

## EVANGELISM IN CHALLENGING SETTINGS III

**The Challenge of the Restricted-Access World**

George Otis Jr.

When Marcus Dods was an old man, he said, "I do not envy those who have to fight the battle of Christianity in the twentieth century." Then, after a moment, he added, "Yes, perhaps I do, but it will be a stiff fight."

It is doubtful, however, that Dr. Dods could have known just *how* stiff the battle would be. Who could have predicted, for example, that an elderly Shiite cleric would leave the French hamlet of Neauphle-le-Chateau, in 1979, to launch a worldwide Islamic revolution that would profoundly challenge the strategic interests of both superpowers—not to mention the church of Jesus Christ? At the end of the 1980s, who was prepared for the fact that two-thirds of the world's population would live beyond the reach of conventional missions programs? And who has yet fully realized the implications of such diverse, present-day phenomena as hyperinflation, *perestroika*, or the fact that, since 1975, the Mormon Church has more than tripled in size?

Despite the contention of the great Roman leader Marcus Aurelius that, "He who has seen present things has seen all," contemporary history is proving to be extraordinarily fluid. While historical precedent may have provided a useful tool for decision-making in the past, the current flow of human activity and achievement is such that precedent is no longer a reliable methodology. As the British futurist Arthur C. Clarke quipped during the 1960s, "The future just isn't what it used to be."

**Crucial Questions**

The church today is in the midst of what scientists call a "paradigm shift." The business world refers to it as a "discontinuity." Put simply, we are in a process of transition away from ministry perspectives and tactics that are nearing the limits of their performance capabilities, to emerging ideas and methods with the potential to raise or extend current performance limits. Many of our standard modes of picturing and responding to the task of world evangelization no longer mesh with the current contextual realities of life, therefore, any future success on the evangelistic battlefield will require us to relinquish many of our cherished, but vintage, wineskins.

The issue before us is not one of efficiency, but of effectiveness. The need is not simply for a few minor adjustments in our "evangelistic engine," but for a revolutionary new design.

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*George Otis Jr. is founder of Issachar Frontier Mission Strategies and is a citizen of the United States.*

Three areas in particular need immediate attention: our mission, our market, and our methods.

Is the primary mission of the church today to reinforce the faith of the believer, or to evangelize the unbeliever? Given David Barrett's recent observation that, "Ninety-nine percent of all global Christian resources are consumed by Christians themselves for their own purposes," our *de facto* answer to this question would seem obvious. A few years ago, the "Voice of Calvary's" John Perkins startled his church audiences by declaring, "Let's be honest, we tithed to ourselves." But when existing Christians are the prime beneficiaries even of the church's foreign mission money—86 percent of it to be exact—can anyone argue with his conclusion?

The second area in which radical change needs to occur is our ministry marketplace. Whom, exactly, are we trying to reach with the gospel? Most Christian mission agencies and workers today will respond that their desire and intent is to evangelize unreached peoples, but with few exceptions, their resources are targeted on the Christian world. Out of a global foreign mission force of some 262,000 workers, only 21,000—or 8 percent—of its foreign missionaries and 14 percent of its missions budget reach the nearly 3.5 billion people living outside the Christian world. If the world is to be evangelized anytime soon, a major redeployment of our resources is clearly in order. We must leave the one that is found and go to the ninety-nine that are lost.

Finally, we must look at our current methodologies. Will the deployment of conventional, resident missionaries remain a viable and effective ministry approach in the years ahead? If the majority of the world's unreached people live in nations whose governments prohibit or severely limit traditional Christian missionary presence and/or activity, how will we reach them?

**Preparing for the Battle**

If we are to successfully evangelize the world in light of these and other important questions, we must first gain a thorough understanding of: (1) the times, (2) the battlefield, and (3) our identity.

