



The Future of Missions: *Hangovers, Fallout, and Hope*¹

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Human beings are adaptable creatures. Those who live in Illinois and Michigan accept the inconveniences and discomforts of snow and ice as if there were no better habitat. Others regard the steamy swelter of the tropics as the Garden of Eden. We get used to things, and as long as they do not change too much or too fast, we adapt.

Change has become a bit too fast for some of us, however. Our adaptability has been overloaded; we are tiring of change. Whether it is inflation, rising taxes, or the return of the great Ice Age, the red flags are going up. Enough, already! But the processes of change push inexorably ahead, and again we accept it. Indeed, we may now have become so accustomed to change that we would have to readapt to stability itself if it were forced on us.

We have learned to live with the hangovers of our own past. Rather than clean house and right wrongs, we adapt—and we expect others to do the same. We have learned to live with the fallout from the world's massive political explosions and social upheavals. It does not quite drive us into fallout shelters. Life chugs ahead almost as if nothing happened. We adapt.

After generations of bobbing on the waves of secular society, largely accepting its undulating values as our own, claiming to influence it by our flexible adaptive presence, the Christian community may be on the threshold of a new confrontation with culture—with our own secular society. Therein lies hope.

Discontinuities

Because of the human capacity to adapt to gradual change, the true extent of change is often not perceived until some climax of conflict or traumatic discontinuity. The common tendency is to assume that life will continue much as we have known it, that our capacity to adjust will continue, and that everything will somehow stay together. Futurists, on the other hand, are calling attention to probable discontinuities. They generally agree that life will *not* continue much as it has. There are too many problems that have progressed to their breaking point; too many possible disasters have become probable ones.

Futurists divide sharply on whether the discontinuities will add up to a shift toward utopia or a precipitous spiral toward calamity. For example, there is no disagreement on the implications of the world energy crisis: it cannot be much longer before it forces dramatic social change which will affect the lifestyle of virtually every person in the industrialized world. The disagreement between the two major schools of thought is not about the fact of impending climax but about its consequences.

¹ Ted Ward. *The Future of Missions: Hangovers, Fallout, and Hope*. In David Hesselgrave (ed.) *New Horizons in World Mission: Evangelicals and The Christian Mission in the 1980s*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 1979), pp. 17-32. Used by permission. (www.bakerpublishinggroup.com)

Those who read history as a series of human triumphs over adversity put their hope in technological advances. Never mind the short-run difficulties arising out of scarcity and economic collapse; beyond all this lies a brave new era of discovery. Never mind the depletion of fossil fuels; new sources of energy can be introduced in time (perhaps solar, wind, or tidal energy)—meanwhile, we have the nuclear energy stopgap. In other words, what technology has damaged, technology can repair.

On the other hand, there are those who read the signs with Malthusian pessimism. Perhaps mankind has driven down a blind alley and run out of gas, literally, and figuratively. There is not enough time to develop alternative energy sources, no way to stop global radiation poisoning, no deterrent to expansion of the stockpiles of nuclear weapons, no way to deal with political terrorism, no preventative for nuclear accidents, no protection against reentry of space debris. (One can only wonder what would have happened had the Russian satellite debris fallen on Chicago instead of the Canadian wilds. And the prospect of Skylab's reentry over a major population center has made us alert to the mounting likelihood of profound effects of technological malfunctions.)

If we learn nothing else from the studies in futurism, we must recognize the folly of assuming that everything will continue to operate much the same as it has. A Christian who places little faith in technology or secular humanity's moral ability can nevertheless find hope in a scenario that anticipates a sharpened distinctiveness of the Christian community. Especially in values related to family, lifestyle, and authority, the Christian community has floated on the secular tide about as far as it can go. Lines are now being drawn. From the recent euphoric pinnacle of the politicizing and merchandising of born-againism, the plunge into conflict seems inevitable. History shows that although such conflicts bring persecution, they also bring vitality, and force the development of integrity. Thus we can anticipate a time of social and political difficulty, very likely forcing on us all sorts of new ways of going about the Lord's business. But with it must surely come a new sense of purpose, and a new urgency to be effectively serving as the light and the salt.

