

# On Being a World Christian

William Lane Craig

## SUMMARY

A challenge to Christians to become involved in the task of bringing the message of the Gospel to the entire world..

## ON BEING A WORLD CHRISTIAN

God is on the move in the world today! All across the face of this planet, like a great tide in its ebb and flow, the kingdom of light is pushing back the frontiers of darkness. We are living at a point of world history of unprecedented expansion of the Christian faith, and huge doors of opportunity stand wide open before us. As I look out at the world today, I am positively optimistic about what the future holds.

Now perhaps this comes as something of a surprise to some of you. As you read the newspapers, it seems like influence of Christianity is continually on the wane. The world is going down the drain to hell, and the Church seems powerless to stop it! Statistics show that since 1900 the Church in the Western World has been in a state of steady decline. Secularism has become the dominant force in the West, shaping its intellectual outlook, its culture, its social values. Meanwhile the population of the world is exploding, and it seems like it's impossible for the spread of the gospel to keep up. It all seems so hopeless.

Well, if that's how it seems to you, then I've got great news! For the truth of the matter is that we are players in the greatest drama the world has ever seen, a part of the greatest movement in the history of mankind, which is continuing to spread and change lives across the surface of the globe. The pessimistic, defensive attitude that characterizes many Western Christians is largely due, I think, to a sort of near-sightedness which focuses only on what is happening in our immediate here and now, and so fails to stand back and see the broader picture that God is painting. It's due to just ignorance of the facts of church history and contemporary demographics.

Look back with me, then, over the last twenty centuries of the existence of the Christian faith and ask what we see. Let's take a bird's-eye view, so as to see the grand sweep of world history without getting bogged down in the details. What we see is simply stunning. We see the hugest, most successful movement in the history of mankind. From its humble beginnings in the three year ministry of an obscure Galilean preacher, Christianity has spread throughout the world, so that today over 1 1/2 billion people at least *claim* to be Christians, thus making Christianity the world's largest religion. Today about one-third of the world's population claims adherence to Christianity, in comparison with 21% to Islam,

13% to Hinduism, 6% to Buddhism, and so forth. The great Yale church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette summed it up nicely when he wrote,

The most thought-provoking set of facts in human history is that in spite of its seemingly absurdly inauspicious start, within five centuries Christianity won the professed allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the Greco-Roman world, that it survived the demise of that world, and that within nineteen centuries . . . it penetrated to practically every corner of the inhabited globe and became a moulding force in every great cultural area of mankind.

As we look back over the history of this remarkable movement, it's instructive to see *how* it spread. The growth of Christianity has been compared to a huge incoming tide which advances and retreats, advances and retreats, but progressively gains ground over time.

The first period of advance spanned the first five centuries after Christ. From a persecuted splinter religion of Judaism, Christianity grew until it supplanted the religions of Greece and Rome and became the state religion of the Roman Empire. But even this incredible triumph did not guarantee that Christianity would survive the decline and fall of Rome.

Indeed, during the next 450 years Christianity did experience its most disastrous and enduring retreat. Islam dealt a blow to Christianity from which she has yet to recover. The geographical expanse of the Christian faith was reduced to 50% of what it had been, and the Christian churches in Moslem lands began a steady, unrelenting decline, until today only traces of them remain.

Around AD 950, however, Christianity experienced another surge forward. This advance lasted some 400 years until around 1350. The faith spread into Scandinavia, Central Asia, Ethiopia, China, and continued to persist in India. Never before had any religion been so widely represented geographically, and Christianity's influence in the life of mankind was even greater as a result of this second advance than as a result of the first.

This advance was followed by another retreat, but not as deep or as long as the previous one. For 150 years, from 1350 to 1500, the Church suffered as old empires fell and new empires rose. The great Mongol Empire of Genghis Kahn broke apart, thus cutting off Christian communities in Central Asia and China from the Christian West. In Central Asia, the Mongols turned to Islam, and today this region constitutes the Moslem dominated nations in the former southern Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire of the Turks arose and overran modern day Turkey, bringing Islam with it. Constantinople (modern day Istanbul), which was the successor to Rome as the capitol of Christianity, was sacked, and the famous church Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque and stands as a museum today. Despite these setbacks, however, Christianity did advance into Russia during this time, and Moscow declared itself the successor to Rome and Constantinople as the seat of true Christianity.

