

The Greatest Happening on Planet Earth | book one

REFLECTIONS ON THE WORLD CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

Max W Chismon



Living Springs International

Written originally as weekly blog posts, these reflections in the form of short essays, have been compiled into the first of several booklets. The aim of the blogposts and these booklets is to assist in promoting the idea of the 'ministry of all believers.' Encouraging all followers of Jesus to participate meaningfully in the world Christian movement and church leaders to equip God's people for works of service!

You can follow Max's weekly blog posts at www.simplymobilizing.blogspot.com

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Index of Abbreviation	NIV	New International Version
	NIRV	New International Revised Version
	NLT	New Living Translation

Living Springs International
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FOREWORD

The Old Testament is full of promises and prophecies of a worldwide ingathering of peoples and people into God's kingdom.

With the advent of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit these prophecies began to be fulfilled. The three thousand gathered in on the day of Pentecost soon became five thousand and the world Christian movement was under way.

Within a relatively short period of time the gospel had spread throughout the Roman Empire and churches were scattered from Jerusalem to North Africa, and from Syria to Britain. Christianity had become a movement and every believer was captivated with a sense of privilege and responsibility in participating with Christ in gathering in the harvest!

It was always God's intention that the end of the age come only after successive generations of believers have had the opportunity to participate in the growth of the world Christian movement. It's as if each generation has been presented with a portion of the harvest and given the privilege and responsibility to bring it in. This generation is no exception!

Some generations failed, others made feeble attempts and yet others have shocked the world with their fervor and single-mindedness, their love and passion for the lost and for unreached nations. How will the history books record the response of this generation? The book is open – entries are being made - the final chapters have yet to be recorded. We have the opportunity to be history makers!

My prayer is that this first booklet, in a series of reflections on the world Christian movement, will encourage you in your journey as a harvester, in what is proving to be, the most exciting harvest of all generations.

Max W Chismon
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1

Christianity as a 'Movement'

Christianity was always intended by God to be a 'movement,' spreading out in ever widening circles from Jerusalem to Judah then into Samaria and continuing throughout the whole earth!

Luke, the writer of the Acts of the Apostles, understood this! He recorded the activities of those who were spearheading the advance of the world Christian movement. He began with Peter, James and John and the other apostles. He then focused only on the activities of Peter and John.

In Acts 9 we see Peter going on a missionary trip without John - at this point John's name drops from the record and Luke records only the movements of Peter. After Acts 12 Peter's name is mentioned only once (Acts 15 - where he recounts what God did through him in the past).

From this point on Luke turns his attention to Paul and continues with Paul until the end of his account! The answer as to why is quite simple - Luke was documenting the advance of the world Christian

movement and was recording the ministries of those who were spearheading this advance. Paul was a 'regions beyond' apostle and was at the forefront of Christianity's advance up until the time Luke concluded his writings and his treatise to Theophilus (Ac 1:1).

It is interesting to note that two-thirds of the Book of Acts is a record of the 'church scattered' – engaged in advancing Christ's Kingdom beyond their borders. Only one-third records the activities of the 'church gathered.'

The idea of the Church as a 'force,' advancing the world Christian movement, was at the forefront of the thinking of the early Church.

Once our thinking shifts from a movement to an organization we lose the spirit of the New Testament! Organizations grow out of movements but they must always be subordinate! Organizations such as denominations, agencies, local churches etc. exist to serve the growth of the world Christian movement!

There are around 600 million believers in the world today in about 4 million local churches. Can we imagine what would happen if all these believers and churches captured Luke's understanding of Christianity as a 'movement?'

2

Jesus - a 'Movement Messiah'

In my previous reflection, I suggested that Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, was very selective with whose ministry he chose to record in his narrative. He focused on 'movement' figures or 'regions beyond' figures! From where did Luke get this idea?

In Luke's first book – the 'Gospel of Luke,' he said he had "investigated everything carefully from the very first" (Lk 1:3). Luke saw something in the life and ministry of Jesus, in his 'careful investigation' that captivated his imagination and interest! Luke was careful to record what he 'saw,' not only in his Gospel, but also in his second book, the Book of Acts!

Luke saw that Jesus was a 'movement Messiah.' Jesus modeled 'movement!' Laying the foundation for what would follow - a worldwide Christian movement to all peoples and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus began his public ministry by announcing his intention to include the Gentile world (Lk 4:24-27). By choosing Galilee as His headquarters and not Jerusalem (Lk 4:14), Jesus gained the widest possible access to 'all

peoples,' both Jews and Gentiles. This enabled him, among other things, to lay the groundwork for Philip's later ministry to the Samaritans (Lk 17:11-16, Jn 4:4-26, Ac 8:5-8).

