
Awakening the Cultural Dimension of the Great Commission

By **Scott D. Allen**

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We are living at a Kairos moment in Church history—a pivotal time where old paradigms are giving way and new ones are emerging. God is the Lord of history. He is actively at work in each generation and in every nation to accomplish His grand purpose of advancing His rule and reign on earth—His promise of extending the blessing of Abraham to every tribe, tongue, people and nation. This purpose won't be fully realized on this side of Christ's return, yet it nevertheless provides *present* hope for substantial healing in all areas through the finished work of Christ.

To understand the vision and purpose of the Disciple Nations Alliance, it is necessary to understand something of the historical and theological forces that have shaped the present. In his important recent article titled *The Future of Evangelicals in Mission: Will We Regain the Faith of our Forefathers in the Faith?*¹ Respected missionary statesman Ralph Winter reaches back to the Reformation and identifies two distinct phases of theological thought that have predominated in the Church to the present. He then provides evidence that we are currently transitioning into the third phase.

The Reformation was an incredibly dynamic period of history. It was a time when the Bible was opened afresh and its transforming power was unleashed upon on the nations of Northern Europe and the American colonies. The Reformation led to the pages of Scripture being translated for the first time into the common languages of the day—and ultimately placed into the hands of common Christians. The social and cultural reverberations of these actions continue to profoundly shape the present.

Vishal Mangalwadi notes that the Reformation marked a historic shift in authority. Prior to the Reformation, cultural authority emanated from Rome and resided with the Pope. The Reformation shifted cultural authority from the Pope to the Bible. The first generations following Luther modeled this new authority. The pilgrims who fled England for the shores of North America brought with them a vision for a new society built on the authority of Scripture. The sons and daughters of this generation included the likes of John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, William Carey and William Wilberforce. The

¹ Ralph D. Winter, *The Future of Evangelicals in Mission*, Mission Frontiers: The Bulletin of the U.S. Center for World Missions, September-October 2007 Issue.

theological mindset that animated this generation was, in the words of Ralph Winter, characterized by “a broad dual social/personal spectrum of concern ranging from foreign missions to changing the legal structures of society... a heady dual emphasis of earthly and heavenly, social and personal.” “[They] possessed a theology combining both personal ‘salvation’ with vast social responsibility... [with] concern for the glorification of God in both individual and social transformation.” The practical outworking of these theological assumptions resulted in what we would today call a “wholistic ministry.”

This wide-spectrum faith resting on the authority of Scripture contributed significantly to the development of America and Western Europe. This period witnessed the first Great Awakening in America, the Wesleyan revival in England, the abolition of both slavery and the slave trade in England, a vast array of social and cultural reforms, and ultimately the rise of the first great movement in Protestant missions which sent the likes of William Carey and Hudson Taylor to deliver this same Biblical mindset to the nations of the world.

The Disciple Nations Alliance draws inspiration from this generation of Christians. We see their theology and practice as a model for what we long to return to today. To this end, we speak on “Reviving the Reformation” in our Vision Conferences and promote books and articles such as *The Legacy of William Carey* by Ruth and Vishal Mangalwadi and *England Before and After Wesley*.

Returning to Ralph Winter’s article, he argues that the theology that predominated during this post Reformation generation began to erode in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Influential Christian leaders of the time, such as D.L. Moody and J.N. Darby promoted a theology that diminished the goals of reforming society. This world was seen largely as fallen and sinful—the domain of Satan. The Kingdom of God was viewed as an irrelevant topic to the present. The expectation was that things would go “from bad to worse” until Christ returned. Hope was offered for eternity, but not for the here and now. Salvation was separated from social transformation—the latter being associated with liberalism and “the social gospel” which was anathema. These ideas continue to predominate within the Church to the present.

The causes of this theological shift (what some refer to as “The Great Reversal”) are many and varied, and not the focus of this paper. Here I will simply highlight a few of its consequences—results that have proven disastrous for the health and vibrancy of the church as well as the church’s mission to bless the nations.

- An unbiblical dualism that dichotomized spiritual and physical, heaven and earth. The spiritual and heavenly were seen as higher and superior, while the physical and earthly were seen as lower, sinful and inferior. Some have drawn parallels between this dualistic mindset and the ancient Gnostic heresy. Today, most evangelicals are unaware that their mindset and actions are shaped more by an ancient heresy than by the Biblical worldview.

