Christian Missions: The Challenge of the Twenty-First Century

James D. Chancellor

James D. Chancellor is the W. O. Carver Associate Professor of Christian Missions and World Religions at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He has published a number of articles, including frequent entries in *The Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Baker, forthcoming). Chancellor is currently at work on *Life in the Family: An Oral History of the Children of God*, to be published by Syracuse University Press. This article was first presented as a faculty address at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Introduction

A little over ninety years ago a significant new journal was established in the United States entitled *The Christian Century*. Western Protestant Christianity had just emerged from the heady days of the nineteenth century, when almost anything seemed possible and the very best seemed probable. This new journal was inaugurated with the explicit conviction that the twentieth century would be "The Christian Century," and that by the year 2000 the entire world would be completely Christianized. This extraordinarily optimistic view was widely held in the United States and the Christian West. Such optimism was perhaps informed by a broader Western cultural ego, prior to the Titanic and the Great War. As we now near the end of this "Christian Century," it would appear the Church in the West, though confident in the power of the gospel, is far more realistic about the prospect of worldwide conversion.

The challenges facing the Church in the West in carrying the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world appear much different, and in many ways more daunting, at the close of twentieth century. Before we address some of those particular challenges, we must first affirm that, though we may be considerably more realistic in our assessment of the task, the mission enterprise of the Church is as healthy today as it ever was.

The Changing Landscape of the Church

To be sure, the worldwide Christian community is in the midst of radical reorientation and realignment, and will change even more in the near future. The Church in Europe, the geographic and cultural heartland of Protestant Christianity, is dying and in many places virtually dead. In city after city, across the Continent and in the British Isles, great church edifices have become little more than museums. On the western frontier of the Euro-American Christian landscape, all is not well, but not nearly as dark as some suppose. In the nineteenth century, the center point of Protestant Evangelical Christianity clearly shifted across the Atlantic. In general, Canadians and Americans continue to carry the missionary burden well; on the other hand, the Faith is losing ground in many areas as well.

The Church is advancing in other places around the world. The genuine success of the "Great Century" of Christian missions has radically altered the shape and character of the worldwide Christian community. In the last 200 years, the Church outside the West has grown from approximately one percent to perhaps sixty percent of total confessing Christians. In Africa, Christian denominations imported from the West are strong and vital. For instance, there are as many practicing Anglican believers in Uganda as in England. More significantly, hundreds of indigenous movements of a peculiarly African form of Christianity

have emerged, with millions of believers.[1]

Asia is beginning to experience a similar explosion of indigenous Christian communities. The Church in China now appears much stronger than ever imagined, with thousands coming to faith in Christ daily. In South Korea, it is estimated that between twenty and twenty-five percent of the population are committed Christians—some nine million people. Only a generation ago, Koreans understood themselves almost exclusively as "receiving people," ones needing missionaries. Today, the Korean Church has grasped the vision of world missions and, though recent financial reverses have forced hundreds to return home, there are still over 4,000 Korean missionaries who now serve on fields from Pakistan to Nigeria to China. Already, a higher percentage of Korean church members serve as foreign missionaries than do members in the Southern Baptist Convention.

We can be grateful to God for the growth of the Church around the world, and we have many reasons to look with hope and anticipation to the future. But there are also great challenges that face American Evangelical Christians and the Southern Baptist Convention in our mission effort of the future. In one sense, the challenges of the twenty-first century are no different than any other. We must continue to maintain a commitment to Christ and the truth of the Gospel. We must maintain a sense of sacrifice both on the part of those specifically called of God to carry the Gospel outward and those who stay and support by prayer and material wealth.

But, as the new century dawns, specific dimensions of the wider human experience pose challenges to the Mission of the Church. In this essay I would like to consider three: a formidable external challenge, a challenge that comes from a shift in the way the rest of the world views the West, America in particular, and some significant theological challenges that are both internal and external to Western sending peoples.

