



Lone Ranger to Barnabas: Over and Out¹

Ted Ward

How North Americans can relate to global missions in the years ahead will depend on three factors: how well the lessons of history are learned, what the planted church wants to do with us and what happens to the human condition in general. None of the three of these factors is predictable except in the most general of terms.

What will the political world be like ten years from now? If there were a clear answer for this question, many recommendations could be made and preparation for the future could proceed with greater confidence. But we don't know. Not even about next year or next month. We just don't know.

So we must make informed estimates—not as wild guesses but in a careful extrapolation from existing evidences. The estimates must take into account what we already have seen. The future, to some extent, is apt to be a continuation of trends that are already in place, complicated, of course, by events that can't be adequately anticipated. These unpredictable events produce “discontinuities” which will send the trends off their trajectories in various ways. A futurist, then, is a user of data which show trends; but a futurist also takes account of possible discontinuities and projects the data about trends into alternative scenarios (scripts of future history) reflecting possible encounters with various discontinuity-producing events.

For the literal-minded meat-and-potatoes person all of this sounds like so much wasted time. Frankly, from where I sit, the probabilities for the occurrences of particular discontinuities loom so large that the data about the trends themselves seem almost insignificant.

Givens and Options . . . And Knowing the Differences

The Gospel is central to Christianity. Living and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God, now and yet to come is the joyful privilege of the faithful. Whether it is called proselytizing, evangelizing, witnessing or making disciples, and whether it is judged by human society as welcome or unwelcome, it will continue as long as there is one on earth who knows salvation in Jesus Christ. As an extension of the presence and proclamation of the church, the community and communities of believers, mission will continue as an inseparable part of the outreach.

Such reassurance, though representative of no new theological insight, seems to be missing from certain discussions of mission and the future. It is an unfortunate reading of the history of the church to confuse the current models of mission with the New Testament models, rooted in the intrinsic outreach of the Gospel (Luke 19:38-40). The issue at hand is not whether the mission of the church will continue but whether North American's organizational and institutional initiatives will continue, and if so in what ways.

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Mission methodology, strategy and modes of deployment of missionaries are always debatable matters. There are no mission strategy guidebooks dangling on golden cords—either in or out of Scripture. Missionary activity is always negotiable, rooted in Scriptural principles and faithful to the person and work of Jesus Christ (so we should hope), but always a creature of the times. If the era is one of colonial expansionism, this reality is reflected in mission practice, whether it should be or not. If the era is technological, then the mission of the church is carried out in technological terms: purpose, methodology and “evaluative criteria.” So it is today.

But a new factor has entered the picture. Since the days of colonial militarism in the New World and slave-commerce in Africa, the world of the missionary has been dominated by the posture of the sending country. In the short period since mid-Twentieth Century, the advent of nationalism has re-colored the world according the many-hued kaleidoscope of national prides. No longer can the missionary from the United States or Canada think and act like an American or a Canadian and get away with it. The ways and means of the missionary must take into account the values and the outlook, official and unofficial, of the people to whom she or he has been sent. It can be observed that some of the best missionaries of an earlier era also went to pains to hear and respond to the aspirations of the host society. Yes, but then humility was an option; today it has become a given.

One reading of social trends sees selfishness and isolationism on the increase, and being reflected in the church and in missions. I see beyond this to a more hopeful scenario premised on the increased contrast between Christian and non-Christian values. As Christians come more and more to accept their distinctive role as representatives of the kingdom of God, missionary “neutralism” and the consequent benign neglect of issues of social justice may become less popular. Whether or not the Christian community as supporters of missions becomes larger, the voices crying in the wilderness can be expected to increase: Christians of the future, “missionaries” and other, can be expected to be more involved in the *whole* of human condition.

At present, one is inclined to despair of a major nation led by a procession of pragmatists who fail even to come to grips with its own history. Leaders in high places criticize the likes of our brother Bill Moyers, who point out that our Central American and Caribbean neighbors remember (better than our President wants us to) the eighty times this nation has put troops into the territory of nearby nations to the south.

The despotic and inhumanly cruel regimes that the United States has propped up in the name of “anti-communism” have become our greatest national disgrace. That “our side” in Guatemala is the 2% who own 70% of the land is, in fact, a loud and clear foreign policy. And it is not compatible with Christian values.