To understand the times, the church needs prescient Christians—those who see the future and responsibly prepare to live and minister in it. A quick glance through Scripture reveals many such men and women. Noah, for instance, saw a coming flood and prepared an ark. Rahab perceived the Israeli conquest of Jericho and hid the spies. Joseph predicted an impending famine and instructed Pharaoh to take action. Mary sensed the imminence of her son's public ministry and commanded Cana's servants to obey him. Peter recognized God's desire to release the gospel to the Gentiles and traveled to the home of Cornelius.

In 1 Chronicles 12:32 (KJV), the sons of Issachar are described as being men that "had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do." God, in similar fashion today, is prepared to give his people insight into events and circumstances that have "ripened" (*kairos*), along with the corresponding wisdom to take appropriate action. Vivid present-day examples of *kairos* include the Iranian revolution and resurgent Islam; the new opening of China; and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union.

While the future is largely determined by God, preparation for it is man's responsibility. Seeing the future, in other words, means nothing if no appropriate action is taken today. Conversely, those with no detailed expectations for the future have nothing to drive their present actions and decisions.

In addition to understanding the times, however, we must also become intimately familiar with today's spiritual battlefield. To do this, we must learn to identify two

important areas of concern: (1) prevailing strongholds (superintended by powerful demonic powers and principalities), and (2) active or emerging spiritual convergence zones (areas where onrushing deceptive forces attempt to fill spiritual vacuums created by retreating or spent ideologies). Contemporary examples of the latter would include Afghanistan, Cambodia, the People's Republic of China, Mozambique, and the Soviet Union. If understanding the times provides us with insight into what is happening and when, familiarity with the spiritual battlefield gives us answers to the question of *where*.

Last, but not least, successful evangelization in the 1990s and beyond will require that we clearly understand who we are and how we fit into this grand process. In the days of the early church, this issue of identity was first broached when the pagan communities of the eastern Mediterranean referred to local Christians as the "third race." Not fitting the mold of traditional Jews, and plainly not espousing a polytheistic worldview, they were a curious anomaly.

Whether we call it strategic non-assimilation, or something else, Herbert Schlossberg is right in saying in his *Idols for Destruction*, "The repeated New Testament call for separation demands that we refuse to think and act like those around us."

Knowing that the kingdoms of this world are destined to become the kingdom of Christ, and that, as Schlossberg observes, "those who seek their ultimate value in the next world are the only ones able to do much good in this one," we must nevertheless take care that our message remains pro-Christ and not anti- any particular political or economic system. Paul's experience in Ephesus is a good example of this. Although the apostles were brought before a restless mob intent on doing them harm, the town clerk in Acts 19:37 (RSV) declares: "You have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess." In the two years Paul spent in Ephesus, he took a stand for Christ, not against the existing system. He remained focused, remembering that his task was to win a bride for God's Son.

### Essential Elements of Victory

As the church approaches the year 2000, the battle to access and win the hearts of lost peoples will intensify—particularly in areas dominated by rival belief systems. In these frontline mission fields, evangelistic progress will require that our understanding of strategic timing, placement, and calling be followed up with a strong commitment to the other essential elements of victory: collaboration, innovation, and activism.

### Collaboration

If the rallying cry of the Lausanne Covenant, "That the whole church might take the whole gospel to the whole world" is to be realized, we must first command a whole church. Regrettably, despite the absence of any scriptural justification for a segmented body, many of us continue to view the subjugation and isolation of certain of our brethren by various man-made barriers and human edicts as simply an unfortunate fact of life. What we do not see, but must begin to perceive, is the fact that these segregative devices contain nothing more than a potential to divide; they are empowered only through our passive acquiescence of their intent.

By referring to the body of Christ alternately as the "persecuted church" and the "free church," we tend to perpetuate a harmful and unbiblical "us/them" mentality. Fortunately, this can be replaced with a healthier "we, together" perspective simply by re-labeling these same references (i.e., the "Forward-Positioned" church and the "Partner-Provider" church) in such a way so as to suggest their unified relationship.

