

Sermon Title: When the Ends of the Earth Come Home

Sermon Scripture: [Acts 1:8](#) and [Proverbs 1:5](#)

Introduction:

In June 1925, Southern Baptists launched the Cooperative Program to take the Good News of Jesus Christ to every tribe, nation, and tongue in the world. This ingenious initiative harnessed the evangelistic and missionary zeal of independent Baptist churches so that, within just a few years, Southern Baptists became the most powerful missionary force in the world, the go-to guys for carrying out the Great Commission. Our missionary zeal for the nations combined with intense evangelism and church-planting efforts in America resulted in unprecedented growth after World War II. Everywhere you looked in the world, you could find Southern Baptists. Some of us even made it to the ends of the earth, where we told people about the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. People—Christian and non-Christian alike—*learned from us* about a better way to live and they joined us in droves to follow Christ. Today, some 43,000 SBC churches still maintain *independence* through their local polity, and at the same time practice the *interdependence* that comes from shared resources and a global strategy.

The world has changed since 1925. Eighty-to eighty-five percent of North American churches are plateaued or declining. In the decade between 1990 and 2000, the number of evangelical Christians living in the Dallas Fort Worth Metroplex actually *declined by 7%*, while the total population *increased by 29%*! By the year 2010, there will be more people living in the Metroplex unclaimed by any religion than there are people of faith—any faith! Using the same methods we relied on in the 1950s and 1960s, it will take more than 1200 years and \$70 billion to complete the task of evangelizing just Dallas/Fort Worth. We have neither the time nor money for business as usual in Dallas/Forth Worth. The statistics are similar for cities like Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles.¹

¹Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Statistics compiled from *The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Feb. 2008*.

While Christianity is declining in North America, it is exploding at the ends of the earth. In places like Cuba, Guatemala, China, India, parts of Africa and yes, even in the Middle East, the Kingdom of God is advancing. At the ends of the earth, strong vibrant New Testament churches employ evangelistic strategies that frequently result in unstoppable church planting movements. Because of their own vision for the Great Commission these churches are starting to send missionaries to North America. The child is becoming the parent. North America is becoming “the ends of the earth” that the rest of the world once was. The ends of the earth have come home.

How did this happen? A major cause is that the missionary efforts of Southern Baptists and others during the 20th century were so highly effective. According to some estimates,

There has been a 40-fold increase in the size of the church in Africa in the last 100 years. The church in China grew from 5 million in 1949 to an estimated 45-60 million in 2005. In 1900 there were approximately 250,000 evangelicals in all of Latin America, but by the year 2000 the estimated number was somewhere over 60 million.²

The Bible says, “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance. (Proverbs 1:5, NIV)” In our current context, we have much to learn. If we are wise, we will listen to what is happening in North America. We will listen to what God is doing in the rest of the world and we will allow what we learn to guide us as we follow Christ to the ends of the earth. What have we learned as the ends of the earth have come home?

I. What We’ve Learned About North American Christianity

- A. The culture war between the American and Biblical worldviews is over, and the American worldview has won. While more than 85% of Americans claim to be Christians, George Barna reports, “There is now no statistical difference in

<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/743/united-states-religion>

² *The Upside Down World: A Shift in Global Missions*, by Frank Sindler. In *Invision, Newsletter of Mission to the World*, April 2006. Online version:

http://www.mtw.org/home/site/templates/mtw_invision.asp?resolutionfile=templatespath%7Cmtw_invision.asp&ar_ea_2=public/Resources/Invision/2006/04/UpsideDown

worldview, values and behaviors of self-identified born-again Christians vs. non-believers.”³ The Scriptures speak to the increasing prevalence of worldly thinking influencing believers:

- [1 John 4:5](#)
- [2 Timothy 3:2-5](#)

B. Because of the divorce of justification from sanctification, self-identified born-again Christians see salvation and discipleship as different issues. Many Christians will rationalize that because they made a “decision” for Christ, the decision of obedience to Christ is also optional. This manner of thinking is in direct opposition with biblical teaching, which establishes a clear link between belief in Christ with obedience to Christ:

