

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE NATION? (see second para of text) GOD'S HEART FOR THE NATIONS?

By Landa Cope

God's Heart for the Nations...It seems like a simple subject. He loves them – let's go home...! But so often it's the simple subjects, the words we think we understand so well, that we have ceased to understand at all. I sat down a couple of years ago, at great expense to a Christian business and ministry, with about 15 other leaders from South America, Africa and Asia. I was the only one who didn't have a PhD, but I was grateful because by mistake they gave me one! So I not only got a free invitation to be a consultant on discipleship, but I got a PhD as well, which was lovely. We sat with leaders of denominations of 3 million or 4 million people, with theologians, not only in their nations but known in their entire regions. As we began to study and look at discipleship, we discovered that no one in that room could define the word.

What does a disciplined person look like? What does a disciplined nation or community look like? We had gone so far in the Body of Christ in the last 100 or 150 years, yet, sitting down with some of the greatest minds in Christianity, we could not define the word in a way that would be simple to use by any church or ministry in the world. And it was the African brothers and sisters who kept saying: "We should go back to what we haven't done and then we would know what we should do." I was the only one in the room who understood what they were talking about. What does an undisciplined person look like? What does an undisciplined community look like? We can define that quite easily and that should begin to give us some indicators.

I am in an organisation and a world in which many of us talk about nations all the time, and understand that nations are important to God. God has this "nation" thing, so at least we know there are targets for evangelism.

I come to this message not as an academic study, but because I have about 30 years in Youth With a Mission (YWAM). In the middle of my journey with YWAM, I began to see the fruit of mission work in our century. I saw nations that were 60% or even 90% Christianised, where, by all definitions of missiologists, we could say "It's reached." Yet if you thought about it you would prefer not to live in those communities. And I began to say: "God, is this what it looks like when 'Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be Done', is done on earth?"

I looked at my own country. Americans love to talk about how we are a Christian nation, yet we have never had more immorality, crime, drugs or disease. We are increasing in illiteracy, corruption and poverty. Where is the Christian bit? We have huge churches and a lot of wonderful people who love God with their whole heart. But how can we not look at the communities around our so-called Christianised communities and say: "Is this it?" So I, literally in mid-journey in my missions calling, said: "God, I want another job!"

I'm a little embarrassed to say I am a missionary. I am a little embarrassed to look at America and say: "That is reached." I am embarrassed to look at many of the countries we quote in mission statistics, and say "That's it, that's the Kingdom Come." So I said "God I don't think this is what you mean by 'Thy Kingdom Come'. I think there is more. When you said: "Disciple the nations" you meant it, but we clearly don't have a clue what you are talking about." I was desperate. I knew I had to be a missionary. God had called me to be one. But to be one, I was going to have to get more of God because this wasn't matching up with what God said. I didn't become a Christian so I could hang out with Christians! I don't think it's wrong to do that, it just wasn't my motive. I became a Christian because I believe God exists, I believe Jesus is His Son, I believe He has a body of truth that is the reality of the entire cosmos. When I came to know Him, I wanted to know all of Him, and when I couldn't find more of Him in my Christian surroundings, I had to go back to the source.

And so I began to go to men and women of God whom I knew who had a heart for the nations, and I said: "How do we do this thing, discipling the nations? Once we have planted a church and have a majority, or even 20% of Christians, how do we begin to work on the rest of it?" They all said: "I don't know, it's a good question." I got the idea that I probably had to go to God. So I said: "Okay, God, you say this is your Word, this is what will lead us with your Spirit into all Truth. You've taught us how to reach every creature. I want to know how to disciple the nations."

I began colouring my Bible by all the domains. Every time God spoke about government, I coloured it purple. Every time God talked about money I coloured it green because I'm an American! Every time He talked about the ecclesiastical institution, not the Body of Christ, but the Church – the institution – I coloured it yellow. Family got another colour, science and technology yet another. I have been colouring my Bible for 10 years now. When I started, I thought: "I've never read this book!" I had actually read it 27 times but I had read it with the questions: "Where is salvation here? Where is church planting here? Where is evangelism here?" I had never read it with: "Where is government and justice here? Where is health care here? Where is finance? And Jehovah Jirah?" I realised I had never grasped 80% of what God was talking about.

I have been in this 10-year personal revival – and I get to talk about it! If I didn't get to talk about it, God wouldn't be one iota less exciting! You see, I've got my dues, I've got more of God. I said: "I thought you were off the charts, God, when I thought you were this side. And now I find out you are this side!" When I thought He just saved people, He was precious. Now I know He goes way beyond that! So it is a thrill for me to be able to share this with you, but it wouldn't make any difference if I couldn't.