International partnership has much to commend it. A good way to illustrate this is to examine the respective asset and liability sheets of the Forward-Positioned and Partner-Provider units of Christ's church. When this is done, it readily becomes apparent that the strengths of one are the precise remedy for the weaknesses of the other. The Partner-Provider's problems with access, language, culture, and general proximity to the field, for instance, are dealt with through relational linkage with his Forward-Positioned brother. In similar fashion the Forward-Positioned church's lack of adequate manpower, training materials, finances, and political freedoms are needs which can be positively addressed by its Partner-Provider. Partnership, in other words, is the only means by which the whole church will be able to take the gospel to the whole world.

However, contemporary attitudes are working against this as seen in paternalism and exclusivism. Advocates of paternalism tend to view the Forward-Positioned church not as partners to work with, but as victims to be comforted. Given their circumstances, these frontline believers are considered generally incapable of either discerning or implementing a ministry plan for their homelands without external guidance. Unfortunately, some Western-based ministries have found it profitable to perpetuate this notion; and, as a consequence, efforts to dispel it often meet with considerable resistance.

Champions of exclusivism, meanwhile, argue that national churches should be solely responsible for the evangelization of their countrymen. This is energetically touted as God's ordained plan, and "outsiders" are encouraged not to interfere with the process.

This position, however, not only negates the concept of cross-cultural work, but it also serves to isolate believers living in politically restrictive societies from the rest of the body of Christ. It suggests that it is necessary for one part of the body to live and function independent of its other members.

But what if these believers, like Apollos in Acts 18, are fervent in spirit but are teaching only that portion of the gospel they have been exposed to? Where, apart from an integrated relationship with the wider body of Christ, will they encounter the Priscillas and Aquilas who will be able to "explain the way of God more accurately"? What if they do not have, and cannot officially secure, copies of God's Word? Apart from access to the Bible, how can believers in closed societies build their faith so as to withstand severe temptations and persecutions?

### Innovation

With many traditional mission programs currently operating under increased governmental scrutiny, and others struggling for measurable results, there is a growing sense among those working in frontier areas that conventional tactics are probably more important for what they have contributed in the past than for what they are going to contribute in the future. The times, in other words, appear ripe for some interesting detours.

Departing from the status quo, however, can be a difficult business. People whose identities are tied to traditional structures and methodologies are often deeply threatened by change. A typical feature of their defense mechanism is to throw up a critical attitude toward almost any new proposal. In response to this, one of the co-founders of artificial intelligence, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Marvin Minsky, offers the following warning: "There is always something wrong with a new idea. But you have to be careful of people who say there are no new ideas because they are likely to fool you into never getting any."

History is not prescriptive; and as one astute writer has pointed out, "Neither

heroism nor invention emerged from doing things as one did them in the past.” If progress is to be achieved in the spiritual or any other arena of life, prevailing assumptions about what is necessary and possible must be periodically challenged. This is not out of a juvenile desire to be deliberately provocative, but rather comes of the understanding that times change, and that many widely held assumptions in the past have proven to be faulty and inaccurate.

In the scientific realm, for instance, men used to hold fast to the belief that the world was flat, and that the sun revolved around the earth. The year before the Wright brothers’ successful first flight at Kitty Hawk, astronomer Simon Newcomb proclaimed: “Flight by machines heavier than air is unpractical and insignificant, if not utterly impossible.” In 1923, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Dr. Robert Millikan demonstrated a similar pessimism when he prematurely declared: “There is no likelihood that man can ever tap the power of the atom.”

On the spiritual plane as well, evangelistic progress has been, and continues to be, hampered by many such negative and false assumptions. Perhaps the biggest of these—that evangelism cannot be conducted in so-called “closed” societies—is in fact no more sound than the prevailing notion in earlier ages that the world was flat.

In truth, many of us stand in need of a fresh revelation from God as to what is possible and what is not. A good starting point might be admitting that we have confused government opposition to Christianity with rejection of the gospel by the resident people groups; and that we have judged these mission fields to not be “white unto harvest” without having first attempted to seriously evangelize there. (Or, in other cases, failing to recognize it may not be the gospel that is being resisted but rather our methods of presenting it!) By acknowledging that our notions are untested, and that we have made our determinations on the basis of assumption rather than experience, we clear the way for God’s purposes to be revealed.

