

part one

global changes demand a better church

what about the world we live in?

from a village church to a global village

The future has a way of arriving unannounced.

—GEORGE WILL

NOT SINCE THE GREAT FLOOD of Noah's day has the world changed so rapidly as in the past twenty years. Population has increased at an exponential rate. Advances in technology have changed the very way we relate to one another. During the student revolt in Tiananmen Square, footage of a single man stopping a line of tanks symbolized the resistance. During the demonstrations in Freedom Square in Tehran in 2009, there was not one photo but thousands of posts on Twitter, Facebook pictures, and cell phone camera footage instantly sent all over the world. The entire world mourned as it watched a young woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, dying in the streets from a bullet wound. The world has become a smaller place, with immediate connection to anybody at anytime.

What would you think if someone told you only fifteen years ago that your car would speak to you and tell you when and where to turn? What would you have said five years ago if I told you that I'd just "tweeted" you? I wonder what development will

come next year that will alter our vocabulary and our way of relating to one another.

Perhaps the institution most notoriously slow to change is the church. We are famous for resisting change, but we cannot afford to resist any longer. Our core belief in the Gospel itself and the consequent sanctification of believers is all about change, so we should be more welcoming of it. In the light of our Gospel truth and the constantly changing world, we simply must choose to make changes to take advantage of current global opportunities. We have not seen the same opportunities for the Gospel since perhaps the first century.

My mentor, Thom Wolf, often points out that the twenty-first century is quickly becoming the sister century to the first century.¹ There are remarkable similarities between them. In this chapter, I list six corresponding characteristics tying the first century to the current one that create opportunities and challenges for the church.

a single and dominant superpower

For two hundred years, there was a type of peace on the planet, not because of the good nature of the people but because of the dominance of a world power that had no rivals: the Roman Empire. Historians have called that period *Pax Romana*, Latin for the peace of Rome. It was during this time that God stepped into the human world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

This Roman superpower actually benefited the spread of the Gospel in many ways. The first overseas missionaries were able to use their privilege of Roman citizenship to fulfill their missionary enterprise. Paul's Roman citizenship allowed him to be taken to Rome (at the government's expense) to proclaim his testimony to kings and ultimately the emperor himself. The Gospel was further advanced while Paul was under house arrest in Rome. There he was able to evangelize, train leaders, write letters, and fully accomplish his calling to bring God's word to the Gentiles. Finally, the persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire helped spread the flame of Christianity across the world.

Today, for the first time in quite a while, we are experiencing another time when a single government is the dominant power

in the world: the United States. Pax Americana has come, for better or worse. It has been anything but a peaceful time, but since the fall of Soviet Communism the United States has stood alone as the dominant force on the planet. The United States is not ruling over the rest of the nations, but it certainly plays a central role in important disputes. Wherever there is conflict, the United States tries to help settle the issue. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians call for the United States to do something when conflicts arise in the Middle East. Whether the United Nations sanctions it or not, the United States will police nations such as Iraq, the Balkans, and Afghanistan. We often do not carry this responsibility well, and “ugly American” is sometimes an earned sentiment, but our influence is definitely real even if it is not positive.

Today, having U.S. citizenship has some advantages as well. Being from the world’s only superpower does not make one popular, but it may open doors for advancement of the Gospel, and it will certainly afford some privilege.

a single, global trade language

In the first century, there was a single language that became the common language of trade for the whole world. It was not often the first language of any people, but they learned to be proficient in it for the convenience of trade and communications around the known world. It was Koine Greek.

The first-century Christian leaders, notably Peter and Paul, took advantage of this linguistic opportunity to write letters that could be circulated globally and spread the Good News around the world in a language all could understand.

Today, English has become the common trade language of the world. Everywhere you go and in every nation of the world, English is spoken. A person who speaks English can find immediate opportunities for spreading the Gospel into a growing number of nations and people groups that are learning English in increasing numbers. Many nations will actually pay you a salary to go overseas and teach English, and a growing number of missionaries are taking advantage of this and using the Bible as their textbook.

technological advances create a global community

In the first century, there was a new technology that made the world a smaller place. It brought together cultures, languages, and trade from various places in the world. This advance was so revolutionary that it has remained the bedrock of civilization throughout the rest of history. Chances are that you have relied on this technology even today without giving it a second thought: it is the road. The Roman roads were more than a series of verses in a book of the Bible describing how to receive salvation. They were an expanding network of highways linking all parts of the world to Rome. Remember the saying, “All roads lead to Rome”? There is truth to that, because it was from Rome that all roads found their beginning.

Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and John all traveled on these roads. The Gospel came at a time when the word could spread more quickly and further than ever before because roads existed and enabled global evangelization to occur.

Today the incredible technological advances of the computer chip, telecommunications, satellites, and jet travel have shrunk the world. Because we are taking life one day at a time, the changes may seem to creep up on us unnoticed, but all our lives have changed in radical ways in just a decade. I will never forget watching the World Trade Center collapse, live on TV, on the morning of September 11, 2001. Because of Facebook, I am exchanging jokes with high school friends I haven’t seen in thirty years as if it were only thirty minutes ago that we parted. Today you can get a sales call in Massachusetts from an Indian woman in Delhi, selling a product made in Singapore for a company headquartered in London, on a telephone manufactured by a company in Japan that is financed by a sheikh in the United Arab Emirates. It is indeed a smaller world today.

The world is not just smaller; as Thomas Friedman pointed out, it is flatter.² Calling this new era (starting in the year 2000) Globalization 3.0,³ he says: “[This new Globalization] is going to be more and more driven not only by individuals but also by a much more diverse—non-Western, non-white—group of individuals. Individuals from every corner of the flat world are being

empowered. Globalization 3.0 makes it possible for so many more people to plug in and play, and you are going to see every color of the human rainbow take part.”⁴

The rise in technology has created a world where we are all connected, but it also levels the playing field so that any one of us can have a voice. In a real sense, with blogs, YouTube, self-publishing capabilities, social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, everyone now can publish thoughts and publicize them to a mass market without the help of a large company. There is potential for anyone with a good idea to make a difference.

Nations that once were closed to the Gospel are losing the struggle to keep the Internet at bay with their citizens. Radio broadcasts pass over walls that people cannot. We can board a jet and be on the other side of the world in less than a day. The opportunities for the spread of the Gospel have never been so remarkable.

relativistic philosophy

When the world becomes smaller and people are more exposed to other religions, cultures, and philosophies of life, it is not uncommon for there to be a rise in relativism—a belief that truth is not absolute, but relative. This view is articulated as, “What is true for you may not be true for me.” This philosophical view grew during the first century, which was best summarized in the statement made by Pontius Pilate when he asked Jesus, “What is truth?”

Relativism ultimately leads to a corruption in morals and ideals. Like rust, it eats away at anything solid and eventually hope and reason are lost. Most people have a yearning inside for something substantial that relativism ultimately cannot satisfy. The New Testament Church was able to take advantage of this prevalent philosophy by offering the stability of real truth to a world of increasing despair.

Today, the philosophy of relativism is increasing at an alarming rate. It takes only a short time under such a framework for life to lose all meaning and darkness and despair to pervade all of one’s thoughts. The longer people live under such a philosophy of life, the more they hunger for solid ground beneath their feet.

This is what we have to offer. Most of us feel threatened by the doctrine of relativism, but we should not be afraid of it. Most people find it a convenient belief, but not a practical one. The despair it brings creates a ripe climate for the Good News of the kingdom of God.

pagan and occult activity

The first century was rampant with the practice of paganism and superstitious worship of a plethora of gods. Paul ran into much of this on his journeys. It was evident in Athens, where he saw many idols erected to gods, and even one to the unknown god just to cover all bases (Acts 17:22–23). He ran into it again in Ephesus, where an angry mob rioted in the streets because their livelihoods were threatened by the number of people destroying their instruments of occult worship as they converted to Christ. He encountered many false idols in Athens and was provoked to anger and grief. Paul and Barnabas were worshipped as cult gods one moment and stoned the next in Lystra—from stardom to stoning in one afternoon.