I am going to give you freely what I believe God has given me. I am not a scholar, I am not a theologian, I have never gone to Bible School, I have never studied Greek and Hebrew. I have been with Youth with a Mission for 32 years, and that counts for something I am sure. I am not an historian, I am not a reformation scholar. I have said: "God, you say your Holy Spirit will lead us in all truth. I need help here. I'm here, I'm reading, talk to me." I am sure there are many ideas that are very important, but I can only share with you what God has shown me so far in Scripture. And I want to share what I believe He has shown me about His Heart for the Nations.

If you begin to mark the word, "nations", in your Bible, like I do every time I read, you would begin to think this book is not about salvation but about nations. On one page alone, five examples, on another two, on another two, on another three, on another five examples, and so on. You realise that God is really into this subject. He's also into salvation, for which we can be grateful. But nations, nations, nations...from the beginning of Genesis right to Revelation, God emphasises that He has a strategy and His strategy is going to be worked out of the revelation of Himself through the cosmos, the created world, the material world, through individuals, men and women, through families, through tribes and through nations. Wow! He is not just working through individuals, He is not just revealing Himself in the pulpit, He is revealing Himself every day when the sun comes up and in every picture from the Hubble Telescope. He is also revealing Himself in families. And He is revealing Himself in tribes and nations.

In the first chapter of Genesis, where it says "Cultivate the earth," we get this idea of all going out and being farmers again. But God is not talking about farming. The root word of "cultivate" is "cultos", the same root as "culture". God is saying to Adam Male and Adam Female, "Multiply, fill the earth, and cultivate it." The mandate is to create tribes, nations and cultures. We are not in our diversity the by-product of sin. We are in our cultural diversity, languages, lands, the creation of God. God hates cookie-cutters. The snowflakes should teach you this. When we get to Chapter 10 of Genesis, if you are tracking with God on nations and what He is wanting to do, we see that He is in this celebration of nations. Oh, yes, there is the Fall in between, but Jesus takes care of that. That is the point of salvation – we are back on track. We don't have to remember the Fall constantly. Yes, people have to be saved from the effects of it, but we can go back to God's original mandate because the Cross has won us the right to re-establish the Kingdom.

So we get to Genesis 10, it is like He has started and can't stop. He's saying: "There's the island people, each with their own land, language and culture. And there's the people who live by the sea, each with their own land, language and culture. Then there are the people who live somewhere else...And you realise He is having a good time. He thinks this is beautiful. Then comes Chapter 11 and the Tower of Babel – the most misunderstood passage in Scripture. We all think that is where language happened. But Adam spoke a foreign language. He created it! Creating languages is one of the things God made us to do. He creates reality and we get to name it! You don't get to create reality – what a silly idea! God created reality; we get to name it. God loves the diversity. He loves the diversity of our experience. The Eskimos have 1 000 words for snow!

In Chapter 11 we come to the Tower of Babel and technology and we think it is a sin. The Tower wasn't the sin, and God is not worried about technology. When it gets out of hand, He confuses everything, as in Chapter 11. The sin of the Tower of Babel is about this culture, this group of people, this language grouping, getting together and saying: "Hey, let's forget this migration, emigration thing, let's just get one

great big mega-country and get everybody speaking the same language. Let's get one huge government, and we'll be the greatest people on the face of the earth!" The first empirical dream, right there. Our language is the best! Let's rule everywhere! The Babylonians were not the first ones to think of that!

But notice God's response: "No! That's not happening." And every empirical dream in history has suffered the same fate. If you want to see some of the most absent people groups and languages, some of the smallest countries, they are the one who had great empirical dreams. But God will not tolerate it. Why? Because it thwarts His purposes of multiplicity of cultures, nations and tribes. He doesn't want one Christian language, thank you very much! He loves diversity.

All the way through Genesis you have to think that birthing the nation is about the most exciting blessing God can give. Noah had a rough time. He was on the boat all those years. He and the few people with him were all that were left. There is discouragement. Then God says: "Don't worry, Noah, I'm going to make out of each of your sons a great nation." That was supposed to make Noah feel better. Abraham was wandering round, not knowing what he was supposed to be doing, and God says: "Don't worry Abraham, I am going to make you the father of many great nations. And guess what, there's more than 12." Because God also says to Ishmael, when he is down and out in the desert, forgotten by his father: "Ishmael, I am going to make you the father of multiple nations." And He did. He said to Lot when he was discouraged: "Lot, I am going to make you the father of two great nations." Rebecca is very pregnant. I have never been married and never had a child, but I have seen pregnant women! And God says this to her in this condition: "Rebecca, you got two nations in the womb." Rebecca was supposed to say: "Really? I feel better!" because God thought this was such an outstanding promise that she could actually be the first of a new tribe, a new ethnos, a new culture. It was His plan and dream not only to multiply individuals all over the world, but to multiply families and tribes and nations.