Jesus was constantly on the move. When asked to preach to a crowd He had spoken to the previous day, He refused, saying He had to go to other towns and villages as well (Lk 4:43)! When a disciple requested permission to join Him Jesus stated very clearly what it meant to follow Him, "The Son of man has nowhere to lay His head" (Lk 9:58). And in traveling with a committed group of co-workers, Jesus legitimized a 'structure' common in His day and similar to what was employed by other 'movement' groups such as the Pharisees and Sadducees enabling them to go global, "compassing land and sea to make converts" (Mt 23:15).

Christianity as a 'movement,' spreading throughout the whole earth, bringing the Gospel to all peoples, is a fundamental part of the Church's DNA! Once we lose this, we cease being the Church Jesus intended us to be!

What do you think? Have we 'seen' what Luke saw in the 'ministry mindset' of Jesus?

3

Luke's Sequel – The Book of Acts!

We are following the theme, 'Christianity as a movement' and looking at the Biblical basis for this! In continuing to develop this theme, we need to spend a bit more time with our friend Luke.

We ask the question, why did Luke write the Book of Acts? Why didn't he leave it for Matthew, Mark or John to write? They being Jews were surely more qualified than he, a Gentile, to write the sequel to the Gospels? Well, let's briefly examine this question – I offer a perspective, which I think, you might find thought provoking!

It was no coincidence that it was Luke who documented the 'acts of the apostles' and of the early Church and not one of the other Gospel writers!

Being the only Gentile writer of the New Testament, Luke was 'beside himself' with excitement! He was seeing in the 'happenings of his day' the beginnings of the

fulfillment of Old Testament promises, stating that one day, the door of faith and the blessing of salvation would open to Gentile nations!

Having been excluded from the 'chosen people of God,' from time immemorial (Eph 2:12), 'Gentile Luke' was determined to continue writing his "orderly accounts," (Lk 1:1) to ensure that all would know of this amazing favor of God towards all nations, tribes, peoples and languages (Rev 7:9). The times of the Gentiles had finally arrived!

Let's review some of these, 'Gentile blessing' Old Testament promises and prophecies:

- all peoples on earth will be blessed.... (Ge 12:3)
- all the peoples of the earth may know your name. (1Ki 8:41-43)
- all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him. (Ps 22:27 – 28)
- The nobles of the nations come together. They are now part of the people of the God of Abraham... (Ps 47:9 NIRV)
- all kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. (Ps 72:11)
- the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord. (Isa 11:9 NLT)
- I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. (Isa 49:6)

With the advent of Christ - the time of the Gentiles had come (Ro 11:25). The fulfillment of these promises and prophecies had suddenly burst onto the stage of human history! And Luke, the Gentile, was determined to ensure that the whole world would know that this glorious day had arrived!

Surely, as Gentiles, we cannot help but share Luke's excitement! Or have we lost the "awe" of the significance of this 'age' in which we live?" For Luke the 'world Christian movement' took precedence over all else! May we all - Christians and churches around the world, capture afresh, the sense of privilege, of gratitude, of amazement, that God in His great mercy has offered salvation to us who were once "far off" (Eph 2:13),

This door to us, Gentile nations, is wide open, but it won't be forever! Every generation of 'Jesus followers' must seize the day and work towards advancing the 'Jesus movement' to the unreached nations in their generation! How can we possibly pass from this earth, without having added value to this movement? God ensures that each of us has both opportunities and resources to do so (Mt 25:24-28)! Apathy and indifference to the greatest happening on planet earth is unbecoming for those who profess to be His faithful followers!

4

The Gospels & Acts - A Seamless Connection

Just one more reflection on 'Luke' before we move on to tracking the amazing advance of the world Christian movement, beyond Acts chapter 28!

I really do love this guy - I appreciate so much the fact that Luke wrote the Book of Acts. Luke, it seems, saw something of the wider, global scope of Jesus' ministry and was determined to help us all to understand, precisely, just what that was!

The Book of Acts could just as easily have been entitled 'Second Luke.' This second book that Luke wrote, the sequel to the Gospel that bears his name, was written to demonstrate the **seamless continuity** of what Jesus **began** to 'do' and 'teach,' in the Gospels with what Jesus **continued** to 'do' and 'teach' following His resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:2).

Now, no longer restricted to one physical body, Jesus was able to replicate through His Church, what He did in the

Gospels - many hundreds, thousands even millions of times over, on all continents, in all countries, among all peoples, throughout the big wide world. Fantastic!

The early Church caught this vision and the Book of Acts, or second Luke, reads like the Gospels – on multiplied!
In 14:12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do.."

Do your own research and you will discover that much of the Book of Acts is taken up with a record of the church 'scattered' - moving beyond its borders and boundaries, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, taking the Gospel to where Christ was not yet named. Far less is a record of the church 'gathered'. Is there a message for us here?

