

Doing Missions in a Closed Country  
CHBC Missions Core Seminar  
August 10, 2003

Introduction:

A couple of weeks ago we began to think about taking the Gospel to people originating from other nations but who are right here in the town where we live, and then last week thought specifically about taking the Gospel to all nations, anywhere in the world. In order to reach many of these people with the message of Christ, this may mean intentionally leaving this country and traveling to another.

Here at CHBC we have chosen to focus a majority of our long-term and short-term missions work on nations that we would define as officially or culturally “closed” to the work of the Gospel. This would mainly include nations of the Muslim world, where the idea that human beings are free to choose their own religion without coercion or intimidation is not respected or, in some cases, even permitted. Before we move on to our further discussion, we need to get a clear definition of “what is a closed Country?” Once we define that, we can think more about issues related to working in such places.

(Andy’s Comprehensive Personal Definition of Closed Country)

*A country where the government’s official policies, or unofficial practices or cultural norms, prevent the free and open presentation of the Gospel without fear of serious reprisal. Most often it means a nation whose government will not grant visas to foreigners who intend to enter the country for the sole purpose of religious work, where churches are illegal or severely regulated, where open religious work may result in expulsion from the country and/or where conversion from a majority religion to Christianity is formally illegal or informally the cause of stiff persecution.*

How should we as evangelical Christians think about nations like this? How should we interact with them? What should be our response with regard to sending missionaries? What respect do we owe to such governments?

During this class I hope we can deal with these and other questions to help us think more Biblically about the difficult topic of doing missions in a closed country.

I. Do we have an obligation to respect the authority and policies of such governments?

The first questions that should occur to our minds when we think about doing missionary work in a closed country is the ethical questions related to respect for these governments. Some Christians just quickly brush aside any responsibility to respect or obey the laws of governments that are so defective by our Western standards. They may reason, “surely any government that won’t give us the freedoms we enjoy in America, which has not popular elections, which has limited rule of law, which is a veritable police-state, which opposes the Son of God, ...is evil, defective, and undeserving of any respect or obedience

from us. Such a response may seem very reasonable from the vantage point of these free and favored US shores, it is certainly an understandably American response. However, as people who call ourselves Christians, we need to understand that such an attitude is also profoundly unbiblical. Until we realize that, we won't be able to think Biblically about our dealings with such states.

#### 1. Respect authority – Romans 13: 1-7

I expect that most of us have never lived in a community that has degenerated into significant anarchy. But the accounts that others have written about it are strangely fascinating and yet chilling. Pillaging, looting, gang murder, group violence, arson, random destruction, rioting, genocide, revenge killings, fear of violent death everywhere ...the list of horrors is as long as our access to history books and international news broadcasts.

As people who understand the effects of human depravity, this really shouldn't surprise us. According to Scripture, mankind unrestrained internally by God's common grace, or externally by the threat of punishment, has a long history of making some of the world's most beautiful cities and nations into visible shadows of the horrors of Hell.

It is with a realization of these historic human truths that we should read and reflect on the words of Romans 13: 1-7.

(Read passage)

I think I can say, without fear of contradiction, that there are few other governments in the world as free, as responsive and as just as the one we have been given in this nation. But does that render other governments immediately illegitimate by comparison. The text we just read would seem to say NO. Keep in mind, Paul is not writing about the local government in his representative, democratic Western nation-state. He is writing from within the strict, occupying Roman Empire. An Empire that has extended its control by conquest, where only a very select few had any inalienable rights, who oversaw the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ...that is the government he seems to be calling "God's servant to do you good."

- a. We are to honor the authority of governments as ... for our good.

Compared to the horror of unrestrained human evil, any government that punishes evil and rewards good, even to a limited degree is potentially to be respected, honored and (whenever possible) obeyed. The good that even a closed, pagan government achieves is still real good, and we should honor them accordingly.

- b. We are to honor the authority of governments as...delegated from God

But even beyond our perceived good, the Word indicates that government is not an accident. Like all things under the hand of a sovereign God, governments arise by

design. And from the book of Daniel to Habakkuk to Romans, we see governments as delegated agents to achieve God's work in the world - limited in scope and authority, but God's agents of common grace none-the-less. It is finally for the sake of our reverence for God's overarching authority that we respect, honor and obey these imperfect regents...trusting that we will answer for our obedience and they will finally answer to God for the conduct of their trust.

## 2. Authority given by God has a limited sphere of operation

But we are not having a civics lecture this morning, we are thinking about doing missions work in a closed country. And a couple of further Biblical considerations should help us to round out these thoughts in a way that moves us on to our main topic on a better Biblical footing.

### a. God and Caesar – Matt 22: 15-22

While we are told to respect authorities, there is clear indication in Scripture that the extent of that authority is limited. One clear indication of that is found in Jesus' teaching on God and Caesar.