Among the more likely results of this series of developments is the abandonment of defunct institutional forms. In the particular case of North American missions we must anticipate change. Just as surely as costly mission-built schools and hospitals have been abandoned by the national churches in several parts of the developing world, the costly aspects of the mission-board approach itself may be abandoned. This suggestion will not be popular at a consultation on missions. But it should constructively challenge all of us. Doubtless it will be an irritant and a threat to two groups: those who assume that God is obligated to continue to work in ways we have organized for him, and those who are more concerned about hanging on to their present job descriptions than they are about the effective proclamation of the gospel.

Keynote for Missions in the 1980s

Considering missions in the 1980s demands more than foresight and vision. It requires humility and meekness, especially if we base our outlook on biblical foundations. We must identify our peculiar perspective as North Americans, acknowledging that God graciously has allowed us a rich history of involvement in his work in the world, while admitting that God is able to carry on very well without us. The future of Christianity depends on the finished work of Jesus Christ and the redemptive work of God in the world, not on our cleverness. If God continues to involve us, it will be on his terms, not ours.

The keynote of this consultation must be a call to humble ourselves, pray together, seek the face of God, and turn from our wicked ways. Indeed, we need a sense of the future; our heritage has made us so preoccupied with the *ultimate* fulfillment of God's plan for the ages that we often lack the flexibility to grapple with the *intermediate* future in anything but stereotypes and simplistic extensions of what we already know. A period of great human trauma is now on us. If we lean back and wait for the Lord's return we do not honor him. The foolish virgins assumed the bridegroom would arrive any moment (Matthew 25:1-13). Readiness demands preparation and understanding—oil for the lamps. We do not know the day or the hour.

In missions planning and management we tend to be blinded by our own technological cleverness. I share this as a self-criticism. We can become impressed with our supposed capacity to account for every contingency on massive charts, and self-deluded into a culture-bound preoccupation with delivering *things* and building *institutions*. In doing so we often neglect the very heart of the gospel: God's concern for *persons*.

Surely we claim to be concerned, but how often one finds even missionaries treated carelessly and disrespectfully, walked upon by rough boots and degraded within the mission structure. All the while we mouth the platitudes about the greater cause of Christ. Indeed, Christian behavior and Christian witness start at home; and in the cause of missions none of "the least of these, my brethren," should be mistreated or neglected. Missions reform should take its first steps in matters of humane relationships with and among missionaries. Neglecting to build a mutually supportive community within the mission is to risk the probability of a cold and ineffectual outreach of the missionary. In the pragmatic zeal to make things *work* and to force everything to *grow*, one risks debasing the gospel.²

The call to humble contrition is neither new nor startling. Indeed, in our literature and in our conferences we may have spent too much time lately dwelling on the shortfalls, errors, and failures. It feels so good to hurt; we gain a sort of glory in self-flagellation. I do not intend to play into this groveling and base emotionalism, but nevertheless I assert that there is some unfinished business to attend to. The way to handle change in the next ten years is critical. If it is God's will to continue to make substantial worldwide use of the resources of the church in North America, he has his work cut out for him. What now exists seems ill-equipped to cope with the probable circumstances of the intermediate future.

When the title of this presentation was determined several months ago, I showed it to a colleague who is a widely-known missionary educator. After a moment he commented thoughtfully, "Hangovers I understand, fallout I understand, but what is the hope?" A cynical response? No.

² In an unpublished paper, Samuel F. Rowen has called attention to the mission board as an organization to which people choose to belong—or not to belong. He relates a maxim of Malcolm Knowles, America's most widely recognized expert on adult education: "One of the misconceptions in our cultural heritage is the notion that organizations exist purely to get things done. This is only one of their purposes; it is their work purpose. But every organization is a social system that serves as an instrumentality for helping people meet human needs and achieve human goals. In fact, this is the primary purpose for which people take part in organizations—to meet their needs and achieve their goals—and when an organization does not serve this purpose for them they tend to withdraw from it. So organizations also have a human purpose" (Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy Versus Pedagogy*. (New York: Association Press, 1970), p. 59.

Quite the opposite—a compassionate response. The world is suffering, lost, and dying. For all of the flair, flash, money, and enthusiasm, modern missions have not related to 80 percent of the world's population. Missionary projects, programs, campaigns, and schemes seem obsessively and repetitively committed to doing more of the same things for the same people. Have missions become a North American prayer wheel? Spinning, spinning, round and round, doing their own thing and doing it with ever so much sincerity? Indeed, what *is* the hope?

Let us take the tour in sequence: hangovers, fallout, and hope.

Hangovers

In the slang of our day, a hangover is a complex of aftereffects resulting from ill-advised self-indulgence. Its major symptom is a headache; other complaints are bitter aftertastes, dizziness, and poor coordination.

