



Transcriptions

A Call for 'Perestroika' in Church and Missions

Ted Ward

Annotation: *BILD Conference: Approaching the Year 2000, Ames, Iowa, February 1990.* Used with Permission. Ted Ward casts disturbing trends in the church against what he anticipates will develop in the new era of global politics. With echoes of his earlier speech and article on "The Church in the Intermediate Future" he challenges the people of God to pray, "Show me what you're doing in the world, and let me know if there's anything I can do to help out."



Now I am not a political scientist and I am not a soothsayer, and I have no crystal ball and I cannot tell you these things will happen. But I can ask you, as Christian friends and brothers and sisters, to regard this time in the '90s as a time of extreme testing and to recognize that what God is doing today is reflecting the great power of God. But the great power of God quite often rewards wickednesses of the past with pain in the future. And we may be facing a time when we will see the consequences of the evil that has been sown working right back against the nations that we have regarded as our mortal enemies, and from whom we have had just cause for fear; becoming not only weakened to the point where we no longer fear them, but creating for us problems that we cannot cope with in terms of our economic situation. And I can imagine very easily a scenario that would make the '90s both a very high point in human history and a very low point in human history, and I think it would be well for us to recognize that things are not over until they're over; and when they're over are still in the hands of God.

Our task is to be about the business of the kingdom. I am less concerned with setting dates than I am with being about the business of the King. I am impressed that our Lord Jesus Christ, on

coming to this world in the incarnate form born of Mary, living and maturing as a young man in Nazareth for thirty years, then emerging on the world scene as it were, for a brief three, was a person who having been resurrected from the dead was asked yet again when will all the fulfillments occur? And again he reminded people that in the incarnation he did not bring the data from heaven. It is not ours to set dates. I have no problem with the theme of this conference toward 2000, but I have a great deal of difficulty with the kind of preoccupation that says we must be here or we must be there, or we must have accomplished this or we must have accomplished that by the year 2000. I don't care who sets such goals. Our task is not with reference to 2000. Our task is with reference to 1990. That's where we are. And it's our task to be about the business of the King. Step-by-step, day-by-day we are servants. We are not kingdom planners. This is our Father's world. We are his servants. We are disciples, not of one another, not of a movement, not of a cause, not of a theme. We are not servants of a slogan. We are disciples of but one Lord and in his hands rests the welfare of humanity.

About ten years ago, when this nation was in a period of anticipation for the new decade which then was the '80s, I wrote an article that became the cover article and feature for the issue of *Christianity Today* that anticipated that new decade. At that time I posited a somewhat simple, if not simple-minded, notion that the church had about three different roads it could go in the '90s. And as I reflected not too long ago on that story, I realized that there are some amendments that I would make as we face the '90s. I think I misspoke myself a moment ago. As we were facing the '80s then, ten years later I would make some revisions in the story although most of the scenario would hold. I argued then that the church had about three different roads it could go. It could conceive itself to be the unheeded conscience of sinful mankind and somehow find its own little corner and lick its little wounds and feel sorry for itself. The unheeded conscience ready to point the way to truth, righteousness, and to God himself, but unresponsive society simply turns away and pays no attention.

That would certainly be one possibility still remaining in the '90s: that the people of God could still do that. Though I think in the last decade one of the things we've discovered is that we aren't nearly as few as we used to think we are. The number of Christians is clearly larger; the proportion of Christians is clearly larger; the influence of those Christians is considerably more clear than it was a decade ago. We are still a minority. We are still badly outnumbered if we were to do a tug of war across a muddy pond. But, as a matter of fact, we are not alone and with respect to the power that empowers us I think there is awareness in the '90s that may make it less likely that we would go down the road as an unheeded conscience.

And I suggested in that article ten years ago that the second possibility would be that the church would become a sort of fortress of the defeated collectively pulling our wagons in a circle and feeling so good about being so different, and taking some degree of pride in the fact that, after all, we are going to heaven; never mind if anyone else does. And by simply pulling our wagons in a circle, we could do things our own way, and educate our own children in our own way, and just peddle our own papers and let the rest of the world go to hell if they want to. And we have our own little Christian Yellow Pages to go on, and we have other little symbols of our own uniqueness and we can just be happy as clams, and who cares?

