



Disciple All Nations by Jim Stier

A few years ago, I accompanied a team out to a village in the war-torn Angolan countryside. We were warmly received by the twenty or so inhabitants of the tiny settlement, but it soon became obvious that they were in a desperate situation. They had moved back to their village six months before when a cease-fire was announced. Their initial corn harvest had failed, and now all their food was gone. One mother was nursing her baby, but was too weak to walk, with advanced anemia. Another brought her baby to us, and I was shocked and saddened by the little girl's condition. She was emaciated and almost comatose, obviously starving and so dehydrated her the surface of her eyes was pasty. There was nothing that the mother could do, and her face was pinched with desperation. It seemed obvious to me that it was too late to save the baby. It was so far gone that it couldn't even cry anymore.

What could our response be? We would have to respond as God would. He is loving, kind, generous, and merciful. If we are to pray and live the Lord's prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done...", we will have to live out His responses to violence, suffering, injustice, chaos, and corruption.

We took the baby to the hospital in the nearest town, gave some vitamins to the anemic mother, and arranged a delivery of food to the village. There was nothing we could do immediately about the background of war in the country, but we could respond in a concrete manner that was worthy of Jesus. A few days later, we got the news that the baby's life was saved.

There is a long-standing debate in the church as to whether we should focus on preaching the gospel or whether we should avoid proselytizing and just concentrate on meeting people's felt needs. As a boy, I went to church every Sunday at a liberal church. They had a message that only referred to having a nice life on earth and helping the needy. When I was in college, I was taught all of the awful dangers of the "social gospel." We were to go out and preach the truth so that strong churches could be formed. Anything that focused on people's secular needs was a dangerous loss of focus and could finally even threaten the purity of the gospel message.

It seems to me now that both of those options are unacceptable. Why?

In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark, writing as a neutral social scientist, attributes a large part of the triumph of the Christian faith in the Roman Empire to the different moral and ethical level that the Christians lived out in that culture. During the great plagues in 165 A.D. and again in 251 A.D., the responses of the pagan Romans and the Christians were stunningly different. Dionysius, a church father and bishop of Alexandria, relates how the Christians flocked to the city to minister to those in need, even though many of them died as a result. Meanwhile, the pagans fled, leaving their sick relatives and loved ones behind to die. This sacrificial service by Christians was so powerful that what had been seen as a tiny Jewish sect grew to become the official religion of the greatest empire on earth. Christianity also became the primary mold of ethics and moral ideals for the West. Who says we can't change things?



Please notice that western civilization wasn't changed because Christians took over the institutions of power, but because they awakened the conscience of an Empire. They offered a better way to live and lived out what they were offering in a graphic way.

It takes a lot of effort and money to change things in a whole nation. Does this mean that we think in terms of competing programs, where one must win and the other must lose in our allocation of man-power and resources? Our enduring tendency to polarize has also gotten into the debate on discipling nations. We hear things like, "We need to quit putting so much emphasis on the unreached and focus our limited resources more on discipling nations." This is another false dichotomy.

In Matthew 28:18-20, we are specifically commanded to make disciples of "all nations." How could it be otherwise? Could God want relatively good, just, and prosperous societies in the West, and ignore the needs of the rest of the world? Could God play favorites? Is this consistent with His character? No! His character demands that He show the same concern and love to all nations, without favoritism.

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Any survey that we might make to analyze where Christian workers are located, where Christian money is spent, or where nations get the most input from the church, will lead us to the conclusion that our present efforts don't reflect God's character. Massive amounts of money are spent on media time, money, political action, and church infrastructure in our efforts to saturate western nations with Christian teaching. Only a very small trickle finds its way out to those who have had no opportunity to hear.

The "all" in "make disciples of all nations" is the biggest challenge in the Great Commission. It can't be left out.

Ironically, the unreached peoples are about a million times more responsive to the teachings of the kingdom of God than are westerners, according to statistics based on analytical methods developed by Dr. David Barrett and Dr. Todd Johnson. This means that the unreached represent by far the greatest potential for discipling nations. In the West, Christianity is generally seen as an old, tired ideology that has already failed. In the East and in tribal societies it is often seen as transforming, exciting, and full of promise. Where do you think we have the best chance to have our initial successes? Won't the new impetus and energy to change the West likely come from places where the gospel is being believed in an energetic and powerful way?

The kingdom is to permeate all aspects of life. It is meant to be present and dynamic through Christians involved in all sectors of society. Through missionaries, it should be actively and purposefully penetrating all tribes and nations.

A few years ago, I was on a long and very boring trip, and picked up a Reader's Digest magazine on the plane. I was going through and reading everything, when I came across an article entitled something like "America's Most Compassionate City." I read with growing excitement as the author described the heritage of Rochester, USA. It has consistently come out on top in surveys of which American cities take best care of their poor and needy. The author traces this characteristic back to the revivals which took place there under the ministry of Charles Finney, about 150 years ago! The gospel does make a great difference in people's lives. It's not meant to just be a means to get to heaven, but a transforming power right here on earth. We really can change nations if we will serve the truth, with love, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jim Stier, Executive Chairperson for Youth With A Mission. Reprinted with permission from the September 2001 International YWAMer.



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