

And out of that he asked himself the question, *My, what is the Lord doing? So many groups are simultaneously beginning to talk about the year 2000. What is happening? What is God trying to say?* So he wrote the article "By the Year 2000: Is God Trying to Tell Us Something?" And in just a few minutes Thomas will come to help us to understand as God has given him insight into the answer to that question. Let us be praying that God will speak to us clearly.

## The Great Commission Decade

Thomas Wang

The book of Isaiah is timeless. It illustrates the relationship between a sovereign God and suffering mankind. The Old Testament prophets did not live in ivory towers—they lived among people. They knew people—their pain and their aspirations.

The book of Isaiah is also the gospel book of the Old Testament. It tells about sin, judgment, redemption, and hope. It not only describes suffering mankind, but also a suffering servant—the Son of God.

The first part of the book warns that the people of Israel will go into captivity because of their sin. And chapter 39 specifically states that they will be taken into Babylon and become slaves. And it happened! Psalm 137 says the Israelites sat down by the rivers of Babylon, and whenever they thought about Zion, they wept. And they said, "O Jerusalem, how can I forget you. If I ever forget Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill, and may my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth." In Babylon, they cried out to God from the depth of their sorrow.

### The Meaning of the Great Commission

As is always the case, after tears there is joy, and after chastisement there is restoration. And with Isaiah chapter 40, we begin to see a totally different picture. God the loving Father is bringing comfort and joy to his people.

God told them to speak tenderly to Jerusalem. And to tell her that her warfare was accomplished, her sins were pardoned, and that she had received from Jehovah God a double forgiveness. What a wonderful feeling it is: the task is done, sins are forgiven, and we are thoroughly chastened and disciplined. This is the meaning of evangelization: the people of the world hear the Good News, receive Christ, and become his followers. This is the Great Commission.

### Agents of the Great Commission

God said, "Comfort ye my people," which means: "*You* comfort my people." He was speaking to the prophets. God did not say, "I will comfort my people," but, "*You*, my servants, comfort my people, wipe away their tears, and bring good tidings to them."

In New Testament times, God's principle was the same. Before the miracle of five

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loaves and two fish, he said to the disciples, “You give them things to eat.” In John 21, Christ said to Peter three times, “You feed my sheep.” We are the agents of evangelization.

Isaiah 40:3 (NKJV) further confirmed this by saying, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness.” The Chinese Bible includes an extra word, “A human voice crying in the wilderness.” It primarily referred to John the Baptist. In a broader sense, it means God’s people. The church is the agent for world evangelization. God uses human instruments to fulfill his Great Commission.

### Preparation of the Great Commission

The voice crying in the wilderness said, “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight a highway for him in the desert.” While the wilderness is a place of lawlessness, the desert is an area of lifelessness; an accurate picture of the world today.

It is incorrect to think this passage means literally an engineering operation or a highway construction project. These illustrations have spiritual and moral meanings in our individual and corporate lives.

The voice said to prepare his way in the world. Prepare room for Christ in people’s hearts, in our personal life, our family, social, and national life. John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord’s first coming. He called his generation to repent. He stood beside the river Jordan and declared to the world who Jesus was, by saying: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,” (John 1:29, KJV).

Who is responsible today to prepare the way for the Lord’s Second Coming? The humanists? The secularists? People of other religions? The politicians? The United Nations? This privilege is the unique and sole responsibility of the church. You and I, *we* are responsible. This is the Great Commission our resurrected Lord gave to his church.

### Realization of the Great Commission

A highway for Christ must be built into people’s hearts and lives. To achieve this requires spiritual engineering with God as the Chief Engineer.

In Isaiah 40:4, God laid down four spiritual principles to build this spiritual highway. These are the four principles for world evangelization today.

1. “Every valley shall be exalted.” *Exaltation*. When a highway comes to a valley, the valley has to be raised up so the highway can be built through. Valleys represent low places in the world, in our lives, in the family, in society, and in the nation.