But the Christian concern for refugees and “widows and orphans” is about ready to come of age. The American people in general and Christians in particular are ripe for hearing just why there are refugees and widows and orphans. There is even a readiness to reconsider war itself. The new social revolution could begin with a sensitized conscience of Christian compassion; then it would be nourished by a contrite spirit, humbled by the recognition that “of the people” means us. Where is the government we could trust to wage a just war? That fervent prayer seems to be at odds with the bellicose belligerence of our new experiment in so-called “conservative” government.

This is no time to “go it alone.” The era of hero figures with silver bullets is over. It will not come back. The North American missionary of the future must be nurtured in a totally different orientation.

It will take genuine love-giving, selfless, humble, committed love to function cross-culturally for Jesus Christ in the days ahead. This is no option. It is a given.

The Trends in Place

The post-colonial period of nationalism is giving way to a period of inter-Third World pragmatic alliances. The practices and policies in many, if not most, missions still reflect the values and assumptions of the colonial period. Few have made their peace with the nationalistic values and the proud autonomies of the *post-colonial* period. To do so has become an urgent agendum because many of these values are persisting into the emerging period of pragmatic alliances. Even as we have seen the end of colonial empire, we can now see with great anxiety, the new power, that of economic empire.

Rather than being liberated, the developing nations find themselves colonized once again, this time by a more generalized and hard-to-target master, economic tyranny. It is difficult to imagine how any of the weaker two-thirds of all nations will weather the economic storms. Rich nations must lend; poor nations must borrow. It is almost that simple. Thus all sorts of pragmatic alliances, now so necessary to ward off economic slavery, are apt to give way to a heavy-handed subjugation of the poor by the rich. The world groans for Jubilee.

The very term “Third World” was the harbinger of the period of pragmatic alliances. The sense of autonomous nationalism is offended by the proposition that a nation must line up with this or that major power. Since the Second World War, Western nations have taken the stance that Communism is a monolithic threat and must be contained. The Russians, on the other hand, have promoted Communism as a supranational ideology that transcends national boundaries. Thus their use of surrogates, Cuba, Angola, Vietnam and so forth, has been a natural and pervasive process, often subtle and usually beyond the reach of the simplistic solutions offered by American politicians (operating as they tend to do in “good guy/bad guy” models of political thought.)

Third World nations have resented being called anyone’s ally, because it suggests, “lackey.” Feeling good about being someone’s servant went out with colonialism. True, commonwealth nations profess at least a modicum of affiliation with Great Britain—at least as mysterious to the people of the United States as Parliament’s annual allocation to the pageantry of the royal family. And the U.S. has managed to hold the formal linkages of “favored nation” status with any number of “friendlies” until, one by one their old-style dictatorships of money and family are overthrown by popular uprisings, replaced then by dictatorships of the left. The United States has watched the process over and over again, usually intervening in exactly the wrong ways. There is little hope left that our national leadership will put together a policy of constructive assistance for people who want to get out from under tyranny and economic oppression. Reflect on American dealings with Cuba, Zaire, Angola, Nicaragua, now El Salvador. One wonders . . . someday the Philippines? South Korea? Argentina? Saudi Arabia? South Africa? Brazil? Reflect on the “guns not butter” trend in foreign assistance under the current administration. And do not underestimate the popularity of that formula within a society whose ethos is so well represented by a national rifle association.

Small wonder that the emerging nations are less ideological than pragmatic. They live in a world of little compassion. They form alliances on grounds that seem petty or peevish to those in the grand nations of the east or west. If they have any sort of raw material needed by the grand nations, they try to put the squeeze on it. OPEC is the most apparent of these pragmatic alliances. Indeed, what else could unite Kuwait and Nigeria? Comparable alliances to control scarce raw minerals (cobalt,

manganese, tin, bauxite, for example) or alliances to control waterways, gulfs, and strategic landforms—no matter how impractical—may emerge. The human social need to affiliate is persistent, but antipathy for the richer nations will surely cause the developing nations to grope for ways to affiliate with one another whenever possible to exclude the “have” nations. Is there a nation in the “western block” which could emerge with sufficient in common with developing nations to become the new “white champions?” For example, will Australia be to the Twenty-First Century what the United States was to the Twentieth? By the year 2000 Australia could emerge as the organizing leader of a half dozen mineral-based OPEC-type alliances for the Third World; for sure none would be as powerful as OPEC, but even as the Arab nations have triggered a turn around for the Nigerian economy, cartels that could assure a stronger world market price for other Third World minerals could provide new hope for the hopeless in many places.

