. During roughly the next 400 years, Abraham was chosen to bless the nations, and moved to the geographic center of the Afro-Asian land mass. The time of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (often called the Period of the Patriarchs) displays relatively small breakthroughs of witness to the surrounding nations even though the central mandate to restore God's control over all nations (Gen 12:1-3) is repeated twice again to Abraham (18:18; 22:18), and once each to both Isaac (26:4) and Jacob (28:14,15).

Ten Epochs of Redemptive History: *The First Half 2000 – 0 BC*



Joseph observed to his brothers, “You sold me, but God sent me.” In effect he was obviously a great blessing to the nation of Egypt. Even Pharaoh recognized that Joseph was filled with the Spirit of God (Gen 41:38, *TLB*). But this was not fully the *intentional* missionary obedience God had wanted. Joseph’s brothers, for example, had not taken up an offering and sent him to Egypt as a missionary! God was in the mission business whether they were or not, and used Joseph to bless Egypt in any case.

The next four periods, very roughly 400 years each, are: 2) the Captivity, 3) the Judges, 4) the Kings and 5) the Babylonian Exile and dispersion (*diaspora*). During this rough and tumble time, the promised *blessing* and the expected *mission* (to extend God’s rule to all the nations of the world) all but disappear from sight. As a result, where possible, God accomplished His will through the *voluntary* obedience of His people, but where necessary, He accomplished His will through *involuntary* means. Joseph, Jonah, the nation of Israel as a whole, when taken captive, represent the category of *involuntary* missionary outreach intended by God to force the extension of the blessing. The little girl carried away captive to the house of Naaman the Syrian was able to share her faith. Naomi, who “went” a distance away, shared her faith with her children and their non-Jewish wives. On the other hand, Ruth, her daughter-in-law, Naaman the Syrian, and the Queen of Sheba all “came” *voluntarily*, attracted by God’s blessing-relationship with Israel.

Note, then, the four different “mission mechanisms” at work to bless other peoples: 1) going voluntarily, 2) involuntarily going without missionary intent, 3) coming voluntarily, and 4) coming involuntarily (as with Gentiles forcibly settled in Israel—2 Kings 17).

We can see in every epoch the active concern of God to forward His mission, with or

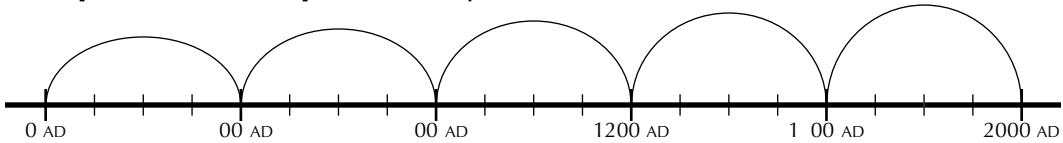
without the full cooperation of His chosen nation. When Jesus appears, it is an incriminating “visitation.” He comes to His own, and “His own receive Him not” (John 1:11). He is well received in Nazareth until He refers to God’s desire to bless the Gentiles. At that precise moment (Luke 4:28) an explosion of homicidal fury betrays the fact that this chosen nation—chosen to receive *and to mediate* the blessing (Ex 19:5-6; Ps 67; Isa 49:6)—has grossly fallen short. There was indeed a sprinkling of fanatical “Bible students” who “traversed land and sea to make a single proselyte” (Matt 23:15). But such outreach was not so much to be a blessing to the other nations as it was to sustain and protect Israel. And they were not always making sure that their converts were “circumcised in heart” (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 9:24-26; Rom 2:29).

Thus, Jesus did not only come to *give* the Great Commission but also in a sense to take *it away*. Natural branches were broken off while other “unnatural” branches were grafted in (Rom 11:13-24). But, despite the general reluctance of the chosen missionary nation—typical of other nations later—many people groups were in fact blessed due to the faithfulness and righteousness of some. These groups come to mind: Canaanites, Egyptians, Philistines (of the ancient Minoan culture), Hittites, Moabites, Phoenicians (of Tyre and Sidon), Assyrians, Sabeans (of the land of Sheba), Babylonians, Persians, Parthians, Medes, Elamites and Romans.

The Second Half of the Story

The next 2,000-year period is one in which God, on the basis of the intervention of His Son, *makes sure* that the other nations are both blessed and *similarly called* “to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.” In each case, “Unto whomsoever much is given, of him (of that people) shall much be required.” In this period, we see the Kingdom “striking back”

Ten Epochs of Redemptive History: *The Second Half 0 – 2000 AD*



in the realms of the Armenians, the Romans, the Celts, the Franks, the Angles, the Saxons, the Germans, and eventually even those ruthless pagan pirates further north called the Vikings. All these peoples are invaded, tamed and subjugated by the power of the gospel and in turn are expected to share that “blessing” with still other peoples (instead of raiding them).

But in one sense the next five epochs are not all that different from the first five epochs. Those nations that are blessed do not seem terribly eager to share that unique blessing and extend that new kingdom. The Celts are the most active nation in the first millennium and give an outstanding missionary response. As we will see—just as in the Old Testament—the conferral of this unique blessing will bring sober responsibility that is dangerous if unfulfilled. And we will see repeatedly God’s use of the full range of His four missionary mechanisms.

In spite of her bloody imperialism at the time of Christ’s visitation, Rome was truly an instrument in God’s hands to prepare the world for His coming. Rome controlled one of the largest empires the world has ever known, forcing the Roman peace (the “Pax Romana”) upon all sorts of disparate and barbaric peoples. For centuries Roman emperors had been building an extensive communication system using the 250,000 miles of marvelous roads which stretched throughout the empire and a system for the rapid transmission of messages and documents somewhat like the Pony Express on the American frontier. In its conquests, Rome enveloped at least one civilization far more advanced than her own—Greece. Highly-educated artisans and teachers were taken as slaves to every major city of the empire where they taught the Greek language. Greek was thus understood from England to India. Equally important to our thesis is the less

known but empire-wide substratum of obedience and righteousness—the massive and marvelous presence of diaspora Jews, more respected in their dispersion than in their homeland! Scholars agree that their numbers had grown to 10 percent of the Roman population. The virile element within this Jewish presence—those “circumcised in heart”—played a large part in attracting many Gentiles to the fringes of the synagogues. Many of these Gentiles, like those of Cornelius’ household, became earnest Bible-hearers and worshipers—people the New Testament calls “devout persons” or “God-fearers.” This way the faith jumped the ethnic borders! Such *God-fearers* became the steel rails on which the Christian movement expanded. This movement was basically the Jewish faith in Gentile clothing, something—take note—that was understandably hard for earnest Jews to conceive.

How else could the Gospels and a few letters from St. Paul have had such a widespread impact within so many different ethnic groups in such a short period of time?

Stop and ponder: Jesus came, lived for 33 years on earth, confronted His own unenthusiastic-missionary nation, was rejected by many, was crucified and buried, rose again, and underscored the same longstanding commission to all who would respond, before he ascended to the Father. Today even the most agnostic historian stands amazed that what began in a humble stable in Bethlehem of Palestine, a backwater of the Roman Empire, in less than 300 years was given control of the emperors’ palace in Rome. How did it happen? It is a truly incredible story.

No Saints in the Middle?