Nations, as God speaks about them, are miracles. He talks about carrying them in His womb. Ladies, this is our Mother God. And He is still the Father. And we are all part of the Bride.

God says nations are birthed by Him. Nations cannot exist except by the will of God and cannot continue to exist if God wills them not to! God has a lot of nations He still has hope in, nations that you and I have written off! Because literally they cannot have their being unless God allows them to. And God says: "I have a covenant with all these nations." We remember the nations that Israel could wipe out. There were five or six of them. God told Israel to wipe them out, because they were irredeemable cultures that were eating and burning their own children. There was no redemptive possibility. So, when disease attacks, we know what we have to do to sustain life, and God is not ignorant of that. But we forget that God said to the Jews: "You can't touch this nation, and you can't touch that one, and you can't touch that one, because I have a purpose for them." And they are all still lost! God doesn't have a purpose for a nation when it is saved! Remember that. God doesn't have a purpose for your life when you are saved, you don't become valuable when you come to Jesus. You are valuable from conception, and He wants to bless you and win you into His Kingdom. He has the same hype for tribes and nations.

Last week we were praying on our campus for some of the Middle Eastern countries, and one of the students said: "How can we pray for God to bless them when they are disobeying Him?" I said: "We prayed for the Jews and they are disobeying God!" I guess we could pray for the communists because God makes it very clear in Scripture that He has one plan and purpose for the nations and that is to bless them. That is another word you can start marking in Scripture! You can mark eight times in Genesis alone that God says to the Jews: "I am blessing you to bless all nations. I am giving this to you to give to all nations." And we are like the Jews, so remember Israel! I ask God to bless Israel. God wants to bless Israel. He is very clear on that. Why? Because He wants to bless ALL nations. When? Now! How? Any way we will let Him!

The mandate of blessing the nations is 4 000 years old. God said to Adam: "Multiply. Fill the earth and create cultures." To Abraham, God said the same thing: "I am going to multiply you like the sand of the sea, like the stars of the sky and you are to bless all nations." And then God says through Jesus: "Reach every creature, multiply and disciple all nations." What does that mean? Bless all nations. What does that mean? Create culture that is glorifying to God.

Of the 39 books of the Old Testament, 33 are focused on the community, nations and tribes, with six focused on the individual. What is wrong with the evangelical picture? You can go into any Christian bookshop and buy 110 books on how I will be better in God. But what about my responsibility as a Christian to my community, saved or not? Hardly any books.

The emphasis of the Church for the last 50 to 150 years has been on the individual. You can blame it on the Greeks, the Westerners, America. I don't care who you blame it on, as long as you get rid of it. God's emphasis in Scripture is on the community, and, as Africans, you should lead the world in a Renaissance of this message. Don't ever expect America to rise up and help you with this. Only God can help you! America can help you with some other things! It's not wrong to know that God loves us as individuals; that's accurate. You can only be saved as an individual; that's accurate, although apparently in Scripture the family influence can be enormously powerful. But God's interest is how we live out our Christian lives in the community. We have no idea what God wants the role of the Body of Christ to be when the service ends and we say: "Go in peace!" What are we supposed to do the other six days? Our focus is on the individual alone, with salvation and personal holiness, which are all important and cannot be eliminated. But we have to hold on to that truth and take a hold of another: we have the largest Body of Christ in history and probably the weakest Church in history.

For the first 1 500 years of Christian growth, the Gospel was preached and not only spread and multiplied, but nations were transformed. The Roman Empire said: "These guys are turning our culture upside down!" And they didn't mean large cathedrals. They meant a different view of government, of education, business, of all of life, because of what they were learning in their first year or two of getting saved. They were out there in the community, practising what Jesus would be doing, practising what Moses had taught, not just sitting in the church and talking about it. The Europeans were the filthy, diseased, ignorant, corrupt, violent people the Middle East Christians were not sure had souls! A co-worker of mine asked one of the kings of Scandinavia how his country began to get the highest quality of life in the world. The king said: "I don't know!" But when you go back in history, as one of our workers has done for his PhD, you begin to find that the first man who preached the Gospel in that nation preached the Gospel at night and taught from Scripture by day on how to start businesses. Everywhere he went he dealt with economics, with political injustice, with the unrighteousness of leaving the vast majority of the population in ignorance. That was part of God's message.

