

LOREN CUNNNINGHAM: How God Rewards Those Who Respond to His Voice

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From the time he was 20 until he was 26, this strange vision haunted Loren Cunningham: *A map of the world. Ocean waves crash against the shores. Wave after wave rolls onto the continents, each going beyond the one before it. Building momentum, the waves sweep across the land, completely covering all of the continents.*

Suddenly, the waves no longer are water, but multitudes of Christian young people in their teens and early 20s, marching onto the shores of all the continents and sharing the gospel.

You can imagine Cunningham's excitement as he began to understand the meaning of the vision. The Lord was directing him to mobilize thousands of young Christians to proclaim the gospel to people throughout the entire world. His first inkling of the Lord's plan came while praying when he was on a mission in the Bahamas in 1956. Four short but eventful years later he had launched Youth With a Mission to implement his vision.

This year YWAM (pronounced "y-wam") celebrates its 25th year, and Loren Cunningham can look back with gratitude. He can see how much of his prophetic vision has been realized, though he anticipates many more waves of Christian youth being sent on missions of world evangelism in YWAM's future. Recently I had the opportunity to speak with him about what the Lord has taught him in his pioneering missionary efforts. We visited in the front parlor of YWAM's Washington headquarters, just across from Capitol Hill. Cunningham is a trailblazer at

heart, and his eyes flashed with enthusiasm as he spoke about his dedication to answering God's call.

"Hearing God's voice has more than once brought me and my family to turning points that changed our lives," he says.

"I preached my first sermon when I was 13 years old. It was about God's testing His children. Ever since, I have gone through many crises and challenges myself. I turned down the offer of wealth from my aunt, gave up my reputation in my denomination, and settled for a risky and presumptuous-sounding call to send out waves of young people to preach the gospel to the nations."

Loren Cunningham comes from a family which listened for and obeyed God's call. In response to a vocation, his paternal grandfather gave up a successful laundry business to serve as a Bible teacher, traveling from town to town.

Cunningham's parents, Tom and Jewell Cunningham, were both active in evangelistic ministries from an early age. As newlyweds in their 20s, they were itinerant preachers, going wherever they believed God told them. Cunningham's earliest memories are of a dusty, desert town in Arizona and a 16-foot tent, furnished with boxes, which was the family home. There the entire family joined in building a church, making adobe bricks with their own hands. In this setting, the young Cunningham learned how to listen to God.

He began hearing God at age 6, and at 13 he already knew that the Lord had called him into the ministry. As in much of his later communication with God, it was a very visual experience.

"I had my eyes shut and saw Mark 16:15 written in huge block letters: GO INTO ALL THE WORLD AND PREACH THE GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE.

"I opened my eyes and still saw the words of the Scripture, as if they were made out of marble, like you'd see in the movies

Quo Vadis or The Ten Commandments.

"The impact of this vision is so imbedded in my memory, I can still see those big bold letters right now as I recall the occasion. It was something God was really driving home to me in a lasting way."

Cunningham was ordained as an Assemblies of God minister, responsible for youth activities in the Los Angeles area. Although the job was good, he felt restless and frustrated in it.

"I enjoyed my work, " he says "The young people were all so bright and eager. But I had to admit that most of the activities I planned for them were empty. They missed the heart of the young people because they had no challenge. That's what we all long for, especially in our teens and early 20s. The big challenge."

The more he pondered the waves of the global vision that had visited him in his early 20s, the more his youth ministry seemed mundane and rather trivial. One day, Loren decided to do something about it.

He proposed taking a group of young people on a missionary trip to Hawaii. One hundred and six people went. The trip was a mixed blessing: half of the young people wanted to evangelize, while the rest chose to have fun on the beaches.

Disappointed at this failure, Cunningham took off for an around-the-world trip. He hoped he might discover some way to achieve his vision for young Christians taking the gospel to every corner of the world.

Returning home after experiencing a primitive and not-so-comfortable world that teemed with opportunities to do something important for God, he came to a startling realization.

"I had been telling young people to give their lives away," he remembers, "yet the system required years of schooling first, by which time most would have forgotten their fiery zeal."

As his thoughts took shape, a plan emerged.

Cunningham would recruit young people for missionary projects and send them out immediately after high school so that later, when they moved on in life either to college, jobs or marriage, they would have a new and deeper sense of purpose. The kids would be sent for short periods of missionary service—a couple of months, maybe a year. Everyone would be there for work, not sightseeing. Each would pay his own way. The program would be open to volunteers from all churches, not just from one denomination.

