

MY ROLE AS A WORLD CHRISTIAN

A. – Maintaining God’s Perspective

A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (10)

During this series, we have tried to imagine ourselves in the position of an early disciple of Jesus, starting with the initial encounter and the call to follow Him; through the years of His popularity; to the cross of Calvary and beyond, culminating in the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the launch of worldwide evangelisation. The experiences of the first band of followers of Christ were real and life-changing. Millions of times since then men and women have heard Jesus’ invitation “Follow me” and have left everything and done so. Sometimes, they got it wrong. All too often they felt they were not living up to Jesus’ standard. Many of them paid the ultimate price of martyrdom to be His witnesses. But they changed the world. The call of Jesus comes to you and me. How we respond to that call will determine the rest of our lives and our effectiveness as world Christians.

The “Great Commission” that commands followers of Jesus to “Go into all the world” and disciple the nations is one of God’s “bottom lines”. We need to maintain God’s perspective about life and our part in reaching others for Him.

It’s God’s world

If we are to understand and fulfil our role as world Christians, it is essential that we start to see the world and our place in it from God’s eternal viewpoint. We need a renewed mind, a paradigm shift. The only way that can happen is if the worldview we have imbibed from society around us is supernaturally excised and replaced with God’s thinking. Let me explain.

A child is run down and killed outside his school - his bewildered parents ask “Why?” Forty per cent of the people living in a village in Botswana suffer from full-blown AIDS. Who can explain it? A teenage girl lies dying on a hospital gurney, the victim of Avian Flu. She never hurt anyone, but she will die and be buried – why should she join the misery of millions sick and dying in poverty in the fourth world? Refugees live in burned out shells of homes, afraid to cross fields littered with mines – the cause of the conflict is religious tension. Whose fault is this mess of humanity? Where is the Man in Charge?

God has a perspective on the human condition and the disasters that afflict us. An apartment building in the south of Lebanon is hit by an Israeli missile and scores of civilians die - is it really the will of Allah that the innocent pay the price of cross-border conflict in which both sides commit war crimes? What about moral tragedies? Theologians disagree on celibacy (God’s idea or man’s?), homosexuality (which threatens to split the world-wide Anglican community) and everything in between. What about capital punishment, greed, degradation of the environment and other issues facing Christians and non-Christians alike?

How does God view our circumstances? How does He feel when good men and women succumb to death because of preventable diseases? Does He care? Does He despair that some things go from bad to worse? There is plenty of money for the Western world so to indulge itself that the average life expectancy is dropping because of lifestyle diseases, yet hundreds of millions do not have proper medical care or shelter and go to bed hungry each night. It is easy to abandon hope because of the state of the human race and the inequalities and sadness that seem to plague us. We need to see events “through God’s eyes”.

There is a God-view of the daily news that offers hope. It is not the CNN, NBC, ABC, BBC or Al Jazeera spin; the versions of “truth”, opinions and pre-dispositions of the far right or far left of society, which are never unbiased or entirely objective. (It is impossible to be objective if you are subjectively involved or have an ideological barrow to push.)

Only God is eternal. Only He will outlast the opinions of the most cynical among us. Knowing this, if we are wise, we will seek to interpret life in terms of His perspectives, in areas as diverse as philosophy, ethics, finances, biology, psychology, sociology, history, economics, the law and politics. In a post-modernist era that lacks (but needs) anchors it is important to understand that God and His word and character are absolute. Only He gives meaning to life.

I am reminded of a flight I once took up part of the Nile River in Egypt. In the vast expanse of nothing, the things that stood out were the water and strips of green on both sides. The river brought life to the desert. Like a stream in a spiritual desert the disciple’s mission is fed and directed by God’s perspective. The life we enjoy in Him is sustainable, while human perspectives are swallowed up by the surrounding heat and sand. Hope withers without God in the frame.

Christians in society – cultural vandals or Divinely inspired?

In an article in the Sydney Morning Herald Magazine *Good Weekend*, dated July 22, 2006 (*With God on their side*), columnist Andrew Marshall wrote about current efforts by Western evangelical Christian movements to reach the world with the Gospel. Citing methodologies used by mission and aid organisations in the new millennium, Marshall took aim at “tentmakers” (Christians who use their professions to enter countries that do not officially sanction missionaries), pejoratively calling such activity “stealth missions”. He asserted that Christian aid organisations are “cruising the disaster zone for converts” and “preying upon populations least able to resist them”. He accused Christian “entrepreneurs” seeking to carry out the Great Commission of undertaking an “evangelical onslaught”. Clearly Marshall did not understand the Disciple’s Mission.

