

# From the Ends of the Earth: Mission at Our Doorstep



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## **From the Ends of the Earth: Mission at Our Doorstep**

“Toto, I have a feeling this isn’t Kansas anymore!” With those now famous words, young Dorothy expressed her surprise at having been carried away from her quiet, traditional life, into a world that she could not have imagined even in her wildest dreams—a world of good and evil witches, of munchkins and wizards, of a cowardly lion and a sensitive scarecrow.

We may not have felt the cyclone. But in the last fifty years the world has changed in ways as astonishing as any young Dorothy had to face. My father used to tell us about one of his most memorable adventures when he was a young boy, and the family decided to go spend a few weeks at the beach. It took them a whole day to load an oxcart, and another whole day to get there—to a beach that was scarcely ten miles away! I can hardly imagine what he would have said if I told him that today you can buy an item in Manila with no more than a magnetic strip, and have it charged immediately to your bank account in Grand Rapids. I was living in San Juan exactly fifty years ago when I finished the manuscript for one of my first books, to be published in Buenos Aires, and it took me several weeks to find a reliable courier to take the manuscript to Argentina. Today, all I have to do is click “send,” and the manuscript is there! I may not even have noted the cyclone, but certainly, this isn’t Kansas anymore.

Just as the rest of society, the church too has been carried away by the invisible yet universal cyclone of the last decades. When I first went to seminary, in Cuba in 1954, every single one of our textbooks was either in English or translated from English. Today, it is quite common for seminarians in the United States and in England to use books originally written in

Spanish. Back then, the center of the church was in the North Atlantic. Theology was produced in the North Atlantic and translated into the languages of the south—Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Swahili. From the same center missionaries flowed southward.

Today, that is no longer the case. Theology is being written in Manila, in Lima, and in Seoul, and translated into English, French, and German. Missionaries are flowing from the South and the East to the North and the West. Today Puerto Rico alone sends more missionaries to New York than all the mission boards based in New York send to the entire world. Today there are more Pentecostals in Latin America than in the United States and Europe. As Philip Jenkins has stated, the typical Christian today is “a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the center is no longer in the North Atlantic.

This may be surprising and disturbing for many who grew up in the North Atlantic, hearing that the “white man’s burden,” or the “manifest destiny” of their land and culture was to enlighten the rest of the world with the light of the gospel. On the basis of that task, they raised money, they sent missionaries, they organized churches . . . How are they to cope now with a new world and a new church whose center they no longer are? Toto, this isn’t Kansas anymore!

In order to respond adequately to this new situation, it is important to realize at least six things:

The first is that the new situation is not a sign of the failure of missions, but rather of their success. Decades ago, missionaries felt that their task was to plant and develop churches

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 2.

that would be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. This goal has been achieved in most of the lands that were the recipients of Protestant missionary work fifty years ago. This is a story of the great success of the missionary enterprise. Even in lands where Christian mission was closely connected with colonialism, and where colonialism is now dismantled and bitterly rejected, the church continues to flourish and to expand. Those missionaries must have done something right! The reason why it is so important to understand this is that to insist that the missionary calling today is the same as fifty years ago, and that what we should be doing is to continue sending and supporting missionaries just as we used to do then, is to deny the obvious success of those earlier missionaries and to deprive them of their glory.

The second thing that we need to realize if we are to respond adequately to the new situation is that in a way this is not entirely new. The center of Christianity has shifted repeatedly through the centuries. Even as we read the book of Acts, we see the center of mission shifting from Jerusalem to Antioch. By the third century, the center had shifted again, and was now the entire Mediterranean basin. Six centuries later, it had shifted once more, and was now an axis running north to south, from the British Isles, through the Carolingian Empire, and down to Italy. In the sixteenth, that previous center was replaced by the Iberian Peninsula, with the Portuguese sailing south and east around Africa, and on to India, Ceylon, Japan, and eventually the Philippines, and the Spanish sailing westward to the Western Hemisphere, and from there even further west, until they met and clashed with the Portuguese in the Philippines. Then came the nineteenth century, and the center became an east-west line running from Western Europe to North America. This was the center I still knew when I was growing up.

So, although we may be surprised, and some perhaps even devastated, that this center no longer holds, the truth is that such shifts have taken place repeatedly in the past and should neither surprise us nor make us lose heart.