Speculation? Yes; but the scenarios of the future bring such possibilities into focus to assist in more effective planning. There are all sorts of trends to watch, and they don’t all go the same direction. No longer can you count on anything in international relations. The disappearance of coherent policy, an increasing weakness of the Western nations since the dissolution of the British, French and Dutch colonial empires) has left a troubled sea with no navigational stars. The pragmatic amorality of the United States has further confused the picture. When it suits Uncle Sam’s pleasure and business interests, this nation is for this and against that. But you have to follow it all closely day by day to find out whether dictatorship is good or bad, whether even trade union solidarity is right or wrong for Poland. The Russians do it the same way, but their notion of what is good for their interest isn’t quite so whimsical. Their self-interest is perhaps more blatant and easier to predict. But they offend our sense of decency because they don’t lie very convincingly.

We can predict that certain trends now in place will continue and that missions in the years ahead will have to accommodate these realities. Is the U.S. playing into the hands of extremists of the left who are telling Third World opinion-makers that the U.S. cannot be expected to comprehend anything complex.

It strikes Latin America watchers as ironic, even absurd, that those who accepted Samosa are now “concerned about democracy” in Nicaragua. God, make us humble! Our history is too much with us. When Nicaraguan leadership plays on the people’s fears of invasion by the United States, they have the facts of established habits to illustrate their point. The United States Marines have been garrisoned in Nicaragua for a total of 24 years. Why not once more?

In my own work in the Third World I am appalled by the political naiveté so common among missionaries. These lambs are being set up for the slaughter. Many of them say such foolish and inaccurate things. When will North American mission sending agencies start looking for a modicum of factual knowledge of American social history, political affairs and global awareness in their candidates?

The question is rhetorical, but the answer had better be forthcoming. The time is running out. Central and South American *campesinos*—yes, even Indians—are more politicized than most missionaries can comprehend. African liberationists are appearing even among the Protestants. Few of our relief and development groups take into account the ways they are being used in genocidal plots.

Consider the way “Somalia refugee camps” keep the hearts of Americans warned and divert the attention from the systematic Amharic purges of the Oromos. Our Oromo brothers in Christ get very

little understanding or attention. We create benevolent refugee camps for their widows and children, but we don't even discuss openly the underlying political problems. And just what is happening? Disillusioned Oromos are turning to Marxist philosophy in order to compensate for the defaults of Christian awareness and conscience. Now the leftist Oromo Liberation Front has emerged to do battle against the Russian-dominated Amharic central government. A strange world.

The fascination with China will be a blessing or a curse to North American missions. It can be a blessing if the unfolding story is carefully studied. In the history of missions in China is a great opportunity to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the western institutionalizing model of missions. The data stare us in the face: Christianity was put to the test against proletarian revolution; the godless foundation of communist dictatorship, though a bludgeon of horrible evil was unable to wipe out the church; but the institutions and organizations crumbled. When survival is at stake, the Christian community can go underground and persevere; our God is powerful. Should organized missions be too busy or too proud to come to grips with the meaning of China's surviving church, the old fascination will likely seduce American money and "cleverness" into some sort of foolhardy adventurism. Already the Bible smuggling movement shows how tragic this could be.

Jonathan Chao and John C. Wang (CCRS Prayer Letter No. 18 February, 1982) report that K. H. Ting, the head of the Three-Self Movement, persists in painting an overly cautious picture of the church in China, but that the greater misunderstandings occur when Western churchmen make short visits and long speeches.