Then shortly after 1500 came the Protestant Reformation, and as a result of the revival it brought to the church, the next 2 1/2 centuries were a period of phenomenal expansion of Christianity.

From about 1750 until 1815 came a period, not so much of retreat, but of stagnation. Then beginning in 1815 and lasting until 1914 came what has been called "the Great Century." Spurred by the evangelical revivals in England and America during the late 18th century, the modern missionary movement was born, and the gospel was carried into Africa, China, the islands of the Pacific, and the American frontier. Nothing even remotely like this expansion could be recorded of any other religion at any time in human history.

It's interesting that numerically speaking the greatest expansion of Christianity during the 19th century was in the United States. In 1815 less than one-tenth of the U. S. population were church members. The church faced enormous obstacles: a westward-migrating population, millions of immigrants flooding in from Europe, exploited non-Christian minorities in the Indians and Negro slaves to be evangelized, and so forth. Yet, amazingly, the church rose to this task: by the end of the Great Century, church membership had grown from less than a tenth to more than two-fifths of the population, and the gains were proportional all along the line: whether blacks, whites, or Indians.

It is probably impossible to exaggerate the importance of this 19th century evangelization of America. It set the stage for Christianity to make an enormous impact in the 20th century with the emergence of the United States as the world's foremost power. As a result of the 19th century evangelization of America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world today also is the nation with the largest number of Christians of any country and is the most evangelized society on earth. Twenty-two per cent of the world's evangelical Christians live in the United States, and the vitality, diversity, and size of her Christian organizations and activities nearly defy description. She has been the chief vehicle for bringing Christianity to the world in the twentieth century: 35% of the world's missionaries are from the U.S., and 76% of evangelical financial giving in the world comes from America. We have much to praise God for!

The world of the 19th century came to its shattering end in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I, in which the world was treated to the spectacle of nominally Christian nations destroying each other in Europe. Contemporary historian Paul Johnson said of World War I, "It was a European suicide; it was also, in a sense, a suicide of Christianity." He goes on to explain that though that war

. . . was conducted in what was still a Christian context, the world which emerged from that war bore the first unmistakable signs of total de-Christianization at a state level. For 1917 saw the birth, in Russia, of the first atheist state dedicated to the destruction of religion of all kinds and of Christianity in particular, and that evil regime itself soon evoked in response others which repudiated all the restraints of

Christianity . . . .

The impact of that change in the world-order was horrific. Johnson believes that the principal cause of the horrors of the 20th century was that great power was acquired by men who had no fear of God and so no absolute code of moral conduct. Lenin, he explains, hated Christianity and was determined to stamp it out. For Lenin there was no Christian code of conduct; anything can be justified in the name of the State and the Party. “Can we wonder, then,” asks Johnson, “that this monster murdered or starved to death five million of his own countrymen and that his successor Stalin dispatched a further 20 million?” The moral counterpart of Lenin and Stalin was Adolf Hitler. Hitler, according to Johnson, hated Christianity with a passion that rivaled Lenin’s. Shortly after assuming power in 1933, he told Hermann Rauschwig that he “intended to stamp out Christianity root and branch.” “One is either a Christian or a German,” he said, “You cannot be both.” Hitler found it expedient to use the state church until the Third Reich had attained supremacy; but then he planned to wipe it out just as he had annihilated the Jews. “Can it be wondered,” writes Johnson, that these two fearful regimes—Communism and Nazism—created by men dedicated to the destruction of Christianity, “soon plunged the world into a yet more extensive and destructive Armageddon, which cost 50 million lives and saw men resort to degrees of savagery and wickedness never before practiced or even imagined? Had the world ever before seen horrors like Auschwitz or the Gulag Archipelago? Here were the first bitter fruits of a de-Christianized world.”

In the post-war era the most important and dramatic phenomenon was the sudden and massive pullback of the Western colonial powers from the Third World. As the colonial powers retreated, totalitarianism, civil war, and international war rushed in to fill the vacuum. In the four decades following World War II, wars and civil conflicts in the Third World claimed some 35 million lives, not to mention the countless others who perished in prisons or famines engineered by corrupt regimes, where, as in Ethiopia, the restraints of Christian government were thrown aside.

