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Propelled by Hope: The Story of the Perspectives Movement
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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Cover and Interior Designer: Mike Riester
Cover image by Flatiron from freepik.com.

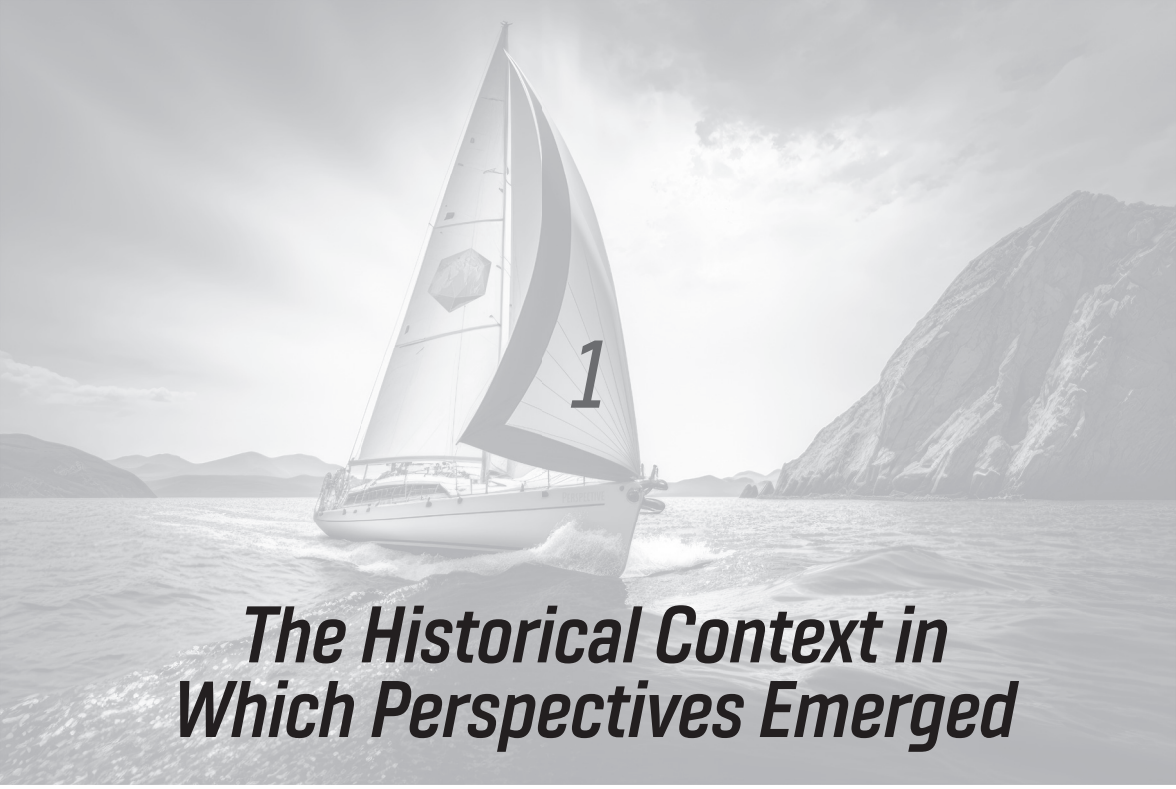
ISBNs: 978-1-64508-464-8 (paperback)
978-1-64508-466-2 (epub)

Printed Worldwide

Outreach 05272026

Library of Congress Control Number:
2024930159

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The Historical Context in Which Perspectives Emerged

"The day of the missionary is over. We have completed the missionary task; all that remains is local evangelism by the national church."