Like it or not, the ideology of the Chinese "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" speaks to a deeply felt issue in many parts of the Third World. The sense of dignity and valuing of one's own worth should not be denied to a human being for any reason—surely not in the name of Jesus Christ. The "three-self" term strikes the North American as a sort of self-centeredness and thus hardly Christian. No. The wanting of one's church to be *self-governing* is dear to the heart of every congregationally-oriented Christian. The ideal of *self-supporting* is surely a valid goal, at least for every responsible fellowship in the West; why shouldn't it also be for the Chinese? And the idea of *self-propagating* is exactly what we respect most in church outreach, evangelism and, ironically, in Third World missions.

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement has been manipulated and to some extent subverted. And even more surely it has been an instrument of divisiveness and anti-Westernism. But we should not be drawn into yet one more misbegotten anti-communism drive. Christopher Morris argues that outsiders should hold an attitude of objectivity not hostility (*China and the Church Today* Vol. 4, No.1, 1982)

The Status Becomes Less Quo

The future of North American missions is hard to predict. Any prediction is sure to be at least partly wrong. Estimates made on the basis of today's confusing evidences are unreliable at best, misleading at worst. Nevertheless, mission planning has never been more important. We must have some sort of image of the future. There is no merit in flying blind.

All sorts of predictions about the future are being made. Futurism has become an urgent pursuit of social scientists and a popular topic for editors of Sunday supplements. Considering the potential calamities—nuclear accidents, political chaos, genocide, starvation, economic collapse, global war, just to skim the top of the long list—it may seem to be "tempting fate" to explore the future. Maybe it is better not to know what hit you!

The most dangerous prediction one might choose to believe is that things will continue much as they are today. Surely any other view of the future is better than that one. Better, in the sense of more accurate and, more important, better for missions inasmuch as an awareness that the days ahead will be different helps to reduce confidence in the status quo. The one sure prediction is that today's ways are tomorrow's failures.

Nor can the immediate past in the history of modern missions be regarded as the pattern for the future. When the world was simpler and the patterns unfolded over longer periods of time, keeping pace was easier. Today long-range planning is a challenge to the human imagination. Planners must make estimates—educated guesses—and take into account whatever the observable trends may suggest.

Three major “facts of life” constitute my view of the future. First, control by donors is a changed phenomenon. In the past there was a sort of “gentleman's agreement” that whoever pays the piper calls the tunes. “Never look a gift horse in the mouth,” was the standard advice for recipients. The matter is far more complex today. Donors still wield substantial influence, but recipients are more shrewd. Donors find themselves bargained, coerced and manipulated, sometimes with such subtlety as to escape attention. And at the bottom line, control is with the receiver as never before. Knowledgeable mission strategists who have watched the twists and turns of manipulated “invitations” to build schools and medical facilities in Haiti have perhaps been watching this process the longest. Now it is a worldwide phenomenon. Perhaps it should be. I suspect that if someone wanted to build a cottage in your backyard you would likely want to help design it—and even more likely, you'd expect to have title to it.

The second “fact of life” is that the prestige of the West, especially of the United States, is substantially lower than ever. Inability to control our economy, the vaunted showcase of free enterprise, added to a muddled and unfathomable foreign policy have combined to dismay and disappoint even our historic “friends.” In the Third World, the new “let them eat cake” sort of economic advice has been seen as a poor substitute for much needed technical assistance and burden-sharing. For sure, no nation can buy friends. But among nations as among friends, those you most need are those who stand with you in difficult times. For sure, these are *terrible* times for many a small nation, especially for nations that are energy poor and find themselves helplessly caught up in the tug-of-war between OPEC and the industrial giants.

The third “fact of life” is the mounting probability of nuclear holocaust. Whether by accident or deliberate act, whether in the “preemptive strike” of a superpower or a “brushfire” war as in Iran, India or the North of Africa, sooner or later an atomic device is going to go off. It may not end the world. Indeed, the sobering possibility is that it won't, but it surely will rearrange everyone's priorities. When this happens—and depending much on who does what thereafter—life on earth will be a waking horror.

I am impressed that though we sit sidesaddle on the fire monster, Americans contemplate and discuss this issue far less than many another society. I can't understand it. Regardless, all futures are “up for grabs” whether we want to talk about it or not. What is the mission of the church to the remnant of civilization whether 10% or 90% of the population survives? How can you plan for that scenario? Or, better yet, does the church of Jesus Christ have a redemptive role to play in taking apart these engines of horror? God help us see it in time!