Now I think that particular possibility is still with us. If anything, I think it may be even a more likely scenario than it was ten years ago. There is a certain kind of smugness, a certain kind of

complacency, and even as I'm hearing Christians do a very simple-minded rejoicing over, hey, the Christians are winning. Take a look at Eastern Europe. I'm just a little anxious that we're a little simplistic; and it may be that we end up with this little caravan pulling its wagons in the circle and rejoicing around the fountain of the well of living water and perishing in the desert.

There's a third possibility and this was my optimistic scenario ten years ago; and that is that as you remember ten years ago we were just coming off a long siege of the television program M*A*S*H, the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. And after having been fed about fifteen years of M*A*S*H, there was a kind of awareness in the American society then, that may have somewhat vanished by now, that there is a possibility of being helpful without being a direct combatant, because that's what M*A*S*H was all about: helpful in terms of broken humanity, but not necessarily a prime combatant in the conflict.

I believe that one of the things that's necessary in our time is that we understand that what is wrong in this world is evil and that the most evil form of evil is when evil turns on itself. I think the ultimate viciousness of Satan is that Satan is not even faithful to his own. And as I see where we are in this world, we're talking about conflict of evil against evil, not of good against evil. And it's been classic and popular within America to presume ourselves always to be the way one defines righteousness—anybody else who isn't with us is an evil empire or something of the sort. As a matter of fact, we're talking about various forms of evil including some homegrown varieties. Ultimately, the Christian posture gets lost in all this because the conflicts rage around us and leave us potentially as a kind of grand field hospital to minister to needy humankind. And I saw that as a real possibility for the decade of the '80s but I haven't seen it realized very much. I haven't seen us move in that direction with any great strength.

Clearly, there are less arguments today than ten years ago over the issue of should we get involved with social issues? That seems to be largely a foregone conclusion that we really have to. Praise God for that. Do we have something to offer to hurting people? We've pretty well established that, but is it something we're really willing to go to work on? We're not really all that enthusiastic about it even still today. And I suspect that this particular scenario still faces us as a glorious opportunity because we've got some things going for us as the children of God that a needy, broken world is desperately needing even though it doesn't know it sometimes.

Take, for example, some of the prevailing problems of our time such as broken families. Unfortunately, in the last decade we've seen the church follow even closer the patterns of a downtrend in stable families. Now the secular society has begun to level out partly because unmarried families are now accepted as part of the national statistic so the church is kind of bottoming out, too. But I do believe that there are exemplary answers for the problems of family instability that we, as Christians, can offer to this world. I also believe that we have some problems with reference to the worth and purpose of life. Much of the problem with the homeless is the fact that there is a large sector of humankind who have no idea what life is worth. That really is part of what the drug problem is all about: it's the acting out of a groping for purpose. There must be some reason we're here. There must be something to do that makes it worthwhile. There must be something that's more entertaining than sitting and watching television. And I hope there still is. It's possible that the Christian community hasn't forgotten what it is even though they, too, are increasingly spending time watching television. That brings me to a really tough matter with

reference to where we are in the church, and what the problems are facing us with reference to leadership tasks.

Not only is it true that, within the church of Jesus Christ, we don't have our act together any more than the secular society does with reference to the problem of weakening families. I think we have a better solution; but we don't really have our act together with reference to the value system that has shifted and shifted radically, even in the last ten years, downhill. We are becoming very rapidly an entertainment-craved society. A craving for entertainment. An insistence that everything we do be entertaining, and preferably more entertaining than the last such event that we engaged in, is really a kind of a massive addiction and I think it's affecting the church. I think it's one of the reasons you have certain phenomena within certain of the churches—not just the superchurches, but also some of the little churches. We're producing far fewer people who can do anything musically beyond the first three chords on a guitar because we're depending more and more on things brought in. It's easier to entertain people with, for example, cassette backgrounds of some high-priced group in Hollywood or London than it is to listen painfully to little Jill thump through her best attempt on the piano. And our entertainment mentality says I don't want to listen to little Jill. She doesn't play nearly as good as that guy that's on television at this same hour. Why don't we go home and watch TV.

We don't even have tolerance any more for our own children. And there are far fewer children being encouraged to do things that will bring them on the line in terms of their capability as leaders in the church because we really don't feel that they qualify, given the standards of entertainment that we're now demanding within our churches. God help us. I would recommend that one of the tasks of leadership in the church—and I'm not just talking about pastors, here, but I'm talking about the broadly distributed leadership that I know I'm talking to here tonight—is that we take a good hard look at the thing we've let our church become in terms of a kind of an entertainment center that has to compete with Hollywood.

