

The Discipling of Africa in This Generation

Dr. D. A. McGavran

Conditions in animistic Africa encourage the belief that all Africa south of the Sahara may be disciplined in this generation. Despite many problems and difficulties, whose reality and seriousness cannot be gainsaid, the supremely important fact in regard to Africa is that, barring its Moslem population, practically all the rest of its people are able within this present century to be won to Christian faith.

Seven great reasons make this likely. 1. A younger church of twenty millions has been established largely within the last fifty years. 2. A vast animistic exodus is going on which will deliver scores of millions of animists to other faiths in the next thirty years. 3. The rising economic potential of Africa makes it relatively easy for the pastorale to be self-supporting from the beginning and for church income to rise with the rising income of the membership. 4. The strong sense of community, the tribalism which is the life of all Africans, makes group accessions available to speed sound church growth. 5. Present relatively quiet political conditions are favourable to church growth. 6. Many governments in Africa are friendly to the idea of the discipling of Africa. 7. It has now been universally recognized that, despite their present primitiveness in many places, Africans are potentially as able a race as any and hence their discipling is as desirable as any. These and other favourable conditions mean that vast numbers of growing multiplying churches can now be established and that the conversion to Christian faith of Africa south of the Sahara is now possible in the foreseeable future.

This situation is vitally important to the Christian Churches. Africa offers incomparably great opportunities for church growth. Fifty million persons may be won for Christ in the next thirty years. No such open door has ever faced Christendom. Here is a continent which may be brought into the kingdom of Christ in this generation. We cannot say that the African opportunity is merely somewhat more favourable than that in other countries. The difference in degree has become so great that it amounts to a difference in kind. In Africa there is a new dimension in missions. Elsewhere "missions" means world friendship, sowing the seed, doing good in the name of Christ, winning one or two per cent of the country for Christ, cooperating with a national church which thirty years from now will comprise a very small minority of the total population. But in Africa south of the Sahara, "missions" means reaping the harvest, winning ninety per cent of the population to Christian faith and cooperating with a national church which thirty years from now will comprise a huge majority of the total population. The unparalleled and momentous nature of the Africa opening, to the visitor from India, towers up above the horizon like Mount Everest.

Yet curiously and tragically the tremendous and unique call of an entire continent in process of turning to Christ is seldom clearly heard. The older churches and their missions seem unaware of the one continent which can be--not

merely evangelized but--disciplined in this generation. Consequently in many places open doors are left unentered, boys are sent to do men's jobs, individuals instead of tribes are claimed for Christ, the denominations of Protestantism, from Anglicans to Pentacostalists, work as separate uncoordinated churches and priceless opportunities are permanently lost. There are several reasons for this 'ordinary approach to an extraordinary situation.'

First, is the equalitarian doctrine which underlies so much of modern missions. Equalitarianism asserts that missions must be carried out everywhere--'to all the world'--and therefore all missions must be considered equally valuable. According to this doctrine a mission board would correctly nourish work in Africa in proportion as it was able to nourish its other missions elsewhere; and mission boards would correctly be only relatively interested in Africa--as in one responsibility among many. The custom of treating Africa as just one more mission field to take its turn at missionary funds and staff along with many other fields where a growing conquering church has not yet been established and probably cannot be for the next thirty years is very widespread. As a result, the magnitude of the Christian harvest in Africa is not seen, and, if it is seen, it is not acted upon.

Second, is the fact that our times have seen a great development in the auxiliary services of Christian Missions. The true end of missions is obscured by the multiplicity of good things done by missions. The centrality of baptizing the peoples is hidden by a plethora of services rendered to the unbaptized peoples. Thus when the sudden opportunity to induct animistic Africa into the Christian Church in this generation presents itself, the eyes of Christian leaders are blinded by the many good works now being carried on by missions--good works which are expected to result in no disciplining at all.

Third, is the fact that the central task of missions is obscured by some of the problems which make up part of that task. There are unquestionably grave problems in connection with missions in Africa. To lead disciplined tribes into such a deep and real knowledge of God that each member becomes a 'born again' Christian; to combat race pride amongst white people which is such a real stumbling block to Africans and such a real denial of the gospel; to lift a hundred million people into literacy; to secure social justice for the economically exploited; to develop African leadership and turn over to it the management of church and mission; while using the magnificent educational opportunities of today for the benefit of the African, to prepare for the years ahead when states will not do all their education through churches;--all these and many others are urgent tasks. Yet they are not the main task and must not take its place--that is disciplining the peoples. These accompanying tasks can be undertaken with the greatest chance of success if the actual induction of the peoples into the Christian Church proceeds at the greatest rate of speed. None of the tasks can be successfully accomplished if half of the animists--or all of them--become Moslems or Communists! It is poor mission strategy to forget that the baptizing of unbaptized peoples in this generation when they want to be baptized is the central task. Only if it is accomplished will these other problems find their satisfactory solution. Yet Satan always suggests that it would be better strategy to stop disciplining for a while to pay attention to some accompanying problem. Naturally Satan suggests the course which obscures the call of God to bring His people out of bondage NOW.