When “Modern” is Passé

A mimeographed letter just arrived from a friend who has served over a dozen years as a missionary in Bolivia.² Now at the close of a furlough year, he is expressing his hopes and concerns for his next term of service:

During our last term, my wife and I, along with several other missionaries, worked with the Bolivian Highlands Church to set up an organized film and cassette ministry I would like to see this organization completely Bolivianized during my next term. I believe it is possible to do this.

Here is an apt illustration of a missionary caught mid-stream in change. He is apparently aware that the new “rules of the game” call for less dominant initiatives by the outsiders. At the same time, the zeal of entrepreneurial “ownership” of the original idea persists. He “believes” not only in his idea (his, his wife’s and that of other missionaries) but also he believes in the new motive of “nationalizing.” For sure, this missionary, in the flesh, is no stereotype; he is aware that “Bolivianization” is no easy task. But, frankly, it isn’t clear that he is willing to consider the possibility that his organization is only possible as an outside representation. Perhaps it cannot be “Bolivianized.”

In case after case, missionaries report that the national Christians resist the turning over of certain activities. Today’s major insensitivity of missionaries is toward the embarrassed national Christians who know full well that their economy and/or socio-political situation make it impossible to continue certain activities that missionaries have started. Especially in reference to western-style institutions (schools, hospitals, large-scale broadcasting, publishing houses, bookstores, aviation services, for example), national Christians are often happy to see the services continue, but the very thought of taking over managerial and financial responsibility can seem like the ultimate folly—and embarrassment.

One of the tasks that missionaries should undertake is the realistic scaling down or discontinuation of culturally inappropriate institutions.³ Leaving the landscape littered with the relics of well meaning beneficence isn’t polite—especially since it is generally understood that the Americans are likely to back off and complain, “You see, they really aren’t ready yet.”

North American missions in the years ahead will need to pull away from the blighting notion that “modern” is better. For sure, the mad dash toward westernization—from television to automobiles—is a trend not to be turned back. But its secular roots, values and its godless aspirations are surely strange bedfellows with Christian missions. This is no plea for a return to goatskins and locusts, but it does suggest that the North American missionary in the years ahead might better be recruited from among those who take Ron Sider seriously.

Christianity Today (March 19, 1982) has reported the 13,000 missionaries were “sent out” by Third

² Names of person and place have been changed to reduce the possibility of offence.

³ Borrowing from E. F. Schumacher (*Small Is Beautiful*), it is suggested that even as there is a distinction to be made between “appropriate technology” and inappropriate technology, there is also such a thing as an inappropriate institution.

World churches last year. WEF reports 15,000. Less than a dozen years ago the number was 3,000. Perhaps even more important than the quantitative increase is the fact that relatively few of these people are deployed and supported in the ways that North Americans associate with missionaries and mission agencies. True, some handful of these are under financial support or assistance from the West, but my informants tell me that far more are “tent-makers,” supported more in the Biblical sense of prayer and sacrificial sharing in substance. And relatively few are engaged in institution-building. It is hard to discuss the upsurge of Third-World mission-sending since the data are so meager, but surely something is going on that will have a profound impact. If North Americans had trouble with comity agreements with Anglicans, Europeans and the like, just wait until it becomes clear that the Third World missionaries are getting closer to peasants and fisher-folk than the North Americans generally do!

The “modern missionary” movement may be over. It may be that its own converts have found the new ways and ushered in an era of missions which the North American missionary agencies haven’t yet learned about.

Wishful Thinking: A Necessary Danger

With tail feathers in the air and head in the warm sand, the ostrich symbolizes naive response to danger. Many animals employ the rollover-and-play-dead defense using helplessness as a strategy. But the ostrich is almost human about it: “If I don’t see the danger coming maybe it won’t see me either.” (Perhaps the ostrich’s behavior is better than the chicken’s: flying off in all directions at once is bad for the heart.)

Yes, there is surely danger ahead—of many sorts. But the times call for strength and hope. Defeatism and pessimism are apt to be terminal ailments.