Let us ask, is *this* what the church is all about? One of the reasons why this is so critical—and it's not simply an aesthetic taste matter—is because the plague upon us is that it produces passive participation within the church. It produces passive participation. Anybody can go to a movie. Anybody can go to a television set. Anybody can go to a good quality entertainment. Anybody can go to church. See how easily it rhymes? But what is the posture? What is the behavior? What is the activity? Basically, the activity of being entertained and ultimately of passing judgment. Well, that one wasn't as good as last week. We used to make jokes about having roast pastor for lunch on Sunday noon. I strongly suspect that what we're having today is a kind of a continuous barbecue; not only of pastor but of everything else that goes on in the church because our posture is that of increasingly craving to be entertained. We dare not let this happen in the church.

Another key problem that rears its ugly head is affluence itself. It is now typical, since the time of the middle of the period of service of President Reagan, that the American society is a two-income family society. Many of us didn't even notice when we passed the mid-point on that. Two incomes in the household are now virtually standard. A lot more money is coming into the house, but it is going out a lot faster because of the way it's being used. Therefore, the overall standard of living in terms of basic quality indicators is going down rather than up because a lot of that extra money is going for things that are, ultimately, very frivolous. But we do know how to spend money

and we do know how to use money to buy things in the way of services that a generation ago, even twenty years ago, we were still doing for ourselves.

But, even beyond the general societal problems, the specific problems in the church worry me because I'm a Christian and because I'm concerned with leadership development. How do we lead the people of God back into a focus on the non-materialistic values that are ultimate and transcendent without being so preoccupied and wasteful with reference to the transient values that are ultimately the values that money can buy? We have a tough problem because people are being diverted by their own wealth. People are being diverted by their own expendable income.

How do we lead in a time like this? I believe that one of the reasons why you need to look at these matters is because they relate; not only to how the church lives and exists and operates within our society, but how we view the rest of the world and how we view our role in the rest of the world. I believe we're coming to a time when it's going to be a lot harder to motivate people to be interested in anything foreign. One of the reasons is that, in many cases today, people are becoming resentful of things foreign because the things foreign are seen as a threat to our lifestyle.

Furthermore, we've got some other spots in the world where people are increasingly suspicious, that maybe we better spend more time and money on our own problems and let them do their own thing. Furthermore, we have an awful lot of people who have paid attention to some of the success stories in missions and have the belief that really the whole world's already been evangelized anyway; maybe we ought to just take our resources and do our own thing with it. So what's happening is that though we are still in a significant rise of affluence in terms of expendable income, we're in a tremendous crunch with reference to willingness to help others. We may be moving into a new period of isolationism, and it may be that Christians will lead the way. And I think that would be a terrible thing.

We are in a moment when, as a matter of *positive* fact, we can be more collaborative in more directions with more people from more different parts of the world than ever before in the history of the church of Jesus Christ; and the potential for a whole new era of truly international collaborations is right on our doorstep. But to take advantage of that, we're going to have to shift our thinking about how we do missions. And we're going to have to shift our thinking about what it is to be the church of Jesus Christ. If the church of Jesus Christ is led down a path of selfishness, we're in big trouble.

The educated leadership of the church of the future in this decade and going into the year 2000 had very well better be more characteristically people who are outgoing and out-looking rather than people who are introverted and people who are, themselves, selfish. We need a sophisticated level of leadership in the church and we need one that is not just intellectually sophisticated, but is sophisticated with reference to the value system of the kingdom of God. For example, this decade, I believe, will be virtually the tailing-out of a long tradition of colonialism and missions as a wing of that colonial structuring and controlling, and a transition away from that colonial mentality into a truly par-sharing of resources, decision-making personnel, and the like. And any missionary enterprise that still tries to go into the twentieth century with a top-down, dominant—we're the donors, they're the receivers, we will give them, they will receive, they will be thankful, they will sit and call us blessed—that kind of missionary operation is, I believe, on its last days and remains to be buried probably before the year 2000. I do believe that before the year 2000, we will probably see

