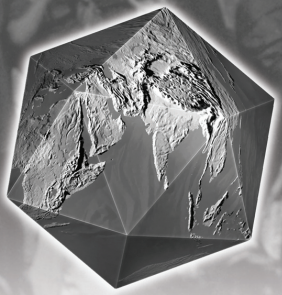

Four Men, Three Eras

By Ralph D. Winter

College students around the world used to be bowled over by Marxist thought. One powerful reason was that Communism had a "long look." Communists claimed to know where history was heading, and that they were merely following inevitable trends.

Recently, evangelicals, too, have thought a lot about trends in history and their relationship to events to come. The massive response a while back to Hal Lindsey's books and films about possible events in the future has shown us that people are responsive to a "Where are we going?" approach to life.

In comparison to the Communists, Christians actually have the longer look, backed up by a mass of hard facts and heroic deeds. Yet for some reason, Christians often make little connection between the discussion of prophecy and future events, and the discussion of missions. They see the Bible as a book of prophecy, both in the past and for the future. Yet, as Bruce Ker has said so well, "The Bible is a missionary book throughout....The main line of argument that binds all of it together is the unfolding and gradual execution of a missionary purpose."

Did I ever hear Ker's thought in Sunday School? Maybe. But only in later years have I come to a new appreciation of the fact that the story of missions begins long before the Great Commission. The Bible is very clear: God told Abraham he was to be blessed and to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). Peter quoted this on the day he spoke in the temple (Acts 3:25). Paul quoted the same mandate in his letter to the Galatians (3:8).

> The story of missions begins long before the Great Commission.

Yet some Bible commentators imply that only the first part of that verse could have happened right away. They agree that Abraham was to begin to be blessed right away, but somehow

they reason that two thousand years would have to pass before either Abraham or his descendants could begin "to be a blessing to all the families on earth." They suggest that Christ needed to come first and institute his Great Commission—that Abraham's lineage needed to wait around for 2,000 years before they would be called upon to go the ends of the earth to be a blessing to all the world's peoples. (This could be called "The Theory of the Hibernating Mandate"). Worse still, one scholar, with a lot of followers in later decades, propounded the idea that in the Old Testament the peoples of the world were not expected to receive missionaries but to go to Israel for the light; and that from the New Testament and thereafter it was the reverse, that is, the peoples to be blessed would not come, but that those already having received the blessing would go to them. This rather artificial idea gained acceptance partially by the use of the phrase, "centripetal mission in the Old Testament and centrifugal mission in the New Testament." Fact is, there are both in both periods, and it is very confusing to try to employ an essentially "Mickey Mouse" gimmick to explain a shift in strategy that did not happen. The existence of 137 different languages in Los Angeles makes clear that now, in the New Testament-and-after period, nations are still coming to the light.

A more recent and exciting interpretation observes that Israel, as far back as Abraham, was accountable to share that blessing with other nations. In the same way, since the time of the apostle Paul, every nation which has contained any significant number of "children of Abraham's faith" has been similarly accountable (but both Israel and the other nations have mainly failed to carry out this mandate).

The greatest scandal in the Old Testament was that Israel tried to be blessed without trying very hard to be a blessing. However, let's be careful: The average citizen of Israel was no more oblivious to the second part of Gen. 12:1-3 than the average Christian today is oblivious to the Great Commission! How easily our study Bibles overlook the veritable string of key passages in the Old Testament which exist to remind Israel (and us) of the missionary mandate: Gen 12: 1-3; 18:18; 22:18; 28:14; Ex 19:4-6; Deut 28:10; 2 Chr 6:33; Ps 67; 96; 105; Isa 40:5; 42:4; 49:6; 56:3; 6-8; Jer 12:14-17; Zech 2:11; Mal 1:11.

Likewise, today, nations which have been singularly blessed by God may choose to resist and try to conceal any sense of their obligation to be a blessing to other nations. But that is not God's will. "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required" (Luke 12:48).

