

THE TASK BEFORE US

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Introduction:

Only a few thousand people first heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea nineteen centuries ago. Today, a thousand million people profess Christianity, making it the first truly worldwide faith. William Temple, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, referred to this as "the great, new fact of our time." This achievement, of course, is not to our credit — it is the Lord's doing, the work of his Spirit, in accordance with his eternal plan. As Ephesians 1:10 says, "a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." So we have not gathered to congratulate ourselves. We are here to celebrate God's glory and grace.

Lausanne reflects this great, new fact of our time. We participate together as members of a worldwide Church. From thirty countries of Asia and Australia 660 of us have come. From Africa 370 of us are here representing forty-seven different countries. From Latin America another 219 of us have come from twenty-nine countries. 560 are here from North America. Our hosts are the 562 participants representing thirty-five nations of Europe.

During the first 500 years of Christian history believers were just a small fraction of the world's population. During the second 500 years Europe was evangelized but North Africa and the Middle East were lost to Islam — so there was little net gain. During the third period also there was little church growth. After the misguided attempt of the Crusades, European Christians concentrated on inward renewal and reform. But God had not abandoned his great plan to disciple the nations. During the past 500 years, and particularly in the last two centuries, the world has witnessed a dramatic upsurge of the Christian community.

Some of the fastest growing churches in the world are in Asia. Men's response to the Gospel there has thrilled us all. There are now approximately seventy million Christians in Asia. Half of these are in the Philippine Republic. It is true that seventy million is only a tiny percentage of Asia's total population; but a more important statistic than absolute numbers must be considered — namely, the rate of growth; that is, the percentage of increase of a group over a given period.

During the first three-quarters of our century Christians in Asia have increased at a rate nearly three times that of non-Christians. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were 75 non-Christians in Asia for every Christian. Today, this ratio has dropped to twenty-two to one — one-third of the previous proportion! And it appears that this trend will continue throughout the remainder of this century — clear evidence that the Spirit of God is moving mightily in Asia in our time.

But God's power has been even more dramatically evident in Africa during the twentieth century. At the beginning of this century only 7½ per cent of Africa's peoples professed the name of Christ. Today, the proportion of Africans who have indicated their allegiance to Jesus has risen to 33 per cent. And by the year 2000, just twenty-five years from now, nearly half of the continent will have come under the banner of the Cross!

A few moments ago we noted that Christians in Asia are increasing at a rate nearly three times that of non-Christians. In Africa during the same period the rate has been almost four times faster! That is, whereas the population of Africa generally is increasing at a rate of 1.2 per cent per year, the Christian community is expanding by 4.6 per cent annually. At the beginning of our century there were twenty-eight non-Christians in Africa for every Christian. Today, there are only 2½ — a ten-fold drop! And, as we saw with respect to Asia, in Africa also this trend will persist for at least the next twenty-five years.

Thus, it is probable that by the year 2000 there will be more non-Western Christians in the world than Western! Also, by that date the center of gravity of Christendom will have shifted from north of the equator to south.

Part of this shift can be traced to the growing number of evangelicals in Latin America. Latin America has been a Christian continent for over 400 years. Brazil, for example, is the world's largest Catholic country. Within Latin America during the twentieth century overall church growth has resulted not merely from normal population increases but from the multiplication of evangelical communities. The current population growth rate in Latin America is about 3 per cent — the highest in the world. Among evangelicals, however, the growth rate in recent years has been 10 per cent! In other words, evangelicals are expanding three times faster than the population at large!

In contrast with Latin America, North America is predominantly Protestant, though with a significant Catholic element. North American church membership increased steadily for more than a hundred years. But, as pointed out in the book, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, some of the largest denominations in America have experienced declines in membership since 1965. In contrast, such declines are not apparent in Bible-centered churches. It is also worth noting that the number of missionaries affiliated with North American evangelical societies has increased by 60 per cent in recent years.

Up to this point we have been considering the amazing expansion of Christianity through the centuries — and for this we praise God. Now we turn our attention to the task that remains before us — the more than two billion unreached people on our planet.

In doing so we look first at Europe, the center of Christian faith for the past 1500 years — the home of the Protestant Reformation — and the home base for much of the modern global missionary movement. Within this century European Christendom has experienced steady secularization combined with intense opposition from atheistic materialism — so much so that contemporary European culture is frequently said to be "post Christian." Christian expansion in Europe in recent decades has not kept pace with the continent's population growth. Church attendance has decreased significantly during the past half-century.