The External Challenge: Islam

Certainly the most formidable external challenge to Christian missions in the twenty-first century is resurgent Islam. Aggressive Islam is not a new challenge to the Church. The Islamic expansion in the seventh through the fifteenth centuries was primarily into Christian lands. In the thousand years after Muhammad first issued the call to go and conquer, much of the core territory of "Christendom" fell to the Army of Allah. Virtually all the great centers of the Christian Faith, with the exception of Rome, were captured and remain in the house of Islam.

But, beginning in the sixteenth century, and reaching a crescendo in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the imperial conquests of Europe and North America dramatically reversed the fortunes of these two great civilizations. By the mid-twentieth century, Islamic culture, social power, and political strength were at perhaps their lowest ebb in the whole of Muslim history. Virtually everyone in the West believed this drastic decay and decline of Islamic states and Islamic societies was normative for the future. Prior to 1970, nearly all political and religious analysts in the West understood Islam to be virtually dead on the world scene. There was near universal confidence that Islam was simply unable to cope with modernity and would be no factor in the great drama of human events yet to unfold. Why such a profound misjudgment?

First, in most Muslim states, indig-

enous, but forward-thinking and highly Westernized political elites were generally successful in taking control of their countries from the Western colonial powers. In the immediate post-colonial period, even in strongly Muslim areas, these new modern leaders were imbued with Western cultural assumptions about progress, modernity, the future, and religion. Most shared the dominant Western view that Islam was tied to the past, with no significant role to play in the modern world.[2] Second, the Western political and academic establishment underestimated the potential and strength of Islam. By and large, Western observers and policy makers imposed their own modern paradigm of religion, in which it is suitable only for private life, onto the rest of world. Secularization theory had taken deep root, and led to a serious underestimation of the power and resiliency of religion in general, and Islam in particular.

In reality, Islamic revival and renewal movements were alive and vibrant prior to the 1970s.[3] Both the Muslim Brotherhood of the Middle East and Islamic revivalist movements on the Indian subcontinent were underway prior to World War II. However, these movements were below the radar screen of many Western scholars and virtually all policy makers. It is obvious by now that the dismissal of a vibrant and significant role for Islam in the modern world was wrong. Various Islamic movements have shown remarkable renewal, vitality, and growth in the last quarter of this century. This is evident not only in the Middle East, but also in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Though Islamic civilization as a whole remains stifled and defensive, Islam as a religion is clearly on the march around the world. A substantial number of Muslim thinkers and activists have moved in the last twenty-five years from positions of defending against the onslaught of westernization, to being engaged in active mission efforts of their own. The Islamic vision has shifted from preservation or survival to active expansion.

A number of identifiable forces are at work in this shift. Many analysts point immediately to oil.[4] Indeed, vastly increased oil revenues to strongly-committed Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have played a major role in providing the resources necessary for a renewed strength and expansion of Islam. Saudi officials are less than forthcoming with detailed information, but it is estimated that Saudi Arabia alone has committed a billion dollars to the worldwide spread of Islam. Virtually all of those funds have been directed toward literature campaigns, mosque construction, the training and sending of missionary personnel, and construction of schools and hospitals in Africa, Asia, the former Soviet states, and the Americas. The successes of highly effective Christian missionary strategies have not been lost on the Muslim missionary establishment of the late twentieth century.

The increase in money and resources is not the sole or even the primary reason for the renewed vitality of Islam. The Islamic resurgence can also be explained from her high ethical standards. Muslim apologists have begun to portray Islam as the religious cure—and the only cure—for the cultural and moral breakdown that an increasing number of people throughout the world understand to be a result of the worldwide expansion of Western culture.

Islam as a more reliable moral norm for society makes little sense to most people

in the West. Our primary images of Muslims are heavily veiled women or bearded radical extremists bombing the World Trade Center and the American embassies in East Africa. But this is a filtered and limited view of the Islamic world and of Muslim peoples. Viewing the religion of Islam through the single lens of terrorist extremism is much like a person who might know nothing of Christianity except from news reports issued out of Northern Ireland. Just as we would be quick to distance "true Christianity" from such sectarian violence, Muslim apologists insist that "true Islam" stands firmly for peace, righteousness, and justice. This limited view of Islam also reflects the general human tendency to judge other people's religion by the deeds they do, while evaluating our own faith community based on our ideals.