(Read passage – Matt. 22: 15-22)

We are to render due respect to imperfect authorities, but only to a point. We must give to them what is theirs, and give to God what is his.

What if that earthly authority takes upon itself that which belongs only to God? The answer to that question is clearly spelled out in another passage in Acts 4:13-20.

### b. God's commands trump the contradictory laws or commands of any earthly government

(Read Acts 4: 13-20.)

We see this principle throughout both the Old and New Testament writings. We see it where Daniel ignored the order not to pray to anyone but the king, instead he prayed to God alone...before an open window just to make the point. We see it when Daniel's three friends refused to bow to the king's idol. And we see it here in this passage from Acts. Respectful disregard for governments and laws that usurp the prerogative that is God's alone...the authority of God to freely offer the Gospel, to call whom he pleases. In such cases the principle for Christians is ultimately clear "Obey God rather than men." No government anywhere has the right or the authority to revoke the command of God "Go into all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything He has commanded."

It is on this Biblical basis that we cautiously and respectfully, ignore the laws, customs and traditions of these “closed” nations and take the Gospel of Christ to them...whatever the cost.

## II. But WHY do missions in a closed country?

Okay, the preceding discussion may provide a justification for why we CAN do missions in such a place, but why do it at all? Aren't there other places that are easier and more welcoming? Shouldn't we just “shake the dust off our feet” and move on to place that is more welcoming? Doesn't it seem clear that these people and cultures just don't WANT the Gospel?

### 1. Because hatred for God does not revoke the Gospel

Well, NO, we don't think so. Whatever our current application Biblical teaching about not “casting pearl's” before folks who are uninterested, or “shaking the dust off our feet” it seems obvious that we are not to ignore whole cultures because some leaders (or even a majority) don't want to hear the message of the Cross.

We know from Romans chapter one how all men in their sin are “God-haters” and that all of us, including you and me, at one time hated the Gospel and hated God. The fact that many of these cultures do not WANT the message of Christ is no surprise. Neither did we. But now we have been saved by a “righteousness that comes from God”, and so may they. Certainly Jesus taught that the natural state of man apart from the Gospel is opposition to God and to His Son. The fact that the opposition in these places is more immediate and violent makes it problematic, but it is no more real than the opposition in the heart of every unregenerate person who loves sin and, consequently, hates God.

### 2. To enjoy the privilege of not building on another person's work - Romans 15: 20 –21.

And there is a special joy and privilege that accompanies the work of taking the Gospel to a new place where Christ's name was virtually unknown. Paul wrote in Romans 15 about his desire to always preach the Gospel where Christ was not known, so he would not be building on another man's work. This is not a prideful desire to be the first, but a holy privilege of being in a place where God may use you to be the “spiritual father or mother” of a whole new community of believers in a place that was formerly dark.

That is a joy that many of the people at CHBC deeply desire and one that we work and strive for.

### 3. Because of the strategic need

Most of the nations within the 10/40 window that you discussed last week are nations that we would rate as having various degrees of “closedness.” Some like Iran are off limits to US workers. Some, like Saudi Arabia, still punish conversions to Christianity with

beheading. Some, like Turkmenistan, have a secret police culture that views and serious religious belief as dangerous and subversive to the State. And each of these have some of the smallest populations of Biblical Christians in the world. Some have fewer than a few dozen known believers in the whole nation, some ethnic minorities have none. The eastern, Central Asian part of this area has been called the most lost area on the planet...though that too seems to be changing.

Still, for now, these nations still constitute that last black-hole for Gospel work. Why? We don't finally know. Maybe because of the violent opposition found in Islam? Maybe because God has allowed this great island of "lostness" to grow up in order to display his power as the Gospel breaks out across all the foolish and futile barriers erected by men.

Whatever the case, it seems reasonable to think that there are many people in these nations for who Jesus died, and whom he intends to call out before the end. What a wonderfully strategic place to go to labor hard for the eternal fruit of the kingdom. There is nothing wrong with going to a country where there are already many Christians in order to contribute to the work of the kingdom. But if the opportunity arises, who would not want to be granted the honor to bring the light of the Gospel to a place, a culture where there are no other lights at all, where the need is as great as the number of sinful humans and the opportunity is as great as the wisdom and mercy of God.

#### 4. To especially glorify God

Ultimately, our deepest motivation for doing this should be the same one that drives us in all our work for Christ...a desire to see him glorified and lifted up among all peoples for his glory and their joy. And there seems to be a special glory for God in the eyes of the watching world, when the words of Habakkuk 2: 13 – 14, he displays his power over all opposition to his kingdom.