Christ came to lift us up physically, socially, and spiritually. When we share the undiluted gospel of Jesus Christ with people, the Holy Spirit will convict them, they will believe, and their lives will be transformed. When individuals are transformed, society is transformed. Christ came to lift us up by his redemption.

2. “Every mountain and hill shall be made low.” *Humiliation*. When the highway comes to mountains, hills, and obstacles, they have to be made low, or be removed so the highway can get through.

The single largest obstacle to world evangelization is not the lack of money; it is not the lack of workers. The biggest hindrance in fulfilling the Great Commission lies in one word, *self*. Self is closely connected with ego and pride. They manifest themselves both within and without the church.

They are like mountains and hills.

For a non-believer to come to God, the first thing he has to overcome is pride: personal pride, intellectual pride, social pride, ethnic pride; the pride of wealth, the pride of position, the pride of age, and the pride of youth, name, authority, and power. When a person says, “I believe in God,” he is actually saying, “I recognize there is a higher authority over me,” which is something a secularist is not willing to admit. These mountains and hills of pride must be humbled before men are willing to receive Christ.

There are also mountains and hills within the church. One of the serious obstacles in world evangelization is the ever present divisiveness among God’s people. The root cause is self and pride. The mountains and hills of self and pride must be made low before world evangelization is possible.

3. “The crooked shall be made straight.” *Restoration*. The world is full of crookedness—in society and in people’s daily lives. These need to be made straight. In John Wesley’s time, one out of every six stores in London was a pub where people went to drink. When revival came to that great city, many pubs closed their doors and went out of business.

About thirty years ago I visited Pastor Petrus of the Philadelphia church in Stockholm, Sweden. I was told that whenever Pastor Petrus walked into a train or bus, people put away their cigarettes.

When the church is truly the light and salt of the world, people will see it, people will be touched and convinced, and they will take the Christian faith seriously.

4. “And the rough places plain . . .” *Levigation*. There are rough places in the church—inconsistencies in Christian lives. Today the eyes of the world are keener than ever before. Sometimes they know us better than we know ourselves. In fact, perhaps they know us too well to take us seriously. We need to ask ourselves the question, *Are we worthy to be taken seriously by the world?*

Men and women of God energized by the Holy Spirit, living a life consistent with their calling, and fully committed to the advancement of the kingdom are indispensable for fulfilling the Great Commission. Technology is important. A database is marvelous. Satellite communication is a scientific wonder. But none of these can replace the centrality of human agency. These are wonderful tools for the ministry and as such should be subservient to the human agency. The tail must not be allowed to wag the dog, although sometimes the tail has a tendency to try to do so.

Rough places in the church and in our lives must be levigated. The uneven surfaces must be made smooth. Our common testimony to the world must be consistent with our words, and then the world will come to Christ.

### Vision Regained

The Bible talks about world evangelization as early as Abraham’s time, if not earlier. God not only blessed Abraham and his seed, he also promised his blessings to all peoples on earth through Abraham. That includes all peoples, all kindreds, and all races wherever they are.

In New Testament times, Christ gave his church the Great Commission for world evangelization in a more specific manner. The people of God, are to go into all the world and bring the gospel to all peoples and win the world for Christ.

The apostle Paul was forbidden to go into Asia twice, and instead he accepted the Macedonian call and went to Philippi and down to Athens. Thus, the gospel headed West, and the West became the sole custodian of the gospel for almost 1800 years.

From the book of Acts down through the centuries, the church was perpetually baffled by the loss of vision, spirituality, moral integrity, dilution of doctrine, and conflicts within herself. Her presence and influence were largely confined in the areas of Europe and Asia Minor.

Not until more than two hundred years after the Reformation did the church slowly, but finally, begin to wake up to the vision of the Great Commission and her responsibility to fulfill it. And the "Great Century" found its lowly beginning when a Christian cobbler in England began to nag his church board on sending missionaries across the ocean. And in the end he went himself.