The article appeared on the eve of an appeal by two Australian ministers, Pastors Danny Nalliah and Daniel Scot, against their conviction in a Victorian court for “vilifying Islam” by explaining the tenets of the Muslim faith at a private Christian seminar, in the context of training those seeking to reach their Muslim friends for Christ.

Is Marshall correct? Do we accept that Jesus calls us to pursue an “evangelical onslaught” on behalf of Wycliffe Bible Translators, Samaritans Pursue, Youth With A Mission, Christian Aid or particularist denominational interests, at the risk of “stoking anti-Western sentiment and exposing indigenous Christians to greater persecution”? Should we adjust the message and methods to make them more palatable to others? Should we respond to those who take cheap shots at Christians by silencing our witness, or should we re-double our efforts to reach them because they simply do not understand the issues involved.

God’s perspective is “redemptive”. The human race is fatally afflicted by sin. Christ died on the cross to save us from the consequences of sin and set us free from its guilt and enslaving power. If we will turn back to Him, that message, and the opportunity to choose, remain to be communicated to the world. The task and privilege of doing so have been committed to all Christians, everywhere.

The Biblical answer always revolves around mobilization to reach out to the world. The Great Commission is not negotiable.

“Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15).

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance”. (2 Peter 3:9)

“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30, 31)

While I do not agree with Marshall’s underlying premise, and while unwise approaches, gimmicks and misjudged zeal are sometimes employed by Christians eager to extend their spheres of influence, build great churches and do what they can to carry out Jesus’ command, such actions do not (of themselves) invalidate the message in any way (nor do they rule out the messengers).

Marshall, and others like him, fail to realise (or reject, because it does not fit their biased cosmologies) that the work of world evangelisation was always at the heart of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and continues to be a powerful motivator in the Christian community in our time

We should not be surprised when we encounter non-Christians who are wary of our witness. In my university days, sociology and anthropology professors were frequently scathing in their attacks against Christian organisations and missionaries in places like New Guinea and Africa. Officials in Peru, Venezuela and Tanzania, whom I got to know in an official capacity, were suspicious of the

work of Protestant missionaries. However, our world view cannot afford to be moulded or hamstrung by the world. We are called to have the “mind of Christ”.

God loved so much that He gave of Himself. If we are to be effective as Christians, we need to be moved by the same impulse. When we do so we will more likely be impactful as a worldwide Christian movement and not dismissed by cynics who think we are out of touch. Our message must be a contemporary one of hope and renewal.

God’s perspective in spatial terms – the view from above

God is higher than us. He sees everything differently. Go to the top of any mountain, tower, apartment building or castle rampart and you will see things in a context those at ground level cannot begin to imagine. During a visit to Taman Negara in the heart of Malaysia I once negotiated the length of the world’s highest tree top walk, far above the jungle canopy. From that vantage point I looked down on rivers, sandbanks, tracks and the camp fires of the indigenous “Orang Asli”. Height gave perspective. In the same way, God is above us all. He sees life and eternity we can only grasp with His revelation.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:9)

I will never forget a memorable hour when I lay on my back and stared into the dark night sky above Gunnedah, in rural New South Wales. I was all alone and far from the pollution of city lights. Above me I could see countless stars, including the beautiful Magellanic Clouds, two of the closest galaxies to the earth, within our own Milky Way. They seemed so close, but astronomers tell us they are some 100,000 light-years distant. Dwarfed by this magnificent stellar show, I followed the faint light of sunlight reflecting off a man-made satellite that crossed the heavens. It was probably only a few hundred kilometres away. The universe (that small portion I could see) seemed so vast. I was humbled when I looked up and considered how big creation is – and how intelligent is the Maker of it all, and how foolish those who peremptorily deny His existence:

“God looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.” (Psalm 53:2). What does God see when He looks down on creation? He is infinite; we are usually less than two metres in stature and very vulnerable. He knows everything; we know almost nothing and our assumptions are limited and often faulty. I once stood on a promontory at Finisterre in Galicia, Spain and tried to imagine what it must have been like for Europeans who believed this was literally the “end of the earth”. Until a Genoan sailor called Cristobal Colon (now lying in a sarcophagus in the Seville Cathedral) speculated that there was land on the other side. It took him several months to complete a journey I once saw a Concorde covering in 3 hours. That is slow compared to space travel. During its journeys, the space shuttle orbits the earth every 90.35 minutes; the crew are less than 300 kilometres above the ground. We are specks in a mighty universe that God holds in one hand and maintains by His word (Hebrews 1:3). Nevertheless, He passionately loves us, as individuals.