Today the practice of Wicca, witchcraft, occult worship, and paganism is rapidly increasing among young people. They long to experience the spiritual world that they know exists. They have a deep yearning to worship and have unfortunately turned to the creation rather than the creator. The occult promises power, spiritual influence, and hidden knowledge, but it delivers enslavement to superstition and fear.

Vampires, Goths, magicians, and even Dungeons and Dragons are no longer found only in fiction but becoming a subculture of our society. They are becoming a part of people's lives. As when Paul traveled through the empire, today people are worshipping a multitude of gods and seeking spiritual enlightenment and power.

Paul took advantage of this religious curiosity. On Mars Hill, or the Areopagus, he presented the true creator to the epicurean and stoic philosophers of the day. We too can make the power and experience of the true kingdom of God attractive to people, just as it was in Ephesus when Paul brought the kingdom there.

sexual promiscuity, perversion, and chemical addictions

Rome is well known for its drunken orgies. The combinations of wealth, power, relativistic philosophy, and pagan worship practices all lead to the spread of sexual immorality and perversions. It is commonly believed that the dissolving moral foundation contributed to unraveling the Roman Empire.

Today sexual perversion is rampant. There are multiple side effects of this ugly increase in sexual activity. Sexually transmitted disease is increasing in pandemic proportions. In our lifetime we are dangerously close to losing a great part of the population of the world's largest continent to AIDS. Unwanted pregnancy and abortion are abundant. There is still a trafficking of young women, who are held captive as sex slaves in parts of our world. Many fatherless children grow up to have little or no respect for authority and wreak great havoc on our urban neighborhoods.

The New Testament believers found the bondage of sexual immorality a difficult challenge, too. Sexual perversion always leaves broken and used lives. A life of sexual bondage and "throw-away" sexual partners will consume souls with darkness, sickness, and eventual lunacy, demonizing, and death.

Although these are all painful realities and harsh challenges, they also present us with opportunity. People who are victims of such ugliness can be responsive to the hope of freedom and forgiveness. Broken people are most receptive to the Gospel. The kingdom of God has hope of freedom, and forgiveness for such people.

aslan is on the move

In the C. S. Lewis story of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the world of Narnia was enslaved to a cold and harsh hundred-year winter without Christmas. Just when things were at their worst, hope was born, through four young visitors who found their way to Narnia by way of a closet that was for a moment a portal between two worlds.

Change did not come easily. There was an epic battle between good and evil, with betrayal, loss of life, imprisonment, slavery, and ultimately redemption. As things started to shift, there was

a moment when good news started to spread. Winter started to melt away. Christmas returned. Green once again began to spring forth with blossoms and running streams and rivers set free from their icy imprisonment. The word spread: *Aslan has returned and is on the move.*

The long reign of darkness and bitter cold broke up in unprecedented ways. No one could even remember how it was before the White Witch cast her spell on Narnia. Buried deep in their souls, locked in a primal and intuitive sense, the inhabitants of Narnia knew there was something better. In their forbidden legends, they knew of a free Narnia and their creator Aslan, but none could dare hope in his return . . . that is, until the nearly forgotten prophecies started to come true and the rumor of his coming started to spread.

I believe we are seeing something tantamount to that same awakening in this day.

Throughout history we have seen glimpses of revival and awakening in specific regions and nations. We have seen God's people arise with renewal and a rebirth of the church, but it has always been localized. Today we are seeing something new that has not occurred since the first century. I travel around the world and meet people of many races, nationalities, and cultures, and I see something that is changing all at once and everywhere in God's kingdom. On a global scale, God is speaking simultaneously to His people and calling them to a new and fresh expression of His kingdom here on earth. It is a wonderful time to be alive.

In all of human history, there was no time that saw the kingdom of God spread as rapidly and as globally as the first century. Every Christian longs for the experience of kingdom life as described in the book of Acts. I am suggesting that we now live in a new century that has equal, if not more, opportunity for the spread of the kingdom. These are dark days, and darkness is when the light shines brightest. We must make changes ourselves if that light is to shine in this world.

We must realize that the church of the past is not equipped for the opportunities of the future. We must shift in our systemic core so that we can take advantage of the global opportunities we face. We must upgrade the church for this new age. It is time for Church 3.0 to rise and spread.