Too many Christians separate the Gospels from Acts. The Church began, they say, with the Book of Acts. Well, perhaps, but the 'world Christian movement' began with Jesus – it began in the Gospels! Mark shared, with Luke, this same understanding – Mark's Gospel opens with "***The beginning*** of the gospel (good news) about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mk 1:1

Jesus is the head of the Church, is He not? Jesus is the Lord of the harvest, is He not? Go back to the Gospels, we will find there the 'DNA' or the 'seeds' of a 'world-wide Christian movement' that would, one day, fill the whole earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord

(Hab 2:14).

Christianity was intended to be, nothing less, than a 'movement' that would take the knowledge of salvation to all 'peoples' and to all people throughout the earth, spanning many generations. Eventually ALL nations, peoples, tribes and tongues would hear and respond (Rev 7:9).

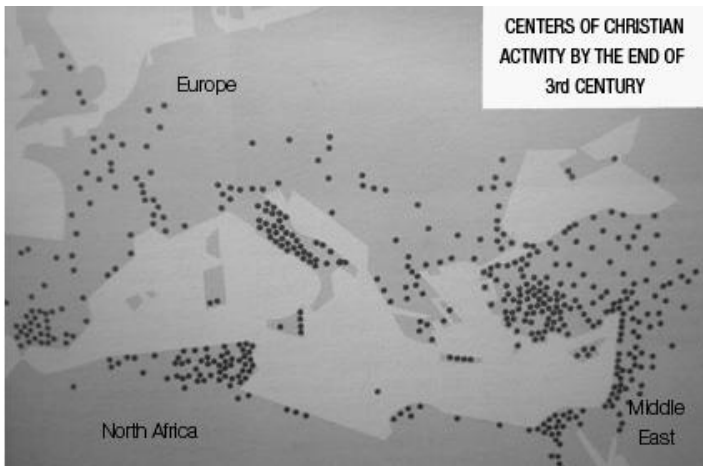
The Book of Acts concludes with these words "*..God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, **and they will listen!***" (Acts 28:28). The Message Bible translates it this way, "*... And believe me, they're going to receive it with open arms!*"

This was what Doctor Luke saw! He saw it in the ministry of Jesus. He saw it being outworked by the early Church. This captured his imagination and he set about documenting the progress of this world Christian movement. The Holy Spirit seemed also to like what Luke was writing. Luke's writings take up more of the New Testament than any other single writer! He was a major voice with a major message!

5

The Amazing Growth of the Early Church

In the first 300 years, Christianity went from a stable in Bethlehem to the Lateran Palace (the official residence of the Roman Emperor). This Palace was gifted to the Church by Emperor Constantine, who moved his headquarters to Constantinople. The positives of the Church gaining this 'official recognition' is debatable, but the fact remains, that as a 'movement', Christianity was so widespread and had so influenced Roman society that it was honored by the Empire's highest authority!



This map from 'A History of Christianity' (Lion Handbook) shows the growth of the Church over the first 300 years. This is stark evidence that the early Church had indeed captured Christ's vision of a 'movement,' which Luke had so powerfully articulated in his writings! A movement of people and of peoples coming into the Kingdom, as the Church moved out with the message from Jerusalem, to Judea, into Samaria and through ever widening circles towards the ends of earth!

Yes, the Roman Empire provided good roads to travel on and borderless regions for unrestricted and relatively safe travel. But this alone could not explain the amazing growth and advance of this 'despised and marginalized sect,' (this being how the "followers of Jesus" were generally viewed, during these times). The Church, with all its faults and frailties, had done, through the enabling of the Holy Spirit, exactly what Jesus intended and commanded it to do!

It should further be noted, that during these centuries, Christians suffered through ten major persecutions! The last two, under Emperor's Diocletian and Galerius, resulted in the martyrdom of some 20,000 Christians.

What a powerful example, that history throws at us, of a people of God, who had, collectively, embraced a truly 'Christ-centered world-view' and in their time, were fully committed to His cause and purpose! They lived for what

Jesus died for!

Had this momentum be sustained, it is hard not to imagine, that in the succeeding 300 years, the whole world would have been covered with people and with 'peoples,' faithfully following Jesus!

This unfortunately was not the case as the Church in succeeding generation experienced notable decline.

What went right in the first three hundred years and what went wrong in the next will be the theme for a future reflection. But let us pause to marvel as we reflect back on the amazing advance of the gospel in the first three hundred years. What took place then can take place today – and, in fact, in parts of God's world, it is!

6

The Coming of the Holy Spirit

When we look for reasons for the amazing growth of the early church, especially as recorded in the Book of Acts, the work of the Holy Spirit and the cooperation of the early Church, with the Holy Spirit, stand out as the key factor.

The Age of the Holy Spirit

The ascension of Jesus marked the beginning of an era, in the outworking of God's purposes on earth, which would be characterized by the work of the Holy Spirit. So pronounced was the involvement of the Holy Spirit, that this 'age' which we call the Church age or the New Testament age, or the age of the world Christian movement, could just as easily have been labeled 'The age of the Holy Spirit.'