Having been born in the era of mercantile and military colonialism, and having been shaped by power and influence with little awareness of the insidious effects of oppressions upon the *oppressor*, “modern missions” are suffering from several bad hangovers. The need to shake off the hangovers will require changes in the *substance* and *form* of missions in the future.

Ethnocentrism in Theology

The self-indulgence to which the metaphor refers is, in its simplest terms, unexamined and unchallenged ethnocentrism. The gospel that has been spread by evangelical Christian missions has been burdened and clouded with a heavy load of the missionary's culture. The “isolated Bible,” battled for, apologetically defended, intellectualized for the sake of elitist scholarship, and somewhat less energetically applied to life—this is the theological heritage of many an evangelical missionary.

In the name of theology and theological education we have visited on the non-Western world the historic issues and debates of Western Christianity. Yet the *real* theological issues that emerged as Christianity confronted the Orient's elaborate religious systems and Africa's animism have been answered more by impositions of American lifestyle than by sharing in theological inquiry. In other words, since certain issues are important to us, we assume they ought to be important to everyone. And if different issues are “temporarily” important to others, we assume that these will be replaced by the really important issues (ours), once the convert gets his or her lifestyle lined up with ours.

For better or worse, our sector of Christianity is founded in part on a theological tradition that dichotomizes the Bible in all sorts of ways, including arbitrary distinctions between literal and figurative components. (From this tradition we learned that a Genesis day had exactly twenty-four hours in it, but a Matthew cup of wine was bottled by the corporate predecessor of Welch's.)

It may help if we learn to laugh at ourselves a bit. I do not want to be absurd or to engage in caricature, though we must somehow be confronted with the issues. Some of my closest Christian brothers are not American; I feel obligated to report that this is one of their concerns. As a matter of fact, several in East Africa with whom I shared the early outline of this paper have specifically asked me to communicate this concern. One said, “Maybe American theologians don't like to think about it, but there are some theological questions where we live and work that they don't seem to like to

deal with. In truth, we don't like to deal with them, either. But the difference is that we don't have much choice."

Make no mistake about it. Our theology, though we assert its centering in the Bible, is extensively centered in our own history and culture. We have used the Bible theologically, and in doing so we have learned to address *our* questions and to discover God in meanings that are sensible because of who and what we are. This is as it should be. God has spoken to all mankind, and surely this includes Western Europeans, North Americans, and others deriving their cultural frame of reference from the pre-Christian Greeks.

Indeed, the complaint is not against the quality or value of our theology but only that we must not fail to recognize that the contextual reality of the one who makes a theological study affects the outcome. Until very recently, this oversight has been characteristic of evangelical missions; a terrible hangover of ethnocentric theology exists that must be dealt with. Even education of foreign nationals within North American Bible colleges and seminaries is a mixed blessing. The church in the Third World is weakened when their leaders come here to help do *our* theology. Only when mission education encourages theological inquiry (with or without our help) within Third World social and political contexts does the church move toward theological integrity.³ The Willowbank Report (1978) suggests that a substantial improvement in the *doing* of theology will result from greater concern for "contextualization" of this sort.

Colonialism in Institutions

Some hangovers go away on their own; others must be purged. The visitor to the "foreign enclaves" (ghettos of a sort) in Third World capitals and commercial centers gets the distinct impression that many of the attitudes and behaviors of colonialism have not disappeared of their own accord. Driving across town to the missionary compounds does not substantially change the impression. It matters relatively little whether the local folks see the foreigner as superrich or just plain rich. (One or the other is apparently inevitable.) About the only variable is how the foreigner treats the local folks. And both sides can tell plenty of horror stories.

Not only are the lifestyle and materialism of the foreigners a burden on the relationship, but the assumptions that are made about how best to get on with the work further complicate matters. The North American comes from a background of rich and varied institutional forms. Never mind that we complain a lot about bureaucracy and impersonality; deep down inside we are true believers: these social machines are not only necessary for us, *everyone* needs them. If you do not have a school, you need one. What should it teach? What ours do, of course! What a silly question!

Although evangelicals prefer to treat Ivan Illich as a fanatic at best and a Marxist pariah at worst, his voice resonates in the drums and dreams of the Third World. We ignore his warnings at our peril. He has focused his attack on our blithe assumptions about schools and schooling. But what he says goes for other institutional forms as well, as Illich himself has pointed out in his subsequent attacks on elitist forms of health care. Following are a few representative statements in which Illich relates schooling to colonialism and materialism, and thus to oppression:

³ Harvie Conn. Contextualization: A New Dimension for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic. *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (1978), pp. 39-46.

