

**Say  
Yes  
to  
Mission**

*blogged*

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**Really, isn't the world situation kind of hopeless by now? Why don't we clean up problems at home and just be a better example?**

**D**iane Oughton (you remember her—the rich girl who became a Weatherwoman and accidentally blew herself up in New York City) worked in a little mountain village in Guatemala among the Quiche Indians. One time on a visit to the capital city a young Fulbright scholar dropped a new thought in her mind: after two years of trying to teach those Indians to read, the country was still 70% illiterate. No matter what she did, it would never end the poverty of the Indians. “You’re only delaying the revolution.” Another friend said that the only answer was “to line up the fifty first families against the white wall.” Too bad she took this shallow thinking so seriously! On at least one hundred other occasions down through history the “world situation” has been immensely *more* hopeless.

What the Fulbright scholar should have

told Diane was that she and one hundred other Weathermen-types probably were not adequate to save the world by *any* method, and that the best anyone can do is to make sure he is part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Those Indians in that mountain town no doubt needed to learn to read. But they needed something more than what could be given them by a girl who was highly confused despite being highly committed. Did she ever run into some of the Indians in that town who were Christians (I happen to know that town), into whose lives have come not only the desire to read but the beginnings of a transformation that puts man, God and society into an entirely new perspective?

**But is it Christian to concentrate just on the spiritual problems?**

**P**robably not! That is, while man shall not live by bread alone, there is no denying that he does need bread. But physical aid is kind of hopeless if it doesn't include the

spiritual. There are a lot of people these days who are reacting fiercely against anybody who proposes merely to change people's hearts. A lawyer recently told a woman who was trying to found a non-profit mission agency that if she hadn't included help along the lines of food and clothing, he wouldn't have even bothered to deal with her, since he was a "humanist." That response is amazingly confused since the humanists never talked about food and clothing but about the aesthetic dimensions of human life.

The lawyer probably would not oppose the work of a psychiatrist—who doesn't deal in food or clothing at all. What he really believes is that the religious pitch is a fraud. That's the point! Lots of people honestly feel organized religion has merely figured out how to survive without really delivering the spiritual goods but only pretending to. OK, but no one in his right mind can deny that the health of a man's inner spirit is the most important thing to achieve, *if you can really do it*. Don't look now, but

the missionary overseas is the only man in foreign aid of any kind who ever even *claims* to be dealing with a man's inner spirit. So the question is not so much whether it is *legitimate* to concentrate on the spiritual, but whether it is really *possible* to affect men at the spiritual level.

In Guatemala I met a Peace Corps fellow on the street one day a few weeks before he finished his two-year hitch. How was the little chicken farm? Would it keep on after he left? He was pessimistic. "Trouble is," he said, "the egg-production drops down suspiciously whenever I leave town for even one day. . . . I can't find an honest man to run it." I sensed a critical edge to his voice. My emotions rose as I heard him imply that Guatemalans couldn't be honest. Then I got a different idea: "You need an honest man? . . . That's the business I'm in." (After 75 years of Protestant missions in Guatemala there are truly committed evangelicals everywhere.) "Name me any little town in this country and I'll find you a man you can absolutely trust." Men who serve the living

God no longer serve themselves: this is the only bedrock basis for real honesty. Such men—Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, Ezra in a Persian colony, Mordecai at the capital—are essential even to secular projects. Anyone working in an agency whose consistent product is that kind of man has the world's most priceless product to offer—whether it is for a chicken farm or a kingdom.