Cunningham began to experiment with small teams of young people participating in a few programs. Then he made an appointment with the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, eagerly expecting to get approval to launch a massive effort.

We had opened YWAM to all denominations, but for my personal ministry I still wanted to stay under the Assemblies' umbrella," he explains. A compromise plan that would allow this was offered.

"You can continue with your vision Loren, but you'll be taking out a more manageable number—say 10 or 20 young people a year," he was told. There was a place for him in the Assemblies if he could be a full team player. He was offered a job at headquarters with a fine salary, staff and good budget.

"But Cunningham believed the Lord had given him a very specific mandate. Youth With a Mission was to send out waves of young people from all denominations into evangelism.

"I tried to explain what I felt God was saying to me," he says. "It was much, much bigger than 20 people a year, and

very much larger than any one denomination.”

Unable to find a mutually agreeable plan, Cunningham resigned from the Assemblies.

“Getting God’s leading from other people is tricky,” his mother had once told him. “We can hear a confirming voice through another person. But if God has something important to tell us, He will speak to us directly.” Cunningham was sure God had spoken to him directly.

In 1960, the idea of short-term missionary service was relatively unknown. Using young people in missionary work was equally unheard of.

“It took seven years after your ‘call,’ assuming you were an adult, to be on the mission field,” Cunningham continues. “In the meantime, you got bonded to everything else but the calling.”

The concept behind Youth With a Mission is simple and Scriptural. Short-term ministries release thousands of potential workers into the kingdom of God on the basis of Luke 10. As they begin to move out in waves, they contribute to the long-term missionary work spoken of in Luke 22:35-38 and Luke 24:47-49.

“This was before the hippie movement, before the Jesus revolution or the challenge to authority of the 1960s,” recalls Cunningham. “Youth didn’t travel, other than the very rich or missionary’s kids. Youth were not allowed—they couldn’t travel. Don’t forget, jet travel didn’t really begin until the late 1950s.

“With jets came the immediacy, which is typical of youth. We opened up channels so they could travel and share the gospel. That was our role. They were there; God had prepared them. He was just now preparing a channel called Youth With a Mission, so kids could go anywhere in the world.”

“Youth With a Mission is a pioneering organization. “We trailblaze, we pioneer and we settle,” says Cunningham, describing its three levels of evangelism, training and mercy ministries.

Kids are willing to take a risk. They do it as they enter the business world,” he believes. “They should be allowed to make mistakes” in the mission field as well.

“You *always* find a fiery zeal in kids. They are ready for life, looking for it,” he says. “That’s why God chose a Joseph, at age 17, to go to a foreign country called Egypt, or Daniel, who was a teenager when he went to Babylon. John, the beloved disciple, was a very young man. What about David? A whole army watched that young, cocky, inexperienced kid!”

About 20,000 people are now involved in YWAM. Five thousand are full-time, long-term missionary workers, while 15,000 are short-term volunteers. The ministry has more than 190 locations around the world, including more than 80 missionary training schools. This work is on all continents and reaches 100 countries each year.

Most YWAM-ers are, in fact, youthful. The average worker is about 22 and the majority fall between the ages of 18 and 29. However, people all the way into their 70s are also involved in Youth With a Mission. Many are second-career missionaries or people who’ve retired and want to labor for the harvest God has planned.

“Youth is not an age; it’s an attitude,” laughs Cunningham. “Our oldest worker was 84.”

Of the 223 countries Cunningham counts in the world, YWAM has trailblazed into more than 200 already. He expects to reach the rest sometime soon. “The tougher we make the conditions,” he adds, “the more the kids volunteer.”

How tough are YWAM conditions? Why do the kids volunteer?

"Kids need to test their manliness and their womanliness—their adulthood—against the elements of life," according to Cunningham. "But they need an opportunity to test themselves spiritually as well. When you get into a Third World situation, you're going to be tested.

"You're going to sleep on the floors, eat food that's different, suffer hot and sticky climates, and be surrounded by mosquitoes. You're going to experience a lot of those physical testings that are out there in Bangkok or on the Cambodian border, working in a war zone. You're going to have it feeding the children at an orphanage we run in Somalia. You're going to have it working with some of the 12 million street kids we deal with in Brazil. You're going to come up emotionally drained and spiritually attacked. But it's part of growing us up in the Lord.

"At the same time, there's a bonding principle: the bonding of your adult life into a spiritual challenge, I think, is one of the greatest opportunities of a cross cultural, mission field experience.