The long full-time courses . . . the dominance of expensive institutions . . . and the standardized academic curriculum all encourage the maximum alienation of the student from his own community and give rise to expectations which can only be satisfied in a modern urban environment . . .

Whatever his or her claims of solidarity with the Third World, each American college graduate has had an education costing an amount five times greater than the median life income of half of humanity . . .

School is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is.⁴

The relationship between the last two points constitutes the most dangerous hangover of colonialism. Institutions teach their own importance; they rally people in defense of the institutions. Thus to implant an institutional form that cannot be supported from within the culture is to “hook” people into dependency.

If colonialism survives in the imposed institutions, its near kinsman, paternalism, lives on in money itself. (I hesitate to call it wealth, lest mission people assume I must be talking about someone else.) The money that missions and missionaries have at their disposal will engender paternalism in missions so long as stewardship is defined as authority for control. Gifts that are given provisionally, grants that have strings attached, and all of the other quasi-generous bequests that we might think up have one common flaw: they fall short of real trust. In the accepting of such gifts the beneficiary becomes more beholden to the giver, more dependent, more humiliated.

The dilemma is terrible. We sit here on the mountains of resources which God has entrusted to North America, wanting to share wisely but seemingly unable to devise ways to be responsible stewards without extending our control. Indeed, money is power in the modern world, and for some, Christian piety is nicely shaped to embrace a hard core of power that grasps for control of events, people, and outcomes. (It is small wonder that manipulative relationships are rarely condemned and that behavioristic tactics in education and communication are rarely recognized.)

If evangelical Christian world missions are to break free of the hangover and become postcolonial, at least two areas of development are indicated:

(1) *Enlightenment of our ethnocentric perspective on sin and righteousness.* In gaining clearer discrimination, we can anticipate a refined sense of priorities. Our tendency to intermix Christian and American social virtues and our preference to pray with the Pharisee, “Oh, God, I thank you that I am not as one of these,” will be replaced with a sincere chorus of “God, be merciful.” And thus we will see the flaws in *all* human social systems—Marxism, socialism, and capitalism as well. And in missions we will be less the moneybags delivering *things* and more the redeemed people building relationships with people for God’s glory and our own joy.

(2) *Rediscovery of the revolutionary excitement of the gospel of the kingdom of God.* Tomorrow’s missionaries will face an ideological fight-to-the-finish, and they had better know why they are there. Their ministry is primarily spiritual, but the context of that ministry is politically loaded. Effectiveness will depend on spiritual commitment and a good measure of personal enthusiasm. The

⁴ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 27, 49, 163.

missionary who discovers that the gospel is revolutionary can better identify with Mary in her song of joy (Luke 1:46-55), with Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79), with Simeon (Luke 2:29-32), with John the Baptist (Luke 3:4-6), and with our Lord himself as he applied the prophecies of Isaiah to his own person and ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18, 19, NIV)

With our theology brought into line with the revolutionary meaning of Jesus Christ, we will make responsible claim to the ground on which to meet the Marxists eye to eye. And on this ground we can more knowledgeably appreciate the motives of our brothers who argue for a "liberation theology." Their actions and visions can use counsel from a more sound Christology, but they should not be dismissed lightly.

Fallout

Fallout is something you cannot escape, whether or not you had anything to do with its cause. There are more and more inescapable realities within the realm of missions. The need to cope with these realities and their fallout will significantly alter the substance and the form of mission activity in the future.

Two related realities confront us. The key reality is nationalism. It is a sort of nuclear explosion (rather, a series of explosions) breaking the back of political colonialism. The fallout is surprisingly lethal. The other reality is totalitarian government. The self-fulfilling prophecies of the colonial powers that most of their colonies would be unable to govern themselves are coming true. The fallout of nationalism has engendered "benign" dictatorship, which in turn has its own evil consequences in cycles of anarchy and totalitarianism. The prospects for participatory democracy seem dark indeed. There are notable exceptions—India, Kenya, Egypt, Israel, Mexico, Jamaica, to name several—but the larger reality is that the trend, though ostensibly toward the left, is actually toward anarchy as the prelude to absolute dictatorship.