William Carey arrived in India in 1793. Following his footsteps, we see the great column of saints marching forth into the world as soldiers of the Cross: Martyn, Duff, Morrison, Judson, Livingstone, Taylor, Mott, the Cambridge Seven, Amy Carmichael, Goforth, Studd, Jones, Schweitzer, Zwemer, Townsend, Gladys Aylward, and the list goes on. Today, we have over eighty thousand missionaries in the Protestant missionary force around the world.

### A.D. 2000—The Dawning of a New Era

About one hundred years ago, God's Spirit spoke to a number of his servants in North America, among them D. L. Moody and A. T. Pierson, and then urged them to challenge the churches of their day to evangelize the world by the year 1900. Unfortunately, this heroic effort of world evangelization fell short of its goal. The reasons were many, but clearly the proponents did not receive the responses they sought from the church.

We are coming to the close of the twentieth century, and we are facing a similar movement and calling. While a century ago it was primarily the voice of several individuals, today we are witnessing a worldwide mighty army of church and mission leaders, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, coming forth like a gigantic chorus heralding the evangelization of the world by the year 2000.

God today is doing a new thing. This is a situation we have been praying for. The church has been waiting for twenty centuries for this to happen. According to David Barrett, there are about 250 active global plans today, and half of them make the year 2000 their target year. Among these, eighty-nine of them spend over \$10 million a year for their plans. Of them, thirty-three spend over \$100 million a year. Between now and the year 2000, a total of \$40 billion will be spent for these plans.

Of course, money is not everything, but budgets like these give a projected picture of the enormous amount of work, manpower, prayer, mobilization, and evangelistic effort that will be poured into the task. The task is staggering but possible if God's children in the world today mean business and work together in the next ten years and beyond.

### Spiritual Renewal

No matter what we do for God, we can never escape his spiritual principles. No plan or project can expect God's blessings unless it is done in God's way. God is interested in what we do, but he is more interested in what we are. As servants of God, it is important for us to serve, but it is even more important for us to be.

Third-World churchmen are not necessarily impressed with big organizations, big

numbers, or technology in church activities. But they are impressed with spiritual discipline, moral integrity, and doctrinal purity.

### New Blood

God has raised up new blood and new forces in his church in recent years. They should be recognized as part of the main flow of Christian forces of the world.

1. *Third-World churches and missions.* One of the most encouraging signs today is the emergence and growth of Third-World churches and missions. Dr. David Hesselgrave said the year 1980 was a watershed. In that year, the percentage of all evangelicals in the Third World came to equal the number in the West. Within five years, in 1985, 66 percent of all evangelicals were located in the Third World. The center of gravity in Christianity has shifted from the West to the East and from the northern to the southern hemisphere.
 

The West and North should beware—the East and South are coming! They come not to take over, but to work together to fulfill God's command. However, if the West and North continue to decline spiritually and morally, and if they continue to lose grip of their commitments to the kingdom and give themselves to pleasure and ease, then a takeover of leadership is inevitable.
2. *The Holy Spirit movement.* God is turning a new page in history. He is making unprecedented breakthroughs in almost every denomination as well as to independent churches through the movement of his Holy Spirit in the past decades.

The Pentecostal/charismatic movement brought renewal and growth to churches across the world. They are the fastest growing church, especially in Africa and Latin America. According to David Barrett, its estimated 1988 size is 332 million church members in 240 countries, with a growth rate of 19 million new members renewed in the Spirit every year.

With their emphasis on evangelism and the working of the Holy Spirit, we have no doubt that this movement will become one of the major thrusts of evangelization in the total task of the Great Commission. However, we should never exalt Pentecost above Calvary because the purpose of the coming of the Holy Spirit was to witness and to glorify Christ. Calvary remains our highest spiritual focus in life and service

### Genuine Cooperation

*Genuine global cooperation* are key words. It is not West versus East, but *West and East*. It was not Jerusalem versus Antioch, but *Jerusalem and Antioch*. These are two arms of world evangelization, and no one can wage a single-armed battle.

