

The *SBJT* Forum: Being Missions-Minded

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Christopher J. H. Wright, Michael A. G. Haykin, and Ted Cabel have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the *Forum* is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: You travel to quite a few different countries each year. Would you care to mention some of the mission trends you yourself see on your travels?

D. A. Carson: You are asking a question that demands, at very least, several long essays, rather than a few paragraphs—partly because the trends themselves vary greatly from country to country. All I can do here is provide a rather subjective and impressionistic list of several things that instantly spring to mind.

(1) At one time, the overwhelming majority of missionaries came from the West (not least from English-speaking countries) and went everywhere else. No longer is this the case. More missionaries than ever before are being sent out from non-Western countries. Indeed, increasingly missionaries are from everywhere to everywhere. Korea (to mention but one prominent mission-sending country) sends out a formidable number of missionaries (at the moment, between 12,000 and 15,000). In addition, Korea sends “tent-makers” into other Asian countries that would otherwise be completely “closed.” Many African churches send missionaries cross-culturally to other tribes and to other African

countries—and, increasingly, to Western countries, primarily to serve those who have emigrated from African countries to the West. Worldwide statistics are complicated and not always easy to come by, and one is not always sure how accurate they are—but in any case, this first development is not in dispute, and one must rejoice over it, even if some of the reasons for getting to this point (e.g., the decline of the West) are disappointing. Jesus has told us he will build his church; he has not told us that such building will necessarily take place in our hometown or school district. It helps to get things into perspective if we take time to read up on worldwide developments in order to gain a worldwide appreciation for what God is doing.

(2) No less important is the array of related changes on the horizon. We are on the cusp of massive transformations of perspective. We have expected the majority of world Christian leaders to be white and Western, to be (relative to most of the world) affluent and capable. But there are now far more believers in the Two-Thirds world than in the West. I have preached in churches of 30,000 people in Asia; a big church in France draws 150

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people. The West still produces more well-trained vocational theologians than any other part of the world, but this owes much to economic factors, and I suspect it will change in the years ahead. It is only a matter of time until the leaders of the Two-Thirds world become better known around the world. Witness, for example, the courageous and influential stance of the Anglican Bishop of Nigeria on the debate over homosexuality in the world Anglican communion. Many churches in São Paulo, Brazil, have something to teach us about energetic racial integration. When we in the West go somewhere as missionaries, even if we ourselves come from humble backgrounds we are perceived as coming from the affluent world; our ministry is naturally read as a “reaching down.” When someone from a Two-Thirds world country becomes a missionary to a country of similar socio-economic class, that missionary is naturally read as a peer. When that same missionary serves in a more affluent country, he or she is naturally read as “reaching up.” As a result, expectations change, social dynamics change, modes of influence change. Moreover, for better and for worse, Christian missionaries bring some of their culture with them. In recent decades, there have been more efforts by our missionaries than in the past to disentangle the gospel from the export of American and other Western cultures, but the challenge is considerable. Now, however, with missionaries coming from many different countries, we are finding pockets of churches served by, say, Korean missionaries that have absorbed not only the gospel but also substantial dollops of Korean culture. It is all very fascinating, sometimes confusing, invariably complicated. It’s a grand thing that Jesus is

building his church—often by means of his people, sometimes despite us. What is undeniable, however, is that massive changes lie just ahead.

(3) God is sovereign, and he loves to overthrow human prognostications and expectations. The growth of the church in Korea during the past century has been utterly spectacular (though it is now at a standstill); during the same time, the growth of the church in Japan has been miniscule. Why? Oh, I know, after the fact we are prone to jump in and offer our after-the-fact sociological analysis. But no one predicted these divergences. How could they? God does what he does, and often in defiance of human expectations. When the last missionary came out of China about 1950, there were only just over one million Christians (with a generous interpretation of “Christians”) in that great country, and many pundits wondered how bad the situation would become. Instead, the church has flourished, with best estimates as to the number of Christians in the Chinese homeland hovering around ninety million. With the “war on terror” focusing on Afghanistan and Iraq, many have said that it would be decades (one pundit suggested one hundred years) before American missionaries would see any growth of the gospel in Muslim lands. And, indeed, there are some additional restrictions on Americans in some lands; there is also a growing turning to Christ in many of these same lands, as Muslims, fed up with the terrorism and not finding the resources to understand it, let alone stop it, in Islam, are turning to the good news of the King of Peace. It is simply too dangerous to pass on to you many stories and relevant statistics, but before the war on terror is over, we may yet see such an overthrow

of current expectations throughout the Muslim world that a new generation of pundits will be as astonished as the current generation is about the growth of the church in China.