Anger has become the major political emotion. Though generalizations are inadequate to explain the complexities of the political transformations, it seems that virtually any political change today is preceded by manipulations of human anger. From the naïve perspective of halfhearted democracy it is hard to comprehend the feelings of oppressed people. Rather than thankfulness and relief, the typical reaction to political emancipation is a whirlwind of anger. Rage motivates violence, and retaliation for the sufferings of the past are visited upon any and all who shared any part in the former power structures, no matter how minor. In Iran, for example, the violent transitions from the Shah to the Shah's handmade "democracy," to the Islamic "theocracy," to the leftist anarchists have made virtually every political force a loser except perhaps the Soviet Union. Because Americans sold armaments to and bought oil from the old regime, we are a major loser.

The political climate which confronts missions in the decade ahead will likely be more and more anarchic and violent. Surely this is no time for major capital investments in place-bound facilities. Rather than more compounds, Bible schools, missionary children's facilities, hospitals, radio stations, and the like, we should concentrate on one-to-one sharing of discipleship, "barefoot doctor" approaches to health care, purchased time on commercial radio, and other such approaches to low-overhead development of human resources.

When the crunches come—and they will come—it is the *people* who continue the work of the gospel. How many more tragedies like Zaire, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and Vietnam will it take before we get it through our heads that missionaries draw fire toward national Christians? There is nothing in our spiritual rule book that says missionaries must prove they're macho by hanging tough. The foremost concern must be the welfare of the national Christian community; the people *without* exit permits should always have precedence in the decision-making. Outsiders who demand the "right" to stay and "help" show ignorance, arrogance, or both.⁵

Naturally, we do not like to hear it put so bluntly, but God is humbling the United States. We have "lost face" in the Orient, where that is nearly the worst thing that can happen. We have lost oil in Iran. Mexico, with its new oil-power, makes us buy on its terms, or not at all. Brazil, the only sizable population in the New World wearing pro-U.S. T-shirts during the Vietnam War, has sent us packing. Our archenemies of World War II have risen to capitalize on our weak economy. As American prestige has fallen, so has the general climate of acceptance of American missions. The cause of Christ, as we represent it, is directly in the fallout pattern of our own nation's losses on the world scene.

Has there ever been a better time for a call to supranationalistic Christianity? Now that the futility of riding Uncle Sam's coattails has been so well demonstrated, we can feel a deeper sense of kinship with our non-American brothers and sisters in Christ. Though thankful for the better qualities of our national heritage, we cannot afford to hold tenaciously to an idealized and romanticized view of ourselves as "God's favorite people." (I am surely not the only person who has discovered that we American Christians are suspected of seeing ourselves this way.)

Above all else, the worldwide community of God's people needs a deeper sense of mutual accountability. Although our national heritage teaches individualism and exalts entrepreneurial prowess, competitive "profiteering for Christ" must stop. Participants in the 1978 Consultation on Future Evangelical Concerns were startled and then strangely warmed by the confessions of leadership people within several independent and parachurch enterprises. God is at work among us, bringing us into a deeper awareness of common resources, common purpose, and accountability to each other. I cannot do "my thing" for God without concern for how it relates to "your thing" for God. Indeed, we should prayerfully seek release from the cultural trait that causes us to think of God's things as *my* things versus *your* things. We share in *God's* work as an extended family.

⁵ With great respect for missionary colleagues who have braved the worst sort of hazards in order to stand by their national Christian brothers and sisters, I must persist in the view that strategic withdrawal of missionaries is not a matter of spiritual defeat. God is not well served by one person's willing sacrifice if it results in another person's unwilling sacrifice. Strategic withdrawal and "missionary moratorium" are separate issues. I can be firmly against moratorium yet firmly in favor of strategic withdrawal. (The latter implies foresight, orderly planning, and cooperative church-mission decision-making.)

But the environment in which we work is already contaminated. We must learn to live with it, and this means taking precautions. The metaphor is apt. One may fall victim to fallout without ever seeing or hearing it. In my work in Third World nations, as God gives tasks within the mission sectors, I see victims of fallout. Old-timers who have not had enough help comprehending the changes that nationalism has brought continue to assume that old patterns and a genial comradeship will weather the storm; some of these faithful servants are prematurely aging and opting out in sheer bewilderment. Many newcomers whose starry eyes and eager impulses match the fervor of the post-World War II missionaries, are literally grieving themselves into frustration because they cannot figure out what is going wrong.

