



The 21st century mission

Disciplining nations

Evangelism and discipleship, while essential, are just the beginning of the task.

By Darrow L. Miller

In reading Ruth and Vishal Mangalwadi's book, *An Indian Woman's Tribute to William Carey*, I was confronted with a picture of William Carey very different from what I had expected. Carey was a botanist "who discovered *Careya* herbacea in the jungles of the Himalayan foothills," and who "brought the English daisy to India and introduced the linnanean system of gardening." He did this to show that, contrary to the Hindu concept that the world is *maya* (illusion), nature was made "good." Carey also introduced the first savings banks into India and established the first newspaper "ever printed in any oriental language."

He also introduced the subcontinent to astronomy, to counter the negative impact of astrology and its fatalisms. He "pioneered the idea of lending libraries in the subcontinent" so that Indians could be exposed to the knowledge of the world. He stood against the oppression of women and Hindu practice of *sati* (suttee), or widow-burning.

Carey understood that we become like the God

that we worship. As we worship the living God, we are charged to transform not only individual lives, but whole cultures. Carey saw that the gospel was to touch every sphere of life- the public square, the marketplace, the science lab, and the neighborhood.

William Carey is known as the "Father of Modern Missions," but this profound book has helped me to realize that he was more the "Father of Christian Development." His mentality and strategy were far different than much of what we see in today's missions movement.

Today's context. Much focus in the last two decades has been on the AD2000 and Beyond Movement, which has harnessed the energy and enthusiasm of thousands into many fruitful evangelistic efforts. The question we must ask now is, "What kind of mission and what kind of missionaries are needed for the 21st century?"

We live at an exciting time. The philosophical foundations of communism have crumbled, as have its political and economic structures in most areas of the world. Christianity has lost much of its influence in the West. The animistic world is under assault by modernism.

In light of all this, today's predominant view of the mission of the church needs to be examined. First we'll look at three paradigms and their impact on missions. Then we will explore in some detail what I call the third-order paradigm as it applies to the Great Commission.

Three missions paradigms

1. *Gnosticism*. In reaction to liberalism's secular assumptions that crept into the church at the turn of the century, many church leaders abandoned the biblical worldview for a Gnostic worldview. Gnosticism, of course, was a second and third century Greek heresy that split reality into a sinful physical realm and a sacred spiritual realm. Unfortunately, many evangelical Christians unwittingly have adopted this mindset today—impacting our concept of the church and our strategy of missions. We have too often restricted the Great Commission to the saving of souls and the planting of churches. Worse, the churches we have planted have been Gnostic in their mental framework and have supplied what I would call the first- and second-order paradigm of the Great Commission.

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The first-order paradigm of the Great Commission is evangelism, to preach the gospel, to save a soul for eternity, and to plant churches. In the second-order paradigm, many evangelicals realized that we needed to go beyond evangelism into discipleship, and so people were disciplined in the spiritual or religious component of their lives, in prayer, Bible study, and worship. But the horizontal components dealing with concern for the creation and for our fellow man were relegated to "the world." Today, however, the church's gnosticism has given way to secularism.

2. *Secularism*. Secularism by definition says there is no God, and man is the center of the universe. There is no absolute truth; the individual defines truth for himself. When we come to Christ through this mindset, the focus is on self. Christianity is true because I believe it, and God exists for me.

Within the church that has been impacted by secularism, there is no place for truth (as David Wells has said) and no place for morals. This new form of Christianity is sometimes called "country club Christianity," "name it and claim it," or (to borrow J.I. Packer's memorable phrase) "hottub religion." The vision is for self, not others. Thus the church's resources are spent internally, not in fulfilling the Great Commission and the Great

Commandment. Secularism has also enveloped much of what is called "Christian" development work. Secularism sees the problem of poverty as coming from outside man, usually from a lack of physical resources or from some variety of economic exploitation.

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3. *Biblical theism*. Biblical theism creates the third-order paradigm for the Great Commission—the discipling of nations. This third-order paradigm recognizes that a person's repentance is not the end of gospel ministry, but the beginning. Reforms such as the Dutch theologian and prime minister Abraham Kuyper understood that following justification comes sanctification. However, sanctification means more than personal holiness, which is its indispensable beginning. It means that all of man, and all of his relationships, to use Francis Schaeffer's term, have "substantial healing." Then, as a critical mass of individuals is disciplined, culture is to be redeemed, with just structures and institutions being formed in society. Carey had this third-order paradigm in mind when he went to India. We need to put it back on the agenda of the 21st century church.

The Great Commission in two dimensions. The Great Commission has a vertical component where the good news of the kingdom of God is to spread around the world to the final frontier, the last tribe, the last people group. But it is also to penetrate vertically, transforming culture and poverty. It is no coincidence that, to quote World Vision's Bryant Myers, "The lost are the poor and the poor are the lost." Massive poverty is endemic to those places where the kingdom of God has not been extended.

Matthew 28:19-20a says, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

1. *The horizontal dimension*. The gospel is to be spread horizontally. Jesus said, "As you go, make disciples of all nations." Notice we are to make disciples of all nations, all ethnos, all tribal groups.

While this is done one person at a time, the command is not to disciple individuals. It's to disciple a group of people, a nation. As we complete the final frontier of mission, we must see it within the third-order paradigm as extending the blessing, discipling nations, redeeming cultures, building nations.

