

*Visualizing Soul-Winning in The 21st Century*¹

While I've been requested to visualize soul-winning in the 21st century, I'm not a prophet, and therefore I have no certain predictable message about soul-winning in the future. Like you, I can only visualize what possibilities may come from discernment of current trends. None of us knows what may really be significant for the future. Just as people generally did not realize at the turn of this century that one of the most important experiments in the history of transportation was being conducted by the Wright brothers in their attempt to fly the *Kitty Hawk*, so also many unforeseen future events will likely shape various aspects of soul-winning in the 21st century and beyond – if the Lord chooses to prolong humanity on the earth.

To understand how to visualize soul-winning in the 21st century and beyond, *a brief review of soul-winning in the immediate past life* of the church will better enable us to understand our subject. *When we think of soul-winning, we may be thinking of the very limited activity which is generally designated as personal evangelism.* Widely used during my early years of preaching, were popular books about personal soul winning – such as Otis Gatewood's *You Can Do Personal Work*, and Homer Hailey's *From House To House*. These were heralded as very beneficial for training brethren for soul winning in local churches. House to house door-knocking efforts to identify potential prospects with which to study the Bible have been popular in many communities. Some of you will remember that, all over the nation, these door knocking efforts were followed by the use of Maurice Tisdell's *Cottage Meeting Charts*, and then later, with Jule Miller's popular *Visualized Bible Study* filmstrips, which have now been put into video form. Bible correspondence courses, such as John Hurt's eight lesson materials, the international *World Bible School* correspondence course which was the brain child of Jimmy Lovell, and many other correspondence courses have been very influential for soul-winning in the 20th century.

Our view of what's involved in soul-winning is surely larger than this, however. Most congregational leaders consider that a major soul winning effort should be made annually through a "revival," or as some prefer to call it, a "gospel meeting." Even the practice during public worship gatherings of extending 'an invitation,' which is a modification of the denominational 'altar call,' is a comparatively recent innovation, having begun during the camp meeting revivals in the early 1800's in Kentucky. Many churches now use radio, television and other mass mediums of communication – including books, pamphlets, tracts, journals, etc. – for soul-winning purposes. From the early 19th century, religious debates were considered by brethren to be very significant for soul-winning. Because a majority of conversions to the Lord, as experienced in the life of the local church, have come up through the church's Bible class programs, a church without a Bible class program is now considered most unusual. The so-called 'Sunday School' is a comparatively recent innovation, having begun in Gloucester, England in 1780, originally to stifle crime among children who worked six days a week in factories, but whose idleness on Sundays allowed them to engage in

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mischievous and harmful pranks. The church's use of a 'Vacation Bible School' for long-range evangelistic goals is even more recent, having begun in the 20th century. Currently, one of the most significant and effective means of soul-winning in many growing congregations is that of *holistic* small groups. "If we were to identify any *one* principle as the 'most important' – even though our research shows that the *interplay of all* basic elements is important – then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups" (Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996, 33). However, soul-winning is a far larger area of concern than indicated by these special soul-winning materials and procedures.

To grasp the larger dimensions of soul winning for the next century, we may find guidance if we'll look several centuries to the past. Our purposes may be adequately served if we try to imagine for a moment that this is the year 1499, that we are Europeans, and that we're going to assess what soul-winning will be like in the next century! As you know, this was the time when Roman Catholicism, with all of its medieval trappings, controlled not only the nations of Europe but also, through their sacramental system, people's individual lives. Had we lived in Europe in 1499, and had we tried to visualize the future of evangelism in the 16th century, could we have guessed that the next century would produce the greatest advance in Christianity since apostolic times? Apparently no one then anticipated what was to come!

The 16th century was a revolutionary century for evangelism. Great advances were made toward the return to biblical Christianity. This was the time of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and a host of other reformers who, like Christians in apostolic times, turned their world upside down. Because we live 500 years later, we can look back on the intervening history, evaluate changing situations, and see how they effected the future of soul winning thereafter.