- A loss of vision and compassion for the poor, and for fighting against poverty and its varied causes. The Bible is filled with literally hundreds of passages that speak of God’s compassionate heart for the poor and the Christian responsibility to feed the hungry and cloth the naked. The new dualistic theology, as it was taught in Bible schools, seminaries, and eventually through thousands of church pulpits, created blinders such that this Biblical emphasis was virtually lost. It continues to amaze me how many Christians I meet (many with advanced theological degrees) who when confronted with passages that demonstrate God’s heart for the poor say, “I never saw it!” Rick Warren recently shared a similar confession.
- The withdraw of Christians (and thus the Biblical worldview) from positions of social and cultural influence in the various spheres of society—the arts, governance, business, science, education, etc. The new theology viewed these earthly spheres as lower, worldly and secular. Christian faithfulness, according to the new theological thinking, increasingly meant pursuing the “higher” callings of the pastorate or missions. The “gates of the city” were surrendered to non-Christian elites. This is seen through the secularization of once prominent Christian universities such as Harvard and Princeton, to state just one example.
- 19th and 20th century Protestant missions movement carried this dualistic theology to the nations of the world. Today, these assumptions are predominant not just in America, but in evangelical churches worldwide. The consequence is that while the church has grown rapidly (numerically) around the globe, the social and cultural transformational power that was unleashed through the Protestant Reformation has yet to touch the millions of new churches and their surrounding nations. Never have there been more churches in the world, making less of an impact on their surrounding cultures.

And yet, by God’s grace, this is changing! New ways of thinking are emerging to replace the weak, Gnostic theology of the preceding generation. We are witnessing an undeniable return to the early theological assumptions of Wesley, Carey, Edwards and Wilberforce. In his article, Ralph Winter traces the first stirrings of this shift back to the 1960s and 70s. He sees evidence through the influential teaching of John Stott and the Lausanne Movement, which, in his words, has labored “very hard to point out that there can be no real dichotomy between faith and good works.” He also spotlights a resurgent interest in the theme of the “Kingdom of God.” According to Winter, “The word kingdom was almost totally banned from Evangelical literature for at least 50 years. Only recently has this word, so prominent in the New Testament, been recovered.

Further evidence is seen through the rise of Christian Relief and Development. Prior to the 1950s, there were virtually no evangelical relief and development organizations. Today, World Vision, World Relief, World Concern, Food for the Hungry and other similar groups have combined annual revenues in the billions of dollars. Winter points out that the founders of these organizations were drawn back into the realm of social transformation not so much theologically as *intuitively*. Most were activists who shared a powerful motivation to help the poor, but had little theologically to draw upon in actually

developing their programs and activities. The result is that many Christian relief and development organizations defaulted to the predominant materialistic and pragmatic assumptions of secular Western culture in conceiving of, and executing their poverty-fighting programs. From my 20 years of experience with Food for the Hungry I can offer first-hand testimony to this tension between Christian motivation and largely materialistic programs. In this tension, Darrow Miller and I—along with many others—found our calling. Our mission became one of helping restore a distinctively Biblical theology from which Christian Relief and Development programs and activities could be developed. The life-lessons of Darrow’s 25 years of work in this area are captured in his book [Discipling Nations: the Power of the Bible to Transform Culture](#).

It was from this effort within Food for the Hungry, combined with Bob Moffitt and his similar calling and contribution through Harvest, which gave rise to the Disciple Nations Alliance in 1997. As we began to share our ideas and teaching on wholistic ministry and the power of Biblical worldview for social and cultural transformation, we discovered a highly receptive audience. A reoccurring theme of people who have been exposed Disciple Nations Alliance teaching, is that it provides a theological basis for something which they knew *institutively*. Our material has found its greatest receptivity among the following groups:

- Christian missionaries and relief and development workers who have been functioning intuitively, yet lacked a fuller Biblical theology to support their instinct.
- Emerging Christian leaders in the global south who live in contexts of extreme poverty and are drawn to a theology (and tools for applying it) that provides hope *for the present*, not just for eternity.
- Christians who are in business, education, the arts and other social spheres, and who increasingly hungry to connect their vocational talents to advancing God’s Kingdom—and who are rejecting the older idea that “full time Christian service” is limited to missions and the pastorate.

It is no accident that God has raised-up the Disciple Nations Alliance at this moment in history. God has given us insights and teaching that help the Church move beyond the dualistic, narrow theology of the previous generation. We see ourselves (along with other similar groups) as a catalyst in God’s hands for the transition to a new era of history. An era that will, in fact, be a return to older one that found expression in the early Church and in the years following the Reformation. We believe that as the increasingly massive global church understands, embraces and functions according to these new, yet ancient theological principles, the same transformational power that was unleashed on the lands of Northern Europe and America following the Reformation will spread to the impoverished nations of the world. This is the optimism, excitement and hope we feel. Hope not in our teaching, but in the God of history who is leading us into this new Kairos moment, and giving us the unspeaking privilege of participating if even modestly, in His plan to bless all nations.

SCOTT D. ALLEN is president of the Disciple Nations Alliance, Inc.

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