It is wise to interrupt the story here. If you haven’t heard this story before you may confront a psychological problem. In church circles today we have fled, feared or forgotten

these middle centuries. Hopefully, fewer and fewer of us will continue to think in terms of what may be called a fairly extreme form of the “BOBO” theory—that the Christian faith somehow “Blinked Out” after the Apostles and “Blinked On” again in our time, or whenever modern “prophets” arose, be they Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Joseph Smith, Ellen White or John Wimber. The result of this kind of BOBO approach is that you have “early” saints and “latter-day” saints, but *no saints in the middle*.

Thus, many Evangelicals are often not much interested in what happened prior to the Protestant Reformation. They have the vague impression that the Church was apostate before Luther and Calvin, and whatever there was of real Christianity consisted of a few persecuted individuals here and there. For example, in the multi-volume *Twenty Centuries of Great Preaching*, only half of the first volume is devoted to the first 15 centuries! In evangelical Sunday Schools, children are busy as beavers with the story of God’s work from Genesis to Revelation, from Adam to the Apostles—and their Sunday School publishers may even boast about their “all-Bible curriculum.” But this only really means that these children do not get exposed to all the incredible things God did with that Bible between the times of the Apostles and the Reformers, a period which is staggering proof of the unique power of the Bible! To many people, it is as if there were “no saints in the middle.”

In the space available, however, it is only possible to cover the Western part of the story of the kingdom striking back—and only outline it at that. It will be very helpful to recognize the various cultural basins in which that invasion has taken place. Kenneth Scott Latourette’s *History of Christianity* gives the fascinating details, a book extending the story beyond the Bible. (A book more valuable than any other, apart from the Bible!) Note the pattern in the chart on page 211. Latourette’s “resurgences” correspond to our “renaissances.”

In Period I, Rome was “won” but did not reach out with the gospel to the barbaric Celts and Goths. Perhaps as a penalty, the

Goths invaded Rome and the whole western (Latin) part of the empire caved in.

In Period II, the Goths were added in, and they and others briefly achieved a new “Holy” Roman Empire. But this new sphere did not effectively reach further north with the gospel.

In Period III, again seemingly as a penalty, the Vikings invaded these Christianized Celtic and Gothic barbarians. In the resulting agony, the Vikings, too, became Christians.

In Period IV, Europe, now united for the first time by Christian faith, reached out in a sort of pseudo-mission to the Muslims in the great abortion known as the Crusades.

Perhaps the most spectacular triumph of Christianity in history was its conquest of the Roman Empire in roughly twenty decades.

In Period V, Europe now reached out to the very ends of the earth, but still with highly mixed motives; intermingled commercial and spiritual interests were both a blight and a blessing. Yet, during this period, the entire non-Western world was suddenly stirred into development as the colonial powers greatly reduced war and disease. Never before had so few affected so many, even though never before had so great a gap existed between two halves of the world. What will happen in the next few years?

Will the immeasurably strengthened non-Western world invade Europe and America just as the Goths invaded Rome and the Vikings overran Europe? Will the “Third World” turn on us in a new series of “Barbarian” invasions? Will the OPEC nations, or the Chinese gradually buy us out and take us over? Clearly we face the reaction of an awakened non-Western world that is suddenly beyond our control. What will be the role of the gospel? Can we gain any insight from these previous cycles of outreach?

Period I: Winning the Romans, A.D. 0–400

Perhaps the most spectacular triumph of Christianity in history was its conversion (or “conquest”) of the Roman Empire in roughly

200 years. There is a lot more we would like to know about the growth of Christianity during this period, which is somewhat mysterious, especially if we do not take into account the Jewish substratum.

Fortunately, the early part of the story is emblazoned in the floodlight of the New Testament epistles themselves.

There we see a Jew named Paul brought up in a Greek city, committed to leadership in the Jewish tradition of his time. Suddenly he is transformed by Christ and gradually comes to see that the essence of the faith of the Jews as fulfilled in Christ could operate without Jewish garments. He realizes that an inner circumcision of the heart could be clothed in Greek language and customs as well as Semitic! It should have become crystal clear to everyone that anyone can become a Christian and be transformed in the inner man by the living Christ, whether Jew, Greek, Barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, male or female. The Greeks didn't have to become Jews—undergo physical circumcision, take over the Jewish calendar of festivals or holy days nor even observe Jewish dietary customs—any more than a woman had to be made into a man to be acceptable to God. What *was* necessary was the “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26).

Paul based his work on the radical biblical principle (unaccepted by many Jews to this day) that it is circumcision of the *heart* that counts (Jer 9), and that the new believers of a new culture did not have to speak the language, wear the clothes, or follow all the customs of the sending church. This meant that for Greeks the cultural details of the Jewish law were no longer mandatory. Therefore, to the Jews, Paul continued as one “under the law of Moses,” but to those unfamiliar with the Mosaic law, he preached the “law of Christ” in such a way that it could be fulfilled dynamically and authentically in the new circumstances. While to some he appeared to be “without law,” he maintained that he was not without law toward God. Indeed, as far as the basic purpose of the Mosaic Law is concerned, the Greek believers immediately developed the functional equivalent to it in their own cultural terms while most of them held on as well to the Greek version of what is often called the

Old Testament. After all, it was “the Bible of the early church” (as well as of the Jews), that had led them to belief in the first place.

We may get the impression that mission activity in this period benefited very little from deliberately organized effort. That may well be only because its structure was transparent: Paul apparently worked within a well-known “missionary team” structure used by the Pharisees—even by Paul himself when he was a Pharisee! Paul’s sending congregation in Antioch certainly undertook some responsibility. But, basically, they “sent him off” more than they “sent him out.” His traveling team had all of the authority of any local church. He did not look for orders from Antioch.

There is good reason to suppose that the Christian faith spread in many areas by the “involuntary-go” mechanism, because Christians were often dispersed as the result of persecutions. We know that fleeing Arian Christians had a lot to do with the conversion of the Goths. We have the stories of Ulfilas and Patrick whose missionary efforts were in each case initiated by the accident of their being taken captive.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to suppose that Christianity followed the trade routes of the Roman Empire. We know that there was a close relationship and correspondence between Christians in Gaul and Asia Minor. Yet we must face the fact that the early Christians of the Roman Empire (and Christians today!) were only rarely willing and able to take *conscious practical steps to fulfill the Great Commission*. In view of the amazing results in those early decades, however, we are all the more impressed by the innate power of the gospel itself.

One intriguing possibility of the natural transfer of the gospel within a given social unit is the case of the Celts. Historical studies clarify for us that the province of Galatia in Asia Minor was called so because it was settled by *Galatoi* from Western Europe (who as late as the fourth century still spoke both their original Celtic tongue and also the Greek of that part of the Roman Empire). Whether or not Paul’s Galatians were merely Jewish traders living in the province of Galatia, or were from the beginning Celtic *Galatoi* who were attracted to synagogues as “God fearers,” we

note, in any case, that Paul's letter to the Galatians is especially wary of anyone pushing onto his readers the mere *outward customs* of the Jewish culture, and confusing such customs with the *essential biblical faith* which he preached to both Jew and Greek (Rom 1:16).