We need to look at the situation from a Muslim point of view. The West says little about religion's role in war-ravaged Rwanda. And one rarely hears of any connection between the religion of the people and this most terrible human tragedy. The recent arrest in Texas of a Rwandan pastor on charges of war crimes seems utterly incongruous to us. Yet, this minister of the gospel is charged with leading the members of his church in the murder of unprotected women and children in a neighboring village. In fact, a very high percentage of Rwanda's population are confessing Christians. Islamic apologists trumpet the "Christian" violence often.

Islam is increasingly being portrayed and understood by a significant number of people as a positive moral response to what many in the non-western world view as the ills of today's world: the economic exploitation of the poor, the breakdown of the family, epidemic drug and alcohol abuse, uncontrolled violence, and rampant sexual immorality associated with modern Western "Christian" culture in general, and America in particular. The recent news footage of America's morally-challenged President emerging from church, smiling and with Bible in hand, is indeed a picture worth a thousand Arabic words. As many Muslim peoples stand back and look at Europe and North America, they see nations where, from their perspective, the Christian faith has failed to produce a decent, moral, or safe society. Hence, they have become increasingly committed to preventing the spread of Western values among their own people. They most assuredly have and will continue to interpret the work of Western Christian missionaries as an attempt to spread those values.[5]

The third force behind the Islamic resurgence is more subtle, but equally powerful. The nineteenth century witnessed a drastic collapse of economic, political, and cultural power in virtually all societies of the Islamic world. This catastrophe came as a profound shock, and created a crisis of identity among Muslim populations from Casablanca to Jakarta. For the first time since the dawn of Muhammad's grand vision, Muslim people as a whole had legitimate reason to doubt that Allah was on their side. As the twentieth century draws to a close, Muslims all over the world are longing for and searching to recover an identity as peoples of hope and destiny. In an increasing number of locations, a strong and vital commitment to an activist and rigorous Islam has become integral to that emerging identity. This commitment is most clearly evident in Iran, Afghanistan, Algeria, and Pakistan, only one of which is an Arabic-speaking country. This vision

is growing in intensity and surfacing in powerful minority movements throughout the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

The Western colonial powers reshaped the world, in a sense, into their own image during the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries.[6] As peoples around the world are no longer willing to exist in that Western image, as they struggle to escape that mold, many are looking to Islam as an alternate, if not antithetical, religious foundation for a new corporate identity.

In the twenty-first century Islam will emerge as a well-funded, fully organized, highly motivated, and vigorous opponent of the worldwide mission of the Church. Muslims have already been carrying their mission to the doorstep of Christian missionary-sending peoples in Western Europe and America.[7] The growth of Islam in the West has come primarily through migration. Islamic evangelism has had little success outside certain minority communities. The number of Muslims in the United States is often greatly exaggerated, but surely there are more Muslims than Episcopalians—and their numbers are growing. Islamic missionary efforts to both revitalize Muslim societies and to extend the call of the minaret to "unreached people groups" will undoubtedly increase substantially in the twenty-first century.

We can also count on a substantial increase in the overt, and increasingly violent, opposition to the Christian missionary enterprise. The majority of leaders in the Islamic resurgence interpret the Christian missionary effort as the religious face of the ongoing aggression, domination, and violence against Muslim peoples by Western states. While this interpretation is mistaken, it is nonetheless real, and it will increasingly serve to justify hostility and direct action against the mission of the Church.

A New Wave of Western Christianity

The challenge of Islam lends directly to our second challenge—a significant shift in the view of "receiving peoples" in the Two-Thirds World toward Western culture in general, and Western Christianity as a particular aspect of that over-arching culture. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the "Great Age of Protestant Missions." The Western Evangelical Protestant tradition can look back with genuine satisfaction on the men and women of faith who, at enormous personal sacrifice, carried the gospel of Christ to the wider world. Many willingly gave their lives for the cause of Christ. No legitimate basis exists for judging or condemning any of them for being people of their times. However, we must also face the reality that this great modern Protestant missionary effort went hand in glove with the age of Western European and American imperial domination of the world. The story is a familiar one and need not be retold here.

