

Current Events

Any vision for missions must be built on the fact that God Himself calls us to a particular world view. This is why the first building block is Scripture. God's mind is revealed in the words of Scripture. Our vision must also be relevant to the world in which we live. We must know how God's Word is integrated into the daily routines of our lives. This is why world events constitute our second building block.

SKILLS FOR BUILDING A WORLD VISION

Building a world vision through current events requires some special skills.

First, we need spiritual glasses; we need to start seeing the world the way God sees it. In Matthew 9:36, we read that Jesus had compassion on the crowds of people because they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." We can safely assume that Jesus' disciples saw the same people with all of their sundry needs. However the difference between Jesus and His disciples is that He saw the people from a spiritual perspective. He saw their spiritual needs, which led to His command to His disciples to pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out workers (Matthew 9:38).

Second, we need “bifocal vision”¹ in order to increase our world vision through our knowledge of current events. Bifocal vision is the ability to see and care for both the world in our immediate vicinity and the bigger picture—the world we do not touch directly. Jesus was seeking to give His disciples bifocal vision when He instructed them to go to “all nations” (Matthew 28:19) and to the “ends of the earth” as well as to their hometown of Jerusalem (Acts 1:8).

Some of us err by limiting our focus to those right here at home. We think, *The needs are so great here. How can I ever think about people in India or Latin America?* Others of us prefer to avoid those near us because it is easier to care for people we do not know. Bifocal vision will help us establish a proper balance, regardless of which focus we tend to swing toward.

Third, we must be open to seeing our own sinfulness and selfishness if we are to increase our world vision through current events. Realizing the plight of people who are persecuted for their faith or seeing the horrors of starvation in the news will not only force us to pray, but will convict us about how incredibly small some of our problems really are. When we see the needs of others through the events we read about in the news, we may be challenged to stop complaining or griping about the hassles in our own lives.

Fourth, we need to remember how God works through world events if we are to build our world vision through them. Remembering how God works will further develop our perspective.

Through the ages, God has mightily used current events to direct the Church. He used historic events in the Roman Empire to direct the Church’s efforts and to foster the propagation of the gospel. Even the persecution mentioned in Acts 8:1 was a God-ordained tool to help the Church fulfill the commission of Acts 1:8.

God has used the oppression of Communism in the People's Republic of China to build a strong, deeply spiritual church there. God used Mao and others to accomplish His long-term purposes. In His providence, God has allowed the church in China to undergo hostile attack, but He has used it all to His glory. James Hudson Taylor III observes what has happened in China: "Though under sustained attack, the Church in China has not just survived, it has actually flourished. From 1 million believers in 1951, when the . . . missionaries made reluctant exodus, the number of Christians in China today may have reached a staggering 50 million."²

An article in *National Geographic* (December 1986) on the tsetse fly of Africa records another of God's sovereign acts in the spread of the gospel. In the article, the author observes that Islam's advancement into Africa was stopped because of the fly's effect on the Muslims and their horses and camels. (The tsetse fly carries sleeping sickness.) So through a disease-inflicting fly, God preserved the people of central and southern Africa for one of the greatest revivals the Church has ever known—a revival that continues to this day.

HOW TO BUILD VISION THROUGH CURRENT EVENTS

How do we build a world vision through the knowledge of current events? We start by learning about what is happening in the world.

While a seminary student, I tried to build my world vision through a missions prayer group I attended. The participants in this group encouraged personal prayer in an assigned prayer room, so one day, I decided to try it out. I was surprised to find a copy of that day's newspaper next to a copy of the Bible and a printed prayer list in the prayer room. All I could think about was how tempted I would be to turn to the sports section or read the comics as I tried to be disciplined in

prayer. To me, the newspaper was a distraction to prayer.

In an effort to find out who had "corrupted" the prayer room by putting a newspaper in it, I discovered that the newspaper was there by the instruction of the missions professor—Dr. J. Christy Wilson—who was one of the school's leading advocates of prayer. When I asked him about the newspaper, he explained, "The Bible tells us what God wants to do in the world; the newspaper tells us where He needs to do it and where we need to be involved through our prayers." From that day on, I have taken a greater interest in local and world news.

When I pick up a copy of *Time* magazine, I look to the world news first. As I do this, God directs my thinking and enlarges my vision. By reading *Time*, for example, I began to change my thinking about America's leadership in world Christianity. I read an article that said, "By the year 2000, Asia, Latin America, and Africa will have 60% of the world's Christians. . . . Protestant churches in the Third World now send out 15,000 missionaries of their own, including some to Europe and the United States."³ This information helped me realize that churches in the Third World play a strategic role in world Christianity.

Feeding our vision for the world through current events means that we are interested in what is happening in the Middle East, that we respond in prayer when a typhoon hits Thailand, that we intercede on behalf of black and white Christians in South Africa, or that we seek to understand the dynamics of rich-versus-poor and capitalist-versus-communist struggles that occur in our world.