He knows every person by name; counts the hairs on their head, notices when a sparrow falls nearby (Matthew 10:29, 30). His perspective is “out of this world”.

Many times I have flown over the world’s large cities (Calcutta, Bombay, Mexico City, Tokyo, London and others) by night and seen the unbelievable expanse of lights below. God’s perspective is all-encompassing, yet He knows the state of every man, woman and child in the dusty barrios, foetid slums, autobahns, jungle villages, office blocks, assembly lines, railway terminuses, airports and housing estates of the world’s six billion inhabitants. I flew over Bucharest late one night. The city was snowed in and the lights glistened, even at 35,000 feet. But God’s perspective drilled down into every living room, kitchen and bedroom, where people lived out their lives. They all needed Him.

Look at what we value. Most of what we work hard to accomplish is gone in an instant: fame, wealth, learning and power are nothing in the context of eternity. Just look at the obituaries in the daily press. And the tombstones! The first time I flew over the pyramids I was amazed at their majesty, but as I stood in front of the sphinx I was reminded that time erodes the glory of man. God’s perspective is higher than ours. And yet He doesn’t remain there; He is so close that we live and breathe because He gives us life; he hears our prayers before we utter them.

God’s perspective on the world - Divine love in action

This is God’s world and those who operate out of His world view can make a difference.

I recently attended an event hosted by the Haggai Institute in Singapore, to celebrate the end of a training program for fifty-four Christian leaders from twenty-nine countries. Their theme was “People need the Lord”. I met pastors from states as diverse as Haiti, Sudan, Peru, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Burkina Faso and Pakistan. Several came from (and were returning to) societies plagued by chronic social unrest and persecution of Christians. All of them came to be better skilled to do the work of discipling others. Take Pastor Kwabena Asare, from Nigeria. When he is not working as an engineer he is overseeing a church of more than 1,000 people, coordinating a church planting program and growing a radio ministry. His vision is to establish twenty-five new home groups by 2007, plant ten new churches by 2008, send six missionaries to Europe and parts of Africa, establish a Bible school by 2010 and develop a Christian school by 2016. Biju Thomas works as a business development manager in Bangalore while he pastors a church in that city. William Triana is an evangelist in Bogota, Colombia; he supports himself working as an English school teacher. Pastor Bagaramba works with the emotionally wounded in Rwanda, who experienced the horrors of the Tutsi-Hutu genocide of the early 1990s. Hernan Corrales Rosas told me of the joy he experiences working with young people in the Peruvian city of Arequipa, helping them discover new life in Christ. The last time I was in Arequipa I met Christians whose friends were being brutalized by the Maoist Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path. These men were looking through God’s window on the world. (Every people group in every nation is visible through that window.) Their historiographies were divergent from the

predominant Western discourse. Their passion was to evangelize their own people and train others to do the same. This is the essence of discipleship.

From God's perspective, the greatest blessing He bestowed on our rebellious human race was to send His son to turn us away from sin (Acts 3:26).

From God's perspective, the day is coming when all the nations will bow to Him and acknowledge Him as Lord (Philippians 2:10, 11). His rule will be supreme in all creation, when men and women from every tribal, linguistic and social background will stand around His throne and glorify the Son.

The day of evil when Satan captures the hearts and minds of so many hundreds of millions of people for whom Jesus died, will one day be over and the enemy will be destroyed once and for all, even the enemy of death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Gaining God's perspective – gearing up for a paradigm shift

“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 2:14-16)

We are all offshoots of our cultures, social conditioning, historical discourses, denominational hegemonic emphasises and ethnic and family backgrounds. And yet we are called to unite in being Christ's representatives in the world. To bridge the gap, the disciple in mission must have a mental renewal, a new hard-wiring from the Holy Spirit, a dimension of thinking that is liberated from the way the world's wisdom operates. Only the Holy Spirit thinks God's thoughts. He comes into our hearts to give us insight into God's ways and priorities. Our responsibility is to “hear” what the Spirit is saying, using our new genetic coding (2 Peter 1:14).