From the end of the First World War to the present, the quest of Two-Thirds World peoples has been to throw off this Western domination. In the last half of the twentieth century, their efforts have been primarily focused on political and economic liberation. With very few exceptions, that struggle has been successful in political terms, while only marginally so in the economic sphere. I am quite confident that in the twenty-first century this quest for liberation will lead toward an effort to end the cultural domination of the West.

Many peoples in the "other world" have come to see the Western missionary (particularly the American) as a symbol of Western cultural domination. Potentially most serious for the mission efforts in the twenty-first century, a small but growing number of indigenous Christians in some areas are beginning to adopt a similar view. A sincere gratitude for bringing the gospel and deep appreciation for the missionary effort of the past exists, but a good number of thoughtful and sincere followers of Christ are beginning to fully explore the proposition that if the Christian faith is to be authentic in Africa, it must be genuinely African Christianity —not English, or German, or American Christianity. And some of these thoughtful Christians are beginning to question both the commitment and the ability of American or other Western missionaries to help fulfill this new Christian vision.

In the mid-1970s, the All Africa Churches Conference proposed the following resolution:

> To enable the African Church to achieve the power of becoming a true instrument of liberating and reconciling the African people, as well as finding solutions to economic and social dependency, our option as a matter of policy has to be a Moratorium on external assistance in money and personnel.
>
> We recommend this option as the only potent means of becoming truly and authentically ourselves while remaining a respected and responsible part of the Universal Church.[8]

This resolution was not passed. It may represent the wave of the future in which any contribution from the West is rejected.

A significant challenge to Christian missions in the twenty-first century will be to find methods and persons to bring the gospel to the world, without being seen as attempting to impose Western or American culture. For some peoples, this "American culture" includes a particular Western style or form of the Christian faith.

Foreign mission strategists and field personnel have been aware of this issue for some time and are constantly at work to resolve it. Certainly one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century mission is for the American church to find the heart to continue spreading the gospel across the world, while having a reduced expectation that the result of that effort will be churches that look like ours, or Christians who think and act as we do. I am not referring to the matter of drums rather than a piano in the worship service, or the nature of church leadership structures. A growing number of Christian leaders and theologians in Africa and Asia are forming a critical view of Western Christianity as a whole. While affirming the authenticity of that great tradition for European peoples, they are claiming both the right and the necessity of developing an equally authentic Christianity for non-Europeans.

A significant number of Christian thinkers envision the whole theological, ecclesiological, and ethical edifice of "Orthodox" Christianity as essentially a synthesis of the message of Jesus with Greco-Roman and European culture. To misquote Tertullian, it is a Jerusalem and Athens synthesis. Christian thinkers outside the West are claiming the right, and even the necessity, for a similar synthesis: a Jerusalem-Peking or a Jerusalem-Lagos synthesis. Their vision is to create a distinctive form of Christianity as true to their own intellectual and cultural heritage as Orthodox Christianity is to the European heritage.[9]

These emerging world theologians are

not simply calling for their own Billy Graham, or even their own Martin Luther. Some are beginning to claim the right to their own Tertullian, Origen, or Augustine, even their own Council of Nicea. This challenge to the Western construct of the Christian Faith is still in an embryonic stage, and it is far from the dominant position of most Christian believers who are the spiritual descendants of Western missionary efforts. But the movement is gaining momentum. If it should develop as the dominant theological paradigm for the Church of the Two-Thirds World, the long-term consequences for the relationship between the Church in the West and the Church of this "other world" are enormous. The challenge posed for the ongoing mission of the Western Evangelical Tradition is difficult to exaggerate.

The Theological Challenge

The third significant challenge for twenty-first century missions is theological. I tackle this issue with considerable trepidation because of my own limitations in this field of study and the sensitivity of theological issues within our community of Faith. I have a real sense of stepping off into some very deep waters. But I will take a breath and plunge ahead. I will consider two issues, one internal to the Southern Baptist Convention missionary enterprise and one external to our community.