When we contemplate these tragic and terrible statistics, the natural assumption is, I think, to suppose that with the close of the Great Century in 1914, we have entered once again upon one of those calamitous eras of retreat for the Christian movement in the world. And yet—and this is the incredible paradox, the best-kept secret which you will never hear on the evening news—*it is not true*. The truth is that despite these setbacks, despite the de-Christianization taking place at the state level, the twentieth century was an era of incredible *advance* for the Christian faith around the world.

Professor Latourette characterized the three decades between 1914 and the close of the Second World War as “advance through storm.” You see, even though Christianity had become very widely spread during the Great Century, the percentage of Christians in each land was very tiny. But during the twentieth century those percentages began to multiply. During the thirty years leading up to 1945, the

percentage of Christians in the non-Western world approximately doubled. The quarter century following World War II, during which the Western powers pulled back from the Third World, has been called by missiologist Ralph Winter “the 25 unbelievable years,” as Christianity underwent a spurt of unprecedented growth in the non-Western world. In Africa, for example, in 1900 only 3% of the population adhered to Christianity. By 1970, that percent had grown to 28%. In Latin America, Protestants grew from less than two million in 1945 to more than 19 million by 1970. Protestantism in the entire non-Western world had, by 1964, undergone an 18-fold increase over 60 years. That’s a rate of increase which was over *twice* the rate of population growth during the same time.

But if the twenty-five years following World War II can be characterized as “unbelievable,” we begin to run out of superlatives for the last quarter of the 20th century. Never before in history has such a high percentage of the world’s population been exposed to the gospel, nor the increase of evangelical Christians been so encouraging. The increase in the percentages of evangelical Christians in the Third World has been spectacular. In the 25 years from 1975 to 2000, the number of evangelicals in the Third World grew from 68 million to 300 million. That’s an increase of 6.7% annually, well over twice rate of population growth. In Latin America, for example, only 5% of the population was evangelical in 1970. Today over 10% of the population is evangelical Christian, with the highest percentages being in Chile (17%), Honduras (18%), El Salvador (20%), and Guatemala (26%). In Africa, about 7% of the population was evangelical in 1970; today it’s over 14%, thus more than doubling in 30 years. In Asia, the most dramatic advances of the gospel have occurred in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In the ten years following 1975 the number of Protestants in Asia increased by nearly 10% per year. That’s compared with a population increase of only 1.7% annually. In 1987, the number of evangelicals in Asia surpassed the number of evangelicals in North America, and in 1991 the number of evangelicals in Asia surpassed the number of evangelicals in the entire Western World! So today, for example, in Korea evangelicals now constitute over 21% of the population. In Indonesia, following the bloody coup in 1965, Christianity experienced rapid and sustained growth in a predominantly Muslim society. This is the first Muslim nation in the world in which such a phenomenon has occurred. But one of the most amazing stories is China. When missionaries were forced out of China in 1948, they left with a feeling of failure and defeat. It was long thought thereafter that the repressive communist regime had all but exterminated Christianity in China. But then during the 1970s news began to leak out of China that though the church had been forced underground, she had flourished and grown. Since the end of Mao Tse-tung’s Cultural Revolution in 1976, during which some 20 million people were killed, the growth of the church in China has been without parallel in history, until today she numbers somewhere over 90 million believers. In the words of Patrick Johnstone, Mao Tse-tung unwittingly became the greatest evangelist in history!

Listen, God is on the move in the world today! He is building His church, just as He has been building it

down through the centuries. I'm reminded of Jesus' words in Mt. 13.31:

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

Perhaps all the statistics I've shared thus far can be best summed up by some remarkable figures released by Ralph Winter. In a chart labeled "The Diminishing Task," he plots the number of evangelical Christians per non-Christians in the world. These figures do not include under either category people who are just nominal Christians. In the year 100 there were 360 non-Christians for every evangelical Christian. By the year 1000, there were 220 non-Christians for every evangelical. By the year 1900, there were only 27 non-Christians per evangelical. By 1950 that number had shrunk to 21 non-Christians per evangelical Christian. And in the year 2000 there were 7 non-Christians for every evangelical believer in the world. Even if you add in all the nominal Christians as well as targets for evangelism, that still means there are only about 9 unbelievers to be evangelized for every believer.