In the 28 chapters of Acts the Holy Spirit is mentioned 56 times! Some Bible commentators, for example, have suggested, that the Book of Acts, should have been

entitled, 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit.'

The Holy Spirit Led, the Apostles Followed

The Holy Spirit, upon being outpoured, immediately took charge. He led the way and the disciples followed! This was to be the model for all succeeding generations.

Often the Apostles were 'surprised' by the Holy Spirit's initiatives and the sudden opportunities these 'surprises' presented them with. His sudden and dramatic arrival on the day of Pentecost, the opportunity to preach to a crowd hastily assembled, the immediate formation of a mega-church (3,000 converts in one day), the healing of a lame man while they were on their way to a worship service, a sudden transportation to a distant location, a miraculous release from prison in the middle of the night - the list just keeps growing!

The Holy Spirit enabled them to perform miracles, preach powerfully, witness boldly, testify with astounding wisdom, make wise decisions, etc. These men were ex-fishermen, ex tax collectors, ex almost everything except scholars, men of prominence and leading figures of their day. They were common people, so common, in fact, that their 'commonness' was a talking point among the leaders of their day (Ac 4:13).

The Holy Spirit Enables the Continuation of the Ministry of Jesus

The Holy Spirit came to glorify Jesus. This he does by

representing Him on earth! Jesus said about the Holy Spirit, "*He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.*" (Jn 16:14)

The Holy Spirit **enabled** Jesus to continue His earthly ministry. What Jesus began to 'do and teach' on earth, as recorded in the gospels, the Holy Spirit enabled Him to continue to 'do and teach' (Ac 1:1), now from His throne at the right hand of the Father.

This brings me to my favorite title for the Book of Acts, this being 'The Acts of the Ascended Christ.'

Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues as Head of the Church and as Lord of the Harvest. This was why Jesus was able to say to His disciples that He would be with them until the end of the age (Mt 28:18).

The Holy Spirit Today

Today there are 'Book of Acts' testimonies coming from all over the world – especially from workers laboring among least-reached peoples!

If the Church needed, Holy Spirit interventions, with the first ingathering of the harvest, how much more do we need His ministry today as we gather in the end time harvest – the most challenging harvest of all!

In the annual agricultural cycle in Israel, the former rains that prepared the early crops for harvest were lesser than

the rains that brought to maturity the end of year harvest. James tells us we need to wait patiently for those latter rains (Ja 5:7) and Zechariah tells us we should also pray for them (Zec 10:1).

We need to mix patience for God's timing with hunger and expectation to see His promises materialize.

May God baptize us, right now, into a fresh understanding of the Holy Spirit's ministry, may He grant us eyes to see His many initiatives that are already taking place and may we be 'surprised' by what we increasingly experience that will be "far above what we could ever ask or think" (Eph 3:20)!

There is a sound of abundance of rain (1Kgs 18:41)!

7

A Summary and Where to Next?

We have been looking at the 'world Christian movement.' From my first reflection I have been attempting to lay a strong Biblical foundation. It is important that we see the world Christian movement as being rooted in Scripture both Old and New Testaments. I have also been wanting us to see that this is the single greatest happening on planet earth since the time of Christ and will be until He returns!

We started with the Book of Acts:

- Christianity was always intended by God to be a **movement**. Luke, in the Book of Acts, was careful to document the activities of those who were spearheading the advance into regions beyond.

Then we backtracked a little

- Jesus was a 'movement' Messiah. He revealed His intentions to include the Gentiles in this movement from the very beginning – it nearly cost Him His life! He headquartered Himself in a location that gave Him the

greatest access to all peoples and was on the move from the beginning!

- The Old Testament was full of promises of a worldwide Christian movement, involving Gentile nations! With the coming of Christ these promises burst onto the stage of human history. Luke, the gentile writer, understood this. He wrote the Book of Acts, determined to let the whole world know that this momentous age had now begun!
- Luke's second book was written to reveal a seamless connection between what Jesus began to do and teach, in the Gospels with what he continued to do and teach in the Book of Acts – now through His redeemed people. What He did as one man He could now replicate hundreds, thousands and millions of times over! The world Christian movement was 'taking off'!
- The first three hundred years saw the world Christian movement grow at a phenomenal pace and spread throughout the entire Roman Empire. Christians had caught Christ's vision for a global movement!
- The work of the Holy Spirit can never be overemphasized. Christ rules, from His throne in glory, as Head of the Church and Lord of the Harvest, through the Holy Spirit!

The Holy Spirit is the reason why 120 timid believers became dynamic communicators of Christ's gospel, confounding the leaders of their day and turning their world upside down (or the right way up)!