*Has not the Lord Almighty determined that the people's labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nation exhaust themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*

Or in Psalm Two, where the writer considers the work of God's Son in the world and the absolute foolishness of all worldly opposition. From our limited human vantage point we treat these closed nations as a great obstacles to the kingdom, but it is good to remember that from God's viewpoint their opposition is not great or daunting, rather to him their opposition is laughable. What seems such a great hurdle to us, is an opportunity for God to display his glory in this complete obliteration of their opposition to his Son, so that with him we can laugh the laugh of faith in God's sovereign plan.

Psalm Two

*Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.*

*“Let us break their chains,” they say, “and throw off their fetters.”*

*The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.”*

*I will proclaim the decree of the Lord:*

*He said to me, “You are my Son, today I have become your Father. Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter, you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”*

*Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.*

*Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment.*

*Blessed are all who take refuge in Him.*

We labor to bring the Gospel to closed, hostile nations because the labor of these nations in opposition to the Gospel is merely fuel for the fire of God’s glory, as he displays his greatness by crushing every obstacle to the advance of his mercy. What a privilege to be a part of this great, God-glorifying work.

### III. Special issues:

These are some of the motivations that undergird our work in closed nations. But there are also a great number of prudential considerations and special challenges that we need to keep in mind as we move forward with this work. One of the first of these is the issue of security.

#### 1. Security:

Working in a closed country requires a willingness to deal with security issues that encumber your work and may be tiring and difficult to maintain. By this we don’t mean security in the sense of personal safety – some of these countries are very “safe” from that standpoint. Rather, we mean something equivalent to “operational security” – the effort to keep our labor for the kingdom from compromising our work in that place.

##### a. Security for yourself, to prevent expulsion from the country

First, there is the need to maintain security for our workers in these countries. This means working to prevent unnecessary conflict with local authorities that might lead to reduced access or expulsion from the country. There are many recent cases where workers in closed countries have been asked to leave the country because the government became aware of their Christian witness and the fruit that was coming from their work. Obviously, we want to avoid this when possible in order to maintain a fruitful work, but there are times to take significant risks. We will talk about that in a few minutes.

- b. Security for local believers, so that you don't become the reason for officials or family members to persecute them.

Second, there is the need to maintain security in order to unnecessarily invite persecution on local, national believers. We do not want to teach local believers to fear man in unGodly ways, but we also don't want to invite persecution by our own thoughtlessness. For local believers in many closed countries, compromised security can result in tremendous suffering and even death. We are told not to be ashamed of the Gospel and we want to teach them accordingly, but so far as human responsibility is concerned, the time and the place of their open suffering should come from their decisions before God, not from our thoughtless slips.

- c. Some security measures

So this brings us to the obvious question of what constitutes appropriate security for work in closed countries. The sending organization with which we work most often rates the relative security needs for various countries and trains our workers appropriately. If you are in regular contact with workers in those parts of the world, or eventually go on a CHBC trip to one of those places, we will gladly give you specific information at that time.

In general, some of the measures we might employ could include:

- Avoiding words that may attract attention, like church, Christian, or missionary. We will not be deceptive or lie, but we try to be wise in not simply inviting unwelcome scrutiny by throwing around terms that may be monitored by authorities or culturally misunderstood.
- Being very careful about emails and phone calls on the field. Many of these governments spend an obscene amount of police and intelligence resources trying to keep the Word of Life away from their people.
- Not meeting with local believers or workers in ways that might invite too much attention from local authorities.

Keeping up these and other security protocols can be a significant and tiring burden for workers in closed countries, but it is often a needed practice in places where the opposition to the Gospel is organized and systemic.

#### IV. Platform

Because of this opposition, workers in closed countries generally can't just come in with the blessing of the government to share the gospel and disciple full time. There is generally a need to have some other reason to live in the country, that the government will appreciate and approve. This is generally referred to as an entry "platform." Examples might be teaching English, medical work, or agricultural development.

## 1. Integrity

However, entering a closed country, as a Christian, with some sort of entry platform raises ethical questions in some people's minds. Is it honest and ethical to use a platform job to gain access to a country when the work itself is not really the main reason for your presence there? Well there are a lot of ways that people deal with this.

- a. The love of Christ constrains us to come and help you. That is a true statement. If they take it wrong, that's not your problem. It is still true.
- b. *Ask the group* "What do you do for a living?" Okay so you call yourself a \_\_\_\_\_, but as a Christian what would you say is ultimately more important, your work or communicating the Gospel to those around you? So, you are really lying when you call yourself a \_\_\_\_\_, you are really a missionary or an evangelist. Isn't it deceptive for you to use your job as a way to support and advance your personal ministry?

Of course we wouldn't say that, and it's not true for Christian workers in other nations whose ultimate primary motivation is the Gospel.