Thirdly, we need to acknowledge that there is indeed something radically new. What is happening in our day is not just that the center is shifting, but also that new centers are arising in various parts of the world. This, and the remaining vitality of the old center, means that what we have witnessed in our generation is not just a shift in the center, but its breakup into many centers, so that today, Christianity, as never before, is polycentric. Korea and Brazil have become centers sending missionaries throughout the world. People from Europe and the United States travel to study theology in Manila, in Lima, in Johannesburg, and in Buenos Aires. Theological books written in San Juan and Johannesburg become textbooks throughout the world. The Catholic Church in Europe imports priests from Sub-Saharan Africa to work in Ireland, and it even imports a pope from Argentina! The great theological libraries in Tübingen, Oxford, Cambridge and New Haven still possess treasures to which the entire theological world must turn. Mission boards and missionary societies in Germany support churches in Namibia, and churches in Mexico support missions to the United States and Australia. In brief, we are witnessing the birth of a truly polycentric church—and therefore a church that can claim catholicity as never before.

In the fourth place, this entire situation means that we can no longer speak of nations that have been missionized and nations that have not. As I was growing up, I often saw world maps depicting the “advance” of Christian missions. Generally, the West appeared in one color,

indicating that these were Christian lands, and the rest of the world in other colors, indicating that they were not. Part of the world was “Christendom,” and our task was to expand Christendom so it would cover the world. I remember as a child looking at a Sherwin Williams poster, “Sherwin Williams covers the world,” and wondering if Sherwin Williams was more successful than Christian mission.

Today it is clear that there is no such a thing as Christendom. There are lands whose cultures have been more profoundly influenced by Christianity, and others where any such influence is less clear. But the world can no longer be divided between what is part of Christendom and what is not, nor can mission be divided between sending and receiving countries. Bringing it home, this means that the United States is now a mission field just as much as China or Angola.

In the fifth place, we need to understand that the changes that have taken place in that world map are not just something that has happened “out there,” in some distant land that we used to consider a missionary field. It is not only that we are no longer the center, but also that what we used to consider the periphery has now come to the center. The dismantling of colonial empires, and the crisis of economic neocolonialism, have resulted in vast population movements from the lands of the colonized to the lands of the colonizers. Angolans and Mozambicans flock to Portugal, Algerians and Malagasy to France, Nigerians and Indians to Great Britain, and Latin Americans to the United States.

This is true not only of the population at large, but also of the churches and denominations. In the United States, the main source of growth for the Roman Catholic Church

is immigration from Latin America to the point that now more than half of all Catholics in the United States are Latinos and Latinas. The membership decline of many of the so-called mainline denominations would be much worse were it not for immigrants who come to engross the ranks of such denominations: Koreans and Brazilians for Reformed churches, Koreans and Latinos for Methodists, Salvadorans for Lutherans, and so forth.

While many of these people have joined such denominations after migrating to the United States, many others were already part of those traditions in their own homelands and are thus bringing to the United States a new way of being Catholic, or Presbyterian, or Lutheran, or Methodist. Quite often, while these various denominations welcome their numbers, they do not welcome their way of being Catholic, or Methodist, or whatever.

And yet, no matter whether willingly or not, all these various ecclesiastical traditions are being reinterpreted, renewed, and revitalized by the presence of relatively recent newcomers.

Which leads us to the sixth, and probably most important point: mission is not—or should not be—a one-way enterprise. It is not just a matter of Christians telling, giving, teaching, and others hearing, receiving, learning. When Christians tell, they must also hear; when they give, they must also receive; when they teach, they must also learn. Otherwise, mission runs the risk of becoming just another form of imperialism under the guise of faith.

We have a clear example of this in Acts 10 and 11. The story is well known and need not be repeated here. It is usually called “the conversion of Cornelius.” But when you look at it more closely, it is clear that what is told here is the story of the conversion not only of Cornelius and his kin, but also of Peter and eventually of the church in Jerusalem. In the story, Peter has no

idea what his vision means. When he meets Cornelius he rather ungraciously says: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean”—in other words, if God would allow it, that is precisely what I would call you! Then he sees things that lead him to baptize the pagan Centurion and his family, to discover that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not only for people like him, and even to stay at the home of this man whom he would formerly have called unclean. But that is not all. When they hear what Peter has done, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem call him to account. How could you have done such a horrible thing? And then, after Peter tells them the entire story, they discover: “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!” In other words, it is not just Cornelius who is converted, but also Peter and the entire church that discover in the gospel dimensions that were always there, but they had not known until the mission to Caesarea made them patently clear.