Hopefulness is most important. Not only is the Christian’s hope in ultimate fulfillments of eschatological promises, but there is hope because the Lord God holds all things in his hands. Nothing is inevitable except that God’s plan will prevail. And God’s plan is redemptive. The purpose of the church is to lay claims on behalf of God’s redemptive purposes. Christians are intended to make a difference. The mission of the church reflects that hope. One need not be motivated by starry-eyed visions of social evolution to believe that being the light of the world is a very hopeful existence.

The old tension between “presence” and “proclamation” arises out of a mistrust of this hope. If it persists into the years ahead the prospects for the North American mission of the church seem less. The times we face will require careful integrating of faith and works. The choice between faith and works is an anachronistic luxury from easier times when Christians could more afford to pull the Gospel apart as an intellectual exercise. No more. Faith without works is dead. Words without deeds are dead. Though deeds alone can speak, ambiguity is reduced when deeds are gently explained to the credit of Jesus Christ, Redeemer.

Perhaps there is no particular basis for an empirical claim that Christianity in North America will “get its act together” to put word and deed into a Christ-centered context. But one must hope. In any case, it will surely be the church that embraces the *whole* Gospel that will prevail in missions in the years ahead. Given a spiritual revival and methodological renewal the North American church may well be part of the continued action. So goes the wishful thinking, but it is profoundly dangerous. The times call for both sober reflection and zealous action. The dilemma drives us toward confused frustration. It’s easier to be an ostrich.

Back to Basics

When things go wrong human beings tend to “revert to type” whether in individual personality or in societies. No one denies that the world is in desperate shape. So now again it is popular to look back and to seek values in older ways.

For the church of Jesus Christ, this could result in miraculous transformations. The history of the faithful saints is a display of effectual power, transcending persecution and the tragedies of human bondage. We can go “back to our basics” for renewal. For the New Testament tradition of mission and outreach any number of principles can be drawn from the Acts of the Apostles. Appropriate to the theme of this paper, there are four in particular.

1. *The Scattered Community.* In the fullness of time, as the young church at Jerusalem had become prepared, there was a persecution and the Christians scattered . . . “chattering Jesus Christ’s Gospel” as they went. The outreach had its origins not in the cleverness of human planning but in the life-changing transformation that made the Christians of that time the bearers of the Good News wherever they went. And God saw to it that they did go. Let us renew this tradition. May the new life in Jesus Christ work its transformations in us.

2. *An Infiltration of Pilgrims.* Quite surely the scattering resulted in infiltration for witness, conversions and new churches. The Christian community was intended to go *into* communities. The infiltration of secular society, was, as the salt and the light, fulfilling the metaphors of Jesus’ promises to his followers. May the Holy Spirit work through his people today not to isolate and separate but to go outward to infiltrate—to invite all people to Christ.

3. *The Church That Uses Helpers.* The incident of Jerusalem’s aid to Antioch and the very personality of Barnabas, the encourager, are perhaps the clearest ancient model of New Testament mission and missionary. The church at Jerusalem learned that the infiltration of Antioch had worked to great conversion and spiritual manifestations. Barnabas was sent to inquire and observe. (Not to “check up,” mind you—an “encourager” would not have been chosen for such a task.) Barnabas, ever the outreaching missionary, saw that indeed the Holy Spirit’s work was evident and he promptly traveled on to bring back poor bruised Saul, much in need of spiritual reassurance. And they stayed for dinner! Just what transactions may have occurred is not stated, but clearly they didn’t “take over” the Antioch church. They helped. And the Antioch church knew how to use their help. May God raise up churches that send true helpers and may God make Christians everywhere a fellowship that can effectively use other helpers.

4. *The Holy Spirit Speaks.* The era of “modern missions” has been marked more by planning than by the intervention of the Holy Spirit. It takes both, but outreach *starts* when the Holy Spirit speaks in a church where cross-cultural helpers are already accepted and at work. Or so we should learn from the first interventional “calling” incident. “Separate for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them,” the Holy Spirit of God said *to the church* at Antioch. And when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them they sent them away—to Seleucia . . . to Cyprus . . . to Salamis. to Paphos . . . to Perga . . . to Pisidian Antioch . . . to Iconium . . . to Greece. . . to Rome. . . to England to the New World . . . to the nations.

May it never cease. The Holy Spirit bears witness through God’s people . . . of Jesus Christ, Creator, Redeemer, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Hallelujah! Amen.