Jesus lived in the world with God's perspective (John 3:13). With the mind of Christ we can likewise maintain an eternal perspective, looking beyond the obvious and the current and “seeing” in the spirit realm. We can think God's way about the eternal nature of truth, the intrinsic value of the individual, the sanctity of every human life, economic issues, the real value of assets, sickness, setbacks, relationships, feelings, work, possessions, the environment, history, study, true and false friends, where we live, what we wear, the trials we go through (why bad things seem to happen to good people), persecution and death. We can see God in control as circumstances sometimes seem to spin out of our control. We can pray “Your Kingdom come; your will be done” with confidence when it seems He is far away. We can “seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness” when we see unrighteousness all around us. We can interpret events according to the plan and power of God. We can be set free from the negative rut into so many others fall because they convince themselves that they “cannot”. We can “know” that God is in control, while all the time living

out our lives as kitchen sink realists. As “world Christians” we can be open, aware, switched on to God’s plan and our part in it, participating in life without being captivated and kidnapped by the world’s values.

How we look at things makes a big difference in our lives. Millions of Christian believers have triumphed over impossible circumstances because Jesus rose from the dead. We can act differently because we view things differently, according to God’s mindset.

Seen from a human perspective, the entry of the Son of God into the world in the form of a baby, especially a poor one, is illogical. From our viewpoint, the cross makes no sense. But they were the “wisdom of God”, the instruments by which He chose to bring the world back into relationship with Him.

The Mind of Christ is not natural, but spiritual. It calls for our thinking to be re-created in the image of God. It is not a state of mind, but the way Jesus lived, thought and taught. The only power that can transform our way of thinking is the person of the Holy Spirit. What is the mind of Christ? It is to think as Christ would have thought. That’s where Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* (2006) got it so wrong, emphasizing as it did a human descendance from Jesus; the real descendants of Jesus are “ordinary” Christians, “born of the Spirit” (John 3: 5, 6, 8) into God’s family (John 1:12). The mind of Christ ought to be rooted in the very nature of every Christian.

Maintaining God’s perspective – throughout life

How do we assess God’s perspective and remain on course as disciples of Jesus in a world that continuously seeks to lure us away from what is eternally important?

- By putting ourselves in the place of Jesus and seeing things the way He saw them; imitating His actions where obvious and making His attitudes and priorities ours (Philippians 2:5-11). This is what discipleship is all about. Jesus lived in our skin. He knew what it was like to be deeply human.
- By spending time thinking about what the Bible says and how it applies to life today; recognizing the authority of God’s word in our lives. God’s truths are forever; He has exalted His Word above His name (Psalm 138:2).
- By asking other (mature) Christians about their experiences and how they interpret God’s hand at work in their lives.
- By spending time talking to the Holy Spirit and listening to Him.
- By allowing the Holy Spirit show us how to die to selfishness, pride and opinionated thinking that distract sound judgment, “nailing them to the cross” as it were.

- By permitting Father God show us how to share the message of “life” with those around us.

When I was little my parents used to take my siblings and me to the beach for holidays every year. I still vividly recall walking along the sand, putting my small feet into the depressions made by my father’s feet. What a guy! He left me big holes in the sand for my little feet to fill. Discipleship likewise involves walking in the footprints left by Jesus, because He showed us how to live.

I admire those who effectively communicate the Gospel as disciples of Jesus. Over the years it has been my privilege to meet men and women who have penetrated barriers and reached ones, twos and thousands with God’s love. When I first met God’s Smuggler Brother Andrew, I was powerfully struck by his commitment to reach people behind the Iron Curtain with the Word of God, counting the risks but taking them nevertheless. YWAM founder Loren Cunningham impressed me as he spoke passionately and urgently about reaching our generation with the message that God loved them. Every man and woman who has ever been effective as a disciple in his or her generation has started from the same point: this is God’s world; the key to fulfilment is to die to self and live for Christ, faithfully carrying out His will in the power of the Holy Spirit. You can make a difference.

There are threshold issues associated with discipleship, and they all have to do with counting the cost and stepping out to be God’s co-workers. Is your brand of Christianity based on commitment in line with God’s perspective, or is it just a walk in the park?

It is my sincere prayer that all of us who hear the voice of Jesus Christ calling out “follow me” will count the cost, rise up and walk in His footsteps, for His eternal glory.