To achieve this kind of worldwide cooperation, some mountains and hills need to be made low:

1. *"Elijah syndrome."* Under pressure, Elijah said to the Lord, "I, only I, am left." The Lord had to educate him by letting him know that there were seven thousand just like him who had not bowed down to Baal.
 

My dear colleague, Ed Dayton, told me a few months ago that a brother from a remote area of the world wrote to him and said, "You must invite me to the second Lausanne Congress, because world evangelization starts here."

Must we always think that history begins with us? Let us appreciate each other's value and contributions to the kingdom.

2. "Turfism." Twenty years ago, I first noticed the word *turf* by reading David Wilkerson's book, *The Cross and the Switchblade*. It described the youth gangs in New York City. Each gang claims a few street blocks as its "turf." They write their names on walls and guard their turf with tenacity and never allow members of the neighboring gangs to intrude. Every turf is a little kingdom.

We have "turfism" in our churches, mission agencies, fellowships, and movements of today. At times I feel we use more time and energy fighting over turf than doing the job.

John Wesley declared, "The world is my parish." Jesus commanded us to go into all the world to preach the gospel. Turfism is unbiblical, self-centered, and deadly to world evangelization.

## GREAT COMMISSION COMMITMENT

### Begin With Yourself

*Commit yourself to be:*

(a) a Great Commission Christian; (b) a Great Commission church; (c) a Great Commission mission; (d) a Great Commission seminary; (e) a Great Commission fellowship.

### People Groups

Does world evangelization mean that we go to every country, city, town, and village and witness to every person we meet in the street, park, and buildings? Even if we did go out that way, how many people we meet and talk to would receive the gospel?

Since the "people group" idea was popularized in the seventies through McGavran, Winter, and the Lausanne movement, world evangelization suddenly became the "talk of the town" and considered entirely possible. When we talk about world evangelization, we must begin with national evangelization. And when we talk about a nation, we must begin with each people group within that nation. The people group idea breaks down world evangelization into manageable units.

Each nation in the world is made up by mosaic-like people groups. Today there are twelve thousand people groups in the world yet to be reached by the gospel. The idea is to plant vibrant, multiplying churches in each of them so indigenous churches within each people group can evangelize their own people.

### Into Each Nation

To plant churches in every people group of a nation, the existing national churches must take the initiative and leadership. They must be thoroughly motivated by the spirit of leadership. They must be thoroughly motivated by the Spirit of God and convinced the task should and can be done. Sometimes God may also use encouragement from churches of other nations to help initiate the spark.

First, a national consultation on evangelization should be held under joint sponsorship of mission groups of that nation. This should be the occasion to inform and to motivate national church leaders, and to relate God's Great Commission to the national level. A national evangelistic task force could be formed during the consultation. And the task force would work out policies, goals, and strategies to mobilize the churches for

national evangelization.

Over two hundred plans for world evangelization are going on at this hour. Much like Isaiah's time, God wants his church today to raise up a voice and to comfort his people—to speak tenderly to the peoples in North America, Latin America, Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and to the people groups in Angola, Ethiopia, China, the Soviet Union, North Korea, Cuba, and Eastern Europe. We need to bring true comfort, that is, the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people groups in the world, because Jesus Christ crucified is the only hope of the world. There is no salvation besides him. Rulers come and go, but our Lord Jesus Christ is King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and he shall reign forever.

The churches of the world need to walk together and work together. We need to put away things that divide us and rally upon the one thing that unites us: Christ! Anyone in the world who believes in Christ, who has repented of his sin, and has a born-again experience in Christ, regardless of what church or denomination affiliation, is my brother! There is no biblical ground to exclude believers from fellowship. They have a right in Christ for fellowship and love. Our basis of fellowship is Jesus Christ and him crucified—not labels, not our name or tradition. Because of the grace of the Lamb that was slain, we have fellowship and working relationships with one another.

If you already have a national evangelization movement in your country, please do some praying and planning in two areas:

1. How to make your national evangelization movement more successful, fruitful, and lasting.
2. How to further involve your churches in world evangelization. Are you willing to help other countries, maybe a neighboring country, for their national evangelization? There are some countries which would welcome your help.

