

DOES THE WORLD CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT NEED A FOURTH ERA?

By Max W. Chismon

The late Dr. Ralph Winter identified three eras of the modern missionary movement, the coastlands, the inlands, and the hidden peoples or unreached peoples, together with the pioneers of those movements, William Carey and Hudson Taylor of the first and second eras, respectively, and McGavran and Townsend of the third era! These eras have shaped the world Christian movement over the past two hundred plus years with astounding results.

Beginning in Europe, in the latter part of the 18th century, the first era saw the evangelical gospel begin its journey from the 'West to the Rest'. Today, the 'good news' is known on every inhabitable continent on earth and in every country of the world. At the start of the first era, the non-western Church represented only around 1% of the world's evangelical population. Today, and through the courageous pioneering efforts of those missionaries, it now represents some 80% of the global evangelical Church. In fact, today, more 'missionaries' are going from the Rest back to the West, than in the traditional direction!

There has also been a dramatic shift in the political landscape from what characterized those three eras. The previous eras of 'modern mission' were carried out in the context of the colonial era. Changes in the political landscape took a dramatic turn following the 2nd World War. Dr. Ralph Winter in his little booklet entitled 'The Unbelievable Years', noted that in a brief twenty-five-year period (from 1945 to 1969), Western control of the world went from 99.5% to just 0.5%. The age of Colonialism has passed and Globalism is the new context in which we now do mission.

All this means that the world's remaining unreached and Christ's followers are now in the closest proximity, ever! We are close, not just geographically, but more importantly, culturally and linguistically. In fact, never before in all of history does the Church speak so many languages.

So, does this 'new fact of our time' - of a globalized Church in a globalized world - mark a new era in world mission? Could these new realities be a 'game changer' and, if identified by a 'new era', see the Church gather in the greatest harvest ever and even finish the task?

Some say yes but, to date, no identifiable fourth era seems to have struck a chord nor captured the collective imagination of the missionary and/or Church community, and – some would argue – for good reason!

There are those who are adamant that the third era, identified as reaching unreached peoples, is the final era and that no new era needs to be added nor should be added.

But surely some new trumpet call does need sounding?

Mobilizers, historically, have identified and trumpeted a new 'era'. In so doing, the collective imagination and energy of God's people have, albeit at times, slowly and reluctantly, rallied themselves and responded, resulting in outstanding missional progress.

Observing the Signs

Often a slump, or the beginning of autumn (fall), is a sign that a summer has passed. A new summer, we know, will eventually arrive, but autumn and winter has to do their all-important preparative work before it does. So, perhaps we are in an autumn slump or wintery season? Mission seems to be in a slump – at least it does in the West. It seems to be losing its appeal in general, and mission knowledge seems to be somewhat evading the new generation (I was asked recently by a youth leader following a Sunday service, what a furlough was, which I had mentioned my wife and I were on in my sermon introduction). Our quest as mobilizers to see mission as central in all churches seems as far away as ever, if not further.

And blowing the same 'finishing the task' trumpet call a whole lot louder, doesn't seem to be working either. This 'tune' doesn't seem to be resonating as it once did and the new generation of God's people seem somewhat indifferent to the mobilizing message of yesteryear. And perhaps for good reason - which brings me to the main point of this article.

Mission has been designed by God to involve 'the whole Church'. It is the 24/7 vocation of all God's people. Embedded in our call to salvation is the call to be on mission with God! Mission is not just a nice idea - it is a God idea, and for very good reason. Mission completes God's full agenda for this age!

So, why aren't all God's people enthusiastically engaged in mission with God? Either the Church is in a horribly backslidden state, or perhaps we as mobilizers have not been blowing the trumpet loud enough - or we have got our 'message' wrong. I subscribe to the latter!

Reshaping Our Understanding of Mission

Not being a Biblical word, as such, mission needs defining. Through the ages, the distinctives of each spiritual and historical era have guided the development of those definitions. In addition, 'missiology' has been the primary theology employed by the Church to guide our missional understanding, especially during the modern missionary period. Missiology has focused, primarily and understandably, on the 'harvest' and as a result areas of 'harvest concern' were identified - coastlands, inland and unreached peoples.

I would suggest that this theological approach, although not incorrect, is on its own incomplete. As a result, mission has been defined in such a way so as to favor apostolic ministries - those charged with taking the gospel cross-culturally to regions beyond (2Co 10:16). This singular approach, however has inadvertently marginalized other significant expressions of the Body of Christ. As mentioned before, mission was always designed by God to involve the whole Church in taking the whole gospel to the whole world. A 24/7 vocation to be stewarded by the entire Body of Christ!

The main 'theology' that has been missing that would make our definition more inclusive and accurate is 'mobiology': the study of all God's people on mission with God!