Thus, how many times in the average church today is the Great Commission mentioned? Even less often than it comes up in the Old Testament! Yet the Commission applies. It applied then, and it applies today. I believe it has been constantly applicable from the very moment when it was first given (Gen 12:1-3). As individual Christians and as a nation we are responsible to "be a blessing" to "all families of the earth."

This mandate has been overlooked during most of the centuries since

the apostles. Even our Protestant tradition plugged along for over 250 years, minding its own business and its own blessings (like Israel of old) until a young man of great faith and incredible endurance appeared on the scene. In this chapter we are going to focus in on the A.D. 1800-2000 period, which his life and witness kicked off. No other person can be given as much credit for the vibrant new impetus of the last two hundred years. He was one of four such influential men whom God used, all of them with severe handicaps. Three great "eras" of new plunging forward into newly perceived frontiers resulted from their faith and obedience (it took two of them to launch the third and final era). Four stages of mission strategy characterized each of these eras. Inevitably two perplexing "transitions" of strategy appeared as the fourth stage of one era contrasted with the first stage of the next. It is easier to see this in a diagram. Better still, to tell the story.

THE FIRST ERA

Coastlands

William Carey

1792

An "under thirty" young man, William Carey, got into trouble when he began to take the Great Commission seriously. When he had the opportunity to address a group of ministers, he challenged them to give a reason why the Great Commission did not apply to them. They rebuked him, saying, "When God chooses to win the heathen, He will do it without your help or ours." He was unable to speak again on the subject, so he patiently wrote out his analysis; "An Enquiry Into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens."

The resulting small book convinced a few of his friends to create a tiny missions agency— the "means" of which he had spoken. The structure was flimsy and weak, providing only the minimal backing he needed to go to India. However, the impact of his example reverberated throughout the English-speaking world, and his little book became the Magna Carta of the Protestant mission movement.

William Carey was not the first Protestant missionary. For years the Moravians had been sending people to Greenland, America and Africa. But his little book, in combination with the Evangelical Awakening, quickened vision and changed lives on both sides of the Atlantic. Response was almost instantaneous: a second missionary society was founded in London, two in Scotland; one in Holland, and then still another in England. By then it was apparent to all that Carey was right when he had insisted that organized efforts in the form of missions societies were essential to the success of the missionary endeavor.

In America, five college students, aroused by Carey's book, met to pray for God's direction for their lives. This unobtrusive prayer meeting, later known as the "Haystack Prayer Meeting," resulted in an American "means"—the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions.

Even more importantly, they started a student mission movement, which became the example and forerunner of student movements in missions to this day.

In fact, during the first 25 years after Carey sailed to India, a dozen mission agencies were formed on both sides of the Atlantic, and the First Era in Protestant missions was off to a good start. Realistically speaking, however, missions in this First Era was a pitifully small shoe-string operation in relation to the other preoccupations of most Europeans and Americans in that day. The idea that we should *organize* in order to send out missionaries did not come easily, but it eventually became an accepted pattern.

During the first 25 years after Carey sailed to India, a dozen mission agencies were formed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Carey's influence led some women in Boston to form women's missionary prayer groups, a trend which led to women becoming the main custodians of mission knowledge and motivation. Some years later women began to go to the field as single missionaries. Finally, by 1865, unmarried American women established women's mission boards, which, like Roman Catholic women's orders, only sent out single women as missionaries, and were run entirely by single women at home.

There are two very bright notes about the First Era. One is the astonishing demonstration of love and sacrifice on the part of those who went out. Africa, especially, was a forbidding continent. All mission outreach to Africa prior to 1775 had totally failed. Of all Catholic efforts and all Moravian efforts, nothing had remained. Not one missionary of any kind existed on the continent on the eve of the First Era. The gruesome statistics of almost inevitable sickness and death that haunted, yet did not daunt, the decades of truly valiant missionaries who went out after 1790 in virtually a suicidal stream cannot be matched by any other era nor by any other cause. Very few missionaries to Africa during the first 60 years of the First Era survived more than two years. As I have reflected on this measure of devotion, I have been humbled to tears, for I wonder if I or my people today could, or would match that record. Can you imagine our Urbana students going out into missionary work today if they knew that for decade after decade 19 out of 20 of those before them had died almost on their arrival on the field?