Do you believe in the possibility of world evangelization? I do! We're so used to hearing about the world population explosion outstripping the growth of Christianity. But the statistics I just shared show that's not true. Evangelical Christianity is growing more than 3 times as fast the world's population. And do you realize that most of the people who have ever lived in the history of the world are living right now, at this very moment? We have the numbers, the financial resources, and the technology to evangelize the whole world in our generation—and thereby to reach the majority of the human race who have ever lived on the face of this planet! Do you see why I'm excited?

And the best is yet to come. The chief difficulty in reaching the whole world today is the fact that hundreds of millions of people live in countries which are legally closed to the gospel and so evangelism is almost impossible. It's estimated that between 15-25% of the world's population lies beyond the present reach of the gospel. But here, too, God is working in unbelievable, unpredictable ways. Handbooks on world mission published during the 1980s lamented the fact that 20% of the world's population was classified as non-religious or atheistic, making atheism the second greatest religion after Christianity. But, of course, most of the people classified in this way lived in communist countries like the Soviet Union or China, where the *official* ideology was atheistic. The political collapse of the Soviet Union has permitted the open proclamation of the gospel in those lands, resulting in a massive turning to God. The collapse of the communistic system and Marxist-Leninist ideology came so suddenly, so unexpectedly that publications on the current scene became antiquated overnight. The handbook *Operation World*, published in 1986, for example, had this to say about the Soviet Union:

Pray that the active efforts of atheist teachers, discriminatory laws, secret police and prisons to speed

the demise of Christianity may not only fail, but that the church may emerge victorious.

In 1985 the new leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev vowed he would achieve what his predecessors failed to achieve the elimination of religious belief in the USSR. Pray that his failure may be abundantly demonstrated in coming years!

Wow! Talk about an answer to prayer!

The Marxist-Leninist system, which conquered over a fourth of the earth's land surface and resulted in the loss of millions and millions of lives and incalculable human suffering, which forbade a billion people to hear and believe the gospel, all but evaporated almost overnight. George F. Kennan, who drafted America's cold war policy, said that events of recent years in the former Soviet Union have been some of the most significant events in the history of mankind. It's hard to accuse him of exaggeration: the threat of world-wide nuclear holocaust, the arms race, Soviet-sponsored wars of national liberation, all these are gone. And spiritually speaking, the changes are just as dramatic: Over 416 million people of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, less than 3% of which are evangelical, now lie open to the gospel. Especially significant is the fact that those Islamic republics of Central Asia, like Kazakhstan and Kyrgystan from which Christianity was extinguished in the 15th century, are now open to the gospel. Dramatic changes continue to occur in this region as we speak. The recent U.S. liberation of Afghanistan and Iraq has permitted the entry of Christian relief agencies into those Muslim lands, and who knows how God may use this for the Kingdom?

What a privilege to be alive today! To be a part of such a strategic time in history, when God is moving in the world in such dramatic ways. Oh, sure, obstacles to world evangelization still remain, the most important of these being the Islamic Curtain. But I am firmly convinced that, like the Iron Curtain, the Islamic Curtain will also collapse in our lifetime, and the gospel will penetrate those lands as well. This may happen in unexpected ways. I recently spoke with an international Christian journalist stationed in Beijing. He said that when you talk to Chinese Christians, they will tell you to a man that they believe that God has uniquely called the church in China to evangelize the Islamic world. They want to carry the Gospel back to Jerusalem along the ancient Silk Road and caravan routes traversing the Islamic republics of Central Asia. "You Americans have all the money and the strategy," they told him, "But we know persecution and we know martyrdom, and we are not afraid." It may well be that the task of world evangelization begun by the British, carried forward by the Americans, will in the end be completed by our Asian brothers and sisters.

So even if Christianity is in decline in the West, that does not mean that Christ has ceased to build His church. Did you know that today 2/3 of all evangelicals are living in the Third World? And even in the West, the overall statistics concerning the decline of the Church which I shared at the beginning of this

talk actually mask an important fact, namely, that the trend among *evangelical* churches in the West has been slowly *upward*. It's just been offset by a precipitous decline in the liberal, mainline denominations. As the mainline churches have become more and more relegated to the sideline, Christianity has lost its place of dominant influence in our American culture. But as evangelical churches continue to grow and especially as evangelical Christians lead lives of personal holiness, intelligence, and compassion, there is hope for renewal and reformation in America. Remember: The pattern of the church's growth down through history has always been one of advance and retreat, advance and retreat, with overall advance over time.