- c. All of life is ministry for a Christian. Actually, I think all Christians should understand their work as a platform to enhance their access for the Gospel. If it is not, then you may need to rethink whether you are really working for appropriate, Biblical reasons. Enjoying our work and doing it well is great...no matter where we live, but if your work is an absolute end in itself, well something may be wrong about the way you understand the integration of work and faith.

Far from being some deceptive ploy, I think "platform" thinking is a good picture of how all Christians should structure their lives to try to gain a maximal hearing and advantage for the Gospel.

## 2. Evangelism in closed nation

Certainly, these structures and limitations in closed countries do present challenges for the Gospel. But not so much as you might think. Some of the best evangelistic work in the US is that which naturally flows from relationships, it's the same in closed nations. To labor in a closed country does not mean that you can't talk about the Gospel, it just means that you must be wise and circumspect in how you do it.

### a. Sharing the Gospel

Still, talking about religious beliefs is often a common occurrence in these nations and many people find it easier to get into Gospel conversations there than in America. Especially in closed Muslim countries you may often have people ask you "So tell me about what you believe?" or any other number of common questions related to Muslim misconceptions about Christianity. Certainly there are other, seemingly massive obstacles to the Gospel, but an inability to talk about religious matters is seldom among

them. Frank, straightforward, one-on-one conversations about God's lordship, man's sin, Christ's work and man's response are effective ways to communicate the Gospel anywhere, even in the most closed nation. While open, mass, public evangelism may be impossible in these nations, the effective work on one friend telling another friend about the Way to life goes on without regard to the official opposition.

b. Evangelism where persecution seems certain and severe

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of doing evangelism in a closed country has to do with a very fundamental issue regarding the truth and worth of the Gospel. In many of these countries the invitation to come and follow Christ means inviting the person to come and suffer...and maybe even die.

How might you feel if you were working in a closed nation, hostile to the Gospel. You were working with students, and in the course of your work you became friends with an 18 year old young man. Over time you were able to share the message of Scripture with him and he repented and trusted in Christ. A few days later you came home to find his head, severed from his body, sitting on your front steps. Next to it is a note saying that his death is your fault. How might you feel then about your work? Such things have happened to people in closed countries in recent years.

When you are laboring in a nation where the invitation to follow Christ is an invitation to come and suffer or die, you must have a firm and Biblical grasp on the worth of the Gospel. You have to understand, especially in nations where conversion=persecution, that the worth of the life in Christ is so great that even if it costs them their lives it is an infinitely worthwhile exchange.

c. Perseverance when fruit is slow to come

Also, it seems that often in closed nations the fruits of conversion are very slow to come. Whether because of the lack of trust endemic to these cultures, or because of darker spiritual reasons, the general rule is that fruit comes slowly in closed Muslim nations. Many workers, particularly those who do not have a good grasp on the Biblical truth of God's sovereignty in election, struggle to remain faithful if fruit is slow to come. Certainly God will do as he pleases, but when he is slow in bringing fruit, workers in these places must commit themselves to a "long-haul" mentality that is content to faithfully, consistently share the Gospel and wait for God to bring the harvest.

And by all accounts the harvest is coming. Many of the nations in the 10/40 window that had few if any know believers 10 years ago now have thousands, and some have begun to send their own workers to closed neighboring nations. The fruit will come in God's time, but workers in closed nations must be especially aware that the battle is the Lord's so that the glory will be his as well.

### 3. Isolation and lack of fellowship

Finally, one of the great challenges for workers in closed countries is the need to deal with a sense of isolation and sometimes a lack of any Christian fellowship. To counter this, the believing foreigners from various groups often meet together each week for worship and encouragement in the Word. In places where it is not possible for them to meet with local believers, because there may be none or security concerns may make it inadvisable, home meetings of Christian workers become the norm. Often these groups are quite small and limited. Some times, workers may even be alone, or with our sending group may be with one other person. Sermon CDs, letters and emails (usually encrypted) from other believers can be wonderfully encouraging in these contexts. This is a great thing for us to regularly lift up in prayer for our workers in closed nations, that they will find fellowship and encouragement each week and will not be worn down by the isolation.

One of the goals that we have at CHBC is to see that some friend or person in leadership visits each of our supported workers each year, no matter where they are. We are getting better and better at this. Pray that in this next year we will do even more to encourage and relieve the isolation that some of our people feel while laboring in closed countries.

#### Conclusion:

So, in conclusion, we need to wrap up by reminding ourselves that the term closed country is our term not God's. To him, no nation is closed. There is no wall, or culture, or religious system, or police force that will keep out the life-changing power of God's Holy Spirit. As we think about the reason that we labor for the spread of the Gospel to all nations, we need to pray for God to be glorified in all peoples and to remember that there are nations that are sometimes closed to us, but never to the power of God.