The apostle Paul clearly saw missiology and mobiology working closely together and being indispensable to each other (something like a husband and wife partnership)! Paul of course didn't use the terms 'missiology' and 'mobiology', instead he used the terms apostolic and prophetic. These two ministries were identified by Paul as the two leadership ministries to the Church (Eph 2:20, 1Co 12:28). They were designed by God and given to keep the Church on track in its vocation to be on mission with God, throughout all generations, until the task be complete.

If missiology's main concern is with the 'harvest', then mobiology's concern is with the 'harvesters'! Not with the training of the 'harvesters' for cross-cultural ministry, but in calling all God's people to embrace a life on mission with God and local churches to be missional by facilitating God's people on mission with God!

There are so many tangents we could now explore on this issue but let's stick with the subject at hand - defining mission!

So, when mobiology is included in defining mission, what might such a definition look like?

There are two parts in the development of this definition. Firstly, God's part (the mission of God) and secondly, our part (the mission of God's people). Let's begin with a brief snapshot of 'the mission of God'!

The Mission of God

The mission of God is huge! Paul sums up God's mission as the 'reconciliation of all things - things on earth and things in heaven (Col 1:20, Ac 3:21, Rev 21-22). Elaborating on this further we could say that the mission of God is the full and glorious realization of all that God planned and purposed from before the world began, the start of which we see in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, and the end vision which we glimpse in Revelation chapters 21 and 22. Absolutely and gloriously stunning! This is a vision worth living for and if proclaimed clearly and passionately would capture the imagination of all God's people – young and old alike. This is classic mobiology!

The Mission of God's People

God in His infinite wisdom apportioned something from His greater mission for us to engage with Him on and, together with Him, complete! This we can refer to as the 'mission of God's people' and it is to 'make disciples of all the nations' as clearly stated by Jesus following His resurrection (Mt 28:19).

Engaging us in a portion of His greater mission is not a random decision, but a continuation of what God started in the beginning when he engaged *man* as a co-labor in stewarding His creation towards its full and complete realization (Gen 1:26).

Redemption is not just about forgiveness of sins. It is about reconciling us back to this original purpose. Nor is it taking us back to where Adam left off. It is continuing on from where Christ left off (Jn 17:11,18). In this age, laboring together with God is defined by fruitful engagement with God on mission (Jn 15).

Such engagement with God on mission is not to 'give God a hand' in our spare time – it's about us becoming what God purposed from before the beginning and has redeemed us for, in Christ! And it is about preparing us for what we are destined to be and the vocation we are to fulfill, in God's new world. John, in Revelation, sees us as Kings and Priests serving God for all eternity and as Christ's Bride — being for the last Adam what Eve was to be for the first Adam. Engaging with God on mission is as much about our transformation and preparation for eternal ages, as it is about reaching unreached peoples and saving unsaved people. Mission is as much about the 'journey' as it is the destination!

Elaborating on the Mission of God's People

Just how then, is the whole Church meant to engage meaningfully with God on mission? The key is in understanding what it means to 'make disciples of all the nations'.

I would like to suggest three critical phases to this task.

Phase One: Reaching Unreached Peoples

The command to 'make disciples of all the nations' was given, in the first instance, to Jewish believers (Mt 28:19). The very nature of this task, therefore, was cross-cultural from the beginning! From an 'unreached peoples' perspective this is always done by foreigners, as a community of Christ followers within a people group (nation) simply doesn't, at this stage, exist. In mission language, we call this E2 or E3.

Phase Two: Evangelism Among a Reached People Group

Phase two is the sharing of the gospel with people within a reached people group. Peter declares that God's will is that 'none perish but that all come to repentance' (1 Pe 3:9). This can only happen if the gospel is shared with every individual in every people group. The very nature of this task (phase two) necessitates it be carried out by the people belonging to that people group - not by foreign missionaries.

A good way to illustrate the importance of this is to ask for a show of hands, from a congregation one Sunday morning, as to how many were led to faith in Christ by a foreigner. One or two hands might be raised but not usually more than that. The vast majority will respond with raised hands when asked how many were led to Christ by someone of their own culture. In mission language, we call this E1.

Phase Three: Displaying Christ's Coming Kingdom.

Phase three is all about 'transformed communities of Christ followers' displaying, through their individual and corporate lives, that 'new creation' (Christ's Kingdom) has now begun, as a result of Christ's death and resurrection (2 Cor 5:17, Ga 6:15). Phase three is where mission, in this age, reaches its climax. It is where a people group gets a glimpse, a foretaste, of God's coming new world through His Church. Not perfectly, of course, as transformation is a journey and as James mentioned, 'we all stumble in many ways' (Ja 3:2). But love, acceptance and forgiveness is, in itself, a powerful display of Christ's Kingdom in action in this current age!

