

A Vision for Mission

As I was packing up my books for the move to Oak Hill, I came across one I had not looked at for many years. A Crisis in Mission by Fife and Glasser published in 1962. Would it have any relevance for the course I was going to teach? As I began to read it, I realised that it reflected the experiences of men whose main missionary careers were before the second World War and whose fears were centred around the liberal agenda of the World Council of Churches, the growth of communism to control a third of the world and the emergence of independent countries from the dismembered empires. It reflected a world far removed from that in which we now live and a crisis that needs historical interpretation to understand. But in the midst of these echoes from the past there are issues addressed that are still to be noted today and if a past generation had taken books like this one seriously, we might be in a healthier situation today. In particular there is the question challenge to deal with racism in Christian life and ministry.

Mission lives on crises. Our reading from Luke's Gospel could be presented as a crisis. Jesus' ministry was meeting increasing opposition. He was declaring the short time available for Israel to bear the fruit of righteousness. His parables were teaching that the growth of the kingdom would be secret and larger than many expected. Opportunity and uncertainty made one man ask what he saw to be the vital question. "Will only a few be saved?" What answer did he expect or hope for? Was it to be "Oh no, everyone will be saved. Don't worry Israel will get there"? Or was the preferred answer, " Yes, it is few. It is a very exclusive club. Not many will be saved"? Jesus does not quantify the number, which

should have been a corrective to the Jehovah Witnesses with their 144,000 and missionary statisticians with their prediction of church growth. Instead Jesus makes the points that entrance is not for all, that some who think they are in are really outside, that his hearer should be more concerned about whether he is in than speculative questions about the number of the elect. But having given these warnings and cautions, Jesus then expounds the glorious extent of the kingdom – that people will come from all points of the compass to sit down with Abraham in the kingdom. I don't think this was the answer the questioner was looking for. To be told that entry is difficult and that you could find yourself outside, but large numbers of foreigners are going to come in to the privileges you thought were yours – is not the message anyone is likely to welcome. But that may be the message that God has for the Western church.

The growth of the non-Western church during the last 30 years has been phenomenal. The fears that the authors of *Mission in Crisis* had about the Chinese church has been met by the growth of that church through the years of suffering and persecution. With perhaps 5% of the 1.3 billion population professing faith in Jesus Christ, the numbers make it one of the largest numbers of Christians in any country in the world. Africa is regarded as a Christian continent with over 50% of the population counted as Christians. If only sub-Saharan Africa is counted the proportions become even larger. 28% of the world's Pentecostals are to found in Latin America where non-Catholic believers are about 13% of the population. Patrick Johnson in *Operation World* predicts that by the year 2025, 83% of the world's evangelicals would be in the non-Western world. Andrew Walls has argued frequently that this is what we should expect since the church has always grown at the point at which it has crossed a cultural boundary.

Mono-cultural non-missionary churches are likely to become static and then decline.

Alongside this growth of the evangelical churches is also the increased mobility of people. Before the communication revolution the world seemed tidy. Hudson Taylor had to go to China to evangelise the Chinese. Now he could have contact with thousands of Chinese without leaving London. Carey went to India to meet Indians. Now he could go to his corner shop. In the providence of God, many of those who are hard to reach in their own countries are coming to live in Britain. 7.5% of people in Britain were born overseas according to yesterday's statistics, but many of them were the children of British people working abroad. But there is an opportunity that had never been here before for all British Christians to build relationships cross-culturally and especially in London.

But not everyone who comes here is from another faith. The growth of the church and the increase in mobility is also to be seen in the beginnings of a missionary movement to Britain. Some is by churches reaching out to people from their own culture who are more open to the Gospel overseas, but there are also those who are bringing the Gospel to the British. British immigration law still has the category of missionary visa!

Those coming to UK are only a small part of the response of non-Western churches to the call to take the Gospel to other people. The growth of the Korean missionary movement to over 12,000. The 4000 or more from Nigeria. The numbers of Filipino believers who have gone to work and witness in countries like Saudi Arabia. Singapore where there is on average one missionary from every church. 44,000 Indians of

whom the majority are working cross-culturally in India. China with those who aspire to take the Gospel back along the silk road to Jerusalem where it all started.

And so we face the question – what should be the vision of the British church in this new situation?

First the remarkable growth of the Christian church outside Western countries should not blind us to the vast numbers of people who do not as yet know the Gospel. Not only are there the millions unevangelised in Europe, but in most of Asia the Christian church is in a minority. However big the church is in China, there are an awful lot of Chinese with no understanding of the Gospel. The Chinese and tribal churches in Malaysia may be strong, but what of the Malay population – kept away from the Gospel by law? There is still a world without Christ.

But if many of the growing churches are healthier and stronger than those in the West and they have a missionary vision, should we not leave the task to them? Some Asian Christians are not suggesting that Western Christians should stop thinking about the missionary call, but are asking whether Western Christians are able to respond to the call. Ajith Fernando of Sri Lanka has written

“Christians from affluent countries may be losing their ability to live with inconvenience, stress and hardship, as there is more and more emphasis on comfort and convenience. Many are unable to stick to their commitments when the going gets tough. They leave their places of service, change churches, and discard their friends. Some discard their spouses far too soon

when their marriages face problems. What will this mean for the church in the west? Might the west soon disqualify itself from being a missionary-sending region? I think we are seeing some embarrassing examples.”

Many mature non-Western Christians have grown tired of the arrogance of young Western missionaries (and some older ones!) who continue to act as if the failed church of the West has all the answers to the world churches' needs. I remember one young man to whom I spoke about Gospel opportunities in Asia. I emphasised the need for him to be adaptable and learn from the people he would go to serve. I heard from one of his friends that he had found that statement unacceptable. He wanted to go and show what the British can do! No overseas church deserves such people. No one who will not give time and effort to learning how other people think and feel can understand the servant spirit of Christ.