**OK, maybe I'd better come out with it: I wonder if the missionaries are not—in any case—in a lost cause. Aren't there more non-Christians today than ever in history? If after 2,000 years Christianity hasn't succeeded, isn't it illogical to keep on with this ... uh ... silly missionary business?**

**D**id you ever stop to think that there are twice as many Christians in the world as there are adherents of any other religion? Sure, non-Christians are still in the majority, but Christians have multiplied far faster than non-Christians, and every day



are increasing their percentage in virtually every country. But you'll say that a lot of those who call themselves Christians are not really born again. OK—if that is what you are getting at—this is one reason why some people have actually come out with the statement that there are fewer Christians today than before. But note that they are redefining the term *Christian* and are saying in effect that there are fewer *real* Christians today than there were *nominal* Christians at some point in the past. However, even if you want to talk merely about real, honest-to-goodness evangelical Christians, there is still no doubt that there are more such Christians today than “then” and that their percentage is increasing in every country of the world. Sorry!

You don't believe me? You'll say you heard somebody famous say that for every new Christian in Africa there were two Muslims and three Communists. Well, that was probably about 10 years ago when everybody was deathly afraid of the Communists. That was when all those little nations in

Africa were bursting into independence, and people thought they were all going Communist.

So much for the Communists. What about the Muslims? Sorry, but the latest evaluation<sup>1</sup> of the situation shows the Muslims to be barely holding their own as the population expands while the Christians of Africa are increasing at twice the rate of population expansion—and *have been ever since 1900!* The facts are incontrovertible: Christians were 3% of the population in 1900, are 28% of population today and at present rates will be 46% by the end of the century.

The same sort of steady increase in the Christian percentage of population is taking place almost everywhere else—indeed wherever Christians are winning others. Why would it be otherwise? Any evangelistic faith, as a matter of fact, so long as it doesn't oppose marriage and does successfully win others is bound to increase its percentage of the population. It is like a surfboard which rises as fast as the tide and

can outrace even the waves, if it half tries. It expands by a wholly different mechanism than biological growth. Remember, too, raw totals aren't so important; it is the *rate* of growth that counts. Cattle greatly outnumbered rabbits in Australia in 1890, even in net annual increase. But you know what happened!

The trouble with Americans is that they are so terribly knowledgeable about everything in the world except Christianity. You've never read anything in the average newspaper about the seven evangelical churches in Da Nang, Viet Nam. The average college student—even one majoring on the Far East—doesn't know that there are 2,000 Christian churches in the city of Seoul, Korea. The university curriculum may include courses on the history of cosmetics, but how many universities have even a single course on the history of the Christian missionary enterprise? (And yet no single human endeavor has had anything like its combination of durability, duration, scope and impact.) There are uni-

versity courses on the great cathedrals of Europe, but few students stop to wonder what transformed those rascally, murderous, superstitious, head-hunting savages of northern Europe into the builders of cathedrals.

“OK, OK, OK,” you say. “So I’m going to have to patch up my somewhat brain-washed American education.” But how will you do it? What courses can you take; what books can you read? You want the facts, not just what Christians said, but what they actually did. Wouldn’t it be great if some student went home from a mission convention and became a professional historian and then spent, say, fifteen years writing an objective re-examination of the whole story of the growth and expansion of the Christian movement down through the centuries and across the globe? Guess what? Somebody did. His name is Latourette. Don’t get me started on him—a widely respected scholar and evangelical. Just buy that seven-volume story, now in paperback. Maybe you’ll settle for his one-volume summary.<sup>2</sup>

**You make it sound like Christianity is so successful that I guess I'm not needed. Or maybe I'm not even wanted overseas. Say, that's a thought!**

**M**aybe you're the person who has heard about the fantastic growth of the Pentecostal churches in Latin America, about the congregation in São Paulo, Brazil, that is building an auditorium that will seat 25,000 people. Or you've heard that some missionaries are being invited to leave because national leaders are taking over, etc. Aren't things different now? Isn't this a "new day"? In other words, in the last question the missionary had so miserably failed there was no use picking up where he left off. In this question the missionary has so fantastically succeeded that he's worked himself out of a job.