So with that amazing foundation laid, how do we now proceed? Well, the clue is in my purpose statement for these series of reflections – a section reads, *"reflections to assist in promoting the idea of the 'ministry of all believers.' Encouraging all followers of Jesus to participate meaningfully in the world Christian movement."*

Why is the involvement of all believers so important? The answer is very simple – the world Christian movement is a movement of 'the ministry of all believers!'

The early church was a 'ministry of all believers, movement.' Not only did the Apostles minister, so did everyone else (Ac 2:47). In fact non-apostles planted the most significant Gentile church ever – the Church at Antioch (Ac 11:19-20)! The apostles not only 'taught' they also 'trained!' Paul preached in one city and one lecture hall for two years and yet all of Asia heard the gospel – those who heard told others (Ac 19:8-10)!

Churches saw themselves as existing, primarily, for their 'non-members', *"The Lord's message rang out from you not only in **Macedonia** and **Achaia**—your faith in God has become known **everywhere**. (1Thes 1:8-10)*

Recapturing the theology and practice of 'the ministry of all believers', I believe, is the final 'stronghold' to be possessed. This will be good news for the Church, the world's unreached and unsaved and for God's glory!

The Ministry of ALL Believers

The New Testament marked the beginning of the world Christian movement. It also marked the beginning of the age of 'the ministry of all believers'! To miss this connection is to miss the plot entirely!

The Old Testament saw select ministries such as prophets, priests and kings, endowed with the Holy Spirit to carry out divine activities within the nation. Nothing more was needed as the worldwide ingathering of peoples and people into God's Kingdom were only promises and prophecies awaiting the 'fullness of time,' (Gal 4:4) when the promised Messiah would come!

Moses' cry that all God's people would be suitably endowed awaited this "fullness of time," *"...I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Nu 11:29)*

The New Testament was to experience a seismic shift in the outworking of God's purpose. From nations being attracted in, to God's people going out. The cry of COME echoes loud and clear from the pages of the Old

Testament (1Ki 8:41-43), while Jesus' commission to GO echoes even louder from the pages of the New Testament!

It was no coincidence, therefore, that Joel's prophecy was chosen by the risen Christ to inaugurate the Church age! Written some 800 years before, this prophecy's time had come! The noise from the celebrations in heaven, as Joel's prophecy finally bursts onto the stage of human history, must have been deafening!

Acts 2:16-18 and 21 *"This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy...(:21) and everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"*

Understanding the Pattern

This initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit, on the Day of Pentecost, was not on "all people," as mentioned, but on "all God's people!" Every one of the 120 believers in the upper room had the Holy Spirit poured out upon them – not one unbeliever was included! However this outpouring upon God's people very soon resulted in 3,000 being saved and this figure quickly rose to 5,000! Thus fulfilling the purpose for God's people being clothed with power from on high (Ac 1:8), *'And everyone*

who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' (Ac 2:21)

The approach was clear – God would gather nations and people into His Kingdom through His chosen, redeemed people - not apart from them! The Holy Spirit would convict the world (all people) of sin, righteousness and judgment (Jn 16:8) but the communication of the gospel and the reconciliation of the nations was entrusted to God's redeemed people!

It was no coincidence that, 'every nation' was represented in Jerusalem on this occasion and that the Holy Spirit came as a 'violent **wind**' – an echo from Genesis 28 when God told Jacob his seed would be as **dust** and would **spread out** all over the world to bless the nations. From Jerusalem to Judea into Samaria and through ever widening circles, to the ends of the earth! Blow on us afresh, Holy Spirit, like a 'mighty wind storm' (NLT) and scatter us, like dust, to the west, to the east to the north and to the south, that all peoples on earth may be blessed!

No Age or Gender Restrictions

In his prophecy, Joel was careful to clarify God's full intentions in pouring out His Spirit on "all people". It would result in the ingathering of a great harvest into Christ's Kingdom involving people and peoples from all over the world, beginning at Jerusalem and ending at the uttermost parts of the earth (Ac 1:8, 2:21). The harvesters, for this great harvest, would be 'all believers'! Joel is careful to qualify what he means by 'all believers' in case of any misunderstandings, due to the culture of the day, or previous held practices!

In referencing '**young** men and **old** men' He was eliminating any age restrictions, such as was placed on priests in the Old Testament (Nu 4:3). And in referencing both **men** and **women**, He was eliminating gender restrictions.

No Age Restrictions

In terms of age, we see that God does not lift His Spirit from His people when they reach a certain age. Nor does He refuse His Spirit to those of a very young age. Our ministries change as we journey through various seasons of life but our effectiveness should increase - not

decrease! An older generation should help 'light the torch' of a younger generation, to help them achieve fruitfulness in ministry, but never extinguish their own in the process. In that sense we never 'pass the baton' and exit the race. Our race is not finished until we are!