We shall first look at some external factors, and then those which may be designated as internal. By external factors is meant technological, cultural and political events of significance to soul-winning in the 16th century and thereafter. By internal factors is meant thought processes or ideas within the 16th culture that influenced soul-winning. Likewise, we may be able to examine these and other categories of information in our own times to arrive at some assessment for soul-winning in the 21st century.

Among external factors related to soul-winning in the 16th century are those which may be categorized as technological, educational, and historical. In *technology*, the invention of moveable type (c. 1450) and the translation of Erasmus' Greek New Testament (1516) led to Bibles being printed in the languages of the people (Tyndale's English translation, 1526; and Luther's German translation, 1534). Surely no one will deny that these most certainly related to soul-winning in the 16th century. In *education*, the universities that were first developed in the 12th century, enabled Luther and other Reformers to teach students the Bible in university settings. These students would then become leaders in their communities, and be able to teach others.

A couple examples of historical happenings are also noteworthy. The *first* I choose to notice is mentioned by Everett Ferguson, in his book on *Church History: Reformation and Modern*. He declares that "The failure of Philip II of Spain's Armada to conquer England in

1588 determined that North America (largely colonized from England) would be Protestant whereas South America (settled and missionized from Spain) would be Catholic” (Abilene, TX: Biblical Research Press, 1967, 41-42). The *second* historical example relates to the sale of indulgences. As Luther was becoming a monk, indulgences were sold to atone for sins. The practice influenced Luther’s rebellion against Roman Catholicism. And that set in motion a chain of events that eventually lead to development of Protestant denominationalism. As we look at the approaching 21st century, who knows what future technological, educational, or historical factors may contribute to soul-winning!

Internal factors related to soul-winning in the 16th century were essentially ideas of the Reformers that turned the people toward God. These ideas were revolutionary for their times. Sometimes their ideas were reactionary to existing situations, while at other times their ideas were fashioned by their struggles. Although these ideas seem simple and so naturally correct to us, the Reformers often came to these ideas only gradually and sometimes through great personal struggles. Then, to get their ideas accepted within their societies, they generally had to go through much personal sacrifice and often had hard battles to fight. Some of them were even martyred for their beliefs.

What were these ideas? The first major idea I’ve selected is at the heart of evangelism. While the Roman church contended that a man could come to God through self-help, the sacraments, and through mysticism, Luther tried all of these to no avail. When he came to despair because he could not seem to find God, he read the scripture. There he learned that *faith is the way to God*. He learned that “He who through faith is righteous shall live” (Romans 1:17), and became energized. A second idea was one to which he came only gradually, namely, that *the Bible is the only valid authority in Christianity*. Only reluctantly did he come to the conclusion that neither the papacy, nor church councils, nor even Canon Law of the church had any authority before God. A third idea was that *all believers are priest in Christ Jesus*. Hence, there is no need for specially ordained priests to administer sacraments of the church. Moreover, of the seven sacraments of the Roman church, Luther held that only two had any validity – the Lord’s Supper and baptism. A fourth idea was that *the Bible should be in the language of the people*, that they might read and interpret it for themselves.

There were also *many other ideas* which contributed to evangelism in the 16th century and thereafter. We must remember that these ideas were *valid because they were true*. Their truthfulness did not mean that they were readily accepted, however. On the contrary, the Reformers not only had to prove their ideas truthful, but they also had to resist the ungodly entrenched powers which felt threatened by these truths. As we look at potential evangelism in the 21st century, we would also do well to examine the Bible for truthful ideas which would displace ungodly entrenched powers of our own times.