Missionaries, young and old alike, need help. Few have any background in political science; many understand Communism at the level of the McCarthy-era tracts. Their experience in philosophical debate is limited to a few polite exchanges with a college professor; their tendency to see things in dichotomous black-and-white renders them almost impotent in situations that the apostle Paul would relish. And worst of all, their education has been in secular or secular-style institutions (Bible colleges, liberal arts colleges and seminaries) where the dominant value is competitive excellence, not Christian community. Small wonder that so many do not have what it takes.

God, we need help.

Hope

Hope, as always, is a gift of the Spirit of God. Whatever may come is in the hands of the God who loves his people. His ways are perfect; our hope lies secure in his promises. Our Lord said, "I will build my church."

What lies beyond this rocky road mankind has recently taken? Only those whose faith is in technology have much hope in a rosy future for secular society.

The responsible futurist in social science spins out not just one yarn about what will happen in the days to come, but many. Taking all the data deemed significant, he develops a variety of scenarios, each one testing out the probable accompaniments and consequences of different branches in the road. Futurism is a more or less scientific exercise in inductive logic, examining various "if-then" conjectures. A series of substantial explorations of the likely scenarios has recently been drawn from experiences and insights of evangelical leaders.⁶ In the recurrent themes of the scenarios developed in the 1977 and 1978 Consultations on Future Evangelical Concerns, one finds hope.

(1) *Hope is vested in God's faithfulness to his people and in his redemptive work in the world.* The implications for the interests of North American missions arise from an appreciation for the hundreds of thousands of faithful persons who have dedicated themselves to serve the cause of Christ throughout the world and the millions who have knowledgeably and willingly provided

⁶ See *Evangelicals Face the Future*, ed. Donald E. Hoke. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978), and *An Evangelical Agenda: 1984 and Beyond*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979).

financial, emotional, and spiritual support. Surely from this historic involvement God will yet move in the future to do work beyond what we dare to ask and think.

Much of this paper has aired the “dirty linen” of the missionary movement. But the intentions are altogether positive. I declare again my fervent commitment to the work of God in the world, through the church of Jesus Christ, now widely planted in many parts of the world, and to the persistent outreach of the church through mission activity.

(2) *Many of us are encouraged by the new sense of openness that allows a more thorough examination of missionary problems and shortcomings.* I, for one, hope that this will increase, as a matter of truth and respect, so that missionaries will become more free to describe their heartbreaks as well as their victories, their “suspect” contacts as well as their “safe” encounters. As the church in North America “toughens up” under persecution, the supports of missions will become more understanding of the realities of missionary experience. I weep for my missionary brothers in Latin America who cannot even share their rejoicing with their “prayer supporters” for fear of reprisals for their involvement with Catholics, Marxists, or Pentecostals. God help us to get our theological priorities in order!

(3) *It is important to hope that God will give the gospel a freer entrance into the vast unreached populations.* The hope is not that typical missionaries, sponsored in the typical way by typical mission boards, will miraculously get visas and invitations (though I readily acknowledge that God has worked greater miracles.) I laud the work of those who are exploring the open roads to the Islamic nations and to China. Those who are actually out there nosing around to find the cracks in the walls impress me more than those who are sitting home speculating, but surely we need both. I hope that God will give us the good sense to see what *is* possible instead of letting us become obsessed with what is *not* possible. The hope requires a more sensitive theology, less noted for its capacity to answer easy questions than for its capacity to wrestle creatively with the difficult issues.⁷

What if God does a new work *within* Islam that does not quite look like what we would expect? It could happen. Are our theological priorities geared to recognizing the mysterious ways of our God? At least one way to understand African syncretistic Christianity is as an interim or preparatory step in which God is moving people, by his own plan, out of the deep bondage of traditional religion. What if a similar thing emerged within Islam, apart from our own making and planning? Would we scoff at it, exorcise it, try to ignore it? Or would we find ways to build on it? It is my hope that because of the growing awareness of culture and the more profound seriousness with which evangelical missions comprehend and accept the meaning of the gospel, we would be more ready than ever before to recognize a new work of God within the so-called closed regions. God may yet make us more open, more sensitive, and more humane, and deliver us from the narrowness of our own dichotomizing, vindictive, compulsive, judgmental heritage.