In other words, we should be not merely spectators, but actors in this drama. No matter how small or seemingly insignificant our role may be, we can make a contribution. Let me close with five practical suggestions on what you can do:

1. *Get a copy of Operation World by Patrick Johnstone*, and on each day read about the country for that day. You will become massively better informed about the world we live in, and this world-consciousness is, I believe, the real key to mobilizing the church to world mission today. We need to become world Christians in our outlook.

2. *Befriend a foreign student*. Each year, thousands of the very top students leave their homelands and come to the United States to study. And do you know what? We have heard many times that these students *expect* someone to tell them about Christianity, about Jesus. They are usually very far away from home and family, and any hospitality and kindness you can show them is a treasured gift to them. Include them during the Holidays when the universities are empty, or just invite them for a meal. Buy them a Christian evangelistic book and perhaps a Gospel of John and give it to them. The next time you get together, they may want to ask you questions. Many students who have contact with Christian families become Christians during their stay in the U.S. When these students return to their countries, they assume roles of leadership in their nations. They may open the doors to missionaries and Christian influences. This is a mission field at your doorstep, and you have no idea of the impact your ministry in their lives might have!

3. *Get involved with a particular missionary or outreach*. Don't just give money to the church and expect it to allocate your funds for you. You should also be involved in supporting and praying for a particular missionary whom you know personally, whose field is a burden on your heart, and whose ministry you know is effective.

4. *Give generously to the Lord's work*. We Americans are so wealthy in comparison to the rest of the world. Many of us should be giving 20% or 30% of our income to the Lord's work. I don't think I know a single missionary on the field whom I've talked to about finances who says that they are fully supported.

This is really inexcusable. We can and should be giving more.

I want to say a special word to those of you who are students. In a few years, you will have graduated and started pulling in an income. It may be small at first, but over the years it will steadily grow, and the patterns you establish at first will continue. How will you spend the money that God has entrusted to you? The Apostle Paul said, "As for the rich in this world, . . . they are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous." You say, "But I'm not rich." Oh, no? You don't know how rich you are. Just imagine what you would have to give up in order to live like the one billion people in the third world who go to bed hungry every night.

Now why do I share this with you? To lay some sort of guilt-trip on you because you were fortunate enough to be born in America? Not at all! Rather I want you to ask yourself two questions:

1. Why do you think that God in his providence has allowed you to be born in the U.S. and to be blessed with such material and spiritual abundance?
2. In light of the super-abundance which you enjoy here, what do you think is your minimal responsibility in reaching the millions of lost and suffering people in the world?

Jesus said, "To whom much has been given, much will be required." What, then, is required of us?

I hope that once you graduate, you won't set your heart on getting a big house, a fine car, and a fancy wardrobe. I hope you'll aim to give 20% or 30% of your income to God's work. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Where you spend your money is like a barometer of your heart. The person who is stingy when it comes to winning a lost world does not understand the heart of Jesus Christ. Jesus shows us again and again where his heart lies: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." "Go therefore into all the world and make disciples of every nation." "You shall be my witnesses, in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth." The heart of Jesus Christ is for a lost and dying humanity. If your heart is close to the heart of Jesus, then your money will be where your heart is: in helping to win the world to Christ.

5. *Be sure you are a Spirit-filled, witnessing Christian yourself.* You are part of the greatest movement in the history of mankind. So don't be intimidated. Speak out boldly for Christ to friends and co-workers. At the same time, do your best to be a true disciple of Christ, leading a life holy and pleasing to God, manifesting the fruit of the Spirit, and steeped in the truth of Christian doctrine.

There's a familiar saying: "If you feel far away from God, guess who moved?" The problem with that saying is that it assumes that our God is an inert, immobile God. But He's not! God is on the move, and we can drift away from Him just by standing still. Don't get left behind at this critical, thrilling juncture in

world history. The world can be reached in this generation. As world Christians, let us therefore pray and give and work to that end.