

Article of the Month – April 2008

Speeding up the Lord's coming

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Many of us have grown up with the notion that “the Lord Jesus can come back any minute, maybe tonight or next week. Are you ready...?” And sure enough, He has told us to always be prepared, because His coming will be, for some at least, “as a thief in the night”. Yet, Jesus’ own words force us into some missiological sense of reality, because He has also said that “first the Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached unto the ends of the earth” and that “*then* the end will come” (Matt. 24:14 – italics mine). In other words, as long as the Great Commission has not been finished there will not be such a thing as ‘the end’ (of this age, including His coming). Jesus gave His Great Commission to (all) His disciples, and these are the ones finishing it. The simple conclusion is then, that Jesus will return only, once the Great Commission has been finished. The relevant questions become then “How far are we with its execution?” and “What can we do to speed up this process?”

This speeding up is possible, according to Peter (2 Pet. 3:12), although it remains true that none of us will ever be able to predict or calculate that Day of All Days. But reality tells us that, although the Jesus Film has been watched by more than 6 billion people, and although the Gospel can be heard by 99% of the world’s population by radio in a language they can understand, facts compel us to face the challenge that still 25-40% of the world’s population needs to be considered as unreached or least-reached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, we have come a long way, but we are by no means finished and we need to seriously reality-check the value of day-dreaming about an imminent rapture, while there is still so much mission work to be done. Did our less-than realistic theologies lull us asleep with regard to the execution of the Great Commission?

If there is such a vast amount of Kingdom preaching still to be done in many (hard, remote) parts of the world, what then do we need to do? The best example we receive from the ‘Vineyard Owner’ (Who happens to be the Same as the Lord of the harvest), as portrayed by Jesus in Matthew 20. Every few hours he goes to the market place in the hope to hire more people to work his vineyard. This is congruent with the prayer Jesus taught His disciples to “pray the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers, for the harvest is white, but the laborers are few” (Matt. 9:37,38). In next month’s article we will look more in depth to the Matthew 20 story. Suffice it to say now, that what matters more than anything else apparently, is the addition of workers – and still more workers. Jesus said so, and so does our proverb that ‘many hands make light work’. So, what hands are needed? We need ‘all hands on deck’ – not just white hands, on the contrary.

Let’s face it: If the white man would have been able to finish the Great Commission, he would have done so long ago. So apparently there are parts of the job to be done that seem to be (too?) hard for the traditional missionary task force, in spite of tremendous sacrifices they made in the past century and a half.

Let's face it: If the white man in this period had taught his disciples to do cross-cultural missions themselves, the Great Commission might have been finished by now – but by and large he did not, never mind what his arguments for this omission may have been (were they too poor? Too untrained? Theologically not sound enough? Too inferior?)

And so we conclude that there is a huge need to mobilize churches for cross-cultural missions, and to recruit people to execute Christ's Commission in countries that we used to consider as mission fields, but which we now have to turn into missionary task forces! The Church in the Developing World is huge in numbers and rich in redemptive gifts. That is what I would like to elaborate on in the article after next. The new generation of missionaries from these Third World churches can not be missed: they are the vital tools that are needed to finish the Great Commission, and it is my strong conviction that without them it is not going to be finished any time soon. They are the hands that can reach where white hands until now have not reached. Yet, these white hands have an important role to play in wisely empower the non-white hands to become their partners on the job. How can this be?

First of all, they need to know and understand that the Great Commission has been given to the entire Church, including themselves, and not only to the white part. Next, they need to accept that owning less funds than their white brothers possess is no reason to *not* do missions; it is all the more a reason to do missions *differently*. Third, if all of us accept the principle of cultural proximity, it becomes obvious that Africans among Africans or Asians among Asians can do the cross-cultural job much faster than westerners can, because the latter have bigger cultural barriers to cross.

With a final word, a quote of Oswald Chambers: "Is it fair that someone should hear the Gospel twice as long as there are people who haven't heard it once?" I would like to leave just one example with you to consider. The continent of Africa, for instance, has still about 1,300 unreached people groups, and over 50 of them have a population of over 1 million. That is a huge, huge task. Do you think the Church in Africa can handle such a vast load of work? I think they can! Just imagine, the Church on this continent numbers close to 400 million believers, about 120 million of them being Evangelicals. If the Evangelicals alone would support and send only 1 missionary for every 1,000 of their members, Africa would be able to raise an additional army of 120,000 new missionaries. Divide those about these 1,300 unreached people groups and more than 90 missionaries could be sent (on average) to each of them. No doubt about it, that this would mean a major break-through in world missions on that continent. Therefore, let's go to work at just that!