somewhere between a third and a half of the theological education institutions of this country go down the drain, and probably between a half and three-quarters of the missionary organizations now extant go down the drain. Because if those two sectors cannot get their act together with reference to, on the one hand, the needs of the church in terms of a dynamic leadership into a creative future, the churches just aren't going to keep buying the products. And with reference to missions, there are fewer and fewer places that you can put the old colonial-mentality missionary. I don't know whether you're paying attention to it, but country after country after country is coming alive in terms of its own vitality, its own sense of dignity, its own sense of worth. And one of the first things that a nation that gets a hold of itself says is who is it that's using up all our jobs. And if the answer is foreigners, they find ways to close the doors to foreigners taking those jobs. Or have you never heard of that? We've been doing it. We've been playing that kind of a game with Canada, for example, for years and years and years. And it is not possible to simply waltz into a country such as the United States, Germany, England, so forth and say, hey, I'm here because God wants me here. Aren't you glad? The United States hasn't been willing to take people on *that* ground for years and years. I mean that went out a long time ago in the U.S. And now we act resentful that other countries are saying the same thing, hey, don't tell us that God wants you here.

For example, Corazon Aquino, the President of the Philippines, is nobody's patsy. Some people like her, some people don't like her. She's a mean little lady. She had her rough spots in life. She has seen the downside of things and she's tough. And she is tough enough to stand up to the United States and is trying to do it. And one of the things she's saying is, *we* set the rents, not *you*. *We* decide how big your military properties are here, not *you*. *We* decide whether or not you stay, not *you*. And after all of this dickering with the United States on the military bases, she has also taken on the missionary establishment. Have you heard about that one? And she has, quite literally, dusted off an old law that's been on the books in the Philippines for a long time, namely, that a missionary can't have a lifelong visa. A missionary can only have a ten-year visa. Ten years is not as long as many missionaries would like to stay in the Philippines. There are a lot of missionaries that have long overstayed that ten years. And you know what they're being told? Your visa is expired. So a number of Christians went to Corazon Aquino—a number of American missionaries, as a matter of fact—and they said, Madam President, we would like an appointment to discuss this issue of the enforcement of this maximum visa rule with reference to missionaries. She said, fine, and she arranged it. And the story as I heard it, granted second-hand—I was not there and, as a matter of fact, I heard two different versions from people who *were* there and they don't quite match so there may be some twisting of data here—but I'm going to tell you as straight as I currently trust the story.

She was asked, "Why are you doing this to American missionaries when you claim, as a Catholic, to believe in missions and you even claim that you are sympathetic to Protestant missions in the Philippines?" And she said, "Indeed, I am." She says, "Indeed I am, one, a Christian. Two, involved in missions myself; and I believe in missions, even when the Protestants are doing it. What's your question?" she says. "Well, they said, 'Well, why, then, are you imposing this rule on the ten-year limit?'" She said, "Because it is necessary." "Why is it necessary?" She says, "Well," she said, "Maybe I should ask *you* a question. Why are your missionaries here?" And the answer came back in the current language of the Western missionary world, "We're here to plant churches." She says, "I believe in planting churches." But she said, "You know, one question nags at me, how long does it take to plant a church?" How long does it take to plant a church? That's a key question. That's a key question and not a bad question because is it planting a church to move in as if

forever? Or is it more characteristic of the pattern of Jesus Christ, the pattern of Paul, the pattern of everything we've got in the New Testament that missionaries are, in fact, itinerant? There is not a permanent resident in missionary described in the Scripture. Every missionary is itinerant. You say, "Oh, but we can't do that because we're Americans and we have families and don't you realize the hardships?" Of course, but I don't believe that we can appeal to the Scripture to rationalize our particular lifestyle problems. As a matter of fact, missionaries can do quite a bit within ten years. And if the missionary movement in China had been patterned on the biblical pattern of missions, it might have never become necessary for the Communist to slaughter so many Christians because the Christians may have been, at the time of the Communist Revolution, somewhat more effectively organized and better able to defend themselves because they were a very, very disorganized lot because they had depended so much on the missionary organizations, enterprises, and institutions as their structure. And when the missionaries were pulled out in '48, the church in China just collapsed like a jellyfish. But the remainder became organized and became a vital church. And by the time the Americans got back into China, the Chinese church was alive and vibrant.