A matter of high missionary interest is the fact that Paul's preaching in Galatia had tapped into a cultural vein of Celtic humanity that may soon have included friends, relatives and trade contacts reaching a great distance to the west. Thus Paul's efforts in Galatia may give us one clue to the surprisingly early penetration of the gospel into the main Celtic areas of Europe, comprising a belt running across southern Europe into Galicia in Spain, Brittany in France and up into the western and northern parts of the British Isles.

There came a time when not only hundreds of thousands of Greek and Roman citizens had become Christians, but Celtic-speaking peoples and Gothic tribal peoples as well had believed and developed their own forms of biblical faith, both within and beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. It is probable that the missionary work behind this came about mainly through unplanned processes involving Christians from the eastern part of the Roman Empire. In any case, this achievement certainly cannot readily be credited to the planned missionary initiative of *Latin-speaking* Romans in the West. This is the point we are trying to make.

One piece of evidence is the fact that the earliest Irish mission compounds (distinguished from the Latin-Roman type by a central chapel) followed a ground plan derived from Christian centers in *Egypt*. And *Greek*, not Latin, was the language of the early churches in Gaul. Even the first organized mission efforts of John Cassian and Martin of Tours, for example, *came from the East* by means of commune structures begun in Syria and Egypt. Fortunately, these organized efforts carried with them a strong emphasis on literacy and the studying and copying of biblical manuscripts and ancient Greek classics.

As amazed pagan leaders looked on, the cumulative impact of this new, much more acceptable form of biblical faith grew to prominent proportions by A.D. 300. We don't know with any confidence what

personal reasons Constantine had in A.D. 312 for declaring himself a Christian. We know that his mother in Asia Minor was a Christian, and that his father as co-regent in Gaul and Britain did not enforce (in his area) the Diocletian edicts commanding persecution of Christians. However, by this time in history the inescapable factor is that there were enough Christians in the Roman Empire to make an official reversal of policy toward Christianity not only feasible but politically wise. I well recall a lecture by the late Professor Lynn White, Jr. of UCLA, one of the great medieval historians, in which he said that even if Constantine had not become a Christian the empire could not have held out against Christianity more than another decade or two! The long development of the Roman Empire had ended the local autonomy of the city-state and created a widespread need for a sense of belonging—he called it a crisis of identity. At that time Christianity was the one religion that had no nationalism at its root, in part because it was rejected by the Jews! It was not the folk religion of any one tribe. In White's words, it had developed "an unbeatable combination." However, this virtue became a mixed blessing once Christianity became aligned with the Empire.

Thus, it is the very power of the movement which helps to explain why the momentous imperial decision to *tolerate* Christianity almost inevitably led to its becoming (roughly 50 years later) the *official* religion of the Empire. Not long after the curtain rises on Christianity as an officially *tolerated* religion, the head of the Christian community in Rome turns out astonishingly to be the strongest and most trusted man around. That's why Constantine, when he moved the seat of government to Constantinople, left his palace (the famous Lateran Palace) to the people of the Christian community as their "White House" in Rome. In any case, it is simply a matter of record that by A.D. 375, Christianity had become the official religion of Rome. If it had merely been an ethnic cult, it could not have been even a candidate as an official religion of the Empire.

Ironically, however, once Christianity became identified with the Roman cultural tradition and political power, it tended automatically to alienate all who were anti-

Roman. This created suspicion and soon widespread slaughter of Christians outside the boundaries of the Roman Empire in Arabia and Persia. (This persecution stopped for three years, when a Roman emperor (Julian the Apostate) *opposed* Christianity and tried to roll things back to the pagan gods! Meanwhile, even in the case of anti-Roman populations within the Empire's boundaries, as in North Africa, the foundation was laid for people to later turn to Islam as an alternative. In one sense Islam was a cultural break-

centuries of Roman literacy in southern Britain were soon extinguished by a new invasion of barbarians—Angles, Saxons and Frisians who, compared to the Goths, were total pagans, cruel and destructive. What would happen now? Thus began the “First” of the two Dark Ages.

Period II: Winning the Barbarians, A.D. 400–800

When the earlier (Gothic) tribal peoples became Christianized into an antagonistic Arian form of the faith, they became an

Benedictine communes held the Bible in awe...and they primarily enabled the Kingdom and the power and the glory to be shared with the barbaric Anglo-Saxons and Goths.

away from Christianity just as Christianity had been a breakaway from the Jewish form of the biblical faith. In a similar way, American “Black Muslims” today deliberately reject Christianity as the “white man’s religion.”

Thus, the political triumph of what eventually came to be known as *Christianity* was in fact a mixed blessing. The biblical faith could wear other than Jewish clothes; it was now dressed in Roman clothes; but if these new clothes were normative, it would not be expected to spread far beyond the political boundaries of the Roman Empire. It didn’t, except in the West. Why was that?

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire it became ill-equipped by its very form to complete the Great Commission among any populace that was anti-Roman. As we might expect, only Christianity of a heretical variety was accepted by the Germanic tribes while Rome was still militarily strong. But once the tribal peoples discovered that it was possible to invade and conquer the western half of the Roman Empire, the Catholic and Orthodox forms of the faith became less threatening. The Goths and others could now try to acquire the prestige of the Roman language and culture without being dominated by the Roman legions

Note, however, the consequences of partially Christianized Gothic barbarians threatening Rome: the Romans in defense pulled their legions out of Britain. As a result, three

increasingly greater military threat to Rome. All it took for this threat to become a true menace was for the feared Huns to punch into Europe from Central Asia. This pushed the panicked Visigoths (and then the Ostrogoths and Vandals) inside the Empire. In the turmoil and confusion, these tribal incursions unintentionally wrecked the entire network of civil government in the West (in today’s Italy, Spain, and North Africa). Later they tried seriously to rebuild it. (Was this something like the post-colonial chaos in Africa after the Second World War?)

The only reason the city of Rome itself was not physically devastated by the invasions that arrived finally at the gates of Rome in A.D. 410 was that these Gothic Barbarians were, all things considered, very respectful of life and property, especially that of the churches. It was a huge benefit to citizens of Rome that earlier informal missionary effort—for which Latin Roman Christians could claim little credit—had brought these peoples into at least a superficial Christian faith. Even secular Romans observed how lucky they were that the invaders held high certain standards of Christian morality. (Not so the Angles and Saxons who invaded Britain.)

We are tantalized by the reflection that this much was accomplished by informal and almost unconscious sharing of the gospel—e.g., the news and authority of the *blessing* being extended to all Gentile nations. How much better might it have been had the Romans—during that brief hundred years of official flourishing of Christianity

(A.D. 310-410) prior to the first Gothic invasion of the city of Rome—been devoted to energetic and intentional missionary effort? Even a little heretical Christianity prevented the Barbarians from that total disregard of civilization that was to be shown by the Vikings in the third period. Perhaps a little more missionary work might have prevented the complete collapse of the governmental structure of the Roman Empire in the West. Today, for example, the ability of post-colonized African states to maintain a stable government is to a great extent dependent upon their degree of Christianization (both in knowledge and morality).

In any case, we confront the ominous phenomenon of partially Christianized barbarian hordes being emboldened and enabled to pour in upon a complacent, officially Christian empire that had failed effectively to reach out to them.

Whether or not the Romans had it coming (for failing to reach out), and whether or not the Barbarians were both encouraged and tempered in their conquest by the initial Christian influences, the indisputable fact is that while the Romans lost the western half of their empire, the Barbarian world, in a very dramatic sense, gained a Christian faith.