From the Reformation movement until the present time, many biblical principles, too varied in scope and too many to mention, have enriched our society and contributed to soul-winning. On the other hand, when non-biblical ideals, like communism for example, dominate the thinking of nations, soul winning is restrained until that ungodly philosophy is either overcome by biblical principles or fails of its own decay. *When we visualize soul-winning in the 21st century, we must look at the big picture.*

What we have said thus far is that in the 20th century we've used different methodologies for effective soul-winning. There is every reason to continue using these. Of these methods, one of them which is not used much among our brotherhood, but which is being recognized as the single most important methodology employed by growing denominational churches is that of small groups for bible study and other purposes. In fact, churches that are growing generally use this methodology among others, while churches that do not use this methodology are generally not growing. Church leaders who are not acquainted with use of small groups should study this methodology and discover how to use it effectively. We've also said that soul-winning involves much more than the use of effective methodology. We've said that external factors like technological, educational, historical and other social and cultural factors also relate to productive soul-winning. We need to realize these, and take advantage of them as we have opportunity. We're also declared that biblical concepts are vital to soul winning. We must examine the entrenched ungodly powers that exist in our times, and learn those biblical truths that should be applied against them.

Now is the time to mention two of the many and various external factors of our times that will surely have a bearing on soul-winning in the 21st century. After we've examined these, we'll look at some of the internal factors. These two external factors, neither of which should to be construed as either a blessing or a curse, confront us as we enter the 21st century. *The first has to do with technology in the area of communications, while the second is concerned with the extent and nature of the world's population.*

Just as the invention of moveable type permitted the printing of books, tracts and other materials that promoted Reformation ideals, so also in our times we have technology exploding with communication mediums. The 20th century has seen the development of the telegram, telephone, radio, television, movies, recording devices, the computer, and the Internet. And these have become ever more sophisticated with the passing of each decade. All these have been and are being used in soul-winning efforts, although their effectiveness may be enhanced in time to come. We may very well expect by the end of the first decade of the 21st century that everyone will have their own personal cell telephone which, if they choose, they may carry on their person everywhere they go. The communications technology will have tremendous impact on educational systems at all levels of society, much of which cannot now even be imagined. Churches would do well to examine how these technologies may be used effectively in soul-winning.

As medicine increases its effectiveness in producing greater health, *the world's population will be getting older.* In the 20th century, we've seen the average life span in the United States increased to the age of 76. Within the next generation we may expect to see a much larger percentage of our people with life spans of a century or more. Some will have their working years expanded beyond the age of sixty-five. Others will have more years to enjoy their retirement. With the baby boomers becoming elderly, there will likely be more elderly people than there are younger people to care for them.

Do we realize what this means? For one thing, it means that, *for the church, there will be more elderly people who can give all their energies to serving the Lord.* These people need to be prepared to serve in ways most suitable to their talents. The church needs to begin assessing these possibilities for soul-winning. But the large number of elderly people in

society also means that the church may need to be much busier caring for the elderly in the 21st century than we've been accustomed.

While the world's population will be older in the next century, this is not the most significant fact about the population to be noticed. *More significant is the fact that by the end of the 21st century, the world's population is expected to more than double our current world population.* Specifically, the United Nations projects 10.2 billion. That fact has so many implications that they cannot now be fully ascertained. I'll mention just a couple of them, however, as they relate to soul-winning.

First, churches in the 21st century will become increasingly cross cultural. The large centers of world population will generally be overseas, although we do have our large cities like New York and Los Angeles. A 1982 projection by the United Nations indicated that by the year 2,000, the 10 largest cities of the world starting with Mexico City and ending with Jakarta, would have from 27.6 million to 17 million people. The smallest of those 10 largest cities, Jakarta, does not even have a sewer system. They cannot bury their trash because it would contaminate their water, and they cannot burn it as it would pollute their air. They have to live in it, and recycle it on a daily basis! In saying this, I've just illustrated something of the magnitude of problems associated with large numbers of humanity living close together.

The growing world population has major significance for evangelism, both at home and overseas. Christianity is stronger in the United States than any other place in the world. Yet the world's population growth will be mostly outside the United States. Unless the church is more aggressively involved in world-wide evangelism to poor countries of the world, where most of the population growth will take place, then Christianity will be diminished in its world-wide influence.