Well, it is a fact that in the majority of cases (where there are national churches) the national Christians are running things today. Would you believe there are 5,000 completely new denominations in Africa

that have no connection whatsoever to overseas Christians, and that the biggest, fastest-growing national churches in Latin America do not in any very significant way depend upon foreign churches? (Even the small size, No. 2 church of some 200 congregations with which I worked in Central America, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala, has not for over 35 years received any U.S. funds for pastors' salaries or church buildings.)

This is great! All over the world there are now autonomous, self-supporting national churches. Not just in India, but in every state of India. OK, but there are still 500 million unevangelized people in India. Worse still, while the 12 million Christians in India are an outstanding testimony to the power of Christ, 98% of them have come from the "untouchable" stratum of society and are not necessarily the ones best able to reach the 350 million Caste Hindus who have thus far been virtually untouched. India, anyone?

**All right, but what about those leaders in the overseas churches that don't want foreign missionaries? Do I just go and say, "Here I am, you lucky people," and hope they will want me after all?**



Obviously you can't force yourself on church leaders who don't want you. But there happen to be more places than ever before where you are really desperately wanted. Real love, however, is not thin-skinned. We do not follow Christ in search of welcoming parties or applause. Furthermore, the irritation of just a few national leaders can blind us to an ocean of high esteem and good will built up by sacrificial efforts over many decades.

The major mission fields today, however, are not anyone's privileged sanctuary. How can leaders in one group in one part of a country speak for some other totally unreached group? Suppose the Christian Ibos were to say "Missionary Go Home!" Do they speak for all Nigeria? There are—this is great—maybe 50 tribal groups in Nigeria

with solid Christian communities in their midst; but there are 200 other major tribal groups that are barely touched—4 million Fulani and 15 million Hausa, for example. We must be very diplomatic, of course. But a century ago we didn't let the Caste Hindus stop us from reaching the "untouchable" class. Today we must not let the millions of Christians from that class prevent us from reaching the hundreds of millions of Caste Hindus. Did Jesus let the Jews stop him from witnessing to the Samaritans? Anyhow, do you abandon a whole nation as soon as you've established a church in one or two of dozens of drastically different sub-nations?

Think about this, too: Even where there are well-established churches we must not suppose "our job is done." Once the national church takes hold the task becomes more fascinating and delicate than ever, as two Christian—but culturally very different—communities enter into permanent symbiosis (sorry, no other word will do). God did not intend any one culture to be self-



sufficient.

**Hey, man, you're backing me into a corner! What about this business (well, it's not my feeling, of course, but some people feel this way) that we've turned a corner in international relations and should not be, ah, religiously aggressive?**

**W**hat are you hinting at? You remind me of a white-haired missionary retired from Pakistan who told me sadly that her daughter was going back to Pakistan but with the Peace Corps. I remonstrated, talked up the Peace Corps. But it didn't seem to help. Then with some hesitation the mother told me what her daughter had said just before leaving: "Mother, I'm not going back to Pakistan as a missionary because I don't believe we have any right to cram our religion down other people's throats."

I admire the girl. I really do. Americans and Westerners in general are at this very moment engaged in the most colossal

snow job in all history, pushing our life ways off on the other people of this planet. We are bogging the whole world down with colored sugar water (and worse) plus the right-out-of-the-U.S. bottling plants to go with it.<sup>3</sup> The Communists railed for twenty years at the mild-mannered Muslim Indonesians for accepting a foreign faith (the Koran had to be in Arabic, you have to pray toward Mecca, etc., etc.). But they could not hang this kind of thing on the Christians. The Christians' book speaks Javanese, their music and musical instruments are Javanese, their church structures strikingly indigenous.