The immediate result: within the city of Rome there appeared two “denominations,” the one Arian and the other Athanasian. Also in the picture was the Celtic “church,” which was more a series of missionary compounds than a denomination made up of local churches. The Benedictines were still less like a church. They came along later and competed with the Celts in establishing missionary compounds all over Europe. By the time the Vikings appeared on the horizon over 1,000 such mission compounds had spread up throughout Europe.

Mission Compounds

Protestants, and perhaps even modern Catholics, must pause at this phenomenon. Our problem in understanding these strange (and much misunderstood) instruments of evangelization consists not so much in our ignorance of what these people did but in our prejudice that developed because of decadent monks who lived almost a thousand years later. It is wholly unfair for us to let our judgment of the

work of a traveling evangelist like Columban or Boniface be influenced by the stagnation of the wealthy Augustinians in Luther’s day—although we must certainly pardon Luther for thinking such thoughts.

Indisputably these “Jesus People” in this second period, whether they were Celtic *peregrini* (wandering evangelists) or their parallel in Benedictine communes, held the Bible in awe. They sang their way through the whole book of Psalms each week as a routine discipline. It was primarily they who enabled the Kingdom and the power and the glory to be shared with the barbaric Anglo-Saxons and Goths.

It is true that many strange (even bizarre and pagan) customs were mixed up as secondary elements in the various forms of Christianity that were active during the period of the Christianization of Europe. The headlong collision and ongoing competition between Western Roman and Celtic (mainly of Eastern origin) forms of Christianity very probably resulted in an enhancement of common biblical elements in their faith. But we must also remember the relative chaos introduced by the invasions.

Enter the Orders

Under the particular circumstances of that time, similar to many chaotic corners of the world today, the most durable structure was the *order*—a highly disciplined and tightly-knit fellowship. Its “houses” came to dot the landscape of Europe. We must note, furthermore, that these novel Christian communities not only were the source of spirituality and scholarship during the Middle Ages, but they also preserved the technologies of the Roman industrial world—tanning, dyeing, weaving, metalworking, masonry skills, bridge building, etc. Their civil, charitable and even scientific contributions are, in general, grossly underestimated—especially by Protestants who have developed unfriendly stereotypes about “monks.” Probably the greatest accomplishment of these disciplined Christian communities is seen in the simple fact that almost all our knowledge of the Roman world is derived from their libraries, whose silent testimony reveals the appreciation they had, even as Christians, for the “pagan” authors of ancient times.

Thus, in our secular age it is embarrassing to recognize that had it not been for these highly literate “mission field” Christians who preserved and copied manuscripts (not only of the Bible but of ancient Christian and non-Christian classics as well), we would know no more about the Roman Empire today than we do of the Mayan or Incan empires, or many other empires that have long since almost vanished from sight. Many evangelicals might be jolted by the Wheaton professor who wrote an appreciative chapter about these disciplined *order* structures entitled, “The Monastic Rescue of the Church.” One sentence stands out:

The rise of monasticism was, after Christ’s commission to his disciples, the most important—and in many ways the most beneficial—institutional event in the history of Christianity (p. 84).¹

Curiously, our phrase *Third World* comes from those days when Greek and Latin were the first two worlds and the barbarians to the north were the *Third World*. Barbarian Europe was won more by the witness and labors of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon converts of the Celts—“Third World missionaries”—than by the efforts of missionaries sent from Italy or Gaul. This fact was to bear decisively upon the apparently permanent shift of power in Western Europe from the Mediterranean to northern Europe. Even as late as A.D. 596, when Rome’s first missionary headed north (with serious faintheartedness), he incidentally crossed the path of the much more daring and widely-traveled Irish missionary, Columban, one of the scholarly Celtic *peregrini* who had worked his way practically to Rome’s doorstep and who was already further from his birthplace than Augustine was planning to go from his.

We are not surprised that Constantinople was considered the “Second Rome” by those living in the East, nor that both Aachen (in Charlemagne’s France) and Moscow were later to compete for recognition as new Romes by the descendants of the newly Christianized Franks and Slavs, respectively. Neither the original Rome as a city nor the Italian peninsula as a region were ever again to be politically as significant as the chief cities of the new nations—Spain, France, Germany, and England.

Enter Charlemagne

Toward the end of the 400-800 period, as with the end of each of these periods, there was a great flourishing of Christianity within the new cultural basin. The rise of a strong man like Charlemagne facilitated communication throughout Western Europe to a degree unknown for 300 years. Under his sponsorship a whole range of issues—social, theological, political—were soberly restudied in the light of the Bible and the writings of earlier Christian leaders during the Roman period. Charlemagne was a second Constantine in certain respects, and his influence was unmatched in Western Europe during a half a millennium.

But Charlemagne was much more of a Christian than Constantine and as such industriously sponsored far more Christian activity. Like Constantine, his official espousal of Christianity produced many Christians who were Christians in name only. There is little doubt that the great missionary Boniface was slain by the Saxons because his patron Charlemagne (with whose military policies he did not at all agree) had brutally suppressed the Saxons on many occasions. Then, as in our own recent past, the political force of a colonial power did not so much pave the way for Christianity as turn people against the faith. Of interest to missionaries is the fact that the great centers of learning established by Charlemagne were copies and expansions of newly established mission compounds deep in German territory, themselves outposts that were the work of British and Celtic missionaries who came from “sending centers” as far away to the west as Britain’s Iona and Lindisfarne.

Indeed, the first serious attempt at anything like public education was initiated by this great tribal chieftain Charlemagne on the advice and impulse of Anglo-Celtic missionaries and scholars from Britain such as Alcuin. His projects eventually required the help of thousands of literate Christians from Britain and Ireland to man schools founded on the Continent. It is hard to believe, but formerly “barbarian” Irish teachers of Latin (never a native tongue in Ireland) were eventually needed to teach Latin in Rome. This indicates how extensively the tribal invasions

of other barbarians had broken down the civilization of the Roman Empire. This reality underlies Thomas Cahill's book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

The Celtic Christians and their Anglo-Saxon and Continental converts especially treasured the Bible. The highest works of art during these "dark" centuries were marvelously "illuminated" biblical manuscripts and devoutly ornamented church buildings, mute testimony to the Bible as their chief source of inspiration. Manuscripts of non-Christian classical authors, though preserved and copied, were not illuminated. Through the long night of the progressive breakdown of the Western part of the Roman Empire, when the tribal migrations reduced almost all of life in the West to the level of the tribesmen themselves, the two great regenerating ideals were the hope of building anew the glory that was once Rome, and the hope of making everything subject to the Lord of Glory. The one really high point, when these twin objectives were most nearly achieved, was during Charlemagne's long, vigorous career centered around the year 800. As one scholar put it,

In the long sweep of European history, from the decline of the Roman Empire to the flowering of the Renaissance nearly a thousand years later, his [Charlemagne's] is the sole commanding presence.

No wonder scholars call Charlemagne's period the Carolingian Renaissance, and thus more precisely replace the concept of a single lengthy "dark ages" for a more precise perspective of a First Dark Age early in this period, and a Second Dark Age early in the next period, with a "Carolingian Renaissance" in between.