No Gender Restrictions

The issue of gender restrictions in ministry is a 'hot potato'. It has been from the beginning and undoubtedly will be until Jesus returns! The internet provides a vast array of convincing arguments from both sides! My own take on this is very simple! It has to do with the principle of 'first mentioned' - a principle of Bible hermeneutics accepted across the board!

This principle is seen when Jesus was confronted by a group of Pharisees. They thought they were on safe ground, when they stretched way back to the time of Moses, and used a law given by the great patriarch, as grounds for their liberal divorce practices. Jesus however went back even further. He went all the way back to **the beginning** and said, *"But at **the beginning** of creation God 'made them male and female.'* *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."* (Mk 10:6-9).

Joel's prophecy marks **the beginning** of the Church age. Among other things Joel's prophecy establishes the doctrine of the 'ministry of all believers'. There are some

difficult passages in the New Testament regarding women in ministry, however, it is important that we measure them against Joel's prophecy given at **the beginning!**

Cultural practices and the interpretation of Scripture through certain cultural lenses can cause a restriction in the full expression of women in ministry. Where these restrictions have not been imposed we have witnessed God doing extraordinary things! It is a fact that women have been the main custodians of mission history over the past two hundred years of the modern missionary era. This era has seen the non-western Church grow from 1% of the Evangelical community in 1800 to more than 70%, of some six hundred million believers, today!

With the Church worldwide composing of more women than men, we will do well to heed Paul's injunction that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28). This end time harvest needs the full compliment of God's harvest force - all whom the Holy Spirit has empowered - both men and women and both young and old!

10

Visions, Dreams & Prophecies – Standard New Testament Practices

Visions, dreams and prophecies feature prominently in the prophecy that launched the Church age (Ac 2:17-18).

What is their significance to the outworking of the gospel going to the ends of the earth? And what is their significance to the 'ministry of all believers,' which Joel's prophecy establishes?

Well, the answer is very simple! God wants to work through us - and how can He possibly do so without communicating with us? Visions, dreams and prophecies are all about God communicating His will to His people! The Great Commission is not about us 'doing our best'. We were always meant to work 'with God,' not 'for God'. Jesus doesn't follow us and bless our good intentions - we follow Him and engage in God inspired works. Those are the works He promises to bless! *"Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me"* (in this fashion) Jn 12:26.

What 'Christ given' vision fills your heart and mind? What Holy Spirit dream are you living to fulfill? What prophecy do you keep hearing over and over again as you read God's word, pray and worship? What area of kingdom ministry would you/do you sacrifice for and spend your time and energy on?

If you have such a vision, dream and prophecy don't rush off to your Pastor, all excited, because he will simply look at you and say, "So what, what's the big deal, that's what you are meant to have. This is normal Christian living. This is the way God intended the New Testament to work. That's why the Holy Spirit was given to all God's people. We are all supposed to have visions, dreams and prophecies. This is not the exception, this is the rule!"

On the other hand, if you don't have a vision, dream or prophecy then by all means go to your Pastor because something is tragically wrong! Seek help because this is not how the New Testament is supposed to work!

The New Testament is about, all of us, being clothed with the Holy Spirit, and through visions, dreams and prophecies knowing exactly what God wants us to do and empowered by the Holy Spirit, succeeding and being fruitful in these endeavors! This is the way the world Christian movement was meant to progress and grow from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

With 600 million believers in the world today, one can only imagine what would happen if the risen Christ was able to continue, through all His people, as He had purposed, the amazing ministry he began while on earth. The book of Acts does not end with an Amen! The Amen comes when Christ returns!

If what we read in the Book of Acts is not wide spread, in all nations today, the problem is most certainly not with God! So where might the problem lie? What do you think?

11

Nameless Workers - the Future of the World Christian Movement

Recognizing and honoring the contribution of the 'nameless' workers in the world Christian movement is the key to the completion of the Great Commission!

This is the true celebration of the 'ministry of all believers', as Christ intended all along!

This pattern was first seen in the Book of Acts, when 'nameless' people planted the most significant church, possibly of all time, the church at Antioch (Ac 11:19-21)! Harold Cook the historian comments as follows:

"One thing is clear from the record. The spread of Christianity in the early centuries was not planned by the church nor any church officials. The church always seemed to have been a step or two behind. This was true when they sent Barnabas to confirm the new believers in Antioch (Ac11). It was also true when they decided to add their approval to the work that Paul and Barnabas

had already done among the Gentiles (Ac15). In a very real sense the spread of Christianity was spontaneous. Like the spread of a forest fire!

These were the informal missionaries, in the sense that they felt compelled to give the gospel to those who did not have it. They might never travel abroad, but they might by persecution or other circumstances be forced to change their residence. The important thing was that they carried the fire wherever they went. And most of the Christian expansion was due to these nameless voluntary witnesses."

