

The Expansion of Our Shrinking Globe

by James W. Skillen

The cliché about our shrinking world has been around for a long time. Without a doubt, various technologies have brought everyone on earth closer together. Faster planes and ships, direct-dial phones, electronic bank transfers, radio and television have all contributed to a proximity of people and an immediacy of communication never before possible.

But as the world's distances seem to shrink, its expansion on other fronts steams full speed ahead. Human populations multiply; the production and concentration of wealth increases; armaments spiral upwards both in power and in numbers; waste material—some of it toxic—piles up faster than dump sites can accommodate it; peoples and nations reach out for more resources, more land, more independence.

The American Perspective

Compared to other people on earth, Americans have been both faster and slower to understand the world's simultaneous shrinkage and expansion. Following World War II, the United States stepped into positions of economic, political and military influence left vacant by crumbling European empires. It didn't hurt that the British had already made English the major world language. Significantly, the U.S. already led the world in technological innovation, and its industrial capacity had not been destroyed by the war. Much of earth's shrinkage and expansion during the past 50 years is "American-made."

At the same time, the very advantage of U.S. leadership has kept Americans in the odd position of being slow to grasp the significance of many of these developments. Everyone else has to learn English; we remain unable to enter very deeply into the language, thinking

and culture of others. Everyone else has to try to keep up with or outpace the Americans. We often remain blind to the achievements and failures of others until they hit us as gigantic surprises—the Japanese economic miracle, the Middle East oil crises or mass hunger among the poorest of the world's poor.

The Christian Perspective

For American Christians, this slowness to understand the world poses special challenges. For more than a century, American missionaries have been among the world's leaders in reaching out to the farthest corners of the globe. American Christians led or followed trade and military missions to China, parts of Indochina and Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe. American Christians have been looking for, and contributing to, the evangelization of the world for decades.

But our Christian mission work has not always been conducted with eyes fully open to the economic, political, legal, military and ecological dimensions of life in societies around the world. We were slow to recognize the anti-Western motive behind much of Islam's revival from

Northern Africa to Indonesia and the Philippines. We have not readily understood the spirit of antagonism toward us that exists throughout much of Latin America. Our love of America and desire to protect it from communism and economic competition have often overwhelmed what should be our chief love of God and His worldwide Church. When Christianity begins to expand in parts of the world where Americans are not the leaders, we do not always take notice.

With each passing year, however, fewer excuses exist for American Christians to remain ignorant of the meaning of our rapidly expanding and shrinking globe. Communication technologies put us in immediate touch with people almost everywhere. The interdependence of peoples is a growing experience, not just a story to read about. Via television, people throughout the world lived through the events in Tiananmen Square, Berlin and Prague in 1989. Those who have access to good newspapers know almost as much (perhaps more) about what is happening in the Soviet Union as Gorbachev does. If we don't yet understand the undercurrents of

For further reading:

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

Paul Marshall, *Thine is the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

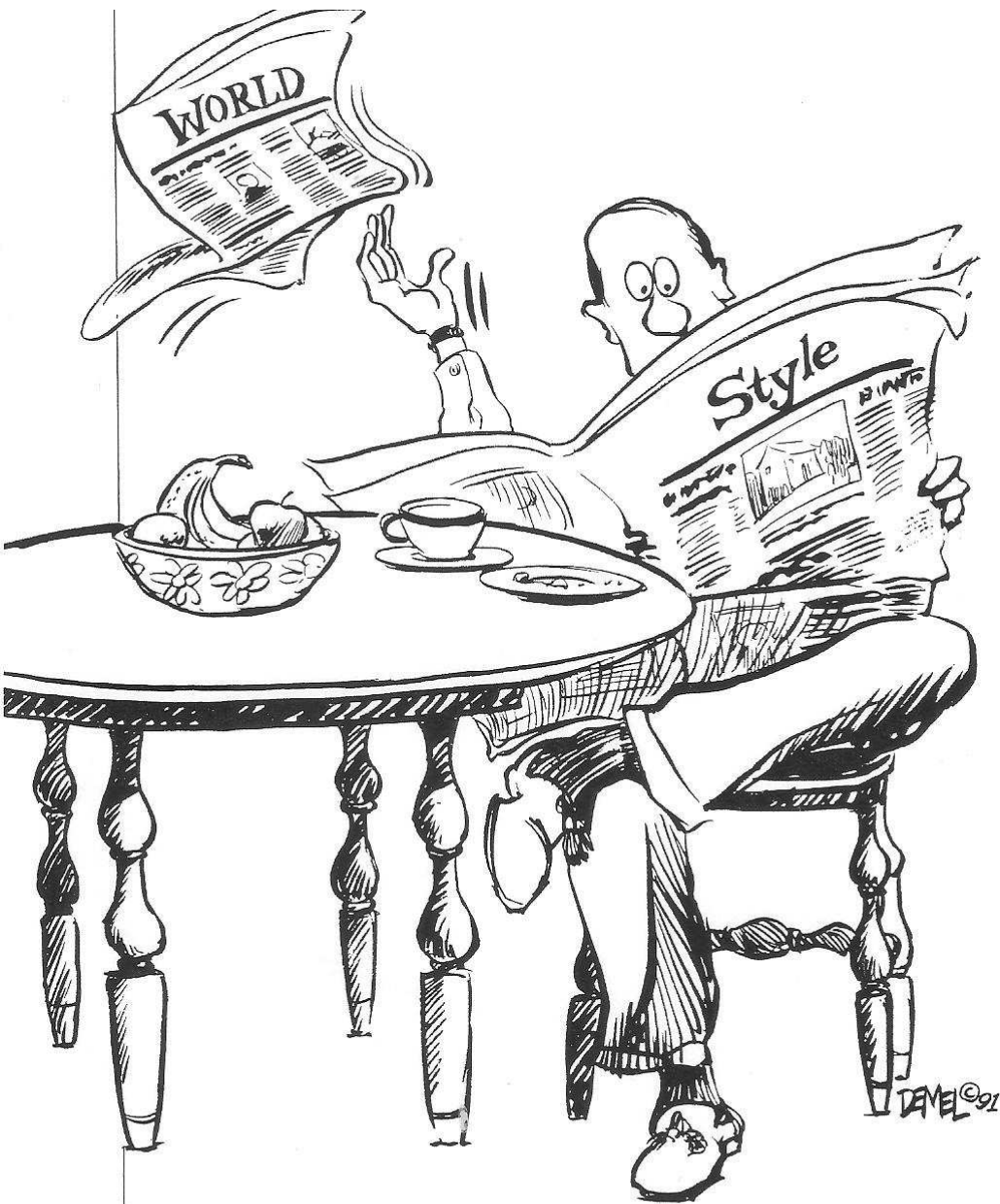
James W. Skillen, *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