Unfortunately, the rebuilt empire (later to be called the Holy Roman Empire) was unable to find the characteristics of a Charlemagne in his successor; even more ominously, a new threat now posed itself externally. Charlemagne had been eager to Christianize his own Germanic peoples. He offered wise, even spiritual, leadership in many affairs, but

did not throw his weight behind any kind of bold mission outreach to the Scandinavian peoples to the north. What missionary work was begun under his son was too little and too late. This fact contributed greatly to the undoing of his empire, as we shall see.

Period III: Winning the Vikings, A.D. 800–1200

No sooner had the consolidation in Western Europe been accomplished under Charlemagne than a new menace to peace and

prosperity appeared. This new menace—the Vikings—would create a second period of at least semi-darkness that would last 250 years. These northern savages had not yet

And once more, the phenomenal
power of Christianity manifested itself:
the conquerors became conquered
by the faith of their captives.

been effectively evangelized. While the tribal invaders of Rome who created the First Dark Ages were rough forest people, they were, for the most part, nominally Arian Christians. The Vikings, by contrast, were neither civilized nor even lightly Christian. There was another difference: the Vikings were men of the sea. This meant that key island sanctuaries for missionary training, such as Iona, or the off-shore promontory of Lindisfarne (connected to the land only at low tide) were as vulnerable to attacking seafarers as they had been invulnerable to attackers from the land. In this new period both of these mission centers were sacked more than a dozen times, their occupants slaughtered or sold off as slaves. It seems obvious that the Christians of Charlemagne's empire would have fared far better had the Vikings had at least an appreciation of the Christian faith that the earlier barbarians had when they overran Rome. The very opposite of the Visigoths and Vandals who spared the churches, the Vikings seemed attracted like magnets to the monastic centers of scholarship and Christian devotion. They took a special delight in burning churches, putting human life to the sword right in the churches, and in selling monks into slavery. These depraved people even sold the raided daughters of nearby antagonistic Vikings into North Africa to become slaves. A contemporary's

words give us a graphic impression of their carnage in “Christian” Europe:

The Northmen cease not to slay and carry into captivity the Christian people, to destroy the churches and to burn the towns. Everywhere, there is nothing but dead bodies—clergy and laymen, nobles and common people, women and children. There is no road or place where the ground is not covered with corpses. We live in distress and anguish before this spectacle of the destruction of the Christian people.²

No wonder the Anglican prayer book contains the prayer, “From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us.” Once more, when Christians did not reach out to them, pagan peoples came after what the Christians possessed. And once more, the phenomenal power of Christianity manifested itself: the conquerors became conquered by the faith of their captives. Usually it was the monks who were sold as slaves, or Christian girls forced to be the Viking’s wives and mistresses, who eventually won these savages of the north. In God’s providence he worked redemption in the midst of the harrowing tragedy of this new invasion of barbarian violence and evil that fell upon God’s beloved people. After all, He spared not His own Son in order to redeem us! Thus again, what Satan intended for evil, God used for good.

In the previous hundred years, Charlemagne’s scholars had carefully collected the manuscripts of the ancient world. Now the majority of them were to be burned by the Vikings. Because so many copies had been made and scattered so widely, the fruits of the Carolingian literary revival survived. Scholars and missionaries had streamed in peace from Ireland across England and onto the continent, even beyond the frontiers of Charlemagne’s empire. Bearing the brunt of these new violent invasions from the north, the Irish volcano which had poured forth a passionate fire of evangelism for three centuries cooled almost to extinction. Viking warriors newly based in Ireland followed the paths of the earlier Irish *peregrini* across England and onto the continent, but this time bringing waste and destruction rather than new life and hope.

There were some blessings disguised in these horrifying events. Alfred the Great, a tribal chieftain (“king”) of Wessex, successfully led guerrilla resistance, and he was concerned about spiritual as well as physical losses. As a measure of the emergency, he gave up the ideal of maintaining the Latin tongue as a general pattern for worship and began a Christian library in the vernacular—the Anglo-Saxon. This was a decision of monumental importance which might have been delayed several centuries had the tragedy of the Vikings arrival not provided the necessity which was the mother of this invention.

In any case, as Christopher Dawson puts it, the unparalleled devastation of England and the Continent was “not a victory for paganism.” The “Northmen” who landed on the Continent under Rollo eventually became the Christianized “Normans.” The Danish who took over a huge section of middle England (along with the invaders from Norway who planted their own kind in many other parts of England and Ireland) were soon to also become Christians as a consequence. The gospel was too powerful. Christian culture spread back into Scandinavia. This stemmed largely from England from which came the first monastic communities and early missionary bishops. What England lost, Scandinavia gained.

We must also admit that the Vikings would not have been attracted either to the churches or to the monasteries had not those centers of Christian piety largely succumbed to luxury. The switch from the Irish to the Benedictine pattern of monasticism was an improvement in many respects, but it allowed greater possibilities for the development of an unchristian opulence and glitter, which attracted the greedy eyes of the Norsemen. Thus, a consequence of the invasions was their indirect cleansing and refinement of the Christian movement.

Even before the Vikings appeared, Benedict of Aniane inspired a rustle of reform here and there. By A.D. 910 at Cluny, the movement took a novel and significant step forward. Among other changes, the authority over a monastic center was shifted away from local politics, and for the first time whole networks of “daughter” houses arose

which were related to a single, strongly spiritual “mother” house. The Cluny revival, moreover, produced a new reforming attitude toward society as a whole.

In Rome the greatest bishop in the first millennium, Gregory I, was the product of a Benedictine community. So also, early in the second millennium, Hildebrand was a product of the Cluny reform. His successors in reform were bolstered greatly by the Cistercian revival, which reformed even further. Working behind the scenes for many years for wholesale reform across the entire church, Hildebrand became Pope Gregory VII for a relatively brief period. His reforming zeal set the stage for Pope Innocent III, who wielded greater power, and all things considered, greater power for good, than any other Pope before or since. Gregory VII had made a decisive step toward wresting control of the church from secular power in his treatment of the question of “lay investiture.” It was he who allowed Henry IV to wait for three days in the snow at Canossa. Innocent III not only carried forward Gregory’s reforms, but he had the distinction of being the Pope who authorized the first of a whole new series of mobile mission orders—the Friars.

To recapitulate, our first period (A.D. 0-400) ended with a barely Christian Roman Empire and a somewhat Christian emperor, Constantine. Our second period (A.D. 400-800) ended with a reconstitution of that empire under Charlemagne, a vigorously Christianized barbarian. (Can you imagine an emperor who wore a monk’s habit?) Our third period (A.D. 800-1200) ends with Pope Innocent III as the strongest man in Europe, made so by the Cluny, Cistercian and allied spiritual movements, which together are called the Gregorian Reform.

The scene was now an enlarged Europe in which no secular ruler could survive without at least tipping his hat to the leaders in the Christian movement. It was a period in which European Christians had not reached out in missions, but in which they had at least, with phenomenal speed, become a presence in the entire northern area, and had also deepened the foundations of Christian scholarship and devotion that had been passed on from the Europe of Charlemagne.

Both happy and unhappy surprises would unfold in the next period. Would Europe now take the initiative in reaching out with the Gospel? Would it sink into self-satisfaction? In some respects it would do both.