(4) The astonishingly rapid expansion of digital technology is changing things for the better and for the worse. On the positive side: It is increasingly possible for students in remote parts of the world to tap into an array of sources that vastly outstrips what has been available in the past. Publishing possibilities are changing—from desktop publishing to digital journals to blogs. Not long ago I was speaking in an Asian country where the leaders who organized the event put the entire series onto streaming video that was simulcast, via cable, on large screen monitors in ten other cities. The same series was digitally recorded for later distribution in churches. As far as I could see, this was typical of this group's imagination and energy: They were comfortable with using technology to leverage the distribution of Bible teaching. On the other hand, the net can also be used for the distribution of the most amazing rubbish. Sinful addiction to pornography is on the rise in many parts of the world. One can visit remote hamlets and find people tuned in to porn (not to mention the mediocre junk of mindless "entertainment"). I recall a Slovak leader commenting to me that three weeks after the Berlin wall came down, for the first time in his life he saw porn openly sold on the streets of Bratislava, the capitol. Now it is available in every community by digital transmission. Globalization has both positive and negative features, of course, but the negative ones must not be overlooked. Moreover, the wrong kind of reliance on technology is in danger of

forgetting that if anything of spiritual value is accomplished, it is by the Spirit of the living God, not because we have money and techies. Unless one is careful, technology can end up depersonalizing Christian ministry. But for better and for worse, technology is changing mission, as it is changing everything else.

(5) It is perennially important to work hard at the proper relation between ministry of the Word and social concern. Exclusive focus on the former is in danger of fostering a docetic view of the Christian life; exclusive focus on the latter is in danger of abandoning the actual proclamation of the good news. Although there are some important principles to work out, the actual balance of time allotment must depend in part on the local situation. When people are crying on a devastated beach after a tsunami, it is not the best time to distribute Bibles, absent fresh water, food, and shelter. Yet an ostensibly Christian organization which, decade after decade, distributes tons of blankets and food, founds orphanages, and combats HIV, without ever offering Bible studies or explaining what doing this in Jesus' name *means*, and what the gospel is about, is indistinguishable from UNICEF or *Médecins sans Frontières*, and is no more Christian than they. Around the world, organizations are wrestling with these and related issues. I am most impressed by Christian witness that is full of the Bible, full of Jesus, full of excellent teaching, full of sacrificial service, full of ministering to the whole person, and, where possible, the community itself, in the conscious outworking of the transforming gospel. But what this looks like varies enormously around the world, for obvious reasons.

(6) In some ways, the most disquieting

region of the world, from a Christian point of view, is Europe—Western Europe, Central Europe, and Eastern Europe. Inevitably, God has not left himself without witness, and there are many wonderful examples of faithful and effective Christian witness throughout Europe. But the degree of raw atheism, the focus on materialistic hedonism, the condescending dismissal of and even revulsion against confessional Christianity, the rising numbers of Muslims (owing in substantial measure to a low birth rate and a high immigration rate), are transforming the continent which was at one time a powerhouse of Christian thought and mission into one of the neediest mission fields in the world. Doubtless this reflects God's judgment on faithlessness—but surely we must cry, "O Lord, in wrath, remember mercy."

(7) There is an urgent need to consider better ways of distributing missionary-designated dollars. Recently a large church in the US spent half a million dollars to send its very substantial number of high schoolers to a short-term summer project in a Latin American city. Doubtless these kids did some good; doubtless they were exposed (many for the first time) to a part of the world where they confronted real poverty for the first time; doubtless they were enriched by the lives of brothers and sisters in Christ who, regardless of their own temptations and failures, were not defined by endless Western toys. But that same Latin American city has a small but extraordinarily strategic seminary with a handful of teachers. The school is too poor to pay them more than a pittance. The result is that these professors, some of whom are well-trained, take on many speaking and pastoral responsibilities simply so that they can survive—and as a

result, they do not read much, they write nothing, they do not exercise the strategic kind of ministry that they *could* exercise if they were not burning themselves out in overwork. For \$50,000, three of these professors could be adequately supported. That would mean that the large church in America that spent half a million on their summer mission project would need to reduce that project by a mere 10% in order to make a massive strategic difference within the country itself. Or they could simply find the money elsewhere. Sadly, I doubt that they will even perceive the need. And as leaders increasingly emerge in these Two-Thirds World countries, there is going to be an urgent need to rethink a number of our mission spending priorities as we try and do *what is best for brothers and sisters elsewhere*, and not merely do good to our brothers and sisters at home.