

## Christian Missions in the New Century

by Bassam M. Madany, October 2000

The Lord Jesus Christ commissioned his apostles to go into the world and proclaim the Good News. He designated several concentric circles that delineated the areas of labor for his church: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. While these were four distinct geographical locations, yet they were all situated within the Roman Empire. There were two distinct peoples to reach: Jews and Gentiles. The latter were free to worship any god as long as they participated in the cult of the emperor. The Jews were tolerated in their worship of the one God. From time to time, they came under persecution and were banished from living in certain areas of the Empire.

Apostles, evangelists, and church members proclaimed the Christian message throughout the Mediterranean world. They used Greek, a common language, and established local churches. Their message had a solid core: God sent His Son to accomplish our redemption. In response, we must repent from our sins, and receive the Messiah as Lord and Savior. There is no other name and no other way of salvation. (See Acts 4:12 & Hebrews 1)

The believing church clung to this message of hope and adapted its delivery of the Good News to the different backgrounds of the hearers. I do not plan to make a survey of the variety of missionary methods employed during the last two millennia. I will simply contrast the conditions that surrounded the emergence of missions in the modern era with our present situation at the dawn of a new Millennium.

My thesis is that, in the Western world, we may no longer follow the study and practice of missions as we have been doing since the last decade of the eighteenth century.

Looking back at the missionary activities during the modern era (1792-1950), we notice the vast differences between those days and ours. The work of Gospel proclamation and the building of national churches overseas during the modern era that lasted around 150 years coincided with the emergence and growth of the empires of Great Britain, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Portugal, and Spain.

All this is a thing of the past. In the early nineteen sixties, prime minister Harold Macmillan of the United Kingdom, declared after his return from a tour of the British colonies in Africa: "The winds of change are blowing." First, Nigeria gained its independence, followed by other areas of the continent. Independent India and Pakistan had already emerged in 1947. That was followed by the disappearance of the Dutch presence in the East Indies and the French expulsion from Indochina. The last decade of the 20th century witnessed the dismantling of the vast Soviet Empire in central Asia

After World War II, a new demographic phenomenon surfaced. I refer to the migration and presence of large minorities from the former colonial territories to Western countries. Millions of Muslims and adherents of other world religions settled in Germany, The Netherlands, France, The United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Belgium, Spain, the United States, and Canada. There is no longer a great difference between foreign missions and home missions. This new situation requires a

serious consideration of how Western Christians must conduct their study and practice missions on the global scene.

Finally, we should not forget the changing religious climate within the West. Early in the modern era of missions, there existed significant doctrinal differences among European and American sending churches. However, they all agreed on the supremacy, uniqueness, and finality of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. That consensus no longer exists today. In the post-modern era, we have several theologies of pluralism that advocate the equal validity of all religions. Those churches and agencies that have succumbed to these unbiblical views have no distinctively Christian message to proclaim. Thus, unless we subscribe to the apostolic declaration of Acts 4:12: "There is no other name," we cannot claim that our 'mission' activities at home and abroad, are genuinely Christian missions.

These are some suggestions I make concerning the study and practice of missions during the new century. First, integrating the study of world religions with systematic theology must strengthen the theological training of ministers. Our present situation requires an augmenting of our field of theological knowledge. We need to learn and understand the basic tenets and practices of the followers of world religions who have become our neighbors. The foreign fields have come to us.

This change in the training of ministers to meet the challenge of our globalized world cannot take place over night. We need to prepare for it. When we make a realistic assessment of our times, we must come to the conclusion that the people of God in the pews do require some specific guidance now that they live in this new environment. They, more than the clergy, rub shoulders in the business and professional world with Hindus or Muslims, or Buddhists. At the same time, the prevailing cultural atmosphere that surrounds them is infused with the slogan that all faiths are equally valid. The pulpit may no longer assume that the average Western man or woman accepts the uniqueness of the Christian message. We must give Biblical reasons for our belief in the uniqueness and finality of the Christian faith. The author of Hebrews, for example, affirmed the superiority of our Lord Jesus Christ by giving two fundamental reasons: that the Son of God had always existed with the Father, that He had participated in the work of creation, and continues to be involved in the work of providence. But most of all, our Lord's uniqueness and superiority, according to the prologue of Hebrews, are due to the fact that He brought about our redemption. If consistent Christians appear to be so inflexible in their attachment to their heritage, this is not due to ethnic pride or arrogance, but simply to the great affirmations of the Scriptures regarding the uniqueness, finality and superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If so many spheres in our post-modern world are adjusting to the new conditions required by the globalization phenomenon, why should Christians be unwilling to realize the need to make some changes in the study and practice of missions? Let me repeat, I am not advocating any lessening of the role of the traditional Biblical and theological disciplines in the preparation of ministers for the New Millennium. All of the basics must be maintained. What is needed is the integration of a basic knowledge of the tenets of the major world religions, within the theological courses normally offered at Evangelical schools of theology. This adjustment will equip our ministers to properly lead their parishioners as they share the Good News with their new neighbors from overseas.