Period IV: Winning the Muslims? A.D. 1200–1600

The fourth period began with a spectacular, new evangelistic instrument—the Friars. After the disaster of the prolonged plague, it would end with the greatest, the most vital, and most disruptive reformation of all. The Christian movement had already been involved for a hundred years in the most massive and tragic misconstrual of Christian mission in all of history; Ironically, part of the “flourishing” of the faith toward the end of the previous period led to disaster. Never before had any nation or group of nations launched such an energetic and sustained campaign into foreign territory in the name of Christ as did Europe in the tragic debacle of the Crusades. This was in part the influence of the Viking spirit in the Christian Church. It is not surprising that all of the major Crusades were led by Viking descendants.

While the Crusades had many political overtones (they were often a unifying device for faltering rulers), they would not have happened without the vigorous but misguided sponsorship of Christian leaders. Not only were they an unprecedented blood-letting for the Europeans themselves and a savage wound in the side of the Muslim peoples (a wound that is not healed to this day), but also they were a fatal blow even to the cause of Greek/Latin Christian unity and to the cultural unity of eastern Europe. In the long run, though Western Christians held Jerusalem for a hundred years, the Crusaders eventually abandoned the Eastern Christians to the Ottoman sultans. Far worse, the Crusades established a permanent image of brutal, militant Christianity that alienates a large proportion of mankind, tearing down the value of the very word *Christian* in missions to this day.

Ironically the mission of the Crusaders would not have been so appallingly negative had it not involved so high a component of abject Christian commitment. The great lesson of the Crusades is that goodwill, even

sacrificial obedience to God, is no substitute for a clear understanding of His will. Bernard of Clairvaux, an authentically devout man, is significant in this sorry movement. (The words of the hymn *Jesus the Very Thought of Thee* are attributed to him. He preached the first crusade. On the other hand, two Franciscans, Francis of Assisi and Raymond Lull, stand out as the only ones in this period whose insight into God's will led them to substitute the gentle words of the evangel for warfare and violence as the proper means of extending the blessing God conferred on Abraham, which was always intended for all of Abraham's children-of-faith.

Unfortunately little was known of Islam in Europe. The first completed translation of the Quran into Latin would not take place until the twelfth century, and even then it would not be published until four centuries later. Had European Christians made the effort to read the Muslim's holy book, they may have been surprised at how much the two faiths have in common. Indeed, modern scholarship has increasingly revealed the strong Christian foundation upon which Islam was built. The Quran itself reads almost as a collection of various Christian traditions held sacred throughout the world in the 7th century. It is likely that its editors were attempting to integrate the fractured Christian community into the newly formed Arabic empire of the 7th century, which had swallowed almost half of Christendom.

However, as a result of the Crusades, Muslim scholarship itself began to change in its interpretation of the Quran. From then on, verses in the Quran about Jesus (of which there are over 90), began to be interpreted in an increasingly anti-Christian manner. Today, for example, it is almost universally believed throughout the Muslim world that Jesus did not die on the cross. However this was certainly not always the case (and the Quran can be shown to confirm his crucifixion and resurrection). This change happened when Christians began to use the cross as a symbol of military conquest.

At this point we must pause to reflect on some of the events leading to this curious fourth period. Let us try to see things from God's point of view, treading cautiously and tentatively. Let us begin our reflection by

looking further back. We know, for example, that at the end of the first period following three centuries of hardship and persecution, just when things were apparently going great, invaders appeared in Rome and chaos and catastrophe ensued. Why? The invasion was preceded by a period called the "Classical Renaissance." It was both good and not so good. Just when Christians were translating the Bible into Latin and waxing eloquent in theological debate, when Eusebius of Caesarea, the government's official historian was editing a massive collection of earlier Christian writings, when heretics were thrown out of the empire (becoming, however reluctantly, the only missionaries to the Goths), when Rome finally became officially Christian—then suddenly the curtain came down with the Barbarian invasion of Rome. Now, out of chaos, God would bring a new cluster of people groups to be included in the "blessing," that is, to be confronted with the claims, privileges, and obligations of the expanding Kingdom of God.

Similarly, at the end of the second period, after three centuries of chaos during which the rampaging Gothic hordes were eventually Christianized, tamed and civilized, Bibles and biblical knowledge proliferated as never before. Major biblical-missionary centers were established by the Celtic Christians and their Anglo-Saxon pupils. In this Charlemagne ("Carolingian") renaissance, thousands of public schools led by Christians attempted mass biblical and general literacy. Charlemagne dared even to attack the endemic use of alcohol. Great theologians tussled with theological/political issues. The Venerable Bede became the Eusebius of this period (indeed, both Charlemagne and Bede were much more Christian than Constantine and Eusebius). And, once again invaders appeared and chaos and catastrophe ensued. Why?

The third period is strangely similar. Early on, it took only two and a half centuries for the Vikings to capitulate to the "counterattack of the gospel." The particular "Renaissance" occurring toward the end of this period was longer than a century and far more extensive than the previous flourishes. The Crusades, the cathedrals, the Scholastic theologians, the universities, and

most importantly the blessed Friars—even the early part of the later Humanistic Renaissance—make up this outsized 1050-1350 outburst of a Medieval Renaissance, or “Twelfth Century Renaissance.”

But then suddenly a new invader appeared—the Black plague—more virulent than ever, and chaos and catastrophe greater than ever occurred. Why?

How should we interpret the disasters that interrupted what seemed to be progress in the Christian movement? Was God dissatisfied with incomplete obedience? Or was Satan striking back each time in greater desperation? Were those with the blessing retaining it and not sufficiently and determinedly sharing it with the other nations of the world?

More puzzling, the plague that killed one-third of the inhabitants of Europe killed a much higher proportion of the Franciscans: 120,000 died in Germany alone. Surely God was not judging their missionary zeal. Was He trying to judge the Crusaders whose atrocities greatly outweighed the Christian elements in their movement? If so, why did He wait several hundred years to do it? Perhaps it was that Europe did not sufficiently listen to the saintly Friars. God’s judgment upon Europe then might have been to take away the Friars and their gospel message. Even though to us it may seem like judgment was upon the messengers rather than upon the resistant hearers, is this not one impression that could be received from the New Testament as well? Jesus Himself came unto His own, and His own received Him not, yet Jesus, rather than the resisting people, went to the cross. Perhaps God employed Satan’s evil intent—removing the messenger—as a judgment against those who chose not to hear.

In any case, the invasion of the Black Plague, first in 1346 and then every so often during the next decade, brought a greater setback than the Gothic, the Anglo-Saxon or the Viking invasions. It first devastated parts of Italy and Spain, then spread west and north to France, England, Holland, Germany and Scandinavia. By the time it had run its course 40 years later, from one third to one half of the population of Europe was dead. The Friars and the truly spiritual leaders were especially stricken. They were the ones who

stayed behind to tend to the sick and bury the dead. Europe was in ruins. The result? There were three rival Popes at one point, humanist elements became menacingly strong, peasant turmoil (often justified by the Bible itself) turned into orgies and excesses of violence. “The god of this world” must have been glad, but out of all that death, poverty, confusion and lengthy travail, God birthed a new reform greater than anything before it.