A second bright spot in this First Era is the development of high quality insight into mission strategy. The movement had several great missiologists. In regard to home structure, they clearly understood the value of the mission structure being allowed a life of its own. For example, we read that the London Missionary Society experienced unprecedented and unequaled success, "due partly to its

Stages of Mission Activity		
Stage 1	*A Pioneer Stage*	*First contact with a people group*
Stage 2	*A Paternal Stage*	*Expatriates train national leadership*
Stage 3	*A Partnership Stage*	*National leaders work as equals with expariates*
Stage 4	*A Participation Stage*	*Expariates are no longer equal partners, but only participate by invitation*

freedom from ecclesiastical supervision and partly to its formation from an almost equal number of ministers and laymen." In regard to field structure, we can take a note from Henry Venn, who was related to the famous Clapham evangelicals and the son of a founder of the Church Missionary Society. Except for a few outdated terms, one of his most famous paragraphs sounds strangely modern:

> *Regarding the ultimate object of a Mission, viewed under its ecclesiastical result, to be the settlement of a Native Church under Native Pastors upon a self-supporting system, it should be borne in mind that the progress of a Mission mainly depends upon the training up and the location of Native Pastors; and that, as it has been happily expressed, the "euthanasia of a Mission" takes place when a missionary, surrounded by well-trained Native congregations under Native Pastors, is able to resign all pastoral work into their hands, and gradually relax his superintendence over the pastors themselves, 'til it insensibly ceases; and so the Mission passes into a settled Christian community. Then the missionary and all missionary agencies should be transferred to the "regions beyond."*

Take note: There was no thought here of the national church launching its own mission outreach to new pioneer fields! Nevertheless, we see here something like stages of mission activity, described by Harold Fuller of SIM in the alliterative sequence (see Table 1 above).

Slow and painstaking, though the labors of the First Era were, they did bear fruit; and the familiar series of stages can be observed. They go from no church in the pioneer stage, to infant church in the paternal stage, and to the more complicated mature church in the partnership and participation stages.

Samuel Hoffman of the Reformed Church in America Board puts it well:

> *The Christian missionary who was loved as an evangelist and liked as a teacher, may find himself resented as an administrator.*

Where the Gospel went, the results were often amazing.

Lucky is the missionary in whose own career this whole sequence of stages takes place. More likely the series represents the work in a specific field with a succession of missionaries. Again, it may be the experience of an agency, which in its early period bursts out in works in a number of places, and then after some years finds that most of its fields are mature at about the same time. Rightly or wrongly, this kind of succession is visible in the mission movement globally, as the fever for change and nationalization

sweeps the thinking of almost all executives at once, and leaps from continent to continent, affecting new fields still in earlier stages as well as old ones in the latter stages.

At any rate, by 1865 there was a strong consensus on both sides of the Atlantic that the missionary should go home when he had worked himself out of a job. Since the First Era focused primarily on the coastlands of Asia and Africa, we are not surprised that the literal withdrawal would come about first in a case where there were no inland territories. Thus, symbolizing the latter stages of the First Era was the withdrawal of all missionaries from the Hawaiian Islands— then a separate country. This was done with legitimate pride and fanfare, fulfilling the highest expectations, then and now, of successful progress through the stages of missionary planting, watering and harvest.