What is the Goal of Mission?

Interestingly, Matthew records the words of Jesus when He made reference to 'when the end will come'! It is all to do with the gospel being preached in all the world and Christ's Kingdom becoming a witness to all the nations (Mt 24:14). Once this witness is achieved, in every nation (people group), the end will come. Christ will return and God's promised new world will commence. It should be understood that God's 'time table' is more of a 'task table,' the fulfillment of a purpose - His divine purpose for this age.

The goal of mission therefore is the display of Christ's Kingdom, through His redeemed and transformed people, in each and every people group. This can only happen through mission and this therefore defines mission.

So, What Then is the Priority?

Reaching unreached peoples, is the starting point - it is not the final goal. Yes, it is the priority, but only in the sense that the fuller agenda of God cannot be outworked without people groups first being reached. And it is the priority for those especially tasked with this ministry, such as cross-cultural missionaries, mission agencies, cross-cultural training institutions etc.

But what about evangelism within a reached people group? Is this not the priority? Well, yes, it is! Until this happens a transformed people of God cannot put Christ's Kingdom on display as God intends. Evangelism has to be the priority and it is (or ought to be) of every local church and should be pursued with vigor and passion.

But what about displaying Christ's Kingdom in reached people groups? Is this not the priority? Well, yes, indeed it is, as this marks the culmination of God's mission agenda for this age - and 'then the end will come' (Mt 24:14)!

Communities of Christ followers, displaying the reality of Christ's Kingdom, ought to be the end-vision of every cross-cultural worker, working in an unreached people group and of every local church that exists within a community, evangelizing with vigor and passion.

Mission is Bigger than We Think

In His infinite wisdom, God designed 'the mission of His people' to involve every believer, 24/7 and every expression of the Body of Christ (sodality and modality) and in such a way that unless there is full unity, cooperation and synergy between all expressions, then mission (as God intended) simply doesn't get done.

Mission is apostolic ministries taking the gospel to regions beyond (2 Cor 10:16). Mission is the local church sharing the gospel within their communities (1Thes 1:8). Mission is the local church partnering meaningfully with missionaries in taking the gospel to regions beyond (Phi 1:4-5, 4:10-19). Mission is missionaries circling back into local churches, reporting, educating and challenging for 'frontier' ministry (1Thes 3:10). Mission is the church shining as stars in a depraved generation which, in fact, was Paul's end vision and what he saw as the climax of his labor and his anticipated 'boast' when Christ returns (Phil 2:15-16). This is mission! This is 'discipling the nations' and it involves the whole Church, with the various expressions of the Church contributing in their unique way - concerned not only with their own 'interests' but also with the 'interests' of other expressions (Phil 2:4). We are on mission with God - together! Mission is the whole Church understanding the whole picture and working together towards its glorious conclusion.

This is mission the way Christ intended, and fulfills the full complement of God's agenda for this age. It reaps the harvest and refines the grain for use in Christ's Kingdom when it comes in fullness.

The divisions within the Body of Christ, the shortsightedness, the self-interest, the passionate pursuits that inadvertently marginalize others - all in the name of mission, has, absolutely no place in the mission Christ has fashioned for his people.

Has a new generation rejected the call to 'finish the task' or have they rejected the way in which this noble cause has been presented? Has our prophetic call gone unheeded or is the Holy Spirit no longer tolerating the way in which it is being delivered? The greatest days for world mission are before us. God will use His people for this harvest: we are His 'plan A' and He has no 'plan B'. But, as always, it is the harvesters that is the problem - not the harvest (Mat 9:37). We, as mobilizers, must get the message right. Once we do this, we will see the mobilization of God's people on the scale that we have always dreamed of, hoped and prayed for but, to date, have never seen.

So, Is There a Fourth Era?

My personal position is that there is not! As far as the harvest field is concerned, the third era completes the identification as to precisely what the harvest is, how it can be reaped and where the harvest fields are! The problem has been that we have not fully understood God's bigger purpose, that He had in mind, in engaging His people, with Him, on mission.

The challenge is for us 'mobilizers' is to re-examine our message, get the 'prophetic message' right, then begin blowing the trumpet with the clear sound God intends us to sound - 1 Cor 14:8 Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?

A 'sound' that will capture the collective imagination of all God's people - every expression of the Body of Christ, to enthusiastically and sacrificially, join with God on mission.

So, perhaps, not a new era but an incredibly important new phase to era 3. A globalized Church doing mission in a globalized world - it doesn't get much better than that!

The outcome might not just be the greatest harvest ever, including the world's remaining unreached peoples, it might even include the greatest display of 'new creation' the world has ever seen!

Now, wouldn't that be something?