The most significant characteristic of world mission today is globalization. Mission is from everywhere to everywhere! The Church exists on every continent and in every country and so do the unreached! The whole idea of missionary sending countries and missionary receiving countries no longer exists and what used to be the exclusive domain of the professional missionary, no longer is!

The unreached, in large and sizable communities, are all through Europe, North America, Australasia as well as in countries of Africa and Asia, where strong, vibrant churches exist! Add to that the diaspora of some 400,000 Filipino Christians who, through employment opportunities, are working in countries that prohibit or restrict professional missionaries, not to mention sizable numbers of Christians from other countries of Asia and

also Africa and Latin America.

It's a new day in world Christian mission – the world Christian movement has never seen anything quite like this!

The need to 'equip the saints for the work of the ministry' (Eph 4:13) has never been so urgent. Nor is the challenge, that we view the Church as a 'movement' - not as an organization, so compelling!

12

Saved by Grace - Saved for Works

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph 2:10b)

How far 'in advance' did God prepare these 'good works' and what exactly are the 'good works' we are supposed to do?

Well, at a bare minimum they were prepared around four thousands years ago, and the **'good works'** is our participation in God's worldwide kingdom expansion!

That's right, the 'good works' was first recorded in Genesis chapter 12, when God promised Abraham, and Abraham's children by faith (Gal 3:29), that they would be a blessing to all the families (peoples) of the earth!

From where did we get the idea that the 'good works' are something other than participation in the Great

Commission? And from where did we get the idea that this was the exclusive domain of missionary professionals?

Similarly, in the same book Paul says that, 'ascension ministries' have been given to 'equip God's people for **works of service**' (Eph 4:12). Works of service are works that directly or indirectly result in the advance of Christ's kingdom among all peoples. From where do we get the idea that the 'works of service' were anything but participation in the world Christian movement?

The scripture quoted above should be quoted in its fuller context, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – and not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."* (Eph 2:10)

For sure, we are not saved **by** works, but we sure have been saved **for** works!

For this reason we have become God's 'workmanship,' with the starting point being created anew in Christ Jesus. Being filled with the Holy Spirit was another milestone, which empowers us to be His witnesses (Ac 1:8), He then 'makes us fishers of men' (Mt 4:18-19) and from there we continue our journey into a life time of ever increasing fruitfulness in the extension of His glorious kingdom! No

wonder Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly." (Jn 10:10)

The fact that every New Testament believer is privileged to be involved in the greatest and most significant happening on planet earth should give us reason for continuous celebration. That fact that we were saved for this very purpose should give us cause for sober reflection!

13

The Great Commission – A Double Edged Sword

Who really benefits from the Great Commission? Well, of course the unreached do! They get the chance to hear the 'good news', respond, and experience the fulfillment to their spiritual search! But have you ever wondered why God entrusted the Great Commission to His people? Why not to angels? He had used angels in the past to communicate the 'good news', and with good effect (Lk 2:8-14), and will use angels again in the future (Rev 14:6).

But, in 'this age,' in His infinite wisdom, God has chosen to use us! Why? Well, the answer is really quite simple - angels don't need perfecting – we do! You see, the Great Commission is like a doubled edged sword! Not only do the unreached benefit – so do the reached! The unreached get reached and the reached get perfected!

We could very easily refer to the Great Commission as the gift of the Great Commission. It is God's gift to the Church – it provides a pathway upon which we can travel

to become all that God intended us to become! There is nothing as powerful as the Great Commission to provide us with the means to mature! It is as we embrace the Great Commission as a 'commission' to be obeyed not a 'suggestion' to be discussed or considered, that the wheels of our transformation begin to turn! From a self-centered, 'what's in it for me' person, to a selfless, bond-servant of Christ! Our journey into Christlikeness and the true joy of being a follower of Jesus begins in earnest!

When Jesus taught on purpose, life and what it means to be His true follower, He frequently would include direct references to the Great Commission. For example, in Mark 8:34-35, it says, '*Then he called his disciples and the crowds to come over and listen, "If any of you wants to be my follower," he told them, "you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me. If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake **and for the sake of the Good News**, you will find true life.*' (NLT).

Note that Jesus was addressing the 'crowds' not just His chosen apostles! He said, "*if any of you wants to be my follower...*" This message was for **every believer!**

Also, unity and collaboration cannot be separated from any definition of maturity! Jesus' high-priestly prayer in John 17 and the description of a mature Church in Ephesians four trumpets loud and clear that unity is a non-negotiable! Some years back, at an international

mission conference, a representative of one of the largest denominations in the world, publicly apologized for a position previously taken, where they thought they could reach the unreached peoples on their own. After making an in-depth study and survey of the world's remaining unreached they came to the realization that unless the entire Body of Christ was involved and working together, the task simply would not get done! The sheer size and challenge of the Great Commission forces collaboration resulting in the unity that is a hallmark of maturity!