Feeding the vision through information on current events also means trying to gain a more Christian perspective on the news. This is why a magazine like *World Christian*⁴ is so helpful. It adds God's perspective to what the secular media reports without interpreting the values or the chal-

lenges related to the issues.

Feeding our world vision does not mean that we look only to the newspaper or television news. It also means that we fully open our eyes to the possibilities and needs around us. When Jesus told His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful," (Matthew 9:37), He was telling them to open their eyes. They could see people, but He also wanted them to see their spiritual potential and needs.

We, too, need to open our eyes. The lost are all around us, so a world vision should enable us to see the folks to whom Jesus is calling us. Opening our eyes may mean noticing international influences in our own communities. While driving through Boston, for instance, I saw a Moslem mosque. In my hometown of Lexington, Massachusetts, I see an incredibly large Chinese population and an increasing Indian population. If my eyes are open, my sense of world vision can increase.

We also need to open our eyes to the vast reservoir of knowledge at our disposal. Satellite communication, telephones, and the printed page have made information about our world available in ways Christians of the past never experienced.

In our country we have no excuse for a lack of knowledge of world events. We have no reason for a narrow perspective or a shallow world vision. A mountain of knowledge is available to us that we must not take for granted or ignore.

I became much more aware of all that God has given us with respect to knowledge about our world when I visited a missionary friend in western Zambia. At noon, my friend rushed into his house to tune in the "Voice of South Africa" news on his shortwave radio. For ten minutes, he listened to a static-filled broadcast of news related to events in southern Africa. The focus was very limited, the news was far from thorough, but it was that missionary's only daily touch with

the outside world. He has plenty of reasons not to know about world events, but we—who have access to news broadcasts from three networks, cable television, newspapers, and weekly news magazines—have no excuse.

WAYS TO RESPOND TO A WORLD VISION

Sometimes it is easier to stay uninformed, isn't it? The mountain of knowledge available to us can seem so steep that we do not even want to start the climb. We may look at the information available to us and respond in frustration, "There is simply too much out there to try to know about!" We need to make wise choices in response to what we learn so we can grow in our world vision without being overwhelmed by the task. Three choices seem mandatory if we are to grow in this respect.

First, we must respond in prayer. Prayer is the topic of the next building block, but we need to mention it briefly here. Prayer must be our first response to what we learn about world events because, more often than not, we are powerless to respond to world needs in any other way.

Our prayer in response to worldwide knowledge may mean active, consistent intercession for one particular geographic location or one people. It may also mean the lofting of "prayer arrows" in response to needs we hear about. A typhoon, earthquake, terrorist attack, or revolution may not be the topic of my daily prayers, but there is no reason not to respond by a single prayer at the moment I hear about a need. Perhaps my prayer will be a short, "Lord, have mercy." Perhaps I will pray for the church or Christian witness in that country. The one-time "prayer arrow" directed upward to our heavenly Father serves to remind us of *who* is in charge.

Second, we must keep from growing calloused. It is easy to hear about disasters or deaths on the news without feeling

a twinge of sorrow, much less compassion for those who are suffering. Growing as world Christians, however, means that we are willing to open ourselves up to God's Spirit and ask Him to help us know how to respond to what we learn about. None of us has the emotional or spiritual capacity to respond to every need we hear about, but we must not compensate for that inability by taking on an apathetic, "who cares?" attitude.

There is another realm in which we need to be softened to the Lord's influence as we learn about world news. We must not fall prey to the propaganda effect of all news reporting. When we hear a story—especially one about conflict between people, ideologies, or countries—the reporter inevitably takes sides. As Christians, we must not take sides when we approach the Lord in prayer. If we take sides, we can become hardened by hate and cannot pray for our enemies as we are commanded to do. The ayatollah, communist leaders, revolutionaries, Marxists, and anti-Christian secularists all need the Lord. If we forget that, our world view will be hampered by our biases.

Third, we must seek a manageable impact. Learning about world events can overwhelm and depress us to the point of inaction if we do not carefully focus our efforts. We must pray, entrusting all the needs we know about to the One who is all-powerful. We can also act in a faithful way, in spite of our limitations.

We may not be able to affect conflicts that we hear about regarding Libya, but there might be a Muslim student in our community whom we can invite to our home. We may not be able to stop world hunger, but we can fast for a day and send the money we would have spent on food to a hunger relief agency. (See Isaiah 58:7 on the relationship of fasting to the relief of the poor.)

We might respond to the information we accumulate by learning about a certain country or learning a foreign lan-

guage. We cannot change the world single-handedly, but we can make a difference through our prayers and efforts.

World Vision, a hunger-relief organization, publishes a poster that reflects our need for a manageable impact. In one corner, there is a picture of a mass of people with the question, "How do you help one billion hungry people?" In the lower corner, there is a picture of a wide-eyed child holding his empty food bowl with the answer, "One at a time."