THE SECOND ERA

Inland

Hudson Taylor

1865

A second symbolic event of 1865 is even more significant— at least for the inauguration of the Second Era. A young man, after a short term and like Carey still under thirty, in the teeth of surrounding counter advice, established the first of a whole new breed of missions emphasizing the inland territories. This second young upstart was given little else than negative notice, but like William Carey, he brooded over statistics, charts and maps. When he suggested that the inland peoples of China needed to be reached, he was told that he could not get there, and he was asked if he wished to carry on his shoulders the blood of the young people he would thus send to their deaths. This accusing question stunned and staggered him. Groping for light, while wandering on the beach, it seemed as if God finally spoke to resolve the ghastly thought: "You are not sending young people into the interior of China. I am." The load lifted.

With only trade school medicine, without any university experience, much less missiological training, and with a checkered past in regard to his own individualistic behavior on the field, he was merely one more of the weak things that God uses to confound the wise. His early anti church-planting missionary strategy was breathtakingly erroneous by today's church-planting standards, yet God strangely honored him because his gaze was fixed upon the world's least-reached peoples. Hudson Taylor had a divine wind behind him. The Holy Spirit spared him from many pitfalls, and it was his organization, the China Inland Mission—the most cooperative, servant organization yet to appear—that eventually served in, one way or another, over 6,000 missionaries, predominantly in the interior of China. It took 20 years for other missions to begin to join Taylor in his special emphasis—the unreached, inland frontiers.

One reason the Second Era began slowly is that many people were confused. There were already many missions in existence. Why more?

Yet as Taylor pointed out, all existing agencies were confined to the coastlands of Africa and Asia, or to islands in the Pacific. Yet, people questioned, "Why go to the interior if you haven't finished the job on the coast?"

I am not sure the parallel is true today, but the Second Era apparently needed not only a new vision but a lot of new organizations. Taylor not only started an English frontier mission, he went to Scandinavia and the Continent to challenge people to start new agencies. As a result, directly or indirectly, over 40 new agencies took shape, composing the faith missions that rightly should be called "frontier missions," as the names of many of them still indicate: China Inland Mission, Sudan Interior Mission, Africa Inland Mission, Heart of Africa Mission, Unevangelized Fields Mission, Regions Beyond Missionary Union. Taylor was more concerned for the cause than for a career: At the end of his life he had spent only half of his years of ministry in China. In countless trips back from China he spent half of his time as a mobilizer on the home front. For Taylor, the cause of Christ, not China, was the ultimate focus of his concern.

Taylor was more concerned for the cause than for a career: At the end of his life he had spent only half of his years of ministry in China.

As in the early stage of the First Era, when things began to move, God brought forth a student movement. This one was more massive than before—the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, history's single most potent mission organization! In the 1880s and 90s there was only 1/37th as many college students as there are today, but the Student Volunteer Movement netted 100,000 volunteers, who gave their lives to missions. Twenty-thousand actually went overseas. As we see it now, the other 80,000 had to stay home to rebuild the foundations of the missions endeavor. They began the Laymen's Missionary Movement and strengthened existing women's missionary societies.

However, as the fresh new college students of the Second Era burst on the scene overseas, they did not always fathom how the older missionaries of the First Era could have turned their responsibility over to national leadership at the least educated levels of society. First Era missionaries were in the minority by then, and the wisdom they had gained from their experience was bypassed by the large number of new college-educated recruits. Thus, in the early stages of the Second Era, the new college-trained missionaries, instead of going on to new frontiers, they sometimes assumed leadership over existing churches, not reading the record of previous mission thinkers.This often forced First Era missionaries and national leadership (which had been painstakingly developed) into the background. In some cases this caused a huge step backward in mission strategy.

By 1925, however, the largest mission movement in history was in full swing. By then Second Era missionaries had finally learned the basic lessons they had at first ignored, and produced an incredible record. They had planted churches in a thousand new places, mainly "inland;" and by 1940 the reality of the "younger churches" around the world was widely acclaimed as the "great new fact of our time." The strength of these churches led both national leaders and missionaries to assume that all additional frontiers could simply be mopped up by the ordinary evangelism of the churches scattered throughout the world. More and more people wondered if missionaries were needed any longer! Once more, as in 1865, it seemed logical to send missionaries home from many areas of the world.