Waldron Scott, *Bring Forth Justice: A Contemporary Perspective on Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, revised and expanded edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

Paul Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Max L. Stackhouse, *Creeks, Society, and Human Rights: A Study in Three Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).



Those of us who have the benefits of relatively stable legal systems, political orders and economic expansion do indeed have something to offer people who know only political corruption, legalized absolutism and systemic poverty. But we in America also have much to learn from Christians in other parts of the world who seek a holistic view of life—where religion is important to every dimension of life and not just on Sundays or in the private recesses of personal piety. What the world does not need today is more American secularism, materialism and “me-first-ism.” American Christians should be the sharpest critics of our own anti-Christian deformities, but often we are not. We have much to learn from Christians in other parts of the world.

Above all, American Christians must act with renewed conviction that the good news of God’s redemption in Jesus Christ comes to the whole world. The world does not need American exports; it needs the Gospel. Americans do not need greater trade advantages or a more secure oil supply; we need to hear God’s powerful word of judgment and forgiveness that can turn people onto new paths of justice, stewardship, mercy and Christian solidarity throughout the world.

God’s Kingdom Expands

God’s Kingdom is coming not through American leadership anymore than it is coming through Israeli leadership. It is coming by way of the Holy Spirit’s work in the lives of people in every nation, in every corner of the globe. God is shrinking the world so we can see more clearly its simple unity under His dominion; He claims it all.

He continues to expand the globe to show us how much—from the first day of creation—He has in-

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life in the Middle East, or the pressures driving Japan’s economic growth, or the agonies of underdevelopment among the poor throughout much of Africa and Latin America, it is only because we have not looked hard enough or explored deeply enough beyond the edge of our narrow American preoccupations.

Unprecedented Opportunities

Right now American Christians face tremendous opportunities both to learn and to give of themselves on a global scale, if we will do both in equal measure and allow humility to guide us. With the crisis of legal,

political and economic systems both in Eastern Europe and in parts of the Third World, we have an unprecedented opportunity to meet with fellow Christians in those countries to learn what has gone wrong and to encourage reconstruction. Many of those social structures are rooted in false ideologies, just as much as our American society is based on the utterly secularistic myth about human progress and ever-increasing prosperity. If Christians from around the world will come together to seek Christ’s wisdom for their lives, they will be able to see more clearly both the blessings and the curses of our present patterns of life.

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vested in its countless peoples, thousands of languages, billions of creative talents and the unfathomable network of human interchanges. All of this He claims for the Lordship of His Son, Jesus, the Christ.

In this centennial year of Pope Leo XIII's famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum* that sparked Catholic political and economic reform efforts in Europe, and in this bicentennial year marking the ratification of America's Bill of Rights, it is time to reconsider how far such documents go in either representing or falling short of genuine Christian social progress. But the global shrinkage and expansion of legal and political networks do not exist in a vacuum. The deepest question concerns the power of Christian faith to guide believers in all areas of life as they face the expansion of secularism and neo-paganism in the West, collapsing socialism in much of the East, revitalized Islam throughout the world and countless idolatries everywhere. Now is the time, says the writer to the Hebrews, to "let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:24-25). ■

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To learn more about Christianity and international issues, attend the conference *Christianity & Democracy: Past Contributions and Future Challenges*. See page 24 for details.