We increase our world vision by learning about what is happening in the world around us. We put our vision into practice by acting in response to what we have learned.

A CASE STUDY FOR BUILDING A WORLD VISION

One of the greatest challenges facing the Church in the days ahead is how to respond to urbanization. The world's population, especially in the developing world, is dramatically increasing—a fact we might not be aware of here in the United States.

David Bryant briefly outlines the impact of urbanization in the Third World:

In 1983, 4.7 billion people inhabited the earth. By 1990, that number will rise to 5.3 billion; by the middle of the next century, we will have 9 billion inhabitants. Most of that growth will take place in the less developed world. Today, 10 out of every 11 babies born are born in the Third World. With most of the unreached currently in Africa and Asia, what will it mean to have 75% of our planet's population residing there within two decades?⁵

Bryant asks a good question, especially since most of this growth will be in cities. He goes on to say, "It's a fact that

where the cities go, the nations go, and so goes the world. So, unless Christians successfully confront the major urban problems of our day, we will soon face unfathomable difficulties in preaching the gospel, and we will be up against cultural and moral forces undreamed of today.”⁶

To add to our knowledge of this current phenomenon, let’s consider some statistics from David Barrett’s research:

- In 1986, the world’s five largest cities were Tokyo/Yokohama (21.8 million), Mexico City (18.4 million), New York (18.3 million), Shanghai (17.5 million), and Sao Paulo (15 million).

- In 1987, 400 million Third World country dwellers streamed into cities.

- By 1999, Mexico City will be the world’s most polluted city, with 6 million cars and a population growth rate of 1.1 million people per year.

- By 2000, the world’s five largest cities are predicted to be Mexico City (27.6 million), Shanghai (25.9 million), Tokyo/Yokohama (23.8 million), Beijing (22.8 million), and Sao Paulo (21.5 million).

- By 2050, the world’s five largest cities are predicted to be Shanghai (42.1 million), Mexico City (41.5 million), Beijing (36.9 million), Bombay (35 million), and Calcutta (34.4 million). Four of these five cities are presently considered to be nonChristian.

- By 2050, there will be eighty cities that Barrett calls “urban super giants”—cities with more than 10 million people.

- By the year 2400, the world is predicted to be 95 percent urbanized.⁷

Are you overwhelmed? Obviously some of these statistical predictions have a wide margin of error, but the general consensus is clear: urbanization is perhaps the greatest “current event” challenge of our time. With this challenge before

us, how can we go about building a realistic world vision? I'd like you to consider the following suggestions as an example of how to respond to world events in a vision-building endeavor:

1. Choose one city as your focus. Pray for that city; learn all you can about it; start a file on it, collecting any articles you read about that city.

2. Contact a Christian ministry working in that city (if there is one), and become more familiar with that mission's work.

3. If there is no direct work in that city, try to find out which mission agencies broadcast Christian radio programs into the city.

4. Pray for and seek out an opportunity to meet someone, perhaps an international student, from that city.

5. Find out the names of political leaders in that country and city and pray for them by name.

6. Seek to understand more about urbanization and why it is happening. Read news articles about the trend toward urbanization.

7. If you can contact a Christian church or ministry in that city (or one that works indirectly to reach that city), find out about one individual for whom you can pray.

8. Consider financial involvement in a ministry or church related to that city. (For more information on this, see building block seven.)

9. Encourage others in your Christian fellowship to pray with you for that city. (This topic is covered in building block six.)

10. Pray, plan, and save so that you might be able to visit that city in the future. (For more information, see building block five.)

When we confront current events and the awesome magnitude of the world, we run the risk of shrinking away and

retreating to our safe, little, manageable worlds. But building a world vision means that we learn to think small in response to the big picture we learn about. We can do our part, even if it seems insignificant, because we know that God's perspective includes His concern for every sparrow that falls to the ground (Matthew 10:29).

Malcolm Muggeridge expressed the Christian perspective succinctly. He says, "Christianity is not a statistical view of life. That there should be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over all the hosts of the just, is an anti-statistical proposition."⁸

God sees our responses to the world, no matter how small they may seem. He will work through our compassionate responses to the world around us to change it. When we keep this thought in mind, our world visions will grow!

NOTES:

1. The Association of Church Missions Committees (P.O. Box APMC, Wheaton, Illinois 60189) publishes a world Christian discipleship series entitled *Bi-focals* that concentrates on the dual growth necessary for healthy discipleship.
2. From the introduction of David Adeney, *China: The Church's Long March* (Ventura, California: Regal, 1985), page 9.
3. *Time*, December 27, 1982.
4. *World Christian* magazine is published bimonthly by World Christian, Inc., P.O. Box 5199, Chatsworth, California 91313.
5. David Bryant, *With Concerts of Prayer* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1984), page 108.
6. Bryant, page 109.
7. David B. Barrett, *World-Class Cities and World Evangelization* (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope, 1986), pages 45-47.
8. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), page 28.