

## Special Missions Message

The following is a paper that I presented in 1983 re: countries closed to the Gospel and some ideas as to how we could yet minister to people in those countries. Although the material was presented in 1983, the principles that I address are the same today. Here is the paper:

### *Our Response to Closed Doors in Missions*

J. Don Jennings, D.D.

International Director Evangelism, A.B.W.E.

That there are doors closed and doors closing to resident career Christian missionaries is too obvious to be denied. However, this is not a recent development. Throughout the history of Christian missions, the “missionary doors” to some cultures have swung both ways. The hinges are well-worn.

You will remember that in the days of Jesus earthly ministry, Samaria was considered a closed door. But Jesus opened the door. He said, “I must go through Samaria.” The result was the salvation of the water woman and others. Jesus also went to his hometown of Nazareth and was rejected and spurned. From there, he went Capernaum and was well received. ( Luke 4:31 – 41) In Paul’s ministry there were places he attempted to go, but found closed doors. For instance, he was “forbidden by the holy ghost to preach the word in Asia.” ( Acts 16:6) some doors have been sealed by God, some by man, but sovereignly orchestrated.

Our present day dilemma is this: how can we obey the command to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creatures” if doors are closed or closing? This does pose a problem for us, doesn’t it? Each generation of Christians is responsible to spread the Gospel as far and as wide as is possible, utilizing all proper means at its disposal to do so. Notice that I said, “as it is possible” and, “utilizing all proper means at its disposal.”

It might not be possible to enter some countries for several reasons:

\*The target country could refuse entry of missionary personnel for various reasons.

\*Prohibitions by one’s own government could prevent missionaries from fulfilling their goal. In my passport is a list of four countries that, at that time it was issued, the United States would not let me enter. These countries are Cuba, Cambodia, North Korea and Vietnam.

\*War zones preclude missionary activity. Illustrations of this are prevalent. Presently war zones include Lebanon, El Salvador, Nicaragua with storm clouds gathering over other countries.

In this session I will expand on the matter of doors that are presently closed. There are a number of countries today that permit no expatriates to personally import the Gospel. We refer to them as “closed-door countries.” This would include the following: Cuba, China, Bhutan, Tibet, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, North Korea, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Somalia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, some of the other Mideast countries, all of the Iron Curtain countries and Russia or what we refer to as the “Soviet Bloc.”

Countries that we consider to be in the process of closing or in which mission activity is greatly restricted include: Denmark, India, Nepal, Malaysia, Israel, Thailand, Indonesia, Guyana, Sudan, Ethiopia, North African countries, and some Mideast countries that we might call the Islamic Bloc. These are most of the countries which missiologists consider to be on the verge of closing. Ralph Winters, of the U.S. Center for World Missions, stated at the Lusanne Congress on World Evangelism in 1974 that he was astonished to find that roughly 2.4 billion people were beyond the reach of existing mission's endeavors. More recently, the Evangelistic Newsletter reported that 30+ countries with a total population of approximately 2 billion presently permit no foreign missionaries.

Let me hasten to say that it is possible that the political situation in any country in the world could change almost overnight. To keep up with the changing world, one would need a hotline to the United Nations Information Bureau! However, closed doors do not necessarily remain close forever; they have a way of opening again, in God's time. One example of this is Columbia. For 14 years, 1943 to 1958, Columbia was closed to all missionaries. Today, there are more missionaries in Colombia than at any other time.

The Missionary Service Bulletin, published by the Evangelical Mission's Information Service, reported in its July 1, 1982 issue that Third World missionaries have now passed the 15,000 mark and are deployed in 57 different countries by 368 non-Western mission agencies. The same issue goes on to state that "non-Western" missionary recruitment for full-time, cross-cultural ministry is growing five times as fast as recruitment for missionary personnel in North America. The editors call this, "the fastest breaking phenomenon in world missions." We are happy that the missionary force is increasing,

However, while we still face the command to "go into *all* the world," how can we get the Gospel to people in those parts of the world that are identified as closed or closing countries? A.B.W.E. has established goals which portray the mission's concern for the people behind closed doors. These are written goals, and I would like to share them with you. Our objective is stated as follows:

"To communicate the gospel in countries closed to North American missionaries by using extraordinary means without violating Christian ethics." In carrying out this objective, we have these clearly defined goals:

1. Contact foreign students and business personnel who are living in the United States, and seek to lead them to Christ and to encourage them to return to their homeland for the purpose of serving in an evangelistic and church planting ministry.
2. Pray daily for believers to suffer for Christ, or the churches that struggle under State resistance, and for wisdom to know how best to overcome governmental opposition to evangelistic and church ministry.
3. To keep informed on the happenings in these closed countries through religious and secular sources for purposes of prayer and planning.
4. Encourage North American professional and industrial personnel to accept opportunities of employment in closed countries with a view to assisting the national church in a tent-maker style of evangelism. (a good mind-stretcher on this subject is a book by J.