In its best moments, mission leads not only to the conversion of the non-believer, but also to the conversion of the church. So much so, that one could even claim that the history of the missionary enterprise is also a history of the many conversions of the church.

Although we often forget it, this dimension of mission is included in the Great Commission, that great passage in Matthew 28 that has long inspired the missionary spirit.

If we were to ask in our congregation, what does the Great Commission say?, there would probably be several who would quote it word by word: “Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you.” We can quote these lines,

which we take to be the reason for our involvement in mission.

But if you read the words more carefully, you will discover that it is not so. These words are not the ultimate reason for mission. As we usually quote it, the Great Commission begins with the words “Go therefore.” This is an odd way to begin a sentence. If someone were to say to you “therefore, go and buy a quart of milk,” your immediate reaction would be: What?! One does not begin a speech with “therefore.” “Therefore” implies an antecedent, a reason for what follows. The words, “therefore, go and buy a quart of milk,” require an antecedent, a reason such as, “We have no milk for tomorrow morning, therefore, go and buy . . .” The reason for buying the milk is that we are out of milk. The reason for what follows the “therefore” is what is said before it: “We have no milk for tomorrow morning.”

So, when we hear the Great Commission, and it seems to begin with the words “Go therefore,” we should immediately understand that the reason for what we are being told is not what follows, but rather what precedes the “therefore.”

What appears before the “therefore” is “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” We are commanded to go because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus. We are not commanded to go and make Jesus Lord. Jesus is already Lord. We are not commanded to go to distant places on earth to take Jesus there. Jesus is already there. We go to take the knowledge of Jesus. We go to make disciples for Jesus. We go to baptize. But we do not go to take Jesus there, nor to make him Lord there.

When we stop to think about it, this is the reason why mission is always a two-way affair. It is not simply that we have to listen in order to be able to communicate with people. It is also

that we have to listen because the Lord whom we announce is already Lord over there, because we have gone there to meet him, and because in order to meet him we have to learn what he has been doing there long before our arrival. Mission is a two-way affair because as we speak of Jesus, Jesus is also speaking to us, giving us signs of his lordship.

We are reluctant to see this, and that is the reason why we begin the Great Commission with the awkward words, "Go therefore." We are reluctant because even while we proclaim that Jesus is Lord we wish to be in control. We like to imagine that Jesus needs us. We even sing, in words that became quite popular in the early twentieth century:

Christ has no hands but our hands to do His work today

He has no feet but our feet to lead men in the way.

No! Jesus does not need our feet to take him anywhere, nor our hands to do what he wishes to be done, nor our lips to sing his praise. As he himself indicated, were we to be silent, the stones would still proclaim his name.

We are reluctant to see this because we would rather build our own empires than serve a strange kingdom in which the last shall be first, and those who are high and haughty will be brought down.

When Charlemagne set out to convert the Saxons, and thus to bring them into his empire, he was convinced that he was bringing Christ to his pagan neighbors. When the crusaders set out to reconquer the Holy Land, they were convinced that Jesus rode to battle with them. When the first Christians arrived at the New World, they were able to join their quest for gold and glory with their missionary endeavors because they were coming to a

heathen land that was badly in need of Jesus. This is the sort of mission that follows from a reading of the Great Commission that ignores what precedes the “therefore.”

But there has also been another sort of mission. In the second century there were those who were convinced that the God who had spoken to the Hebrews through Moses and the prophets had also spoken to the Gentiles through their sages and philosophers. So, they set out to find places where the eternal Word of God, the One through whom all things were made, the One who is the light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world, the One unto whom all power has been given, had been manifested even before the advent of Christianity. They argued that the Greeks knew that all truth comes from the logos, that this logos, this Word of God, is the same one whom they had come to know in Jesus, and that therefore there was in the wisdom of the Gentiles something that could even be dubbed “Christian.”

Granted, there were many dangers in this view, and the church has had to struggle with those dangers throughout its history. But even so, the notion that the Word of God was already present in Greek culture even before the preaching of Christianity allowed those early Christians to approach that culture with openness and respect, and thus to model an approach to mission that is quite different from the imperialistic mission that stems from the Great Commission without the “therefore.”