If you do not have a national evangelization movement in your country, please pray and think about how to use the next one or two years to prepare and organize a consultation for national evangelization. I am sure God will bless your effort, and that other countries would be more than happy to share their experiences with you to see that you have a successful conference.

### Into the Whole World

It is nearly the end of the century. The actual number of years varies depending on how you count it. Whichever method you use, the time is short.

There are more than two hundred nations in the world. Is it possible that within the next few years, by the grace of God and through the cooperative effort of the churches in each country, every nation will have a national evangelistic movement and a task force to serve the churches to achieve the Great Commission?

The readiness of each nation for a national movement is not the same. In some countries national evangelistic movements are already underway such as the Philippines, Guatemala, Ghana, New Zealand, El Salvador, India, and Zaire.

Some are operating in cooperation with international movements, such as the DAWN movement. Some operate independently. And some national movements are in the final phase of preparation and are about to be launched soon. The majority of the rest of the nations will need time for information, motivation, and mobilization efforts.

Can we, by faith, envision a global evangelization movement through each national movement of the world? For instance, today there are twenty nations who already have

national movements underway. According to available data, twenty additional nations may have their national movements by 1990. In 1991, fifty more nations may join in the force. That makes a total of ninety.

Through continued efforts of us all, can we believe that God will help make it possible for sixty more in 1992, and still more in 1993, to have their own national evangelization movement underway?

### Adopt a People

Data research greatly enhanced modern mission outreach. But the differences of systems and records between leading researchers of today have been a source of frustration to church and mission leaders in the past decades.

In 1988, Dr. David Barrett, author of *The World Christian Encyclopedia*, was commissioned to be coordinator of the LCWE Statistics Task Force for the purpose of working out a unified code and system to enable the researchers to provide the church community with unified data. Marvelous results have been achieved. From now on we will receive unified data.

According to the new statistics, the researchers have generally agreed that there are about twelve thousand unreached people groups in the world today. The immediate goal of national and world evangelization should be to plant vibrant and growing churches in these unreached people groups, and let these indigenous churches evangelize their own people. With the growing number of congregations of the world, and the decreasing number of unreached people groups, today's ratio is over four hundred congregations for every unreached people group. Does this sound simplistic? Maybe so, but it presents a dramatic and reasonable picture of how achievable the task is.

Pray and see if God wants your church or denomination to "adopt" an unreached people group—to get to know the people and be responsible to send and support church planters to go and start the evangelization process. The people group approach has made world evangelization understandable and achievable.

Church history is turning a corner. God has patiently waited for almost twenty centuries for the church to fulfill her responsibility. Today, God is handing us the possibility of evangelizing the world by the year 2000 on a silver platter. Are we willing to accept it?

Acts 12 describes the apostle Peter's release from prison. The church was earnestly praying for his deliverance, but when he was delivered and came to them, they could not believe it and told the messenger that she was mad.

We have been praying for world evangelization, but if God answers our prayers and says to us, "All right, you can evangelize the world in ten years," are we so shocked that we cannot believe it?

God is doing a new thing today. Almost everywhere you go you hear people talk about A.D. 2000. Sometimes it seems God is ringing a bell in heaven, as if he is saying to his church, "Ladies and gentlemen, the hour is late, and the job is not yet done. It is time to get serious. Remember my commission to you. Complete it soon."

Let's work together. Let's open ourselves to each other and to all who take seriously this task of sharing the gospel story. This is our Father's world; it is great and complex. No one can do it alone. Some of us have come into the arena earlier, some later. Let no "early birds" say to the later ones, "Back off, I was here first." Let no "younger birds" say to the early ones, "Time for you to move on. I'm taking over." We need a gigantic global evangelization cooperation across geographical, denominational, ethnic, linguistic, and generation lines.

Perhaps it could be said that today we are writing the next chapter of church history. Just how it shall be written depends on whether we are collectively sensitive and obedient to the leading and prodding of the Spirit of God, who sometimes speaks to us through a still small voice, "This is the way, walk in it."