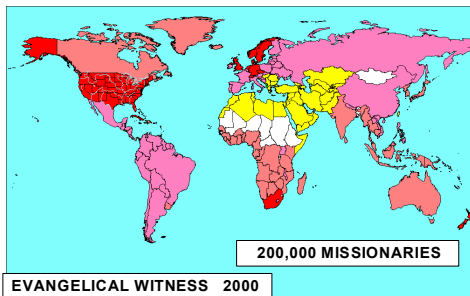
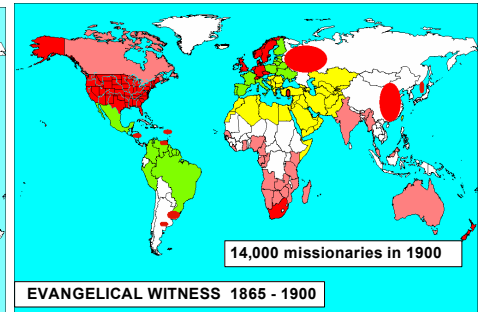
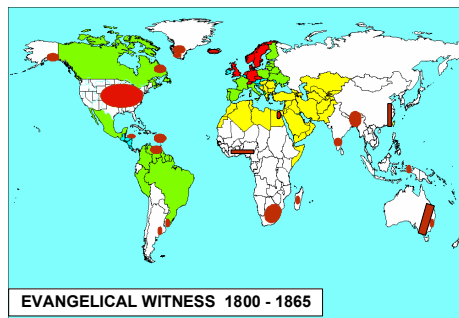
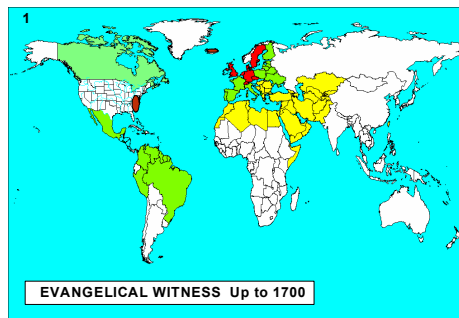


SIGN OF THE TIMES: THE GENTILES

“This gospel will be preached in all the world and then the end will come” Matt. 24:14

The four maps below show through increasing red colouring the development of evangelical witness across the world in the last three centuries. Map 1. indicates how small it was in 1700; indicating it was confined to N. Europe and the American colonies. (The yellow colour shows the extent of Islam, and the green the extent of Roman Catholic influence.) Map 4 shows how it had spread right across the world by 2000. Maps 2, 3, indicate the progress. Nothing remotely like this growth has happened before in Christian history, not even in the wide expansion of Christianity into N. Africa, India and China of the first five centuries. In the light of Matt. 24:14 such an extraordinary global development demands attention and explanation. It implies we are getting close to a fulfilment of the “end time” sign that Jesus announced. It is a massive vindication of his words. It calls for very careful watching of 21st century development, and much prayer.



How has this happened? There are 4 major features that can be seen in this world-wide spread of the gospel, and they are crucial pointers for us as we look for its future completion.

1. PROPHETIC VISION - THE ROOT FACTOR.

When we look at map 1 and see how besieged the early 18thC evangelical witness was we may well ask what gave that witness the dynamic to spread across the world like it did. The answer to that question is simply that prophetic vision was germinating in that small Northern seed bed. The word of God had been released by the Reformation in the 16th century, and this allowed a biblical vision of God’s purposes for the nations to grow. In the 18thC it was ready to bear fruit.

This vision was deeper than just a recognition of the “Great Commission” of Jesus. It was born out of a discovery of the widespread promises in the prophetic scriptures about the vast blessing that was to come to the Gentiles. These promises came alive and were hugely motivating. A representative selection might be: *“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, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he reigns over the nations”* Ps 22:27; *“God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him”* Ps 67:7; *“They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea”* Is. 11:9; *“In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious”* Is 11:10.

The prophets were full of such statements, and it was the inspiration of these that sent out the early missionaries with such extraordinary vigour and purpose. These were the staple texts that were preached at the inaugural meetings of the great new missionary societies that sprang up at the end of the 18th century and the middle of the 19th century. This was a movement essentially of prophetic vision which came alive and was acted on. The depth of the grasp of the idea of all the nations coming to the Lord was astonishing. Nineteenth century missionaries were ready to die on the field with little to show yet none the less spoke with enormous faith that the harvests would undoubtedly come.

It is imperative that we keep alive and foster world vision for Jesus in the life of the churches. Christians must think deeper than their own spiritual consumer needs. We need to regain a new depth of prophetic vision for God’s ultimate purposes. It would not be wrong to say that such prophetic vision was the consequence of illumination by the Spirit through revival among Puritans and their German counterparts. That is one of the reasons why we constantly need revival. Revival is critical in other ways as well.

2. REVIVAL - THE CRUCIAL DYNAMIC

The 18thC was to show how Holy Spirit revival would be the agent of world-wide growth, the dynamic of prophetic vision. Jonathan Edwards in New England was deeply immersed in the prophetic vision for the nations. He himself became involved in widespread revival in 1734 with large growth in the numbers of Christians (The Great Awakening). He also witnessed through his friend and missionary David Brainerd widespread revival among the American Indians. He was convinced such revival was the way forward to growth - God himself at work through the Spirit in awesome power. At the same time Zinzendorf in Moravia learned the same lesson. He, also deeply moved by missionary vision, became involved with revival among religious refugees on his estate at Herrnhut. After three days of intense prayer and confession the Spirit descended on them. The ensuing fellowship became the vehicle of Zinzendorf’s vision, sending missionaries into numerous coastal areas across the world, even as far as the Pacific Islands. The Moravians became the trailblazers of later missionary activity. They were also the catalyst for the revivals under Wesley and Whitefield which increased missionary work later in the 18th century.