That was the model followed in the sixteenth century by Las Casas and other Spanish missionaries who saw and affirmed the good in the native population of the Americas, and therefore, sought to curb the abuses that were taking place in the name of religion. This was the model followed by Matteo Ricci in China, where he studied Confucianism, became a sage

according to Confucian standards, and published a treatise *On Friendship* in which he tried to show the connection between his own faith and ancient Chinese wisdom.

Such practices, however, often are not well received for they undercut the use of faith and mission as a justification for conquest and imperialism. Las Casas was given all sorts of honors by the Spanish authorities, mostly in order to keep him quiet, and long after his death was repeatedly maligned by his fellow countrymen as a liar and even a traitor. The mission that Ricci had started in China had a serious setback when there was a dispute among Catholics in China about how best to translate the name of God into Chinese, and the pope decided to intervene—thus earning the comment by the emperor, “Who is that barbarian who thinks he can teach the Chinese how to speak their own language?”

But even so, when missionaries such as Justin in the second century, Las Casas in the sixteenth, and Ricci slightly later, encountered other cultures with the conviction that the God of Jesus Christ had already been at work in them, they, too, and their own church, learned something about the meaning of the gospel that they would not have known without such an encounter—much as Peter and the church in Jerusalem learned much from Peter’s encounter with Cornelius. They learned that God had long been active in other cultures and societies. God had been inspiring wisdom to Heraclitus, Socrates, and Plato. They learned that God had long established principles of justice and solidarity in the Western Hemisphere, and that there was much in Confucius that should be ascribed to God’s action.

And in this again the story of Peter and Cornelius serves us well, for Acts tells us that Cornelius was “a devout man who feared God”—that is, he was what was then called a

God-fearer, a Gentile who, while not converting to Judaism, believed in the one God and the moral laws of Israel. Furthermore, his vision came a whole day before Peter's, and was also much clearer—which means that, even before Peter arrived at Caesarea, God had been working in Cornelius, preparing the way for the arrival of Peter. And in this case too, the church in Jerusalem resented and questioned what Peter had done.

Mission is both the announcement of what God has done and is doing in us, and the discovery of what God is doing in others. And in that very discovery God often tells us something we need to know

Back once again to the sixteenth century, while John Calvin was working for the reformation of the church in Geneva, a number of Frenchmen, under the leadership of Nicholas de Villegaignon, attempted to settle on an island near what is now Rio de Janeiro, creating a colony that they called *la France Antartique*—Antarctic France. The colony was to survive economically by exporting brazilwood, a wood used for expensive dyes. Villegaignon had promised freedom of worship to Protestants among the settlers. But things turned out otherwise, and after a few months the Protestant settlers decided to abandon the colony and settle on the mainland, among the Tupinamba Indians. The Protestant pastor Jean de Léry thus began a mission among these Indians, learning much of their language and their customs. When the Portuguese managed to expel Villegaignon and his settlers, Léry remained among the Tupinamba. In a book that he published in 1578, *Histoire d'un voyage faict en la terre de Brésil*, de Léry reported some of what he had learned from the Tupinamba, not only in matters of life in Brazil, but also about his own faith. For instance, he tells the following story:

An old man once asked me, “Why do you people, French and Portuguese, come from so far away to seek wood to warm you? Don’t you have wood in your country?” I answered that we had plenty, but not of that quality, and that we did not burn it as he supposed, but extracted a dye from it for dyeing, just as they did their cotton cords and their feathers. The old man immediately replied: “And I suppose you need much of it?” “Yes,” I answered, “for in our country there are traders who own more cloth, knives, scissors, mirrors and other goods than you can imagine. One single trader buys all the brazilwood carried back by many ships.” “Ah,” said the old man “you are telling me marvels. But this very rich man you are telling me about, does he not die?” “Yes,” I said, “he dies like all the rest.” But savages are great debaters and generally pursue any matter to its conclusion. He therefore asked me: “When he dies, what becomes of what he leaves?” “It is for his children if he has them . . . or for his closest brothers and relatives.” “Indeed,” continued the old man, who as you can see was no fool, “I now see that you French are great madmen. You cross the sea and suffer great inconvenience, as you say when you arrive here, and work so hard to accumulate riches for your children and for those who survive you. Is the land that nourished you not sufficient to feed them too? We have fathers, mothers, and children whom we love. But we are certain that after our death the land that nourished us will also feed them. We therefore rest without further cares.”