There is another line of argument that we need to address. Some people see the spiritual vitality of other churches and the comparative affluence of the West and say that we should stop sending expensive missionaries overseas and rather finance the activities of these churches. People are better at ministering into their own culture. Why send foreigners who need to learn the language and culture when you can support national believers to do the work? When the statistics are presented it all seems obvious. But looking behind statistics is always wise.

One of the stories in *Crisis in Mission* was of a missionary in the Philippines being asked to finance a new church building. His response was: If I get you the money, you will say, Here

is the church the Americans built for us. If you look to the Lord and sacrifice to build an appropriate building you will say: Here is the building the Lord gave to us.

A recent survey of partnerships between Western and non-Western agencies showed that only 16% believed that they were being treated as equal partners by the financial donor. A missionary leader was recently told to stop using the word partner because it was empty of meaning. There are those who are encouraged to give to the support of Chinese Christians who want to take the Gospel Back to Jerusalem. But there are other Chinese church leaders who are saying: We have won our present spiritual growth after we stopped being regarded as the pawns of the West. Pray for us, help us when we ask, but don't shackle us again with Western funds.

Cross-cultural ministry within a country demands the same skills from the nationals as from a foreigner. Cultural differences need to be learned even when people can communicate directly in one language. I remember a Hong Kong Chinese woman in severe culture shock as she sought to work with a Chinese church in Indonesia. Ethnically they were the same. Linguistically there were no problems. But culturally they were far apart. Cross-cultural ministry within a country may also be compounded when there is a history of community animosity to overcome.

Sending money to others to do Christian work is the easy option for some Western Christians. It is for many easier than facing the challenge of personal involvement or seeing members of your own family follow the call of God to work elsewhere. I have often been surprised by missionary-supporting Christian parents who seem more unwilling than

unbelieving ones to see their own children leave. To send money that others might do the task is to avoid the challenge of a real engagement with the world church as it is today. Of course there are some circumstances where we can give support to poor and suffering brothers and sisters, but the sending of money is not the complete answer to the challenge of mission today.

We may be moving towards the time when Western missionaries are no longer welcomed in the world church, but that time has not yet arrived. But we do not know how long specific opportunities will exist. Mission for many years has depended on the educational, social and development needs of other countries. There have been few places where an English teacher was not welcomed. But as standards rise needs diminish. One organisation working in China is now only recruiting Teachers of English with Masters degrees. There are few countries in Asia that welcome foreign doctors for local employment. And if they do allow you in they may insist that you requalify in their language. What effect will it have on mission perspectives when we no longer go to countries because our Western expertise can supply what they lack? But that day is not yet and there are still many opportunities for service.

Those who go need to be humble adaptable people who are willing to not only work under the leadership of others from different cultural backgrounds There is one couple working in China who have left the mission agency with which they originally went out. They have placed themselves under the pastoral authority of a local unregistered church so that they can have a training role among them. We do not only need to learn to work under non-Western leadership, but also to learn

to see the grace and truth of God expressed in different cultural terms. This is also the challenge that comes home to British churches. As the centre of the world church moves from the West to the South and East, what new understandings will we gain about the truth of God as revealed in his Word? What challenges will there be to those areas where we have compromised Biblical truth in accommodation to our own culture? A few years ago lecturing at another college, I had been talking about suffering as part of the Christian calling. After the lecture a Pakistani student came to thank me for mentioning that. He had been in the UK for eighteen months and I was the first British Christian to suggest that suffering was normal for Christians. He had begun to think that Pakistani believers had got it wrong. In how many other areas do we need to be challenged? We will need to be people who are ready to be challenged biblically, but also those who know what the Bible really says so that we don't just exchange Western compromises for those of another culture.

The opportunities presented by the world coming to Britain means that a church's missionary vision is no longer only long-sighted. The world has come here. Not all are called to go elsewhere, but now all the members of the church can be involved in reaching across cultures for the Gospel. And once the church has begun to see the need to cross cultures, the missionary vision of the church begins to grow. They value those who have immersed themselves in other cultures and have the expertise to lead people on from the beginnings of a profession of faith to what discipleship will mean in another culture. These opportunities may not exist for ever. Legislation may curb cross-cultural evangelism. Immigration rules may prevent people continuing to come in large numbers. Chinese student numbers are down this year. Why? Because as

educational standards improve, the need for expensive overseas study decreases. But once again there is the opportunity now. God word and calling to us is always for the now. The future belongs to him.

The opportunities here will lead some to explore the possibility of service in the countries from which these people come. As members of the congregation go round the world on business or for holidays, they will stop being blind to the spiritual needs of the people they are meeting. Some will deliberately find ways of working or living overseas for the sake of the Gospel. Their churches need to recognise that they need prayer as much as those who are also asking for financial support.

Luke, and the rest of the New Testament, presents us with a picture of the final messianic banquet. There are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There are the prophets. There are Jews who have believed in the Messiah. And then the people come from north, south, east and west to sit down with them. Revelation expands the picture as it designates those from every tribe, tongue, people and nation before the throne. Our vision for mission expands to this. That the purposes of the coming of Jesus Christ is the establishment of a new creation in which all the different cultural groups into which sin has divided us, come together to worship the Lamb who was slain. It is the vision of the final unity that should inspire us to find every possible way of working together with churches around the world to bring people into the kingdom of Christ and to continue the formation of the new mankind as groups of believers within their own culture begin to be transformed into the image of Christ. To be Gospel people is to be world people. With the vision set before us of a completed church We hope that the Mission course at Oak Hill we will be able to

have a small part in the bringing in of that final vision.