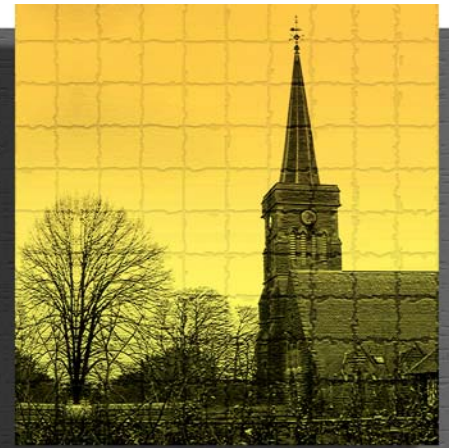


Globalization, the Church, & Finishing the Task



Smart Missions: How the Great Commission will Triumph in the Face of Globalism

By Dr. Douglas Shaw

“The world is changing so rapidly! Even the pace of change is racing past us at breakneck speed!”

How many times have we all heard these clichés of modern times? The fact that our world is changing faster than any of us can manage has become the new overhanging fact of our lives—a rhetorical Sword of Damocles every bit as constant as the threat of nuclear war was to generations past.

So what is the most radically unchanging truth of human history, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to do in the face of such runaway change? Do we threaten its eternal verities if we adapt how we express them in today’s shifting cultural sands? Do we throw away the proverbial “baby with the bathwater” if we evolve our methods of sharing it with the world?

The greatest movement of the past century was not Communism or Capitalism. “Do the math,” he says, “and the winner is spirit-filled Christianity...”

Phillip Jenkins
The Next Christendom

I say *no*. I say that if we remain true to the core of our faith, yet remain open to discarding the human window-dressings of religion and outdated cultural habits, we can find today’s rollercoaster world, rather than just a place of bewilderment

and obsolescence, one of jaw-dropping opportunity.

The challenges we face

Indeed, the past century witnessed a remarkable advance in the Great Commission. According to Penn State University’s distinguished professor Phillip Jenkins, author of the landmark book, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, the greatest movement of the past century was not Communism or Capitalism. “Do the math,” he says, “and the winner is spirit-filled Christianity...”

And yet today, those incredible gains also face challenges and new realities unheard of in years past. All around us glare the signs of a world that has transformed many of yesterday’s missions paradigms into noble but unworkable relics of a former era.

Asian Partners International declares that **80% of nations with unreached people groups are now closed to traditional missions**. One by one, developing nations turn away Western families believed to be Christian missionaries. Global trends like the resurgence of fundamentalist Islam, anti-American sentiment, and rampant spiritual darkness make Christian evangelism the most dangerous practice across vast swaths of the planet.

A laundry list of trends is making our world a challenging, counterproductive, perhaps even hostile, place to share the Gospel “as it’s always been done.”

- *Knowledge, or access to informa-*

tion, ranks as probably the supreme driving force of this change. It has been projected that by 2015, most unreached peoples on Earth will have access to the Gospel in one form or another. Of course, the internet and worldwide web have inserted access to information into the last corners of the planet.

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- *Language* rides the crest of this trend. English is more widely accepted, even required, than ever. In China, proficiency in English is an established prerequisite to acquiring any sort of responsible job.

- *Technology* itself comes in for its share of credit, or blame, depending on one’s perspective. In a world where one can fly eighteen hours continuously to reach Singapore from the United States, where satellites beam real-time footage of world events to the dimmest places on earth, and where a pair of briefcases can hold both a radio station and transmission station, most of yesterday’s barriers have evaporated.

- *Globalization*, one of today’s trendiest buzzwords, is nevertheless an amazingly potent force. The world economy has become porous beyond imagination. Existing transnational alliances, treaty organizations, and long-standing boundaries are now fading in significance. The word “Europe” now refers to a single, economic commonwealth. NATO now boasts more of the old Soviet-bloc nations than it once did Western ones.

- But other, less modern factors also

come into play. *Natural disasters* like the Tsunami of 2005, devastating regional earthquakes, drought and its by-product, famine—have dislodged the international status quo on a myriad of levels. **Conflict, hardly a recent phenomenon, continues to reshape the “world as we once knew it.”**

The bottom line? The same global upheavals which are forcing international business to become so fast-paced and responsive demand that we “spreaders” of the Gospel do the same. Many of these changes are rooted in Scripture and are the direct fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Most of them are beyond human control.