If the prerequisite to innovation is the discarding of dated assumptions, then innovation itself begins with the formation of new ones. In this regard, deliberate, firsthand exposure to current challenges is critical. Not only does this provide useful protection against the malignancy of apathy, but it also affords God the opportunity to birth creative vision in our hearts. When this happens, however, we must dream largely; because as Malcolm Muggeridge wrote in the early 1970s, “Experience shows that those who ask little tend to be accorded nothing.”

The encouraging news is that the last few years have evidenced a significant upsurge in large-scale dreaming relative to evangelism in politically changing settings. Even the descriptive label “restricted-access nations,” itself a replacement for the theologically troublesome term “closed countries,” is in the process of evolving. As previously daunting restrictions are transformed into surmountable challenges, the new, more appropriate, emphasis is on “creative-access nations.”

Several promising methodologies are also emerging. Some of these are new, while others have been remodeled to meet the requirements of today’s spiritual battlefield. All represent viable alternatives to conventional approaches which are fast reaching the limits of their effectual life spans in the world’s growing community of creative-access nations.

In addition to the multiple entry evangelism of nonresident missions and the persistence of gospel broadcasting, the rapidly growing potential of indigenous missions and tentmaking gives the church a formidable arsenal with which to approach the ministry-access challenges of tomorrow.

National missions are now virtually unstoppable. In addition to holding their own

strategy consultations, such as the recent Third World Missions Advance at Portland’s Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, they are developing extraordinarily creative, diverse, and bold ministry initiatives. Examples from within the creative-access world include the David Evangelistic Outreach in Nepal; two highly effective indigenous ministries operating within the Arab world—the Lord’s Army in Romania and the Society for Propagation of Christian Ethics; and the Light and Life Movement in Poland.

By taking advantage of opportunities uniquely open to them, many non-Western Christians are moving into positions and places of strategic influence. An Indian ministry is recruiting believers from the subcontinent to take employment openings in the Arabian Gulf. African exchange students in the Soviet Union have been used by God to evangelize and disciple unreached young people there. Koreans, Filipinos, and Nigerians have been effective witnesses in some of the most tightly controlled nations of the Middle East and North Africa. Eastern Europeans have been instrumental in presenting the gospel to Mongolia. Five new Latin missions are presently focusing their attention on North Africa. And the list goes on.

Tentmaking’s growing appeal is due to its ability to simultaneously provide access to unreached peoples, involve the laity in missions, and keep costs in check. While tentmaking is hardly a new idea, and in fact can be traced back to Paul (Acts 18:3), it has never fit the prevailing mission context as snugly as it does today. The role of modern communications in diminishing isolation, growing economic interdependence, burgeoning tourism, and increasing technical and educational exchanges brought on by the advent of the information age all pave the way for, and indeed beckon, tentmaker missionaries to come to the forefront of world evangelization.

While tentmaking may appear one-dimensional to some observers, this is not the case. For in addition to standard international employment opportunities, there is today virtually unlimited potential for entrepreneurship. If we can stem the “brain drain” in the church by helping our more talented and enterprising lay people to decompartmentalize their vocational and spiritual callings, “missionary corporations” and “companies for Christ” will abound on their own accord.

Finally, though hardly an innovation, we must not overlook the role and gifts of the Holy Spirit in areas where spiritual breakthroughs are needed. In many lands today, including—and perhaps especially—within the Muslim world, we cannot afford to come in with our doctrine but not with power. People will often have been prepared by the Holy Spirit for our arrival; and they expect an encounter with the supernatural.

## Activism

Having joined ranks with our fellow believers and examined fresh approaches to the task, it remains for us to act. For as Peter Wagner puts it: “God brings the harvest to ripeness, but he does not harvest it.”