The United States is a nation of immigrants and their descendents. During the 19th and most of the 20th centuries, immigrants settled in the big cities, mostly in the north. Now, however, large numbers are coming to the south, even small towns and rural areas. One preacher noted that, of the 233 nationalities of the world, sixty nationalities were represented within the one square mile where he lived in Chicago. In the 21st century, churches must learn to adapt to people of other races, cultures, ethnic groups, and nationalities. Under these circumstances, the place to begin mission work is at home. Convert those people with cultural differences within your own city. They still have contacts with relatives and friends back in their former countries. They are the most logical people to reach out to them with the gospel.

Second, churches in the 21st century will need to be more concerned with benevolence. With the world's population more than doubled by the end of the next century, and with the increased industrialization of the world, there will be growing competition for land on which to grow food products. Hunger may result from increased worldwide use of agricultural lands for industrialization, decreasing land for food production, and increasing demands for grain consumption. An agricultural expert, working with the United Nations, predicts that food costs will double in 30 years. Most Americans may be able to sustain such costs, but millions worldwide, who now barely live from hand to mouth, may be facing starvation. The church must begin now to find an answer to what it will do when it sees malnourished and starving people in the 21st century. What the church does about this problem

will surely have an impact upon whether the world's populations will be receptive to evangelism.

I hope these thoughts about some external factors as we enter the 21st century indicate to you that *the church faces many challenges in the coming century*. Other challenges may be discovered by looking at some ideas now facing Christians as we enter the new century. *I firmly believe that the greatest philosophical challenge facing Christians now is the Humanist philosophy*. This philosophy may be defined in many different ways. The term humanism is really a catch all term covering many other philosophies. These philosophies go by the more familiar names of secularism, rationalism, relativism, naturalism, materialism, socialism, and feminism. Some less familiar terms would also include hedonism, statism, scientism, multiculturalism, romanticism, and globalism. *Essentially, Humanism is the philosophy that removes God from reality and makes man the judge of all things*. Humanism permeates all areas of our society, and dominates most. Humanism is a major hindrance to evangelism in our times, and will continue to be unless it is checked.

A major challenge for Christianity during the 21st century will be to overthrow the strongholds of Humanism. The major fortification of Humanism that we must now confront is the nature of civil government. The civil government – as an institution – is divinely sanctioned – just as are also the institutions of family and church. My concern with civil government relates to its domination by Humanist ideology. To overcome Humanist ideology in the civil government in the 21st century, we must inject biblical ideas, in much the same way as Luther and other Reformers injected biblical ideas during the 16th century to overcome the stranglehold that Roman Catholicism had upon the nations.

The Humanist ideology regarding civil government is that civil government is itself all-powerful. Remember that humanism wishes to remove God from all reality. Humanism would remove God from civil governments and all their agencies. Remember that Humanism wishes to make mankind the judge of all things. Humanism would make mankind the judge of everything through enforcement by civil governments.

The biblical idea concerning civil governments that Christians must forcefully inject into the political arena during the 21st century is the idea that all three institutions – the family, the church, and the civil government – must be under God's authority and guidance. Each of these institutions must be governed and guided by God's word. While we want a civil government of the people, for the people, and by the people, that government must be under God. Make no mistake about it, this is a major challenge facing Christians in the 21st century. If Christians are able to implement this idea in civil governments throughout the world, then Christian evangelism can soar. On the other hand, if Christians do not seek God's governance and guidance in civil governments, then the church may be severely persecuted, and will likely diminish rapidly and Christian evangelism along with it.