Funny thing, Christianity is the only world religion that does not have a cultural home base. In fact, the Christians' Bible is the one book that most strenuously denounces any kind of cultural conformity as a substitute for the transformation of the inner man. Indeed, a good deal of Paul's letters are taken up with insisting that the Greeks did not have to adopt the Jewish culture to be Christian. Remember, Paul

said that membership is open to Jews, but also to Greeks, Barbarians, Scythians, slaves, even women!<sup>4</sup> Just as Christianity began the liberation of women, it also began the movement—which we today must complete—to recognize every language, every culture, every people, every person as equally acceptable to God. In becoming Christian, every culture—as every person—will undergo a profound inner transformation the more it apprehends the will of God. In the process, the cultural and individual personalities are not destroyed but turned on, enhanced by the Spirit of the Living God.

Was the girl who went to Pakistan thinking of the Crusaders, or of the Spanish nationalists who dealt so uncharitably with both Jew and Moor in 1492? (Must we blame on Jesus Christ everything pseudo-Christians do?) Did she realize that in no other role than that of a missionary would she have been as freely allowed and encouraged to study and respect the national culture of Pakistan? that the great mass of

the Christians in Pakistan, once a down-trodden, out-caste group, were strikingly lifted and liberated, not tyrannized? that during most of the period of English occupation the British did not support and back up the missionaries, but did all they could to prevent them from going to India at all?

Or was she thinking of the movie *Hawaii*, where—according to the movie—the missionaries smashed up the native religion? (Fortunately, that and many other things happened only in the movie. The island religion had collapsed 40 years before the first missionaries arrived.) But there is not space in this little booklet to combat all the distortions in popular ideas about the history of missionary activity.<sup>5</sup> Granted Western cultural influences are a massive force in the non-Western countries today. The true Christian missionary is the one person who is committed to something far more profound and basic.

**I've still got a problem. I'm convinced there's still a great job to do. But I'm hung up on the matter of having to work through existing organizations. I don't want to work in an outfit that's bogged down by old fogies. Dave Howard's book<sup>6</sup> shows that students can really do something if they can run their own show.**

**Y**ou're right! The Student Volunteer Movement produced its own leadership. Its story is staggering. (Imagine 800 students at Yale in Bible study groups—when Yale was one-fifth as large as it is today.) But in the main those students went overseas under already existing boards.

**Yeah, but they actually took over some of those boards. What about Robert E. Speer? Wasn't he out for football practice one day (and with another year of seminary to go) when a messenger asked him if he would accept the position of secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions?**


**A**ll right, that was a stroke of genius. Even so, in those days most of the decisions were made on the fields overseas by democratic vote of the missionaries involved. Don't think the SVM captured everything overnight.

However, no one is stopping you from starting your own organization. One hundred and forty-five new mission agencies have been started since the Second World War. George Verwer, who spoke at Urbana 67, started his own. He bought a ship to use, in part, as an off-shore parking lot and auto-service center to make it easier for foreign vehicles operating in India to leave the country every six months (as the law re-

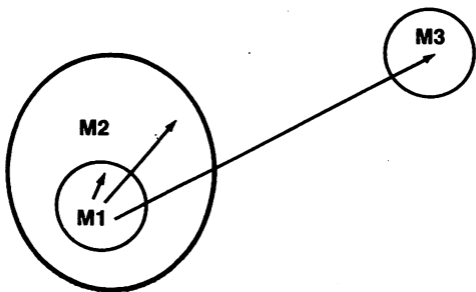
quires). Now what older agency would have thought of a thing like that? Youth's creativity is a fabulous asset to the cause. (I wonder if George doesn't need some patient, experienced older person to keep that ship afloat.) The combination of youthful ingenuity and older patience is unbeatable.

Anyone starting from scratch will do well to take a good look at the agencies already at it. A short-term experience under one of them would no doubt be helpful. You might be surprised at how many youthful executives there are. The Sudan Interior Mission, for example, has a full-time Ph.D. director of research, and he is not an old fogey.

