

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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THE WALTON-WYCLIFFE STRATEGY

by Gary North

And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick (Matt. 9:10-12).

If you want to find an audience ready to hear your story of a successful cure for some scourge, go to those who are suffering from it. The sicker they are, the more ready they are to hear your message. But don't expect to get rich by selling it to them. Their capital has been depleted by the ravages of their affliction.

Physicians prefer to heal the not-so-sick and the "sick for the first time with their health insurance still intact." These are the most desirable patients. Everyone has a story or cure for them to buy. The noise of competition drowns out so many potential remedies. So it is with stories about gaining eternal life, not to mention a better world in the here and now.

Sam Walton's Strategy

I have commented for years on what I call the Wal-Mart marketing strategy, which I regard as among the most brilliant ever conceived. Sam Walton was in the "sundries" business, a word seldom seen and never heard. It is an open-entry business, which means that it is highly competitive. Walton took on not only K-Mart, but Sears, Penneys, and Montgomery Ward. They didn't figure this out until it was too late.

Walton operated out of Bentonville, Arkansas. He drew no national attention. He initially built stores in small towns in the South. These towns were too small for a Sears store or other national chains, given the way they did business. Walton competed only against local retailers. His strategy was price competition. He offered prices that had never been available in small towns. Wal-Mart replaced local retailers, who went out of business, one by one, in the silence of small-town obscurity. Word did not filter upward to the national chains.

In the early 1980's, Walton had so many stores that he could negotiate steep discounts for mass purchases from manufacturers. This gave him an even greater competitive edge. This network of small town stores enabled him to launch the next phase of his strategy, which was to build in medium-sized Southern towns. He began to give Sears, Penneys, and Montgomery Ward a run for their money, but not yet in a direct frontal assault. He nibbled away at their fringes. He was not yet perceived by his national competitors as the total threat that he became by the end of the 1980's.

By the time they woke up, it was too late. He had

positioned Wal-Mart and then Sam's Warehouse as the premier discount retailing organizations. His stores offer a huge selection of low-priced goods. His computerized sales and automatic re-order satellite system reduce inventory costs by an estimated 20%. When you buy an item, it is re-ordered even before you leave the store, with this information broadcast directly to the manufacturer. Wal-Mart passes most of the savings on to its customers.

What have Walton and the Wycliffe Bible Translators got in common? A lot. Walton adopted the strategy that Wycliffe uses, even though I doubt that Wycliffe fully understands what their strategy offers. Wycliffe adopted it because there seemed to be no other choice. Walton adopted it because it was perfect for a stealth campaign that kept his competition in the dark while he set the trap to replace them.

Go Where Hardly Anyone Cares

Nobody cares about little tribes located in the hinterlands. These tribes have no money, no power, and no resources. They live on the fringes of national societies. Central governments ignore them. Bureaucrats operate in terms of orders printed on pieces of paper, but these societies are illiterate. These societies are not worth conquering unless they live on top of valuable mineral deposits.

God cares about these people, and so do Wycliffe's missionaries. In the quest for souls, Wycliffe has relegated urban missions to other organizations. Wycliffe is content with winning large percentages of very small tribal societies to saving faith. Other missionary organizations do not enjoy such high percentages. They do not see social transformation.

These tribal societies are analogous to Sam Walton's targeted small Southern towns in the 1960's and 1970's. The national retail chains did not want these markets. They ignored them. They assumed that no one could make a profit by serving them except small local retailers. Walton saw an opportunity, and he took it. He decided to go where others had deliberately ignored. Wherever a Wal-Mart store appeared, the shopping habits of a lifetime disappeared. The country locals took to discounts the way that city people did. Walton offered them a better opportunity, and they took it. That constituted his opportunity.

It is the church's opportunity today. God wants to hear the praises of a thousand tongues — not just large numbers of people but large numbers of languages, i.e., cultures. "Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise" is not a call for a large choir in one large congregation to sing familiar hymns. It is a call for a thousand cultures singing God's praise, each with its own accent, music, and lyrics.

We have lost Europe. We have lost huge chunks of North America. Commercial broadcasting and public education —

another form of broadcasting – have done their common-ground corrosive work. The myth of neutrality has blinded men to the social transformation called for by Jesus, His comprehensive redemption. But in obscure, isolated societies into which modern culture has not yet spread its cornucopia of sin-cursed baubles, people are ready for a change. They can see the difference between spiritual darkness and light. The fruits of righteousness are sweet in a society that practiced cannibalism a generation earlier, or less. So is seeing your children grow to adulthood.