This “vision + revival” pattern is equally evident in the 19thC when for example the early missionary societies sprang up owing both their dynamic and manpower to the 2nd Evangelical Revival. Later in the mid-19thC a second wave of societies sprang up fuelled by the great “Prayer Revivals” of 1857-59 in America and Britain. The earlier societies established widespread stations

on sea coasts and the second wave took the witness inland, notably in Africa, India and China. The 19thC, with its huge gains, has been called the “Great Century” of mission. This becomes evident in the fact that whereas the 18thC had finished with some 120 missionaries, the 19thC finished with some 14,000 of whom 6,000 came from Britain and 4,000 from N. America. It was a huge privilege for Britain to spearhead such great endeavour.

It is when we come to the 20thC, however, that the full force of revival as the dynamic of world mission properly comes into focus. This is the century in which converts were numbered in the millions, something that Jonathan Edwards could only dream of in faith (and did!). Map 6 indicates some major 20thC revivals, and they can be seen all over the world. Perhaps the most outstanding was the Pentecostal revival which began in an inauspicious Azusa Street of Los Angeles in 1906. Marked in particular with speaking in tongues, but also characterised by healings and other gifts of the Spirit, it spread rapidly as a great many people went to and from the meetings.. Its most spectacular advance was into the Hispanic areas of America (Mexico, the Caribbean Islands) and then into South America proper. In S. America there were some 2 million converts in 1940, there were 5 million by 1950, 10 million by 1960, 20 million by 1970 and 90 million by 2000, 30 million in Brazil alone. It was very largely a grass roots movement among the poor with working pastors. There was massive evangelism with the likes of Tommy Hicks, Billy Graham, and Annacondia.

It spread all over the world, not least in Britain, and the Pentecostal missionary arm was very strong right from the start. By the end of the century there were some 200 million denominational Pentecostals. In addition the Pentecostal revival had, in the latter part of the century, a huge impact in refreshing other mainline denominations, even the Roman Catholics. By 1985 Catholic Charismatics numbered 7.5 million in 80 countries and by 2000 there were 50 million.

20thC China has been the scene of repeated revivals. There were revivals in 1908 in Manchuria under Jonathan Goforth and in 1927 under Watchman nee and John Sung, but the great outpouring of the Spirit came in the latter half of the century after all mission agencies had been ejected in 1949-50 and when the church numbered some 1.5 million. By the end of the century it numbered an estimated 50-70 million, very probably more.

Why “tongues”? This is important. Given on the day of Pentecost, the “tongues” sign has from the start primarily signified the fact that we are in the time when the gentiles would praise God in all their different languages. No wonder such a sign re-surfaced early in the 20thC when so any millions were to become members of the Kingdom, and no wonder it continues!

There were so many more revivals: the Welsh Revival was international in impact, the East African revival of the mid century had profound repercussions in Europe and elsewhere. The Nepalese revival has taken the church in Nepal from no known Christians in 1960 to over 400,000 by the year 2000 and is still growing. Large revivals in Indonesia, India and Nigeria could be added. Significantly as the 20thC has progressed the numbers of converts have increased. It has been a remarkable fulfilment of God’s words to Zerubbabel, “Not by power, not by might, but by my Spirit, says the Lord”. It was clearly a work of God through Holy Spirit revival.

3. PRAYER - THE SPIRITUAL TRIGGER.

Prayer forms the essential link between vision and dynamic. It is prayer that brings revival into being. At the same time it is revival that sustains prayer. That is the clear lesson of the last three centuries. The Puritans, the Pietists and the Moravians, the evangelical missionary visionaries who set the advance in motion were profoundly prayerful people. The 18thC witnessed many prayer groups at work, a trans-Atlantic prayer network with its origins in Scotland, and a 100 year Moravian prayer gathering to back up its missionaries. Their burden of prayer was clear: that the nations might be visited by outpourings of the Spirit. Every revival throughout those 300 years can be shown to have been preceded by strong, directed and united prayer. The prayer testimony is astonishing. None more so than the prayer focus on China both from within and from the rest of the world during the great Communist clamp down after 1950. The prayer was desperate and prolonged, and the result was the conversion of tens of millions of Chinese. Prayer remains our greatest challenge.

4. THE TRIUMPH OVER EVIL.

The historical background against which this huge world-wide move has been made has been dark and very unpromising. For example in the 18thC Britain and France were in conflict over the control N. America, and the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars later threatened Britain at the very time the first missionary societies were getting under way. The American civil war with its huge loss of life, was the background to the great mid 19thC prayer revival in the U.S.A.

The 20thC, however, provides the clearest examples of the dark background. It was supremely a century of revivals but at the same time by general consent of historians a century of endless human cataclysms. These can easily be listed: World War 1 and the even more lethal world flu pandemic which followed; inter-war economic depression; World War 2 which literally convulsed the whole globe; the demise of Western empires; cold war dislocation and the threat of nuclear war; a world AIDS epidemic; the rise of militant terror; widespread national tyrannies. In all this tens of millions died in warfare or through disease, far more were displaced, and whole nations suffered under vicious oppression.

We might quite justifiably describe such events as judgements as well as cataclysms; humanity was showing itself in an appalling light and was suffering accordingly. The extraordinary fact is, however, that none of this prevented the grace and mercy of God being demonstrated, and unparalleled numbers of people being drawn into the Kingdom of God. Judgement is real and devastating, but it simply does not stop the purposes of God in spreading the gospel throughout the world. Nor will it until the “full number” is gathered in.

**THE FULL FORCE
OF REVIVAL CAME IN
THE TWENTIETH
CENTURY**