(4) *The great hope is that God will provide vision and that the Holy Spirit will energize toward the recovery of initiative in evangelical missions.* It is so tempting today to see the world as already evangelized. We have cast the “bread” of the gospel on many waters—we have told the story far and wide, at least by radio—but we have not evangelized more than a quarter of the world’s population. The story of

⁷ Phil Parshall. “Evangelizing Muslims: Are There Ways?” *Christianity Today*, 5 January 1979, pp. 28-31.

modern mission pioneers—Carey, Goforth, Judson, and the like—is a drama of initiative into the forbidden areas and the development of hitherto unknown procedures for outreach through faith. Today we act as if there were no more forbidden areas and no unknown procedures waiting to be developed. How we need God's grace of initiative!

(5) *Transition from reading theology to doing theology is a hopeful sign.* Our cultural traditions tend to glorify verbalisms. We are content to talk about things rather than to *do* things. We need vision to see our missions as being even more than *talking* the gospel. "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us" (John 1:14 NIV). The propagation of the gospel still requires the living presence, observable in authentic existence. Yet today few mission boards have demonstrated any leadership in evangelization through the modes of the vastly increased foreign exchange of students as well as business, industry, and government workers. May God give us first a vision to define the mission to be accomplished, and subsequently to define the various ways people can fulfill the mission. One of my great hopes is that we will quit trying to define the term *missionary* and simply accept the validity of a wide array of services to the church in other lands. God's sovereignty establishes the mission. The missionary's roles and tasks must be derived from that mission, not vice versa.

(6) *Closely tied to this transition from talking to doing is its counterpart, recovery of the biblical meaning of evangelist.* Just as surely as the word *missionary* ought to suggest a wide range of roles, *evangelist* ought to suggest a focal commitment and assignment to proclamation and "church planting." Surely the support systems for transplanted institutional forms have become the "tail that wags the dog." Hopefully, we are on the threshold of the rediscovery of the indispensable evangelist. Many mission issues may be resolved by the church's taking responsibility for the institutions, and the mission's putting its resources into evangelization of new fields (preferably in cooperation with the church or churches most able to provide encouragement for the new converts.)

Still, it is not an either-or matter. The validity of church-to-church support, encouragement, and service is biblical. It can be traced at least to the relationship between Jerusalem and Antioch, and it validates missionaries like Barnabas. But have we lost sight of Paul? It is Paul who best exemplifies the evangelizing missionary. Paul, encouraging others to enjoy the grace of God in a life of service like his, recommended a minimum of anchor-dropping. He remained without wife or children; he traveled freely and widely. He prayed and struggled to keep on the move, to return to places where he had experienced triumph and tragedy, and to go to places where he had not yet preached. Where is this sort of zeal today? Indeed, are mission boards prepared to encourage a missionary with these attitudes? I suggest, in hope, that God may be about to restore this kind of commitment and daring to his people in North America.

Christian missions in the 1980s—what is there to encourage us? Regardless of how well the Trinity Consultation comes to terms with theological issues, there are real live people out there whose destinies are wrapped up in what mission executives decide to do. May God grant that the practical decisions be based on solid theological foundations. The present approaches to recruitment, preparation, development, and management are falling short. Procedures that were adequate for yesterday will not handle the strain of the conditions just around the corner.

(7) *People adapt, but institutions often do not. God is helping his people cope.* Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of faithful servants of God with a burden for the unreached are learning to cope with the new conditions and the new openings. They are inventing, experimenting, exploring, and finding

new approaches to missions. Most of us here know of such people. Perhaps in our discussions we can share information and experiences, for some of the things God is opening up are dramatic.

My hope is more in the adaptability of people than in the adaptability of institutions. Is the age of missions over? Hardly. But I am not so sure about the future of the current mission board, its institutions, structures, and approaches. God will work change where he wants it and set the rest aside.

This consultation should evaluate its deliberations according to three types of criteria: the *biblical*, the *life-changing*, and the *future-oriented*. As we consider missions in theological perspective, our theology should be done with a firm hold on biblical truth, a commitment to make all theory practical in terms of changes in our own lives, and a rigorously disciplined attempt to come to grips with the realities of tomorrow.

Thus our hope will speak of its *foundation in faith*: God's work will be done and the people of God will be invited to participate. Our hope will reflect *optimism*: the resources appropriate for the new needs will be forthcoming from the hand of God, and the appropriate means to cope with the tasks ahead will be available for the asking. Our hope will be fulfilled in *renewal*: God is developing us, humility will replace pride, serenity will replace ballyhoo, and the feverish grip on "our ways" will be broken in repentance.