What Walton saw Wycliffe probably has not seen: that success in the hinterland is the first step in success in suburbia. He used his stores to increase the organization's buying power. Then he launched a successful assault on his urban competitors. Given the premillennial eschatology that is common to most missions today, a Walton-like vision of victory is thought to be unlikely. The missionary is more likely to adopt some variation of that old premillennial missions recruiting slogan, "When the last person to be chosen by God for salvation" – an amazingly Calvinistic concept of the history of salvation – "accepts Christ, the Rapture will follow." They have incorrectly identified the nature of the coming discontinuous event. What is more likely to follow is not the Rapture but a movement of the Holy Spirit in the dry bones West (Rom. 11).

Another practitioner of this encircling strategy was Mao Tse-tung. He recognized early that the cities would fall when the Communists controlled the countryside. He could content himself with successes on the far reaches of the 1934 Long March into the hinterlands.

Modern men do not believe this. They believe that if they control the major media in the big cities of the most powerful nations, they will be able to impose their worldview on the general population. But operating invisibly on the far reaches of civilization are hundreds of experiments in Christian social order. People who have lived their lives in demonized societies have no illusions about the myth of neutrality.

No More Neutrality

Wycliffe understands that the survival of a tribal culture is dependent on the preservation of its language. The mother tongue is what most men respond to best. This is a fundamental insight. A subordinate insight is that the tribe's theological confession can be changed without destroying the tribe if the mother tongue is preserved. The tribe can move from demonism to Christianity and still preserve part of its way of life. But it cannot preserve all of it.

One goal of the Wycliffe missionary is to give the tribe the tools of economic growth: simple public health measures, small-scale agricultural innovations, small business skills, and, above all, literacy. These are the hooks. To these hooks are attached lines: the gospel. Wycliffe missionaries give backward tribes what the tribes want, and what national governments want for them, free of charge. But, as the old saying goes, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Free grace is not free. It forces changes in the way people live.

Decades ago, the biologist Garrett Hardin coined a phrase: "You can't change just one thing." This is surely true of foreign missions. The more isolated the tribe, the more all-encompassing the social change which the gospel produces. The tribe has operated in terms of one worldview. Then comes a rival one. The new one "delivers the goods" far better than the older

one. In terms of what men see as benefits, Christianity outperforms primitive occultism. The vision of a better world on earth accompanies the promise of a better world in eternity.

It is ironic that Christian pietists who insist that "Christianity can operate in any political system" and "there is no such thing as Christian economics" simultaneously promote foreign missions which they expect will improve the earthly lives of those who respond favorably to the gospel. These pietists are willing to defend the legitimacy of the missionary's offer of improved living conditions to the demon-bound primitive society. They are ready to fund the translation of the New Testament into languages spoken by only a few thousand people. They are not equally ready to fund the translation of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

The intellectual schizophrenia of modern pietism can be seen here. Pietists vocally adopt a common-ground, natural law doctrine of political economy when dealing with their own societies, yet they know that there is no common-ground neutral political solution to the problems of primitive tribes. They donate money to support missionaries whose work will inevitably undermine the customs and civil laws of these tribes. This, in fact, is one of the goals of the missionaries, just as it was Paul's goal almost two millennia ago.

Conclusion

I have said for many years that I regard the Wycliffe Bible Translators as the only Christian organization on earth that is widely recognized by the non-Christian world as the best in the world in its specialized field. When secularists want to know how to understand the language of some newly discovered tribe, they prefer to rely to Wycliffe to do the spade work. One of the benefits that Wycliffe offers to foreign governments when seeking visas for its missionaries is the promise to provide the national university's anthropology and linguistics departments with comprehensive dictionaries of any translated language. Wycliffe's linguistic materials are highly regarded by these scholars.

Wycliffe offers the correct model: go where everybody else refuses to go. We must target the unwanted. "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

There will come a time when more tongues – cultures – confess Christ than any other god. These tongues will persuade God to send His Spirit back among those who have forgotten Him. The transformed societies that have experienced the fruits of the gospel will serve as a model to those who have funded the missionaries. Those who sent the messengers into the field will hear stories of the transforming power of the gospel. This is not a familiar doctrine in our day. The proof of its truth must come from far afield. Christians must learn the lesson that Sears learned: important skills are developed in the hinterlands. Those who possess such skills are in a better position to transform the world than those who have dwelt in the shadows of humanism's power, content to live off of the scraps that fall from humanism's table.

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