Or so went the thinking of much of the Christian church as the 1960s came to a close. The celebrated fact of the time was the recognition of the "younger churches"—those planted by earlier mission efforts—on every continent and in almost every country. This led many to believe that Christ's Great Commission was nearly fulfilled and all that remained was a mop-up job to be done by the national churches within each country.[1] Furthering this popular belief was a call by some in the "younger churches of the Third World," as they were then called, for a moratorium on missions.[2]

Global Realignments

What occasioned this sentiment that the missionary vocation was no longer welcome or appropriate? A principal answer lies in one of the most massive global political realignments in history. In his remarkable book, *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years, 1945–1969*, missiologist Ralph Winter recounts how rapidly the world shifted from a colonial-dominated landscape to a

1 McGavran, "Crucial Issues in Missions," 169–70.

2 Howard, "A Moratorium on Missions?"

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vast array of newly independent nations. By the cessation of World War II in 1945, Europeans had virtual control over 99.5 percent of the non-Western world. In an astonishingly brief twenty-five-year period, Western nations had lost control over all but 5 percent of the non-Western population of the world. In a tide of rising nationalism, missionary presence was often equated with colonial rule; therefore, in the minds of many in both the non-West and the West, as one form of Western dominance was shed, so should the other.

Such rapid change brought with it unrest, resulting in regional conflicts. Many newly independent nations turned to authoritarian governments, often embracing Marxism and coming under the shadow of the Soviet Union. The long war in Vietnam raged as America sought unsuccessfully to push back the communist forces in Southeast Asia. Coming on the heels of the recent harsh repressions of Chairman Mao in China, there was a sense that communism was winning the Cold War.[3]

Not only did communism seem to be gaining ground around the world, but Christianity seemed to be losing ground in the West. In American society the Vietnam War fed the youth revolution of the 1960s, fostering anger and disillusionment with "the establishment." Racial injustice and segregation in church and society betrayed the truth of the gospel. American Christians watched hopelessly as a whole generation dropped out into an alternative culture of drugs, sex, and rock and roll. David Howard, InterVarsity director of the Urbana student mission conventions in the early 1970s commented that

> the student world of the 1960s was marked by activism, violent upheavals, and negative attitudes. The anti-government, anti-establishment, anti-family, anti-church attitudes were also expressed in anti-mission reactions. Seldom have missions been looked upon with less favor by students than during that decade.[4]

Societal Trends

Secularism replaced the Judeo-Christian worldview in American media, government, and educational systems. What could not be proved by science was considered a private belief system and little by little was extracted from the public square. Major denominations and seminaries removed belief in the supernatural, including the resurrection of Jesus, from their

3 Crawley, *World Christianity*, 10–12.

4 Howard, "Road to Urbana and Beyond."

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interpretation of Scripture, demythologizing the Bible into something "modern man" can accept. Salvation takes on a whole new meaning when the immortal soul is dismissed. Indeed, the very meaning of salvation was the theme of the World Council of Churches' Bangkok assembly in 1973. They defined salvation exclusively in this-worldly terms as a struggle for economic justice and human dignity against exploitation and oppression, solidarity with the marginalized poor, and hope against despair.[5] The purpose and goal of mission accordingly turns upon the definition of salvation. Simultaneously, salvation in Catholic circles began to be equated with socio-political liberation. Arising out of Latin America and emerging from the reforms of Vatican II (1962–65), liberation theology focused the mission efforts of the church on working for political and economic liberation for the oppressed and marginalized masses, even if it meant revolution. Liberation theology overflowed its geographical and ecclesiastical boundaries, becoming both a popular and controversial theological approach to missions in the 1970s.[6]

Alongside secularism, an equally damaging societal trend in the early seventies was the rising tide of religious pluralism (understood in its original sense that all religions contain equal truth and validity). The world was shrinking due to astounding advances in technology. Familiarity with those of other religions made it harder to conceive of an acquaintance going to hell for holding a non-Christian belief system. The plurality of religions and the outworking of secularism produced a relativism of truth.

Religious pluralism and relativism obviously have disastrous consequences for missions and evangelism. Why proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to others if it is not ultimate truth and they are "saved" through their own religion anyway?

Negative View of Missions

The combination of these and other factors in the 1960s—a collective guilty conscience over colonialism, rapid moral degeneration, alluring materialism, the struggle for racial equality, shocking political assassinations—permeated the American church at the turn of the decade with a spirit of negativism and despair. With the nightly news showing horrible footage from Vietnam, popular books making dire predictions about global overpopulation, reports on the seriousness of the drug problem in public schools, the ubiquitous fear of communism, and the cataclysmic threat of the arms race, the entire country was in a funk.