Christie Wilson, Jr., entitled Today's Tent-makers.) If all professional missionaries were to be excluded from a given country, it might still be possible for a non-professional missionary to enter that country. I believe that at this point we have miserably failed. There is no reason why Christian laymen should not live and work abroad for the purpose of bringing the Gospel to countries closed to the professional missionary, especially in these days when the missionary corps is out-numbered by other groups, such as businessmen, military personnel, and government employees. For example, there are many and American-owned companies that are managing plants in China. In almost all countries, Christian professors can teach and Christian students can study at Hindu, Moslem and secular universities. In fact they have opportunities not usually afforded the average missionary.

5. Explore ways by which Christian books and literature can be regularly supplied to the national believers who are now ministering in their own country which is closed to outside missionaries. I have had the exhilarating experience of taking Bible and Christian materials into China to the delight of believers I met there.
6. Create strategy for entering close countries awaiting the day the doors are opened to missionaries. For example, our missionaries in Hong Kong have studied the situation and have created a plan they would implement should China open. They have been in touch with their national believers and gain information from them as to how we could best minister in China if and when it is opened again to foreign missionaries.
7. Create a literature and radio committee for purposes of study, strategy and recommendation. Radio has the ability to penetrate the thickest curtain. Utilize the developing world wide internet which is leaping closed doors in a single bound!
8. Establish contact with the nationals enclosed countries and discover ways that we can assist any existing sound of ministries.

In addition to these established goals of A.B.W.E., there are other considerations:

- Tourists can distribute literature and witness.
- Christians can write to their brothers and sisters in close countries to encourage them. The February 4, 1983, issue of Christianity Today has an excellent article on Captive Christians and gives names of organizations that can provide names and addresses of individuals.
- T.E.E.—Theological Education by Extension—offers a good medium of communicating the Gospel.
- We ought to give our best thought to securing ways and means of penetrating closed countries with the Gospel. We need to take creative initiatives. If we can plant a flag on the moon, certainly we should be able to find new ways to inject the Gospel message into closed countries without violating Christian ethics.

I must not conclude without at least mentioning another type of "closed doors." All of the closed doors are not geographic boundaries. All closed doors are not outside the continental United States either. What about the door to the ethnics in our own country? Are blacks closed white missionaries? Or all Jews close to Christians? Are the ghetto-dwellers close to suburbanites?

Edward C. Pentecost's book, *Issues in Missiology*, rights in the chapter on "Receptivity" as

follows: “some are seriously asking the question whether the U.S. missionary is the best communicator to the American Indian. The Navajo has a deep presentment against the U.S. missionary because of the history behind him. The white man took away his land and his livelihood. A missionary has a great obstacle to overcome. With a missionary from the Quechua tribe of Bolivia be a more suitable communicator to the Navajo? Or perhaps one from Guatemala or Mexico?” He goes on to postulate that it might not be the message that has been rejected, in some cases, but the communicator of that message. Be that as it may, these are issues that we must think through.

In conclusion, let us not make the mistake of viewing all closed doors as catastrophic. Any country has the right to decide who shall enter into show not. Any country can expel any alien at any time. It is one thing to get rid of the missionaries, but it is another thing to get rid of God. Heaven is a strawman Earth is his footstool. It is impossible to banish him from any part of his domain; he stays when the missionary leaves.

30+ years ago, all missionaries had to evacuate China. But China’s loss was again for other countries in that region of the world. More than 50% of the China missionaries were deployed to other parts of the Far East and Southeast Asia. God is able to make the wrath of man to praise him. He can move his servants in such a way that his purposes for nations are worked out. One door closes—another opens, and happy is the missionary who is able to see the hand of God in the affairs of nations.

When doors are closed, they are not closed by man, but by God. In Revelation chapter 3 the Lord Jesus refers to himself as the one who “opens and no man’s shuts; and shuts, and no man opens.” I have never heard anyone who complain about that first clause in the verse, but I have heard many complaints about the second clause—the doors that shut. Let us remember that God is the Doorkeeper!

What the Church of Jesus Christ needs today is to take a fresh look at what the Scriptures have to say about the sovereignty of God. He knows the end from the beginning and is working all things after the counsel of his own will. ( Ephesians 1:11) Anyone can believe in the sovereignty of God when the situation is under control; but when things appear to men to get out of hand, when right is on the scaffold and wrong is on the throne, it is then that we must believe that in some mysterious way which we cannot fully understand, the purposes of God are being worked out according to his plan. He knows what he is doing even if we do not.

There are more open doors in the world than we can take advantage of with our present missionary manpower. The real tragedy is not the number of closed doors that we cannot enter, but the number of open doors that we do not enter! We should be recruiting men and women in ever increasing numbers to enter the lands that are open. The open countries far outnumber the closed countries. The opportunities in the open countries are greater than ever before.

We must march ahead, there are many open doors, the fields are ready for harvest but the laborers are few. Let us “pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”