Today we have nations which are 20% to 80% Christian. I have quoted these missionary statistics for 20 years and they are an embarrassment to me, even in relation to my own country. There is no noticeable impact on the community whatsoever. What has happened? What happened to the Gospel? Nothing! What happened to God? Nothing! So what's the problem? We've changed the message. We are not preaching the Gospel of God any longer. We are preaching a Gospel that begins and ends with salvation. The Gospel does include salvation, but it isn't a goal. If it was the goal, God would rapture us immediately. God's goal is that we should become representatives of His righteousness and His worth in our community. God's goal is that we should become more like Him. We should become more wise, more mature, more understanding in how we deal with our family members, how we deal with our communities, how we deal with our jobs, so that wherever we go we are ambassadors, a living example of what God the Father would do if He were there right at that moment. And you know He wouldn't be late! You know that! So why are you? God respects time. God says: "Consider the light of the day, while it is still light, because the dark comes quickly." God says: "Learn to measure your time to know how much of it is left." God says He created time and He owns it. God gave a 24-hour day, a seven-day week, a cycle of months and seasons. This is not a Western construct. And you only have so much time. God says that. It has a purpose, and if you are wasting it, you are missing it in God.

How did we lose so much of the Gospel? How did we lose so much understanding of God? This is fairly simple, but theologians and historians make it sound complicated! I will give you the simple version. The primary thing is how we miss God and how we get back on the road. There are many things that have happened, but basically we began to think there was a spiritual Kingdom and everything else was secular. This happened primarily in the evangelical movement because part of the Protestant Movement said: "God takes care of salvation, so what we need to worry about is clothing, housing, food and helping the people learn to read." The other half of the Protestants said: "No! We are here to get people saved!" This half became known as the liberals and the other half became known as the evangelicals. One half was interested in social things, the other was interested in spiritual things. One half was only interested in the material world and how things were happening on a daily basis. The other half were only interested in habits. One half was concerned about the earthly, this half was consumed with the ever-after. One half stressed study if you wanted to get ahead in life, the other stressed prayer and getting out into the world to win people for Jesus, starting a church and moving on. I don't know which half you are in. I know which half I have been in most of my life!

The problem is they are both right and they are both wrong. And so we got the idea that there was a spiritual Kingdom, mostly invisible, mostly on Sundays, mostly in an institution called "the Church", mostly

about prayer, worship, warfare and “Oh God, I’ve got to go to my secular job!” Most of the evangelicals in the world began to pray: “God, give me a real ministry and make me a pastor or a missionary.” And if God didn’t, they would sit in the pews and say: “I work!”

When I started in missions and went to Egypt, you could see the people from one group running hospitals, schools and food programmes. But I was there to be a real missionary, not a social gobbledegook! We have taken the Kingdom of God, we have taken God Himself, and said: “I like this part of you, I won’t have that part!” The other side has said they will take one part of God but the other is not their business. Yet God is saying: “When will you let God be God.” When will we stop telling Him what He has to be like because we have a real theological package which is convenient? When was God in Scripture ever convenient?

If we are to see God glorified in our generation, if we are to see God’s glory fill the earth as the waters cover the sea, we are going to have to return to the Gospel of the whole Kingdom of God. We are going to have to return to loving God and our neighbour. Jesus said the second is as important as the first. How devastating! In Los Angeles, the Christians don’t even know who their neighbour is. I have a neighbour. God, who is my neighbour? And God says: “Your neighbour I know – who are you?”

This has resulted in personal holiness with no community responsibility, political criticism with no political responsibility, and a love for God which can ignore everyone who lives around me. It has resulted in huge churches with no social impact, and it is time for it to stop!

How did God want to bless all nations? How are we to love our neighbour? When God gives us a mandate in Scripture, He gives us an answer in the Bible and a plan. And God has taught us how we are to love our neighbour. What did He teach the Jews? He said: “I want to give you justice and government, because I am the King of Kings.” He said: “I want to give you beauty and art because I am the potter. I am the Rose of Sharon.” He said: “I want to give you family because I am the Lord of Love. I am the Father.” He said: “I want to give you communication because I am the Living Word.” He said: “I want to give you science and technology because I am the Creator God of all order and all power. He said: “I want to give you education because I am the great Teacher, the Lord who loves wisdom.” And He said: “I want to give you good things, because I am Jehovah Jirah, the God of business.”

It’s time for the whole Church to rise to the whole Gospel, to the whole community. It’s time for us to remarry our Christian heart with the Christian mind. It is time for us to see all of life as sacred and under God and call to be redeemed to Him through the Blood of Jesus Christ. It is time for us to lay down our self-interest as a Church and take up the interest of the communities in which God has placed us. It is time for us to let God be God!