And yet our response clearly *does* lie within our control. We, as the Church of Jesus Christ and the human agents of the Great Commission, can strategize differently, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, to better reach this fluid and challenging new world of ours. We can use the web and the internet, despite their bewildering and isolating tendencies, to reach out beyond traditional boundaries and address the universal desire for wisdom while leading seekers to the call and claims of Christ Jesus.

“Smart missions” simply means spreading the Gospel in a far more intentional, thoughtful, precisely-targeted, and strategic manner. . .

How we can respond

“Smart missions,” despite its echoes of high-technology and/or military hardware, simply means this: *spreading the Gospel in a far more intentional, thoughtful, precisely-targeted, and strategic manner than ever before.* Some of the responses I offer are philosophical in nature, and some quite specific.

For instance, in the future, we must base our efforts on a renewed understanding of the Great Commission by focusing more on preaching, baptism, and discipleship. For the last fifty years, we have placed an excessive emphasis on conversion alone, to the detriment of these other three imperatives.

First of all, far too few modern churches now feature true, *evangelistic*

preaching, exalting Jesus Christ as the only way, truth, and the life.

- *Baptism* has become a passing thought, even in churches who believe in the practice. And yet the need to continue following Christ in the baptism command remains acute. People today need outward expressions and evidences of their faith. Call it a “ritual” if you will, yet in today’s world where nothing sacred remains the same for every long, rituals are more important than ever. By diminishing the outward evidences of our faith, we reinforce the fallacy that Christianity is a faith to be kept hidden.

- *Discipleship* is even more neglected. For too long, we have presented disciples rather than the practice of discipleship itself. Noted teacher and *Experiencing God* co-author Henry Blackaby recently shared that 180 of America’s top 500 CEOs reported having a personal faith in Christ, yet also having suffered a lack of discipleship by pastors and laypeople who simply knew nothing of spiritual mentorship. Eastern religions, by contrast, have long mastered the dynamics of the “master-teacher relationship,” to their great gain. **Although the Gospels show us that Jesus was repeatedly called “Master” and “Teacher,” that facet of His nature has languished in today’s Christian landscape.**

Another corollary of this issue is the Church’s neglect of our faith’s more personal and inward factors, such as personal reflection, meditation, and relational versus ritualistic worship. We have emphasized study of religious facts over the practices of faith. By contrast, Muslims pray five times a day. Buddhists do so for a whole day. Modern Christians are often unique if they personally interact with God for minutes a week, supplemented by a few more minutes of familiar, Sunday-morning music to fill the gap.

Another future imperative is that we insist on a theme of *proclaiming the supremacy of Jesus Christ.*

- Another future imperative is that we insist on a theme of *proclaiming the supremacy of Jesus Christ.* Individuals do not respond to denominations, but to

the person of Jesus Christ. A decade ago, missions scholars reported that the number one Church need worldwide was for trained national leaders, but a close second was proclaiming the supremacy of our Lord. The great legacy which began with Simon Peter and ran through Mars Hill, Martin Luther, and others has now languished for far too long.

- **Today’s global Christians must also perfect the art of *dialogue.*** For too long, our conversations with non-believers have tended to fall into one of two extremes—either not defending the faith at all, or doing so by becoming defensive in attitude. By speaking the truth in love and trusting God for the response, we can make great strides in today’s pluralistic world. Most people sense love, or the lack of it, before they process the apologetics involved. Remember that today, the acquisition of information is no longer a challenge. The web alone has forever made that a thing of the past. But people continue to starve for acceptance, love, and an appreciation of their unique, spiritual journey.

The earliest world missions paradigm was *colonialism*, and perhaps the second was the *clandestine* model—with leaders like Brother Andrew and the Underground Church of so many persecuted populations. Today’s is *contextualization*. A big word, but it means simply that the Gospel is expressed within terms defined by the target culture, not the culture from which it was sent. This does not mean altering its core or its truth—merely being creative and adaptable in the ways we frame those eternal foundations. The Great Commission refers to “nations” as the units we must reach. This usage refers to a context of customs, languages, and cultures. We don’t need to import Western materials and doctrinal slants. If God considers their autonomy worth respecting, our strategies should reflect that as well.