5 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 396–97.

6 Bosch, 432–42.

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Ralph Winter reflects on those days:

> I wrote a book in 1969 called *The Twenty-Five Unbelievable Years*. The title of every chapter was negative on the grounds that I did not think it would arouse interest if it took an optimistic approach. That is how bad the negativism was in popular Christian culture at the time. That's why McGavran's famous lecture, "The Sunrise [not the sunset] of Missions," was so shocking to so many people.[7]

A common question was, Is there a future for the missionary enterprise? The seminaries of liberal denominations were terminating their mission programs.[8] The deeper issue for liberal denominations was a questioning of the entire theological basis for mission. Liberal theology and religious pluralism had shifted much of the church away from the conviction of the Christian responsibility to evangelize.

Another momentous issue concerned the tension between the mission and the "younger churches." The hesitation and delay in transferring authority and responsibility from the missionary to national church leaders was causing great consternation on the part of many in the newly independent countries. Some in Africa were calling for a complete withdrawal of all European and American missionaries.[9]

At the close of the 1960s the view of missions among evangelical students was similarly grim. Students on Christian-college campuses seemed to have the most negative view of all! To get a clear picture, I will quote at length from a 1970 article in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. As I read this article, I was struck by how well it described my own view of missions as a student in the 1970s … and the view I continued to hold until I took the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* course in 1989. The authors of this article catalogue the contemporary student impressions of missions.

> *Missions as "out of it."* Many students consider missions not much more than a dead cause because missions seem so irrelevant to the issues and problems of the day. … Students still accuse *missionaries of being drab*. In emphasizing devotion to God and sacrifice for His work, many evangelical missionaries seem to deny certain essential aspects of personality and beauty. … *Missions as traditional and inflexible*. Students fear that missions strategy and policies have not changed in the last twenty years. Frequently the terminology they hear from the missionary on

7 Ralph D. Winter, interview by author, June 20, 2005, audio tape recording.

8 Kane, "Changes in Missiological Studies."

9 Crawley, *World Christianity*, 83.

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> the campus is very much the same that they heard as children; this gives rise to the suspicion that perhaps the whole enterprise is static and unimaginative. … *Missions as non-personal*. Youth are desperately scared that they might get involved in an organization where they are just another cog, going around in circles like the next one! … *Missions as unsuccessful*. … Because students question the validity of the institutional church here at home, they also question the validity of exporting institutional churches overseas. They also question the need for North American missionaries abroad when there is a national church in existence among all groups. They have nagging suspicions that missionaries have exported more Americanism than Christianity. … *The whole concept of the missionary has become "foreign" to the students*. They see the missionary as having a totally different life orientation and style. *They can hardly imagine themselves in a similar role; far be it from them!*[10]

This, then, is the negative environment preceding the 1974 launch of the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* course. However, to borrow a phrase from a popular song of the decade, a change was "blowin' in the wind."[11]

A New Spiritual Vitality

Emerging from the turbulent 60s, the "Jesus Movement" erupted on the national youth scene. Beginning on the West Coast, hippies turned from drugs to Jesus and found in him the love, freedom, and purpose for which they were searching. Christianity began to take on a radically different appearance as they melded their music and youth culture with their newfound faith. The radical activism that ignited protests in the 60s now found expression in bold and passionate witness to their faith.

EXPLO '72, sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ, attracted an unprecedented eighty thousand students, capturing the attention of national media. The magnitude of the event signaled a shifting in the youth culture. It was obvious that the Holy Spirit was at work among American youth.

This change was noticed at the Urbana '70 Student Missions Conference, which recorded an upsurge in attendance. Although still not enamored with the institutional church, "This generation of students," observed James Reapsome, was "looking for and finding spiritual vitality centered around the person of Jesus Christ."[12]

10 Schwas and Melick, "How to Close the Gap between Students and Missionaries," italics mine.

11 From the song, *Blowin' in the Wind*, written by Bob Dylan in 1962 and released in 1963.

12 Reapsome, "Urbana '70."

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