In recent years, there has been a heightened eschatological emphasis in mission motivation and strategy. The president of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Jerry Rankin, a person I deeply admire and respect as a committed servant of Christ, has stated on any number of occasions that he is confident we are sending out the "last generation of foreign missionaries." His statement carries an implied expectation that this generation will reach into the last unreached people group, thus fulfilling Jesus command in Matthew 28 and ushering in the return of Christ and the end of human history.

While end time expectations can be powerful and often have been a strong motivating force for the fulfillment of the Mission of the Church, they can also have significant implications for mission strategy and the shape of the world mission enterprise as we enter the twenty-first century. Time, energy, resources, and personnel are apt to be poured into reaching the "last frontiers"—frontiers that often contain small, isolated communities of persons who are minimally responsive to the gospel. Since there is always a finite level of energy, resources, and personnel, such a mission focus implies a reduction in resources allocated to established mission fields that are, in many cases, high response areas. A mission strategy informed by a millennial vision may also imply reduced efforts in support services and institution building in existing fields where mission churches are established, but remain in need of various kinds of long-term assistance, such as theological education.

Some twenty-five years ago a friend of mine received an alumni mail-out from a small independent Christian college in the South. The package contained an abstract of a sermon recently preached in chapel by the President of that college. In the sermon, the President had read the "signs of the times" and relevant biblical passages, all of which led him to the inescapable conclusion that Christ would return in the next two to three years. Also included in the mail-out was a plea to contribute toward the school's ten-year development

plan. I laughed at that story for years. Then I began to consider the possibility that perhaps they were right. To fulfill her mission, the Church needs the energy and motivation that flows out from the expected return of Jesus. And she needs a ten-year development plan.

The recent shift in emphasis, strategy, and resources may be appropriate. The majority of the Western mission effort remains focused in areas already heavily "missionized." Intense millennial expectations tend to wax and wane through the life of the Church. But if the Lord should tarry, and the twenty-first century stretches on, eschatologically-driven mission strategies may require considerable adjustment.

However, another theological dynamic in world Christianity shows far greater potential for reordering the face of Evangelical Protestant missions. I am addressing the most significant theological development of twentieth century Protestant Christianity—the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement. It is providential, or perhaps only coincidence, that the modern Charismatic movement began with a single individual on the very first day of the twentieth century.[10] The movement soon exploded throughout the American underclass and onto the world scene by mid-century. This eruption occurred with very little appreciation, or even notice, by the Protestant establishment. In 1975, Sydney Ahlstrom published his two-volume, 1400 page *A Religious History of the American People* in which he allocated approximately seven pages to the Pentecostal and Charismatic phenomenon.[11]

Exact numbers are impossible to calculate, but it seems probable that the percentage of evangelical Protestants worldwide who are part of the Charismatic tradition, or heavily influenced by it, may have now surpassed fifty percent. It is quite probable that a similar figure prevails among Baptists.

If the present trajectory of growth continues, the percentage of Charismatic Protestants will pass eighty percent by the mid-twenty-first century. The Southern Baptist Convention has approximately fifteen million members in the United States and has been involved in an international mission effort for over one hundred and fifty years. Currently over four million Baptists worldwide are associated with Southern Baptists and can be seen as the fruit of their mission effort. The Assemblies of God, the flagship Pentecostal denomination, has approximately two-and-a-half million members in America, having been involved in foreign missions for approximately seventy-five years. Today, over twenty-eight million Assemblies of God members exist outside the United States, a direct result of their international mission effort.[12]

For evangelical communities like the Southern Baptist Convention that are not part of the Charismatic tradition, the challenges are numerous. We will consider only two. The first is predation, or sheep-stealing, to put it bluntly. According to a number of Southern Baptist missionaries, Charismatic churches identify recent evangelical converts as a harvest ground for new adherents to their churches in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. This practice transcends individuals and families. In Southeast Brazil, the headquarters of the Baptist Conference and the Baptist seminary sit on the same site with a beautiful edifice, the largest Baptist church in the region. This church was founded by Southern Baptist Convention missionaries and built with Lottie Moon funds.