For us today it is highly important to note the overlap of these first two eras. The 45-year period between 1865 and 1910 (compare 1934 to 1980 today) was a transition between the strategy appropriate to the mature stages of Era 1, the Coastlands era, and the strategy appropriate to the pioneering stages of Era 2, the Inland era.

Shortly after the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, there ensued the shattering World Wars and the world-wide collapse of the colonial apparatus. By 1945 many overseas churches were prepared not only for the withdrawal of the colonial powers, but for the absence of the missionary as well.

> For almost half a century he waved the flag for the overlooked tribal peoples

While there was no very widespread outcry, "Missionary Go Home," as some supposed, nevertheless things were different, as even the people in the pews at home ultimately sensed. *Pioneer* and *paternal* were no longer the relevant stages, but *partnership* and *participation*.

In 1967, the total number of career missionaries from America began to decline (and it has continued to do so to this day). Why? Christians had been led to believe that all necessary beachheads had been established. By 1967, over 90 percent of all missionaries from North America were working with strong national churches that had been in existence for some time.

The facts, however, were not that simple. Unnoticed by almost everyone, another era in missions had begun.

THE THIRD ERA

Unreached Peoples

Cameron Townsend

1934

(Linguistic Barriers)

This era was begun by a pair of young men of the Student Volunteer Movement—Cameron Townsend and Donald McGavran. Cameron Townsend was in so much of a hurry to get to the mission field that he didn't bother to finish college. He went to Guatemala as a "Second Era" missionary, building on work which had been done in the

past. In that country, as in all other mission fields, there was plenty to be done by missionaries working with established national churches.

But Townsend was alert enough to notice that the majority of the Guatemalan population did not speak Spanish. As he moved from village to village, trying to distribute Scriptures written in the Spanish language, he began to realize that Spanish evangelism would never reach all of Guatemala's people. He was further convinced of this when an Indian asked him, "If your God is so smart, why can't he speak our language?" He was befriended by a group of older missionaries who had already concluded that the indigenous "Indian" populations needed to be reached in their own languages. He was just 23 when he began to move on the basis of this new perspective.

Surely, in our time the one person comparable to William Carey and to Hudson Taylor is Cameron Townsend. Like Carey and Taylor, Townsend saw that there were still unreached frontiers, and for almost a half century he has waved the flag for the overlooked tribal peoples of the world. He started out hoping to help older mission boards reach out to tribal people. Like Carey and Taylor, he ended up starting his own mission, Wycliffe Bible Translators, which is dedicated to reaching these new frontiers. At first he thought there were about 500 unreached tribal groups in the world. (He was judging by the large number of tribal languages in Mexico alone). Later, he revised his figure to 1,000, then 2,000, and now it is closer to 5,000. As his conception of the enormity of the task has increased, the size of his organization has increased. Today it numbers over 4,000 adult workers.

THE THIRD ERA

Unreached Peoples

Donald McGavran

1935

(Social Barriers)

At the very same time that Townsend was ruminating in Guatemala, Donald McGavran was beginning to yield to the seriousness, not of linguistic barriers, but of India's amazing social barriers. Townsend "discovered" the tribes; McGavran discovered a nearly universal category, which he labeled "homogeneous units," which today are more often called "people groups." Paul Hiebert has employed the terminology, "horizontal segmentation" for the tribes which each occupies its own turf, and "vertical segmentation" for groups distinguished, not by geography, but by rigid social differences. McGavran's terminology described both kinds even though he was mainly thinking about the more subtle vertical segmentation.

Once such a group is penetrated by the gospel by diligently taking advantage of that missiological breakthrough along group lines, the strategic "bridge of God" to that people group is established. The corollary of this truth is that until such a breakthrough is made, normal evangelism and church planting cannot take place.