Course corrections

In order to properly implement the “smart missions” of tomorrow, we must overcome these lingering problems:

- *Western control*—Another paradigm shift which must take place is to abandon the colonial mentality of the “missions compound” from which

Western “experts” dictate to local believers the shape and direction of their Christian faith. **By over promising help and support to those it reaches, the colonial model has been often unable to “wean” fledgling leaders from the financial aids with which it began.**

This, in turn, has fostered division and strife. Globalization means, among other things, that the remnants of the last century’s paternalistic attitudes must give way once and for all. Tomorrow, Americans may just as likely listen to a missionary sent to their shores from a so-called “third world” nation as to send a missionary overseas.

Christ is all too often pictured as a destination alone rather than a doorway to the Father.

- *The “partial Gospel”*—All too often, the Gospel being presented abroad is a distorted or half-picture of the whole, rather than the entire Good News of Jesus Christ. Christ is all too often pictured as a destination alone rather than a doorway to the Father. In other developing nations, prosperity theology has become an enticing alternative to the rest of the Word. When it eventually, as it so often does, fails to fulfill its grandiose promises to the impoverished, enemies of faith gain an almost impregnable place from which to attack Christianity as a whole. At the other extreme, an excessive emphasis on the sovereignty of God can create a false sense of helplessness and victimhood.

- *The anemic Western understanding of spiritual warfare*—In order to fully overcome the powers of darkness which hold such sway over large parts of the world, we must arm ourselves with the full arsenal God has offered us. That arsenal is far more than book learning, economic opportunity, and sound preaching. It can only be implemented by believers wielding a fuller understanding of the spirit realm and how God’s power can overcome all adversaries.

- *Religious extremism*—Many ideologies which stand against us are becoming radical in their opposition to Christianity. And tomorrow, the primary embodiment may not be the familiar

adversary of Islam. Hinduism is becoming militant and ruthless in its suppression of Christians in many lands. In order to thrive, tomorrow’s missionaries will have to become more creative and careful in their methods of sharing the Gospel.

- *Increasing spirituality*—The human population is becoming more open to matters of the spirit, and more willing to admit its need for what they offer. While Christianity remains the fastest growing religion, globalism has enabled the rapid spread of Hinduism and Islam. However, while atheism is almost a thing of the past, skepticism of any one creed is on the rise. The spirituality of today is more apt to be diffuse, syncretistic, and pantheistic as anything else.

- *Diasporas*—Just as economies are becoming increasingly stateless, so are people groups themselves. **Population groups are not remaining rooted to their ancestral homelands but are displaced by various economic and geopolitical forces. This is a bright opportunity rather than merely a challenge.** For instance, future leaders come to America, as well as the world’s other centers of higher education, in the form of international students. There they become ripe for cultivation and outreach. Authoritarian control, which once restricted access to the Gospel, cannot overcome this trend.

The Gospel may never change, but old paradigms and cultural wrappings can and must do so today.

Conclusion

These musings are not intended to suggest that global missions be abandoned. Merely that we consider new, perhaps “smarter,” strategies in order to accomplish our perennial goal. The Gospel will never change, but old paradigms and cultural wrappings can, as they have in the past—and they must do so today. Just as in Old Testament times, when the sons of Issachar “...understood the times and knew what Israel should do...” (1 Chronicles 12:32, NIV), we must understand our own and respond accordingly. Adaptation is neither a compromise nor a capitulation to the “world.” It is merely another step in God’s creative work of revealing Himself to His creation.

Resourcefulness is now more than a desired trait, but a requirement.

Resourcefulness is now more than a desired trait, but a requirement. Continuing on the present path will only proliferate more wholly redundant structures, streamlined perhaps, yet led by fallible humans rather than true solutions birthed by the Holy Spirit.

We must continue to nurture and execute these kind of “spiritual guerilla tactics” in a spirit of adaptation and radical commitment. When we do this in humility and submission to God’s leading, we will find tomorrow’s ever-shifting landscape truly a land of opportunity.

Douglas Shaw considers himself a blessed beneficiary of Western missionary efforts, which reached his Muslim great-grandfather and Yogi grandfather with the Gospel, but also a Global Christian concerned about a world in desperate need of hearing the Gospel before it is too late. He currently serves as the President of International Students, Inc.



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published by FullCycle Publishers

January 2006 — GL series 001

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International Standard Book Number: 0-9770661-2-6

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