

'Is the Age of World Mission over or just beginning?'

*Message preached by Mike Frith, Founding Director of OSCAR, at
'Derwent Week', Cliff College on Monday 22nd July 2002.*

Main themes:

- 1. World Mission is central to the Bible*
- 2. World Mission should be the prime task of the Church (not sidelined)*
- 3. There's no time like the present*

Introduction: Examples of made up 'Famous Last Words'

- Well we've made it this far.
- It's fireproof.
- Let me reach in and get your watch out of the printing press.
- He's probably just hibernating.
- What does this button do?
- You wouldn't hit a chap with glasses on, would you?
- I'm making a citizen's arrest.
- Are you sure the power is off?
- Pull the pin and count to what?

John **Wesley** (died 1791). His last words were 'The best of all is, God is with us'.

What were Jesus' Last Words?

Matt 28:16-20

Mark 16:15-20

Luke 24:46-49

John 20:21-23

Acts 1:4-8

Did Jesus save 'the best 'til last' or was it just incidental that these words came at the end of his time on earth?

The Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20)

The last words of Jesus were the most important.

Jesus told all eleven disciples to 'go and make disciples of all nations'. They didn't have to feel specifically or individually called. The calling was for *all of them* to do this task. The things that would define the what, how and where would be things like: gifts and abilities, contacts and opportunities, God's

specific leading. But, there was never the option `not' to be involved in taking the gospel to `all nations'. Why, then, do we think that mission work is only for the chosen few, or those who are called?

The Great Commission was a mandate or task given to all eleven of the disciples and every subsequent member of the Christian community. Jesus said that the end will not come until the gospel has been preached in the whole world to all nations (Matt 24:14). The disciples and the early Church believed that Jesus was going to return soon, within their lifetime in fact. But, once Jesus went up into heaven, the task of taking the salvation of God to the nations fell to the Church. Not that He was leaving them an impossible task, it was made possible by the coming of the Holy Spirit to give the power to do the work (Acts 1:8).

With this Great Commission, the `raison d'être' for the church is explained and the reason behind the new covenant is expounded.

Our main reason for being ... to bring glory to God.
Our main reason for living ... to bring God's glory to others.

"A church is the only organisation that exists primarily for the benefit of non-members."
- C.S. Lewis

Why hasn't Jesus returned yet?

Two further readings worthy of a mention:

Matt 24:14 `And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.'

Revelation 5:9 `with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'

These stress the importance of this task. All nations must have the chance to hear the gospel before Jesus returns.

So, why after 2000 years, hasn't it been done?

If Paul was to be transported to today, I think he would be horrified by the way in which even Christians have become preoccupied with comfort, convenience, selfish ambition and personal security and well-being. All of which stems from a general disregard for the rest of the world. Putting oneself before others.

I think he would be shocked to see that in 2000 years, with all the advances in technology and travel, we haven't completed the Great Commission.

Most of all, I think he would be saddened to see how the task of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world has been sidelined by the church. Maybe we feel that our nation is in greater need than many others, therefore we should concentrate on our own nation. Maybe we feel that missionaries who have gone out in the past have done more damage than good with their cultural imperialism ... perhaps the days of us being able to help other nations find Christ are over?

But we misunderstand ... the task of taking Christ to the nations is not just 'our nations' task, it is the commission to the Church, the body of Christ, which spans many nations itself. This is not a 'national' thing, it's a command to all Christians, everywhere, to work together on this task.

Paul believed in the urgency of the Great Commission (Romans 13:11-12), the need to concentrate on the important things that make the difference between life and death and 'throw off' the things that hinder us from that work (Hebrews 12:1). Paul was a missionary and, therefore, we need to view some of the things he wrote through 'missionary' spectacles ... in order to see the significance of his teaching to a young Church who had this great task before them.

Hebrews 12

Surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses (v1)

We don't do this alone. We are 'surrounded' by others whose example and encouragement spurs us on. We should not live our Christian lives in isolation, we should do this together. The Message, written by Eugene Peterson, puts it this way 'Do you see what this means - all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we better get on with it. Strip down, start running and never quit!'