McGavran did not found a new mission (Townsend did so only when the existing missions did not properly respond to the tribal challenge). McGavran's active efforts and writings spawned both the church growth movement and the frontier mission movement, the former devoted to expanding within already penetrated groups, and the latter devoted to deliberate approaches to the remaining unpenetrated groups.

As with Carey and Taylor before them, Townsend and McGavran attracted little attention for twenty years. But by the 1950s both had wide audiences. By 1980, 46 years after 1934, a 1910-like conference was held, focusing precisely on the forgotten groups these two men emphasized. The Edinburgh-1980 World Consultation on Frontier Missions was the largest mission meeting in history, measured by the number of mission agencies sending delegates. And wonder of wonders, 57 Third World agencies sent delegates. This is the sleeper of the Third Era! Also, a simultaneous youth meeting, the International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions, pointed the way for all future mission meetings to include significant youth participation.

As had happened in the early stages of the first two eras, the Third Era has spawned a number of new mission agencies. Some, like the New Tribes Mission, carry in their names reference to this new emphasis. The names of others, such as Gospel Recordings and Mission Aviation Fellowship, refer to the new technologies necessary for the reaching of tribal and other isolated peoples of the world. Some Second Era agencies, like Regions Beyond Missionary Union, have never ceased to stress frontiers, and have merely increased their staff so they can penetrate further—to people groups previously overlooked.

> The task is not an American one, nor even a Western one. It will involve Christians from every continent of the world.

More recently many have begun to realize that tribal peoples are not the only forgotten peoples. Many other groups, some in the middle of partially Christianized areas, have been completely overlooked. These peoples are being called "Unreached Peoples," and are defined by ethnic or sociological traits. Thus, they are people so different from the cultural traditions of any existing church that missions (rather than evangelistic) strategies are necessary for the planting of indigenous churches within their particular traditions.

If the First Era was characterized by reaching coastland peoples, and the Second Era by inland territories, the Third Era must be characterized by the more difficult-to-define, non-geographical category, which we

have called "Unreached Peoples"—people groups which are socially isolated. Because this concept has been so hard to define, the Third Era has been even slower getting started than the Second Era. Cameron Townsend and Donald McGavran began calling attention to forgotten peoples over 40 years ago, but only recently has any major attention been given to them. More tragic still, we have essentially forgotten the pioneering techniques of the First and Second Eras, so we almost need to reinvent the wheel as we learn again how to approach groups of people completely untouched by the gospel!

The task is not as difficult as it may seem for several surprising reasons.

We know that there are about 10,000 people groups in the "Unreached Peoples" category, gathered in clusters of similar peoples, these clusters numbering not more than 3,000. Each individual people will require a separate, new missionary beachhead. Is this too much? Can this be done?

Can We Do It?

The task is not as difficult as it may seem, for several surprising reasons. In the first place, the task is not an American one, or even a Western one. It will involve Christians from every continent of the world.

More significant is the fact that when a beachhead is established within a culture, the normal evangelistic process, which God expects every Christian to be involved in, replaces the missions strategy, because the mission task of "breaking in" is finished.

Furthermore, "closed countries" are less and less of a problem because the modern world is becoming more and more interdependent. There are literally no countries today which admit no foreigners. Many of the countries considered "completely closed"—like Saudi Arabia—are in fact avidly recruiting thousands of skilled people from other nations. And the truth is, they prefer devout Christians over boozing, womanizing, secular Westerners.

But our work in the Third Era has many other advantages. We have potentially a world-wide network of churches that can be aroused to their central mission. Best of all, nothing can obscure the fact that this could and should be the final era. No serious believer today dare overlook the fact that God has not asked us to reach every nation, tribe and tongue without intending it to be done. No generation has less excuse than ours if we do not do as He asks.

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- *Finishing the Task* - Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch
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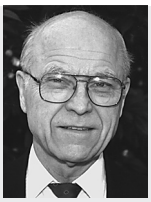

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