Now I ask you, where is the plan of Jesus Christ? Is the plan of Jesus Christ more invested in that kind of thing that says we go in and we do our thing? We build our institutions. We stay there as long as we blooming well want to. Or is the pattern of the Scripture and the will of Jesus Christ more wrapped up in a missionary enterprise that says we will do what is necessary to help people come to Christ and to discover one another in terms of the vitality of churches and bless them and get on our way to do the same thing somewhere else. And, by the way, that doesn't always mean leaving the country. Quite often that can mean moving around within the country, so even language investment is not a very good argument. But what we find, instead, is that we are living in a generation where missionaries are still building missionary compounds so they can live among their own kind and live securely within little clusters which become little interdependent—or, little self-dependent communities where people scratch each other's back and go to the post office for each other and take turns doing each other's laundry. I'm exaggerating, but very little.

I believe that in the United States there is a revolt of the churches and it's just beginning. And I think the revolt of the churches focuses on the issue of an irrelevant education that is not producing the kinds of people that the churches really want; who can lead them in a spiritual warfare to deal with the current problems of society. I believe we need a tough-minded training, a tough-minded practical on-the-ground training that will deliver to the churches that which the churches want. And if we don't, the churches are going to put out of business the institutions that don't deliver the product. I believe corollary in the international that we are now in a time of a new missionary, go home movement.

Now I am not just a bearer of sad tidings. I'm a bearer of truth and fact on these matters and let me tell you this latest information. You may or may not have heard it. About thirty years ago, there arose in Africa and in Latin America a missionary, go home movement among the major denominations—the Conciliarists.¹ And one of the consequences was that missionaries were asked to get out of the way to let the church grow. And many of the missions of the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and the Episcopalians, and a number of the other mainline denominations left countries by the dozens and never were invited back. Some were, but only about 20%. And the

¹ Conciliarism was a reform movement in the Roman Catholic Church in the 14th-16th centuries that sought for control by a local ecumenical council. Local church government was to have more authority than the Pope, or in this case, denominational officers at a distance.

national church in Brazil and in many other major nations of the mission world began, for the first time, to run their own institutions and to call their own shots.

This movement did not affect the evangelicals very much and it did not affect the independent mission organizations very much, and it was as if God had spared us that anguish; that period from twenty years ago to thirty years ago we seem to have gotten off scot-free. About three years ago, I was on the West coast for another assignment. I received a phone call one evening and asked if I could meet a group of fellows for breakfast. And two of the guys that were named were people that I had known from Africa days, and I said are they going to be there? Yes, they're going to be there and they want *you* there. I met, and there were a group of thirty people. I was the only white face in the room. In a restaurant in Portland, a group of African church leaders from various parts of the United States doing graduate studies here had met in Portland to talk about the necessity of establishing a new missionary, go home movement for Africa. Did you ever hear about that? It struck just two months ago in Zimbabwe. And the tragic situation is that one very strong established mission having its centennial year this year—a hundred years old—has now, in its mission compounds in Zimbabwe, the terrible embarrassment of being locked out of the churches that they, themselves, have built; locked out by the national church. Those churches are still active. They're vibrant, they are moving under national control. Many of them exist on missionary compounds, and the missionaries are not free to go on those properties.

Now that's terrible tension when the people of God come to that kind of a clash because of not being able to hear each other. And that is a persistent problem in missions today. We are on the threshold of some very serious change. It will either be constructively led or it will be the crumbling of the ground under our feet. We are in a period of a dynamite time for creative leadership. We are in the period of God's opening up of opportunities that far exceed our wildest imagination. But, we still tend to approach those things with a kind of a leftover mentality about doing things the way we've always done them, whether it's with reference to training our own leadership or with reference to the kinds of mission activity that we get involved in in various parts of the world. There is a time for change. The change has got to come. It'll either be forced on us or we'll get ahead of the game and begin to create a new destiny for a strategy in the world that is much more responsive to the old missionary prayer that's been around a long time but many a missionary has ignored. The prayer: "God, show me what you're doing in the world and let me know if there's anything I can do to help out." That's the prayer we need. Not the prayer that says, "God, I got a great idea. Let me tell you what I'm going to do for this country. Let me tell you what I'm going to do over there. Let me tell you what we've decided we're going to do. Let me just let in on it, God. The reason we pray to you is so that you won't be behind and uninformed."

We need the humble prayer that says, "God, show me what *you're* doing and let me know if there's any way I can help."