And then Léry, as a good Reformed theologian, relates what he has just heard to Scripture and sees the connection between the witness of this Tupinamba and the Ninevites in the story of Jonah: “Although this tribe may be blind in attributing to nature . . . more than we do to the power of God’s providence, yet it will rise up in judgment against the plunderers who bear the name of Christians.”<sup>2</sup>

Léry has good reason to relate the story of the Tupinamba wise man with the Ninevites in the book of Jonah, for this is similar to what Jesus did with the story of Jonah. As we all know, Jesus declared that “this wicked generation asks for a sign, yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah” (Lk 11.29).

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in John Hemming, *Red Gold: The Conquest of the Brazilian Indians* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1978), 16.

When we hear these words, we usually understand them in terms of the parallelism between the time Jonah spent in the belly of the whale and the time Jesus spent in the grave. This is certainly part of what the Gospel of Matthew does with it. But we forget that, both in Matthew and in Luke there is more to the sign of Jonah than the days in the belly of the whale.

The entire passage says:

For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The queen of the South will arise at the judgment of the people of this generation and condemn them: for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and yet something greater than Solomon is here. The people of Nineveh will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here (Lk 11.30-32).

Surprisingly, the sign of Jonah is not primarily in Jonah himself, but in the people whom the prophet apparently despised. The sign of Jonah is in the people of Nineveh repenting and calling on the mercy of a God whom they do not know, while the prophet who does know God bemoans that mercy. The sign of Jonah is in the people of Nineveh bringing God's prophet to shame because he wishes to keep the knowledge of God's mercy for himself and his own people.

The sign of Jonah is in the queen of Sheba coming from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon when the king's own sons refuse to follow that wisdom.

The sign of Jonah is in the harlots and the publicans going into the Kingdom of God ahead of the holiest of religious leaders.

The sign of Jonah points to the One who was rejected as a blasphemer and as a drunkard by the religious leaders of his time, and condemned to death by the political leaders, then rising from the dead and sitting at the right hand of God.

And ever since the sign of Jonah has continued to point to him. The sign of Jonah is in the Ethiopian eunuch who is baptized even though the law of Israel forbids that a eunuch be added to the people of God. The sign of Jonah is manifested again in Caesarea in the conversion of Cornelius, and in Philippi in the conversion of a jailer and a rich merchant woman. The sign of Jonah was manifested in the few who at the Areopagus believed the message of Paul, and in the millions who ever since have received and believed that message—in those millions among whom we stand, who had no claim to call themselves children of Abraham, who were no people, who were strangers and foreigners to the promises made to Abraham, but who now have come near.

And the sign of Jonah is ever present among us today. But it is not directly present in the good, religious people who follow our traditions and our customs. It is present in this new world that we are unable to understand, but where all authority has been given to Jesus. It is present in the ever more motley crowds coming into our communities, questioning our churches, wondering about the love and mercy of God. Like Jonah, we either see that mercy acting in them, or we do not see it at all, and even come to begrudge it.

We live in a scary world. The old clearly defined communities where we used to find comfort and ease no longer exist. We look around, and we see many different faces. We listen, and we hear many different languages. In many ways, this new world may be as scary to some of us as Nineveh was to Jonah, or the land of Oz was to Dorothy.

But, unlike Dorothy, we cannot simply click our heels and get back to Kansas. We may yearn for past assurances; we may live in perennial nostalgia, but we cannot return to the past.

Like Jonah, we may attempt to flee to Tarshish. We may try to live in closed communities where we try to keep this new world from impinging on our lives. We may try to close our borders to any who are not quite like us—like us in culture, in color, in education, and in social standing. We may even use the church as the last stronghold of the world we knew, under the pretext of doing everything “decently and in order,” or that “our system of government does not allow it,” or that we must defend the Reformed tradition in its pristine purity.

Or, as Jesus invites us to do, we may come to acknowledge that something greater than Solomon is here, and that something greater than Jonah is here. This someone greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon is none other than the One who gave Solomon his wisdom. The One who called Jonah to a mission. The One who showed mercy to the Ninevites. The One who has declared “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; go therefore . . .” The One in whom we believe and whom we seek to serve. The one who not only sent his disciples “to the end of the world,” but who also brought the Queen of the South “from the ends of the earth.” The One who is served both when his disciples go to the ends of the earth and when those who are not his disciples come from the ends of the earth.

This may be a scary world. This may seem an alien world. It certainly isn't Kansas anymore. But it is still a world in which all authority has been given to the One who still says: “Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you and I shall be with you till the end of the world, even when the ends of the earth come to you!”