Once more at the end of one of our periods, a great flourishing took place. Printing began, Europeans finally escaped from their geographical cul de sac and sent ships in the name of commerce, and brought both subjugation and spiritual blessing to the very ends of the earth. And as a part of the reform that came along with this, the Protestant Reformation now appeared on the horizon: that great, seemingly permanent, cultural decentralization of Europe.

Protestants often think of the Reformation as a legitimate reaction against the evils of a monstrous Christian bureaucracy sunken in decadence and corruption. But this “reformation” was much more than that. This great decentralization of Christendom was in many respects the result of an increasing vitality which—although this is unknown to most Protestants—was just as evident in Italy, Spain and France as in Moravia, Germany and England. Everywhere we see a return to the study of the Bible and the appearance of spiritual renewal and evangelical preaching.

The gospel that was now preached encouraged believers to be German, not merely permitted Germans to be Roman Christians. Nevertheless that marvelous insight was one of the products of a renewal already in progress. (Luther produced not the *first* but the *fourteenth* translation of the Bible into German.) Unfortunately, the marvelous emphasis on justification by faith—which was preached as much in Italy and Spain as in Germany at the time Luther came into view—became identified and ensnarled with German nationalistic (separatist) hopes and was thus, understandably, suppressed as a dangerous doctrine by political powers in Southern Europe.

It is a typical Protestant misunderstanding that there was not a revival of deeper

spiritual life, Bible study, and prayer in Southern Europe as well as in Northern Europe at the time of the Reformation. The issue may have appeared to the Protestants as faith vs. law, or to the Romans as unity vs. division. But such popular scales are askew because it was much more a case of overreaching Latin cultural dominance and uniformity vs. national and indigenous diversity. The vernacular language and culture eventually conquered.

While Paul had not demanded that the Greeks become Jews, nevertheless the Germans had been obliged to become Roman. The Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians had at least been allowed their vernacular to an extent unknown in Christian Germany. Germany was where the revolt then reasonably took place. Italy, France, and Spain, which were formerly part of the Roman Empire and extensively assimilated culturally into it, had no equivalent nationalistic pressure behind their reforming movements and thus became almost irrelevant in the political polarity of the scuffle that ensued.

However—here we go again—despite the fact that the Protestants won on the political front, and to a great extent gained the power to formulate anew their own Christian tradition and certainly thought they took the Bible seriously, they did not even talk of mission outreach. Rather, the period ended with the *Roman* Europe expanding both politically and religiously across the seven seas. Thus, entirely unshared by Protestants for at least two centuries, the Catholic variety of Christianity actively promoted and accompanied a worldwide movement of a scope unprecedented in the annals of mankind, one in which there was greater Christian missionary awareness than ever before. But having lost non-Roman Europe by insisting on its Mediterranean culture, the Catholic tradition would now try to win the rest of the world without fully understanding what had just happened, and why this project would not work.

But why did the Protestants not even try to reach out? Catholic missionaries proceeded for two hundred years while Protestants sent none. Some scholars point to the fact that the Protestants did not have a global network of colonies. Well, the Dutch Protestants did. And

their ships, unlike those from Catholic countries, carried no missionaries. This is why the Japanese—once they began to fear the Christian movement that Catholic missionaries started—would allow only Dutch ships into their ports. Indeed, the Dutch even cheered and assisted the Japanese in the slaughter of the budding Christian (Catholic) community.

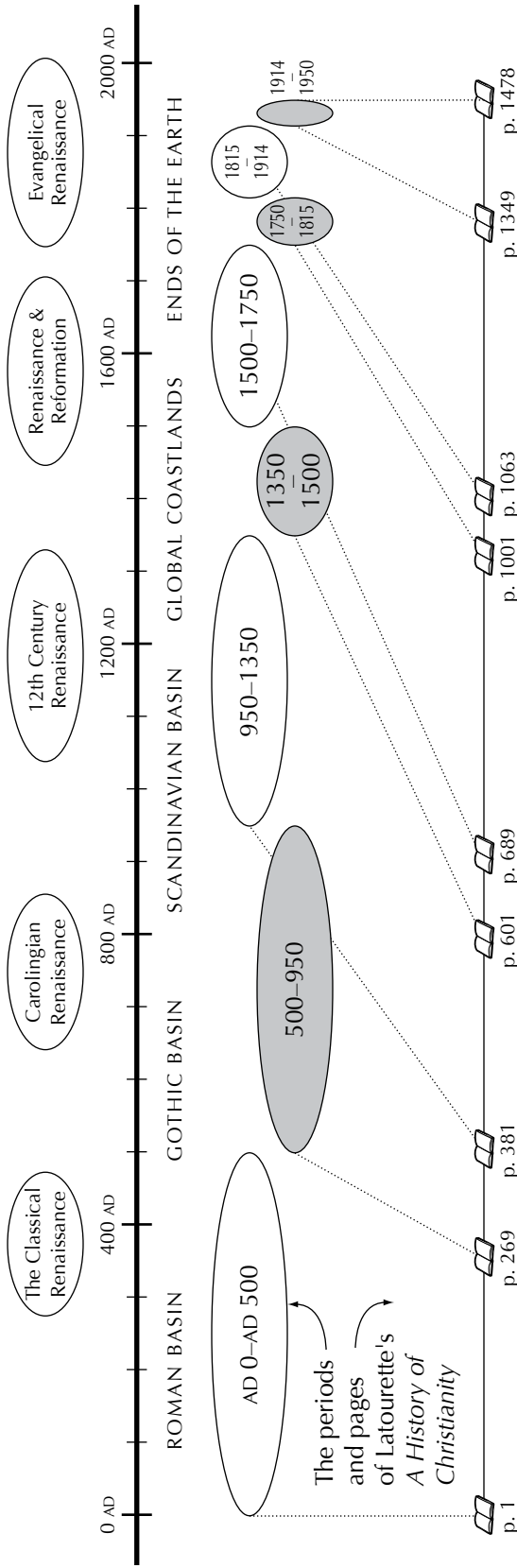
Period V: To the Ends of the Earth, A.D. 1600–2000

The period from 1600 to 2000 began with European footholds in the rest of the world. Apart from taking over what was relatively an empty continent by toppling the Aztec and Inca empires in the Western hemisphere, Europeans had only tiny enclaves of power in the heavily populated portions of the rest of the non-Western world. However, by 1945, Europeans had achieved virtual control over 99.5% of the non-Western world. This would not last. The peoples inhabiting the colonial empires had grown significantly in Western knowledge and initiative, just as the Goths had grown strong outside the bounds of the Roman Empire. The Gothic military leaders had had years of experience in the Roman military. Today many of the chief leaders of the non-Western world have had years of training and experience in Western education and industrial institutions. The Second World War mightily distracted the Western nations from their colonial hold on the rest of the world. That did it: Nationalism exploded, and European control began to be shaken off.

Only twenty-five years later (by 1969), the Western nations had lost control over all but 5% of the non-Western population of the world. I have described in a small book called *The Twenty-five Unbelievable Years* this 1945–1969 period of the sudden collapse of Western control coupled with unexpected upsurge of significance of the Christian movement in the non-Western world. If we compare this period to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire's domination over its conquered provinces of Spain, Gaul and Britain, and to the breakdown of control over non-Frankish Europe under Charlemagne's successors, we might anticipate—at least by the logic of sheer parallelism—that the Western world itself will soon be significantly dominated by Asians.