**Why not work at home? Didn't you skip over the idea, a few questions back, about cleaning up in our own nation first?**

 'll grant you missions is not just a matter of geography. The crucial question is not *where* you work, but *at what cultural distance*. In the diagram,  $M_1$  means mission to people in your own cultural sphere, using your mother

tongue, whether in the U.S. or in an American community in a foreign city. M<sub>2</sub> means mission to people at a slight cultural distance, like, say, a U.S. Anglo dealing with people who are essentially European, such as the Spanish-speaking people of Los Angeles, Mexico or Argentina. M<sub>3</sub> means mission to people who are totally other: Navajo, Chinese or Zulu.



Very simply, it is not that M<sub>3</sub> mission is *holier*. It is *harder*. The culture shock is




greater. Not everyone can be effective in an  $M_3$  task. You can at least try. It also happens that the great bulk of the need is at the  $M_3$  distance from the vast majority of Christians. However, even if that were not true, even if the  $M_3$  tasks were not bigger in aggregate than the  $M_1$  and  $M_2$  tasks, it is still true that for everyone who is really *able* to handle an  $M_3$  job, there must be nine people who can't but who *can* handle an  $M_1$  or perhaps  $M_2$  cultural distance. A good course in cultural anthropology will help a great deal, but cross-cultural empathy is not merely a matter of training. Some people have it, some don't. If you've got it, you surely don't need to feel guilty about leaving  $M_1$  and  $M_2$  jobs for others.

Furthermore, trying out for  $M_3$  isn't a bad idea even if you end up later in an  $M_1$  or  $M_2$  task. Even a limited amount of  $M_3$  experience will tend to give you an outsider's insight into your own culture that you can't get any other way. Maybe the best way to understand the Christian faith is to see it in action at close range in two utter-

ly dissimilar societies. (Is this possibly the reason Christianity does not remain healthy among those who are not actively trying to give it away to people *at a cultural distance?*)

**I hate to say this, but I cringe at the thought of the kids back at school getting wind of any real interest in missions on my part.**

 remember being embarrassed as we approached the Guatemalan border, driving through Mexico. I wanted to tell them I was an anthropologist and just not mention *missionary*. (You know, no use stirring up prejudices—after all, my most advanced degree was in the field of anthropology.) Now I'm embarrassed about being embarrassed. Doubly: I was not in Guatemala long before I discovered that missionaries were quite well known, especially in the rural areas, and very highly respected, while the few people who had heard the word *anthropologist* before often recalled with some distress the long-haired hippie types. Rightly or wrongly.

Depending on the environment you have grown up in, you may never completely avoid all embarrassment. Look, I'm a hardcore, card-carrying religious fanatic, but in certain circumstances I still feel twinges of embarrassment. Don't you think Christ felt it too? How about when he was on the cross, and they jeered out "He saved others; himself he could not save"? But Jesus, "for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame." To follow *him* is your choice. You're warned! But don't forget the *joy*.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>David Barrett, "AD 2000: 350 Million Christians in Africa," *International Review of Mission*, 59, No. 233 (Jan. 1970).
- <sup>2</sup>Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I-VII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970). *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row).
- <sup>3</sup>Ralph D. Winter, *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years, 1945-1969* (South Pasadena, Cal.: William Carey Library, 1970). See "Cultural Imperialism," p. 16.
- <sup>4</sup>Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11.
- <sup>5</sup>The best resource for a balanced view is Latourette. See also Horace L. Fenton, Jr., *Myths about Missions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973).
- <sup>6</sup>David M. Howard, *Student Power in World Evangelism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1970).

The author, who graduated from Cal Tech in engineering and took pilot training in the Naval Air Corps during World War II, didn't exactly fall into missions. After floundering around in several graduate schools, he was doing Ph.D. studies in anthropology when the thought struck him that everywhere anthropologists went, missionaries were there before (and after). Working under the United Presbyterian Church, he and his family spent ten years with Mayan Indians in Guatemala. Since 1966 he has been on special assignment with the Fuller School of World Mission. He is the author of *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years, 1945-1969*.

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