"We're there to help people get over the hurdles into the victories," he explains. But he quickly emphasizes that. YWAM is not an "American Express tourist organization or a Thomas Cook tour."

Ask him what he's learned from the kids and he'll grin as he tells you of their constancy, freshness, zeal and depth of commitment.

"Faith, hope and love ... the greatest of these is love," observes this man who points out that among youth, what you most often see is hope.

Love has to be proven through the test of fire. But faith is that word of the Lord that comes. I've watched young people with their hope turn it into faith, and begin to produce love," he says. "Faith, hope and love—on the part of youth—are

all wrapped up in the zeal, the adventure.”

Loren Cunningham describes a pattern in God’s dealing with him throughout his life: God would speak to him, giving a distinct call. Then a testing would come. He learned that while the Lord often leads us into victory, success itself can be the most dangerous obstacle to hearing the voice of God properly.

As YWAM’s missions and ministries developed over the years, God repeatedly performed surgery on its spiritual leader’s heart. Each success—turning hotels into homes, castles into schools and abandoned buildings into international universities, in Hawaii, Switzerland, New Zealand and Munich—was tempered for Cunningham by a new understanding of what God really expected of His witnesses and ambassadors.

Then came the test. The ministry was thriving, and the moment seemed perfect for launching a special new project—a ship which could minister mercy to all ports of call. It would be a floating campus with cargo holds able to carry medicine and goods to people all over the world.

A ship, the Maori, was found for sale in New Zealand.

Young YWAM missionaries were quoted by the press in New Zealand as saying God had told them to purchase the vessel. One headline actually read, “Youth Say ‘God Will Give Us The Ship.’”

In poured volunteers, money and special offers for painting, decorating and equipping the ship with a precious cargo of grain, meat and medical supplies to take to the needy.

At a time when everything seemed to be going so well, Cunningham did not realize he had just stepped into one of the biggest mistakes he would face.

Things kept happening fast—but quickly screeched to a halt. The money stopped flowing. Instead, prophetic words of warning

predicted the ship was in jeopardy.

I look back on it as our 'University of the Spirit' experience," says Cunningham, "because it was a catalyst that brought us to an opportunity for deep humbling.

"The ship looked like a disaster for us worldwide, because the Lord had clearly said pursue this particular vessel, which we did. But then I had a vision, which greatly distressed me and changed the entire course of our actions."

In Cunningham's vision, he saw the ship in the spotlights. Jesus alone, stood in the shadows.

"We had our lights shining fully on the boat and had made an idol of it. To give the ship up, to relinquish it to Jesus, we put it on the altar of consecration for our sins.

"After we decided to give the ship back to the Lord, we received three loan offers so that we could save the ship and save our face. But it was clearly not right to accept the money. We had to say no. It was God's discipline on us for focusing our attention on the creation, rather than the Creator."

The experience taught Cunningham and his team a valuable lesson: *Put your dreams on the altar. When they are of God, they will be resurrected into something even grander.*

Years later, the Lord led YWAM to purchase another ship, a vessel appropriately named the Anastasis, which is the Greek word for resurrection.

Cunningham tends to speak in philosophical terms. He has a degree in philosophy, and it's obvious he enjoys delving into the reasons behind things.

No question elicits a simple response. The teacher in him, instead, requires that he respond to each and every point.

Talk to him, for instance, about the challenges he has faced after each distinct call from the Lord. He'll give you his philosophy on testing:

"God's word in Romans 8:28 says that He takes everything and turns it for good. So even a test is a turning point for good."

But how does he know that such a testing is not God telling him he's missed the point, or that the devil isn't attempting to thwart God's plans?

"You can distinguish Satan's hand by his character," Cunningham emphasizes. "That's where you get back to the principles of the word of God. Always test the *rhema*, the personal word of the Lord, against the written principles in Scripture. If it contradicts any of God's written principles in any way, then you know it's off."

Ask him how he reconciled his rejection of the covering of the Assemblies of God for YWAM with the biblical concept of submission to those in spiritual authority. Again he gives a thoroughgoing answer.

"Let's bring it to Youth With a Mission," he says. "*I* am the authority in some people's lives. So the same issue is there, but it's a corporate and individual issue. God speaks corporately and individually, and only He can bring the two together in understanding where they separate.

"The Lord Himself must guide us and direct us. As I lead, I cannot be a lord over the people. I must serve them in leadership, not control them. That's an important key in my leadership role. I must endeavor to release workers into their ministries as God calls them. I can help them to discover, or confirm, a word. But I don't want to be responsible in any way to direct them away from the will of God.