Less than 3 per cent of those now living in Europe are members of non-Christian religions such as Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. Over 25 per cent are avowedly atheist, though living in countries which are historically Christian. Nearly two-thirds are Christian, the majority being Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.

It is impossible, of course, to estimate the precise number of *committed* Christians. But in most European countries regular church attendance does not exceed 5 per cent. It is apparent, then, that the task of evangelizing Europe consists as much in reaching those who are Christian in name only as in persuading atheists or members of non-Christian religions.

The situation in North America is similar to that in Europe in that there are relatively few adherents of non-Christian religions to win — Eskimos, Indians, and members of the Jewish faith being the main exceptions. One difference is that North America is almost totally Christian — at least formally. Militant atheism is not a major factor as in Europe. *Another* difference is that the evangelical sector is somewhat larger than in Europe — or at least more visible! Yet America's pervasive materialism presents a formidable challenge to evangelism.

Again, in *Latin America* the challenge is not only the aboriginal tribes — though it is imperative that they be reached — it is also the great mass of nominal Christians who combine various mixtures of pagan and Christian practices.

In some respects, therefore, the evangelistic challenge presented by Europe, North America, and Latin America is similar. When we look at the challenge of *Africa*, however, we see something quite different. Here the percentage of adherents of traditional tribal religions — and Islam — is much higher than in Europe, North America, and Latin America.

From the standpoint of sheer numbers, however, *Asia*, even more than Africa, presents the greatest challenge of all to our generation. Members of non-Christian religions constitute fully 95 per cent of the population of this vast continent! The significance of this strikes home when we realize that Asia, though only one of six continents, contains more than half of the world's population — that is, more than half of all those for whom Christ died.

Within this circle, which has a radius of less than 2000 miles, lives 45 per cent — nearly half — of our planet's peoples. We are not suggesting, of course, that the entire evangelistic and missionary resources of the Christian church be projected into this area — we have already indicated the special challenges of the other continents — but it is imperative that we recognize that almost half of the fulfillment of the Great Commission in our time *will* be decided in *this* small area. It is reasonable to assume that the greatest part of the task of world evangelization in the immediate future lies in *Asia*.

Yes, something new. A worldwide Church! Christians in every land! And yet, so much remains to be done! Hindus, Muslims, Chinese — these three groups alone constitute 83 per cent of all non-Christians in Asia and Africa. And note how they are growing! Moreover, they are beyond the reach of ordinary near-neighbor evangelism. Consequently Lausanne emphasizes the importance of both local evangelism *and* missionary outreach.

Missionaries — that is, disciple-makers sent out across cultural frontiers — are needed more than ever. Even Western missionaries are required in many places in greater numbers than ever, in spite of some voices to the contrary. Yet these three groups — Hindus, Muslims, Chinese —

nearly two billion strong — are the object of only 5 per cent of today's Protestant missionary force! The other 95 per cent of our missionaries are directing their efforts toward that much *smaller* group of unreached peoples which, though admittedly important, nevertheless comprises only 17 per cent of the unreached citizens of Asia and Africa.

One reason for this, of course, is that Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism, as well as Chinese communism, present special obstacles to Western evangelistic agencies. Realistic strategy for the coming quarter-century, therefore, calls for many more *Third World* missionaries. Indeed, this strategy appears to have been inaugurated already by the Holy Spirit, for one of the most exciting developments in our time is the emergence of Third World missions. The authors of this book, *Missions from the Third World*, report that more than 200 agencies from forty-six Western countries have *already* sent out more than 3,000 missionaries.

Nigeria, India, and Brazil lead the way, followed by the Philippines, Japan, Mexico, and Third World ethnic missions from the United States. But these are only the vanguard. Thousands more are needed! Surely one of the most significant things we can do here at Lausanne is to give prayerful consideration to how missionaries from the Third World can be multiplied.

It may appear that too much emphasis has been placed on statistics in this presentation. We recognize the dangers inherent in working with figures — and it is perfectly true that our Lord is as much concerned with quality as with quantity. However, statistics are useful in revealing something of the *dimensions* of the task before us. For every person in our world today who professes the name of Jesus, there are *two* who have never *heard* his name. And, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they be sent?" To these sharp questions we may add a fourth: "And how are they to go if they do not have the facts?"

Now that we have considered some relevant facts — if each of us were to return home from Lausanne and bend every effort to mobilize our fellow Christians first, for the evangelization of our own nation, and then for the whole world — what wonders might God do? May Isaiah's prayer be each of ours: "Here am I, Lord; send me!"