The Great Commission is a double - edged sword in the hands of the risen Christ! He wields it to reach the nations, to take from them a people for His name. He also wields it to transform the people that bear His name.

It is very probable that the 'end of the age' will see the convergence of two key divine agendas. The maturing of the Church and the discipling of all the nations!

How great is our God and how marvelous are His works!

14

The Things that Must Happen Before the Lord will Return

Personally, I have never believed the second coming of Christ depended on the arrival of a fixed date. That is not to say that God, in His infinite knowledge, doesn't know the exact day when Jesus will return (Ac 1:7). THAT DAY, I believe, is determined far more by the fulfillment of God's purposes than it is by the arrival of a date on a calendar! God's 'time table' is far more a 'task table' than it is 'the big hand and the little hand of a big clock in the sky striking twelve!

Jesus promised to be with His disciples until the end of the age (Mt 28:20). This age will one day come to an end and eternal ages will begin (1Co 10:11, Heb 6:5). Below I have highlighted four things that MUST happen for this age to end. These four things provide a glimpse into the purpose of God!

World Evangelization

The Old Testament is replete with promises of a world-wide ingathering of peoples and people into God's

Kingdom (Gen12:2-3, Ps 22:27, Isa 49:6). The New Testament marked the launch, the outworking and the fulfillment of these promises. It makes sense that Christ's return would come following the full ingathering of his harvest – mission accomplished!

There is no clearer answer to the question, "When will Jesus return?" than the record of Jesus' own testimony in Mathew chapter 24. In this passage Jesus answered the three questions asked by a group of his disciples. As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. *"Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"* (Mat 24:3)

The first question, "When will this happen," was in reference to the destruction of the Temple (verses 1 and 2). This took place in AD 70 when the Roman General Titus and his army sacked Jerusalem, destroying the temple. The second and third questions are connected. To these questions Jesus gave the **signs of the approach of His coming** (the beginning of birth pains :8) such as wars, famines etc, followed by the **sign of His coming**, the gospel having been preached in all the world and having been a testimony or witness to all nations (people groups). This would conclude the 'task' and the end would come (Mt 24:14).

The Apostle Peter says something similar when responding to criticism that Christ's return had not yet

happened. *"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 (2Pe 3:9).* Clearly, the return of Christ is connected to world evangelization. Peter repeats his argument several verses later by saying, *"Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation"* (2Pe 3:15).

The Preparation of the Bride

The parable Jesus gave of the ten virgins – five wise and five foolish (Mt 25) tells us that the groom delayed his coming. The only logical answer as to why an excited groom would delay on such an occasion would be that the bride was unprepared! In the book of Revelation John gives us the most exciting scripture in the entire Bible, *"Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready."* (Rev 19:7)

Jesus is coming back for a bride without spot or wrinkle (Eph 5:27) and for a Church having attained the *'whole measure of the fullness of Christ'* (Eph 4:13). Personally, I believe that our participation in the 'Great Commission' that Jesus gave to the Church, is our pathway to maturity. It is similar to the 'beauty preparations' provided for Esther (Est 2) in her preparation of her marriage to King Xerxes, King of Persia.

The Maturity of Evil

Paul talks much about the 'mystery of iniquity or

lawlessness' (2Thes 2:7). Lawlessness must reach its maturity before Christ can return, *"Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction."* (2Th 2:1-3)

The maturing of His Church and the maturing of iniquity will coincide – both are ripening for harvest - one for glory and the other for destruction.

There is precedence for this - Abraham's descendants had to 'cool their heels' in Egypt for 400 years because "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" Gen 15:16. During those years in Egypt (world) however, a nation was being formed in readiness for a 'promised land' (new heavens and new earth).

The Ingathering of the Jewish Harvest

The end of the age will mark the end of the harvest season of the Gentiles and the beginning of the harvest season for the Jews. *"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob."* (Ro 11:25-26)

It could be argued that Jesus, personally, will reap this

harvest at His coming. When He returns they will say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD." (Psa 118:26). The Jews knew that Psalm 118 was a Messianic Psalm. They knew it spoke of the coming of the Messiah, that is why they sang it when Jesus entered Jerusalem (Mat 21:9, Mk11:9, Jn 12:13). Their expectation was of a conquering King not a suffering servant, hence their later rejection of Him!

In Jerusalem, several days later, Jesus lamented his rejection by the Jews and wept over Jerusalem expressing His longing to have gathered them as a hen gathers her chicks but they would not, so He says, *"Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"* (Mt 23:38-39)

Christ will return when God's full agenda for this age is complete. Of that agenda our part is world evangelization, people group by people group and our preparation as Christ's Bride to be His companion throughout eternal ages! The other components of His agenda, in my opinion, are in His sovereign hands!