2. *The vertical dimension.* Jesus also says, "Teach them to obey all I have commanded." The good news of the kingdom is to spread not only geographically around the world, but vertically through culture, through society. Unfortunately, the vertical penetration of the gospel into culture has been sorely lacking in 20th century mission strategy.

So, how are cultures transformed? By ideas. Ideas begin in the intellectual realm, with philosophers and theologians. From there, they pass into the art and music of a culture and then to the educated and professional people, the teachers and lawyers and pastors, journalists, the writers and entertainers, and into the laws and political and economic structures of a society. And from there they influence the behavior and life-style of the common man. Unfortunately, the church has forgotten that ideas have consequences and thus has not been able to penetrate culture with the gospel. Is it any wonder that many areas of the world that have been "Christianized" have in reality merely received a flimsy church veneer over what is still an animistic core? Unless we challenge the non-Christian thinking at the heart of a culture, syncretism and nominalism will continue to plague our best efforts. However, this is not a call to Westernize or, more crassly, to consumerize peoples. Nor is it an attempt to repeat the mistakes of the past, whether they be cultural imperialism or liberation theology. But it is a recognition that "the truth will set you free," that God wants to redeem all of man and all of culture for his kingdom. The challenge is to make sure we are not confusing our own cultural preferences with what is truly biblical.

What is it that we are to teach them to obey? "All that I have commanded." The word *all*, *pas* in Greek, means the whole or everything. Because we reject gnosticism, we are not to teach people to be "spiritual," nor to be religious. Christ wants every thought brought captive, not just the moral and spiritual thoughts. He wants the earth to be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. The word "commanded" is the Greek *entellomai*, the base of which is *telos*, or "the end, the finish." It relates to the aim or the pur-

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pose of the commander. Christ is Lord, commander, captain. The third-order paradigm of the Great Commission is to disciple nations to hold precious all that God intends, all that he commands.

The 21st century mission. Imagine standing with Christ and the disciples in the hills above Lake Tiberias. The disciples constitute Christ's "religious order." This band of men and women, this community of believers, this sodality, has just received its marching orders from the King—orders that will impact even the civil order. The King's final purpose-*telos* is reflected in God's good intentions for all nations. His purpose for the redeemed is that they become like him, fully human, perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. His cosmic purpose began with Adam and Eve. Genesis 1:28 records God's commands to:

Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

It continues with the Abrahamic covenant, where Abraham and his descendants are commissioned to be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:2-4). It is reiterated in the Great Commission to disciple all nations, and it will be consummated when the King comes with his kingdom. This marvelous picture is found in Revelation 21:24-26.

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring in their splendor to it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

How are nations redeemed? How are nations to be redeemed? God has built physical laws into the universe to govern creation, moral laws to govern the soul, and kingdom laws to govern society. As God's principles in these realms are acknowledged and obeyed, life and development blossom. When kingdom principles (as opposed to merely Western ones) replace a culture's ungodly foundational principles, the society gladly retains its good elements and blossoms toward God's purposes for it.

I am neither advocating cultural imperialism nor theonomy, the idea that society must be governed by Old Testament law. These are neither practical nor desirable. But Christians have the responsibility to glorify God not only within the four walls of the church, but in the public square, in the halls of government, in the home, in the media. The Reformers knew something we have tended to forget, that there is no division between sacred and secular, that all of life is sacred, and that the minister's position is no higher than a street sweeper's, if both have been called by God.

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Today there is much talk about saturation church planting and discipling nations, but unless we produce churches equipped to understand and speak to their individual cultures, we will not reach our ambitious goals. Instead, we will forever be cultural outsiders, coolly irrelevant to the burning issues igniting those around us. Evangelism is the beginning of a process, not the end. Yes, we must add discipling to evangelism. But what kind of disciples and what kind of churches are we aiming for? Will we be replicating Gnostic or secular disciples and churches, or kingdom disciples and churches? We need to infuse our disciples with the third-order paradigm, the discipling of nations.

Conclusion. How will we equip the church and missionaries for the 21st century mission? First, we must repent-literally be re-minded-of our Gnostic tendencies in missions and secular tendencies in development work. Second, we need to grasp the third-order paradigm for the Great Commission. Third, for those who respond to the evangelical message, let us disciple them from the very beginning in the full counsel of God. Let us prepare kingdom Christians, men and women who will live before the face of God-*Coram Deo*- in every area of life. Fourth, as William Carey did, we should proclaim the gospel into all areas of life. We should build disciples who seek justice, who provide a prophetic voice as dissidents against the status quo of either the right or the left, who raise moral questions in the marketplace. They are to

be engaged, as Carey was, in science and technology, in pursuing the truth, in crating beauty. Fifth, the gospel must go to the neighborhood, the street corner, the community center. We are to be peacemakers between tribes, between gangs, between races. Much of what the world evangelization movement has done since the days of William Carey has been outstanding. Christianity is truly a global faith, testifying to the energy of our witness. But if we want to see the Great Commission fulfilled, we must move beyond evangelism and discipleship and see nations transformed and cultures redeemed.

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"Ivy League colleges are full of well rounded individuals. Great Groups ["organizations that can change the world"] are not. The people in such enterprises try to turn a vision into something big. You can be sure their goldfish die of neglect. Great Groups understand, even if no one else does, that they are on a mission from God." -Stanley W. Angrist, Wall Street Journal, July 10, 1997.