The issue regarding civil governments relates to the extent of their authority. What is it that determines the limitations of civil powers? Is it man? Or is it God? And how is that determined? A look at the question of population control will illustrate the issue. China now has a population problem. Their government planners realized some time ago that because of their growing population, unless they did something quickly, they'd not be able to feed their

next generation. Therefore they instituted a policy of one child per family, and set about to enforce it. Those of us in the western world who believe in the sanctity of human life are horrified that China insists on abortion to maintain its one child per family population policy. We rightly contend that such a policy is contrary to biblical teachings regarding the sanctity of human life. While China's population problem is not now our problem, it will likely be ours by the end of the 21st century when the world population has doubled. Now the question is – do civil governments have a biblical right to try to resolve this and all other major issues in society? Humanists affirm that civil governments must have unlimited authority in resolving social problems. While Christians generally have not really dealt with the issue of the extent of civil authority, I contend that civil governments have limited authority, and that the limit is determined by scripture.

The scriptures define the role and authority of the three divinely sanctioned institutions – the family, the church, and the civil government. In a nutshell, the Bible authorizes the family to provide for and nourish its own members. It authorizes the church to evangelize the world, to edify its members, and to care for the needy. And it authorizes the state to administer justice – which includes maintaining order and peace in society. That's it! Anything else civil governments undertake to do – other than administer justice – they do without biblical authority. The Bible grants authority to the family, and only to the family – not to the church nor to civil authorities, to determine how many children it will have, and how it will provide for them. The China policy of one child per family is biblically wrong not only because it opposes sanctify of human life, but also because it usurps family authority.

If you agree with these principles regarding biblical authority as related to civil governments, then you need to think seriously about the implications of these principles in other areas. If civil governments have no biblical authority other than the administration of justice, then it has no biblical authority for public welfare or public education. Public welfare and public education are forms of socialism and socialism is an entrenched form of humanism within our civil government. The Bible gives authority for personal welfare and education to the family, not to civil governments. My purpose is not to argue these issue just now, merely to state them.

But you ask, what does biblical authority of civil governments have to do with soul-winning in the 21st century? *Just this: soul winning has to do with the whole of life, not just a segment.* It is concerned not only with the individual, but with the family, the church, and civil governments. When civil governments take away a family's authority to provide and nourish its own, as it does through legislation on sanctity of human life and other social issues; as it does through public welfare and public education, etc., then the civil government (not God through scripture) controls society. In these situations civil governments restrict individual freedoms and become hindrances to soul winning.

You may think that the matter of biblical authority in civil governments and all their agencies is too big an issue for Christian involvement. You may think that we'll never change the way things are. Don't be so sure. Some said that Russian Communism was here to stay. But it fell! Some said the Berlin wall would never come down. But it did! Medieval Catholicism didn't want the Bible translated into the language of the people. But it was! Jesus said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted" (Matthew 15:13).

Remember that the concept of the all-powerful state is not more than a few centuries old. Its demise will come!

When I mention these challenges to soul-winning in the 21st century, do not think that I'm pessimistic about the outcome. I'm not. When the Apostle Paul wrote the First Corinthian letter, he said that "a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries" (1 Corinthians 16:9). Paul didn't say, *but* there are many adversaries. Rather he said *and* there are many adversaries. Those adversaries didn't frighten Paul. The fact that there were many adversaries must have seemed to him as wonderful as the fact that a great and effective door had opened to him. As we face these challenges, we need to remember Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians. "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:10-13).

Before we close our visualization session about soul-winning possibilities in the 21st century, *I must mention some character qualities essential to successful evangelism.* Our character qualities must be the same as were those of Christ and his apostles. Jesus declared that he "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). So must we. Ours must be lives of self-sacrifice. "Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me'" (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Evangelism was important enough to Christ, "that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). The Apostle Paul counted all things "loss for Christ." He said he "suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish," in order to gain Christ (Philippians 3:7-8).

The personal question confronting each of us relates not so much to the external and internal factors we may visualize regarding soul-winning in the 21st century, but rather just how much we are willing to get involved. The answer to that question lies in our willingness to deny ourselves.