Activism—a term not to be confused with busyness—is the inevitable result of a soul that moves into close proximity to the heart and purposes of God. It is the natural response to the realization that the will of God is the highest and most profound cause which may be served.

Jeremiah cried under the weight of prophetic anointing: “His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not” (Jeremiah 20:9, NKJV).

Peter and John argued before the Sanhedrin: “For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.”

The apostle Paul reasoned with the Corinthians: “For if I preach the gospel, I have

nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16, NKJV)

Jesus declared to his disciples: "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4, NKJV).

In Paul's epistle to the Romans, he exhorts them to be "not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11, NKJV). Proverbs declares: "If you faint in the day of adversity, Your strength is small." An even stronger admonition is found in Jesus' parable of the talents where indolent servants are called "lazy" and "unprofitable" and given their dread release.

The strong intimation in this latter parable is that God will judge us not on the basis of what we have done, but rather on the basis of what we could have done and chose to neglect. The central question at all times involves what we are doing with what we have been given. To ensure we are able to provide a satisfactory answer to this question, it is crucial that we maintain a conscious inventory of the resources God has entrusted to our stewardship.

The Partner-Provider church, in particular, must also remember that God's definition of stewardship requires investment; although not, it should be added, in comfortable zones of control where those who pay homage to the Christian message can congregate in peace.

After a recent lengthy tour of American Christian churches and media ministries, a Polish pastor was asked to summarize his impressions. His reply was piercing:

The American church is captive to freedom. . . . To American Christians the most important thing about freedom is that they have it. To those of us in Eastern Europe, however, the most important thing about freedom is what one does with it.

As the church proceeds toward the year 2000, there is perhaps no other warning more appropriate to the occasion. Multitudes still wait in the valley of decision, but the question remains as to who will reach them first. Never before has the competition for souls been as fierce. Never before has the church had to contend with such a diverse assortment of rivals so utterly committed to the principles of activism.

All of this raises significant questions when it comes to sharing our faith with others—particularly when in so doing we can be relatively certain that it will stir up fierce opposition. If, for example, we know there will be persecution, should we attempt to gauge its probable severity before we extend a witness? If our calculations indicate that the reaction will be severe, even life-threatening, can we biblically justify a conscious decision to avoid the confrontation?

Should the church in politically or socially hostile circumstances remain covert to avoid potential eradication by forces hostile to Christianity? Or would a more open confrontation with prevailing spiritual ignorance and deprivation—even if it produced Christian martyrs—be more likely to lead to evangelistic breakthroughs?

Islamic fundamentalists claim that their spiritual revolution is fueled by the blood of martyrs. Is it conceivable that Christianity's failure to thrive in the Muslim world is due to the notable absence of Christian martyrs? Can the Muslim community take seriously the claims of a church in hiding?

Advocates for a more covert approach argue that it is essential for young national churches to be allowed to mature undisturbed until they reach a point of "assured viability." Once the church grows beyond this critical threshold, it can, and inevitably will, become public knowledge. Even if stiff persecution follows, proponents of this

position claim that the church's roots at this stage will be deep and wide enough to sustain it.

The question remains, however, as to whether it is possible to bring a covert church to a point of assured viability. Can enough converts be won and effectively disciplined in the absence of fearless role models, or living examples of God's ability to deliver and sustain his people in the teeth of adversity?

There is surely biblical precedent for strategic seclusion. David hid out from the relentless anger of Saul, Rahab hid the Jewish spies in Jericho, and Joseph and Mary took the infant Jesus into Egypt in order to escape Herod's massacre of the innocents. The question, then, is not one of whether it is at times wise to keep worship and witness discreet, but rather how long this may continue before it becomes a matter of "hiding our light under a bushel."

Admittedly, these are issues which most Western Christians can only deal with vicariously. There is unquestionably a danger in allowing those of us who live in the hills of freedom to thrust our sometimes all-too-rational perspectives on those who live in the valley of the shadow of death. Still, God has called us in the spirit of unity to "remember those that are in bonds as bound with them." He further reminds us in his Word that "all that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." If this blessed privilege has not yet touched our lives, perhaps it is time for us to ask why not.