- [Matthew 7:21-23](#)
- [James 1:22-23; 2:17-18](#)
- [Luke 6:46](#)

C. In most American churches, the term “discipleship” refers to dissemination of spiritual information, not to life transformation. Generic discipleship programs lead people merely to agree with Christ in principle, not to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. Spiritual reproduction has been abandoned by all but a few spiritual “superstars.” However, the Bible clearly exhorts all followers of Christ to enter a discipleship process of whole-life spiritual transformation:

- [Matthew 16:24-25](#)
- [2 Peter 1:3-11](#)
- [2 Timothy 2:2](#)

D. Global missions and evangelism is declining among Western evangelicals, with North America becoming more of a missionary-receiving continent than a

³ The Barna Group. *Beliefs: General Religious*. <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=2>

missionary-sending continent. Barna research states, “It is estimated that the number of Protestant missionaries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America in 2000 was about 170,000, accounting for more than 70 percent of world’s Protestant missionaries. More conservative estimates put the numbers at 101,000 in the majority world and 63,000 Western missionaries working cross culturally. Nonetheless, the majority world’s missions bases are expanding at a significant rate, while Western missions-sending has stagnated or, by some estimates, has declined by five percent over the last 20 years.”⁴

- E. America is both post-Christian and post-literate. Meanwhile, the Church is stuck in a communications paradigm that is highly literate. According to statistics published by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy Skills, 69 of the nation’s largest cities have fifty percent or more of their populations either illiterate or functionally illiterate. Topping the list is East St. Louis, where 92% of the population cannot read or write well enough to fill out a job application.⁵

What we’ve learned from North American Christianity is discouraging. Not only are we not winning the world to Christ, we are actually losing ground. However, because the ends of the earth have come home, we can regain our former effectiveness if we are willing to learn.

II. What We’ve Learned from Global Christianity

- A. We have learned that God is blessing evangelistic efforts that focus on evangelizing/discipling the world’s unreached ethnolinguistic people groups. These efforts begin with serious people group research at the worldview level and include communicating in the heart languages of the world’s people groups. This means that people are taught what it means to follow Christ before being asked for a decision. Cultural and worldview barriers are addressed as priority issues in discipleship.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Statistics compiled in the National Assessment of Adult Literacy Skills (NAALS) Report, 2003.
<http://nces.ed.gov/naal/reading.asp>

Never in the history of America has ethnic, heart language, worldview sensitivity been so appropriate and required than as it is today.⁶

B. God is blessing efforts that focus on discipleship, not decisions. Discipleship is defined as:

- Believing What Jesus believed – doctrine
- Living as Jesus Lived – behavior
- Loving as Jesus Loved – relationships
- Serving as Jesus served – ministry
- Leading as Jesus led – leadership

C. God is blessing efforts that develop only the minimum “structures” needed to spread the gospel and transform lives. By structures, we mean:

- Buildings—House Churches are common. Multi-million dollar facilities are not.
- Programs—Simple, Bible-based programs designed to spread the gospel are the norm. Crowd-building programs are not.
- Christian Education—Local, church based education is common. Institutional education is not.

D. God is blessing efforts that are indigenous to the unreached cultures and communicated in the heart language of the people.

Illustration: For years, missionaries tried to evangelize the K’ekchi people of Guatemala in Spanish-their “trade language”- with limited success. When missionaries switched over to their heart language-K’ekchi- the gospel exploded, resulting in a church planting movement.

E. The world’s unreached people groups are moving to North America in unprecedented numbers.

⁶ Ibid.

- The setting in America today better fits the Great Commission's "panta ta ethne" mandate of Christ than any other era in American history. It seems that God has brought the "uttermost" to our individual "Jerusalems."⁷
- Many people groups are moving into the United States and remaining in isolated communities.⁸

Conclusion:

The world continues to change, but the Lord's Great Commission does not. It commands us to make disciples of all of the world's people groups wherever we find them. In the past, Southern Baptists were *experts* who taught people at the ends of the earth how to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Today, Southern Baptists need to become learners because the ends of the earth have come home.

⁷ *History of Immigration in the USA & Its Implications*, by Jim Slack. Power Point Presentation, 2007.

⁸ *ibid.*