Today it is fully in the Charismatic orb and is no longer in association or fellowship with traditional Baptists.[13] This story could be told many times over.

The challenge cannot be limited to raw numbers, or to the loss of church members, or even to losing whole churches. If the current growth trajectory continues, the Charismatic phenomenon will establish a gulf between the predominant evangelical communities in the wider world and the major non-Charismatic evangelical Protestant sending churches and agencies in the West. The gulf will have many dimensions. The most immediately obvious area is worship, though distinctly Charismatic worship forms are spreading quickly into traditional Baptist settings. Perhaps the most serious breach will be in hermeneutics. Modern western evangelicals generally employ a historical, rational, contextual approach to the interpretation of scripture. This is in vivid contrast to the immediate Holy Spirit-directed approach current among the majority of Pentecostal believers. Two very different approaches to both the nature of and the path to truth are represented here. As the Charismatic-driven approach to theological truth spreads and intensifies, it seems inevitable that their different orientation will result in a serious, if not complete, rupture between these two sub-communities of Evangelical Protestant Christianity. Many Evangelical bodies in the West may become estranged from the overwhelming majority of the Church in the world beyond. The validity of our faith and the legitimacy of our mission effort may then be questioned by most Evangelical Christians in the world.

Over ninety percent of all Protestant Christians will be Pentecostal and Charismatic by the end of the next century. The movement is also making deep inroads in the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions as well. The sheer force of numbers will give this movement the power to redefine the Faith for the future. They might well come to see non-Charismatics as we now look on much of the German Protestant establishment today: solid institutions, great libraries, and good scholars, but little spiritual insight and not really connected to the true life of the Church.

Conclusion

The challenges that face the Southern Baptist Convention and the wider Evangelical Church on mission in the twenty-first century are complex and varied, though often interrelated. I have attempted to address only those that seem most significant to me, those most likely to have a broad and long-term impact on the lives and fortunes of ministers and missionaries we now prepare for the coming century.

The range of responses to these challenges is equally complex, and surely resides with those more steeped in the theology of the Church and more immediately informed in mission philosophy and strategy. It is perhaps the curse of the historian, or at least this historian, to be more adept at identifying problems than providing solutions. One thing remains clear, however. In the face of all these challenges, the Church must remain strongly committed to the truth of Gospel and must be flexible in the face of a radically changing environment. She has done so in the past, and I am confident she will do so in the future.

ENDNOTES

[1]David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 112-115.

[2]Much of the political establishment in the Islamic world, from Algeria to Egypt to Syria to Indonesia, continues to hold to this general paradigm.

[3]See John L. Espisoto, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992) 12-16.

[4]See "Saudi Arabia—the Koran as Constitution" in Edward Mortimer, *Faith and Power: The Politics of Islam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).

[5]Sayyid Qutb, the principle ideologue of contemporary Islamic Fundamentalism, was primarily motivated by his negative experience in America. See Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Beirut, Lebanon: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1978).

[6]For a clear and scholarly exposition of this process, see "The Impact of the Great Western Transmutation" in Marshal Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974) 176-222.

[7]See Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992).

[8]All Africa Churches Conference, *The Struggle Continues* (Nairobi, Kenya: AACC, 1975).

[9]For examples of this thinking see "African Reality and Theological Hermeneutics" in Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993) 36-62; and Feng Shangli, "The Contours of a Chinese Theology," *Ching Feng*, 13:1 (1970) 63-78.

[10]Agnes Ozman at Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas. January 1, 1901.

[11]Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New York: Image Books, 1975).

[12]Assembly of God statistics as of December 31, 1997: Members in the United States, 2,494,574; members outside the United States, 28,155,905. Telephone interview with Sherri Doty, Statistician for the General Council of The Assemblies of God, Springfield, Missouri.

[13]Interview with Wendal Mark Johnson, SBC missionary to Southern Brazil.