At the same time, those who pray for the spiritual awakening of unreached peoples in restricted lands, but cannot at the same time abide the thought of a church in confrontation, might wish to reconsider the likely implications of answered prayer.

The first book of the prophet Samuel records a truly dramatic encounter between God's people and the spirit of fear and intimidation. The account involves the armies of Israel and Philistia who had set themselves for battle in the Valley of Elah. As they faced each other atop parallel ridges, a monstrous Philistine warrior broke ranks with his fellows to defy Saul's troops. For forty days, this giant presented himself, morning and evening, before the armies of God. As he bellowed his hostility across the valley, we are told that "all the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were dreadfully afraid."

In these modern times, our fears over what might happen have resulted in an increasing incidence of missionary detours and evangelistic paralysis. All too often the primary question to be answered today is not: "Is the field ripe," but, "Is it safe?" If relative freedom and safety cannot be satisfactorily affirmed, the only prudent option is to step back and wait for God to "open doors."

But what is meant by the phrase *open doors*? If one surveys its popular definition, the concept clearly involves more than mere assurances of personal safety. Opportunity and feasibility are cast as equally important components, demanding, in the first case, some kind of legitimizing invitation or welcome to minister, and in the second, a resources-to-challenge ratio that is realistic. Should any of these factors be absent, the assumption is made that the doors to effective ministry are, for the time being at least, "closed."

Despite the prevalence of such notions, a careful re-examination of the New Testament places them in clear conflict with the views and practices of the early church. The idea, for instance that God's servants must or will be welcomed in their ambassadorial roles is nowhere encountered. From Jerusalem and Damascus to Ephesus and Rome, the record shows that the apostles were beaten, stoned, conspired against, and imprisoned for their witness. Invitations were rare, and never the basis for their missions.

people to a fair fight. The recurring theme of Scripture is one of giants and multitudes. Time and again, Christian warriors were asked to face foes whose natural resources exceeded their own.

The script is the same for us today. As we face the emerging challenges of urbanization, massive refugee populations, militant Islams, and growing numbers of totalitarian governments opposed to the spread of the gospel, there are no fair fights.

Spiritual inroads into enemy territory are nearly always the result of godly initiatives rather than heathen invitations. God's strategy in reclaiming his fallen creation is decidedly aggressive; rather than waiting for captive souls to petition for liberation, he instead dispatches his servants on extensive search and rescue missions. It is a slippery and deadly serious business, for outside the perimeter of the kingdom of God, divine emissaries are immediately confronted with the gates of hell. Fearful in their imagery, these malevolent structures have persuaded more than one expedition to turn back for safer havens.

Those who proceed, however, do so in the double confidence that Christ has promised to go with them, and that he has passed through these portals before. Additional encouragement, if any is needed, is afforded in Jesus' declaration of Matthew 16:18 (KJV) that "the gates of hell shall not prevail" against either the church or her truths. In glorious strokes, the dynamic characteristics of the Lord's army are highlighted against the static and essentially defensive structures of the enemy. As for the myriad of supposed "closed doors" facing Christian believers today, the reality is that very few are the work of God. Most are deceptive barriers that have been erected to ward off divine arrows of truth, and are, therefore, legitimate targets for spiritual conquest. All represent golden opportunities to prove his resources and promises afresh.

Today, Goliaths stand all about us—in our society and throughout the earth. The Mongolias, Libyas, and Albanias of the world mock us, because for decades we have displayed neither the courage nor faith to penetrate their ramparts with the gospel. Do we hear them? Are we, like David, shocked at their defiance of the armies of God? If so, the time has come for us to fulfill our duty. And as an old Talmudic proverb observes: "These things are good in little measure and evil in large: yeast, salt, and hesitation."

## II. A. The Whole Gospel