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles (v1)

We have become so wrapped up in our own comfort and convenience. We've forgotten what it is to be sacrificial, to operate out of our comfort zone, to do the things that God requires of us regardless of the problems and the hindrances, and regardless of our own desires, wants and failings.

Let us run with perseverance the Race marked out for us (v1)

The race is marked out for us ... we have our orders! If you're a bit lost as to what God wants you to do ... it's all here, in His last words.

Any race starts with a burst of energy. For the initial part of the race, enthusiasm is the driving force. After a while, though, fatigue and pain start to set in. It gets harder and harder, to the point where the easiest thing and most natural thing to do would be to stop and give up. A good runner, though, recognises this tendency and resists it. As he or she perseveres, the end

draws near, the pain is overcome and the runner's main focus of finishing the race becomes the dominating factor. The point in completing any endurance race is that it's a triumph of determination over discouragement.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus (v2)

His example of triumph over pain and adversity is a demonstration of the power and the greatness of God. Take courage from the fact that He has shown us that it's possible to endure such hardship and win not only by His example, but by the power that He has given us in the Holy Spirit.

It produces a harvest of righteousness (v11)

The result of completing a task in the face of adversity and not giving in to pain and hardship is a harvest of righteousness.

The Great Commission as a Race

Initial burst of energy and enthusiasm in the first century. Then we've had nearly 2000 years of struggling to make the gospel known in the whole world. The problem is, each time we seemed to be making strides, more people were discovered and the population grew as well ... so the proportion of Christians seemed to get smaller and smaller and the task of 'taking the gospel to the nations' more and more insurmountable. The pain set in.

However, the faithful few have endured the pain and discouragement of these times and kept their eyes on Jesus and His command. This has paid off. We now have a world that we can grasp ... we have knowledge and contact with the whole world and can see just how we're doing in the Great Commission. We also have the means (technology and resources) to make huge strides forward in this task. Things like: faster travel, improved communications, TV, radio, the Internet ... all the things that contribute to what we call Globalisation. Our world is getting smaller because of the things we can do with greater ease and greater speed than ever before. This is starting to have a serious impact on the Great Commission.

Take Bible translation for instance. In 1380 John Wycliffe started translating the New Testament into English. Back then books were all written by hand. In the middle of the 1400s, the printing press was invented and the work got easier. In 1520, William Tyndale translated the Bible into common English. By 1600, just 36 languages had scriptures in their own language. By 1800, that had grown to 67. By 1900, 537. With the aid of technology and computers, by 2000 that figure stood at 2800 languages!

In 1974, approximately half of the world's population was beyond the reach of the church, living in unreached people groups. Today, just one third of Earth's inhabitants live in unreached people groups.

The proportion of Christians in the world remains relatively unchanged throughout the last century (approx. 33%). The increase in world population still outstrips the increase in Christians about 3 to 1. That is, for every 3 people being born, roughly 1 will become a Christian. But the dramatic change is that since 1974, for the first time in modern mission history, the number of unevangelised (i.e. those that haven't heard the gospel) has been falling ... in spite of the accelerated population of the planet. This is a dramatic development.

We are not called to make the whole world Christian, we are called to tell the world about Christ and make the gospel known throughout all nations. The subsequent choice of whether or not they follow Christ is theirs, as it was ours at some point.

So, what *is* necessary to do mission work?

- **Knowledge**

1. A personal knowledge and experience of the saving power of the Lord Jesus Christ - Example: John Wesley didn't have this when he started missionary work in North America!

Have you ever tried introducing someone you didn't really know to someone else? It's not easy.

Maybe some of you, like John Wesley, know all about Jesus but you don't yet know Him as your personal saviour and Lord.

2. An awareness of the universal saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.
Example: The 4 `alls' of Methodism:

1. All need to be saved
2. All can be saved
3. All can know themselves to be saved
4. All can be saved to the uttermost

- **Power**

The power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1: 4 & 8)

Do not attempt to do God's work without God's power.

Luke 24:46-49 `This is what is written: Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high'.

- **Dedication**

Willingness, sacrifice, perseverance, endurance.

Matthew 19:29 `And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.'

Luke 14:33 `In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.'

Summary:

The end of the race could be in sight. Pick your feet up, focus your eyes on Jesus and the task He's called His church to do, and run like the wind for the finishing line.