"I think about the struggle I had. I never was rebellious. The

turmoil was inside, wanting to be submissive, and yet knowing my ultimate submission had to be to God. You must be *absolutely* committed to the Lordship of Jesus; *conditionally* submitted to spiritual leaders. If you ever turn it around, you've made an idol in your life.

My question was one of idolatry in My heart, not whether the organization was good or right or anything else. Was I going to obey God or man?

First it's a matter of ultimate submission to the Lord. Then it becomes finding the Lord *through* leadership."

How can one learn to recognize the voice of God?

That," says Cunningham, "is the thesis of my life, and it should be a subject of central importance to every Christian.

Hearing God is not all that difficult," he says. "If we know the Lord, we have already heard His voice. After all, it was the inner leading that brought us to Him in the first place.

If God did, in fact, commission individuals to the task of going everywhere telling people the Good News, then surely He'll guide them."

Spiritual guidance, according to Loren Cunningham, is first and foremost a relationship with the Guide. The goal of all guidance, therefore, is to lead us into a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. All other goals must be subordinate to this. "The ship experience revealed a danger area in guidance," says Cunningham. "Divine guidance is so heady, so spectacular, that there is the risk of glory attaching itself to the work rather than to the Lord.

If we make the wrong choices, we can end up not only robbing God of His glory, but of His rightful first attention."

At many times of great turning points, both in YWAM's-ministry and Cunningham's own life, it has helped to ask how much of

the supernatural there was in the guidance he had received.

“We had not been asking for signs, nor seeking the spectacular,” he confesses, “but signs and spectacular coincidences had been occurring one after another. It seemed spiritual foolishness not to pay attention.”

Cunningham believes every Christian has the option and the right to receive even overwhelmingly obvious directions from God when they learn to recognize them and begin to give Him the glory.

“When you do that, even in your own heart and prayer life, then you become more aware and see God released more to speak into your life.”

“That’s dependence on God in the sense of trust,” he says.

“After you’ve obeyed and done everything possible, let Him do the impossible. You do the possible; God does the impossible.”

Summing up his philosophy of the Christian life and ministry, Loren Cunningham believes that not everyone can be a preacher—but every Christian does have a call of his own.

Cunningham’s calling?

“I believe God has called me to be a pioneer-leader in His work, someone who loves to teach and preach.”

While the scope and magnitude of the projects he has overseen through Youth With a Mission might overshadow the intrinsic value of his teaching/preaching ministry, Cunningham has nonetheless had the privilege of speaking in churches all over the world.

“Leadership is a calling of God; a leader is someone who walks out in front,” he affirms. “In other words, he pioneers.”

In his biography, *Is That Really You, God?* (co-authored by his

sister, Janice Rogers), Cunningham stresses the need to regularly check one's life against his or her original call. Has he himself done that recently? Is he on target? Has the calling changed?

"Not the call," he says, which he checks very often. "The call, in the sense of the task, still is the Great Commission. We track what YWAM is doing in the light of the Great Commission every day of the week. How many countries are left where we haven't trailblazed? How many groups or peoples remain that still have no Christian witness?

"We're seeing several churches started each week, somewhere around the world from the people who are converted. We're not a denomination. We turn the people in these countries over to others in the area. That's our call: to get a witness, a permanent light, in every single country and ethnic group in the world. There are 5,010 languages in the world. Does each one have a gospel witness? No. But they must be started!

"My role? I must help lead our people into doing that. We don't want to train anyone but totally, sold-out Christians who want to see the world evangelized. That's our bottom line: to know God and make Him known."

One of the problems inherent in being led by the Lord, says Loren Cunningham, is keeping one's perspective.

"As divine guidance begins to unfold, it always seems to come with hard, gritty work. Gone is the thrill of the original leading. Ahead, still, is the excitement of seeing the fruit harvested."

How has this been evident in Youth With a Mission's development?

"I enjoy anticipating the work of the future, sometimes more than the present," says Cunningham. "I love the vision, I love to ponder it.

"The excitement comes when the Lord says, 'Now do *this*.' Then I see it as *His* work, and my calling, commitment and fulfillment.

"By the time a project is implemented, I'm moving on to the next word of the Lord," he says.

"Part of that is the calling of the pioneer. You have to be a visionary to see things prior to their existence. So I'm describing bridges that haven't been built, and I'm getting ready to cross them, even though they have not been constructed. I'm living in buildings that don't yet exist."