Fourth, amongst some the opportunity is not seen because of the preoccupation with individualistic processes, concepts and habits of evangelism and church

growth, in a day when whole peoples (tribes) are being called by God to leave Egypt for Canaan. Hendrik Kraemer gives much credit for the rapid discipling of sections of Indonesia to the fact that some of the earlier missionaries "claimed whole tribes for Christ" rather than attempting to convert a few persons out of the tribes to Christian faith. Acquaintance with group conversion, so urged by Dr. Warnshuis and Bishop Pickett, would enable Christians to recognize the magnitude of the African opportunity.

Fifth, the opportunity is sometimes not seen because with the more advanced African churches, whose independence of action is rightly respected by missions, great opportunities fail to be recognized or grasped while mission and church are engaged in respecting each other's rights. Thus for example, there are tremendous opportunities in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast, but utterly inadequate efforts to meet these are being talked about by the strong national churches of southern and central Gold Coast and the missions close their eyes to the open door because it is in the churches' field.

Sixth, the concept of a planned discipling of a ready continent is something novel to those accustomed to thinking of missions as cautious advance among resistant non-Christians. That a ready continent really exists can hardly be conceived. Though for many years we have been praying for His kingdom to come, it is difficult to believe that all of Africa south of the Sahara can now be turned to Christ. The day of large scale coordination of missionary effort to serve a tremendous exodus of men, women and children from their lands of bondage has arrived, and is so unexpected that we scarcely know what to do with it. The sociological and theological understandings of such movements or whole peoples is largely lacking. We are trying to shepherd peoples with the tools used for a one-by-one process of conversion. All this demands (a) that the attention of the churches of the world be focused on the overwhelming opportunity for the discipling of Africa; and (b) that a strategy of massive ingathering be initiated and given an absolute priority in men and resources.

How long the favourable conditions described in the beginning of this statement will last no one knows. Many signs indicate that they will not last long. They are here today. They will probably not be here thirty years from now. The extremely favourable situation strikes anyone coming into Africa from Asia. But equally certainly any visitor from Asia is quite sure that the revolutionary tide which has engulfed Asia will engulf Africa. The time is short. Among the factors which urge haste are the following.

At present an inactive Islam lies all across the northern edge of animistic Africa and deeply infiltrates all of East Africa. Even in its relatively inactive state many of the tribes of West Africa are adopting it as the easiest world religion into which to emerge. Should Islam become active with many Moslem nations coming to self consciousness, its rate of advance would be greatly accelerated.

The uneasy political condition throughout the world threatens multiplication of disturbances such as Mau Mau and of major changes in control such as those anticipated in Nigeria. As such changes occur, the work of discipling may become much more difficult. Now is the accepted time....

1971 Comment by Donald McGavran

"The Discipling of Africa in This Generation" was written in October 1954. I had gathered the evidence on which it was based in April, May and

June 1954 during a trip across Africa from Mombasa to Accra by train, car, bus, truck, paddled canoe and airplane.

Church Growth Bulletin seldom prints sixteen year-old observations; but is doing so this time for three cogent reasons.

a) This good news was so unexpected that it was not believed, and today it must be. When, in October 1954, the report was read out to a New York gathering of mission executives convened by the chairman of the Africa Committee, it was met with amused scepticism. When, in January 1955, it was circulated as the mimeographed document reproduced above, it elicited no resolve to multiply resources in Africa, no determination to learn how better to disciple those who wanted to be followers of the Lord, no survey to see whether these extraordinary affirmations were really true, and indeed no interest at all. Such scepticism and unbelief should now end.

b) "The Discipling of Africa in This Generation" is now supported by much additional data which makes action even more desirable and urgent. Dr. Barrett's considered forecast that Christians in Africa will by the year A.D. 2000 number 357,000,000 was first published in the Church Growth Bulletin for May 1969. The enlarged form, in the January 1970 issue. This scientific forecast - widely quoted since by Time and other national news magazines - abundantly supports the 1955 article, which can no longer be shrugged off. The mighty discipling is going on and will continue for the next few decades. Nothing can stop it, though large scale withdrawing of missions can slow it down and reduce its Christian color. Whole highly winnable tribes can turn to Marxism, Materialism, or Islam.

c) Grave danger exists that what happened in 1955 will happen again in 1971. Barrett's forecasts and other similar reports of receptive peoples may again be read with 'amused scepticism'. It is still possible for open doors to be left unentered, to send boys to do the work of men, for individuals to be claimed for Christ instead of tribes, and for priceless opportunities to be permanently lost. What the day demands is sacrificial action. Missionary societies, supporting laymen and ministers, missionaries, and African church leaders of note should so center prayer, giving, evangelism, discipling and perfecting on Africa that the great turning now in process continues a deeply Christian process and leads tens of millions to an intimate knowledge of the Saviour and His Word, making possible marked ethical and cultural advance.

This 1955 article is being reprinted with the prayer that the massive pessimism with which great commission missions are regarded in many quarters will be replaced with a sober understanding of the new day which God gives the Churches and a firm resolve to respond to these unprecedented opportunities as Christians should. The next thirty years must see

The Discipling of Africa South of the Sahara.