Pulses in Western Civilization

As the faith moved in to each new cultural basin it struggled before gaining acceptance in a flourishing period which scholars have called a "Renaissance."



Renaissance in Five Epochs

The dark-lined upper grid of 400-year "epochs" is designed to be easy to remember, not to determine the reality of history. However, the most significant expansions of the Christian faith are reflected at least roughly in this way. More importantly, the existence of five "renaissances" is also highlighted.

The lower line represents the pages Latourette devotes to the timeline above. The

unshaded ovals represent what Latourette calls "Resurgences" of Christianity, while the shaded ovals represent "Recessions."

The most important thing revealed by this comparison is the fact that all four of Latourette's "Resurgences" correspond to the "Renaissances" of the upper timeline. The only significant difference is that he does not honor the Carolingian Renaissance to the extent many other scholars do.

One reason Latourette saw this differently is that he was concerned strictly with what is called "Christianity" (which is not illogical in a book entitled *A History of Christianity*) and thus does not consider the Islamic movement a largely positive expression of the same "Judaic" tradition.

In any case, Islam, although starting later, became an advance far more illustrious than our Western upbringing normally

allows us to realize. By the time of the Renaissance in the fourth epoch, Islam had become politically, culturally, militarily, and even numerically, superior to "Christianity." In many ways this had been true for more than half of the Christian period. This is not surprising since much of the expansion of Islam built on a Christian substratum, just as Christianity had earlier built on Jewish a substratum.

With some reason, ever since the collapse of Western power became obvious, there have been many who have decried the thought of any further missionary effort moving from the West to the non-Western world. Perhaps they have confused the inappropriateness of political control with a need to cut ties of faith in foreign missions situations.

The true situation is actually very different. In fact, the absence of political control for the first time in many areas has now begun to allow non-Western populations to yield to the Kingdom of Christ without simultaneously yielding to the political kingdoms of the Western world. Here we see a parallel to the Frankish tribal people accepting the faith of Rome only after Rome had lost its military power. This new openness to Catholic Christianity continued among the Anglo-Saxons, Germans and Scandinavians until the time when the emergence of strong papal authority mixed with power politics became a threat to legitimate national ambitions. This threat then led to a Reformation, which allowed nationalized forms of Christianity to break away.

The present spectacle of a Western world flaunting the standards of Christian morality in more obvious ways than ever may dissuade non-Christian nations from embracing the Christian faith; but it may also tend to disassociate the treasure of Christian ideals from a Western world which hasn't lived up to them, and until this age, but which has been their most prominent sponsor. When Asians accuse Western nations of immorality in warfare, they are appealing to Christian values, certainly not the values of any nation's pagan past. In this sense, Christianity has already conquered the world. No longer, for example, is the long-standing incredibly developed Chinese tradition of ingenious torture likely to be boasted about in China nor highly respected anywhere else, at least in public circles.

But this worldwide transformation has not come about suddenly. Even the present, minimal attainment of worldwide Christian morality on a tenuous public level has been accomplished only at the cost of a great amount of sacrificial missionary endeavors (during the four centuries of Period V) that

have been mightier and more deliberate than at any time in 2,000 years. The first half (1600-1800) of this fifth period was almost exclusively a Roman Catholic show. By the year 1800, it was painfully embarrassing to Protestants to hear Catholic missionaries writing off

There will be the defeat of Satan's power holding millions of people hostage in thousands of peoples —peoples who have too long "sat in darkness" and who "shall see a great light" (Matt 4:16).

the Protestant movement as apostate simply because it was not sending missionaries. But by that same year, Catholic missionary effort had been forced into sudden decline due to the curtailment of the Jesuits, and the combined effect of the French Revolution and ensuing chaos that cut the European economic roots of Catholic missions.

However, the year 1800 marks the awakening of the Protestants from two-and-a-half centuries of inactivity, if not theological slumber, in regard to missionary outreach across the world. During this final period, for the first time, Protestants equipped themselves with organizational structures of mission comparable to the Catholic orders and began to make up for lost time. Unheralded, unnoticed, and all but forgotten in our day except for in ill-informed criticism, Protestant missionary efforts in this period, more than Catholic missions, led the way in establishing throughout the world the democratic apparatus of government: the schools, hospitals, universities, and political foundations of the new nations. Rightly understood, Protestant missionaries along with their Roman Catholic counterparts are surely not less than prime movers of the tremendous energy that is mushrooming in the "Third World" today.

Take China, for example. Two of its greatest modern leaders, Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, were both Christians. Teng Hsiao-P'ing's "Four Modernizations" were principal emphases of the Western mission movement in China. Missionaries had planted a university in every province of China, etc.

But if the Western home base is now

to falter and to fail as the tide is reversed through the rising power of its partially evangelized periphery (as is the pattern in the earlier periods), we can only refer to Dawson's comment on the devastation wrought by the Vikings—that this will not be a “victory for paganism.” The fall of the West will, in that case, be due partly to a decay of spirit and to the pagan power in the non-Western world which became emboldened and strengthened by its first contact with Christian faith. It may come as a most drastic punishment to a Western world that has always spent more on cosmetics than it has on foreign missions—lately ten times as much.

From a secular or even nationalistic point of view, the next years may be a very dark period for the Western world. The normal hopes and aspirations of Christian people for their own country may find only a very slight basis for optimism. But if the past is any guide at all, even this will have to be darkness before the dawn. The entire Western world in its present political form may be radically altered. We may not even be sure about the survival of our own country. But we have every reason to suppose from past experience that the Christian, biblical faith will clearly survive in one form or another. We can readily calculate that during the 20th century, Westerners dropped from 18% to 8% of the world population. But we cannot ultimately be pessimistic. Beyond the agony

of Rome was the winning of the Barbarians. Beyond the agony of the Barbarians was the winning of the Vikings. Beyond the agony of the Western world we can only pray that there will be the defeat of Satan's power holding millions hostage in thousands of people groups—peoples which have too long “sat in darkness” and who now “shall see a great light” (Matt 4:16). And we can know that there is no basis in the past or in the present for assuming that things are out of the control of the Living God.

If we in the West insist on keeping our blessing instead of sharing it, then we will, like other nations before us (Israel, Rome, etc) perhaps have to “lose” our blessing in order for the remaining nations to receive it. God has not changed His plan in the last 4,000 years. But how much better not to focus on how to retain God's blessing for ourselves, but rather to strive intentionally to extend, that marvelous blessing! That way “in you and in your descendants all of the peoples of the world will be blessed” (Gen 12:3). This is the only way we can continue in God's blessing. The expanding Kingdom is not going to stop with us (although it may leave us behind). “This Gospel of the Kingdom must be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all peoples, and then shall the end come” (Matt 24:14). God can raise up others if we falter. Indeed, the rest of this book indicates that is already happening. 🌍

Endnotes

1. Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points, Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 84.
2. Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, (New York: Image Books, 1991), p. 87.

Study Questions

1. Illustrate this thesis: “The conferring of the blessing brings sober responsibility, dangerous if unfulfilled.”
2. Explain the cultural and social dynamics behind the Protestant Reformation.
3. Winter contends that history is a “single, coherent drama.” What are the outlines of the “plot”? What themes are repeated? What major lessons are to be observed?