

The Power of One

Individual Christians have played extraordinary roles in the spread of the gospel.

Early in my Christian walk (which began more than three decades ago), I recall hearing the phrase, “One plus God is a majority.” The idea behind this was that Christians should never be discouraged by numerical or other odds ranged against them because, with God, not only are all things possible, but also ordinary worldly reckonings of who will or won’t succeed are often overturned.

Later, as some prominent figures in the charismatic movement began behaving in odd ways, Christian teaching began to focus once more—correctly—on the need for both general laity and leaders to be accountable to oversight through a pastor or some sort of board of elders.

So far so good. Balance and accountability has always been needed if the Christian life is not to take off in strange directions.

That said, the fact is that throughout history individual Christians have played extraordinary roles in the spread of the gospel, often in the face of great criticism from their peers or those in ecclesiastical authority over them. The apostle Paul himself is an example of a pioneer who initially was misunderstood by the other apostles and the Christian community in Jerusalem.

Indeed, it is striking how strongly many of the greatest pioneers of evangelism or missionary outreach were flatly opposed by many of the leading Christians of their day. In the

Protestant tradition, of course, Martin Luther springs to mind. But John Wesley is perhaps the most remarkable example of a man who persisted in evangelizing England despite intense opposition from much of the Anglican Church.

One of the fruits of the Wesleyan revival was William Wilberforce, whose 47-year campaign against slavery made him at one point one of the most hated men in England. Many devout Christians from his own class opposed his activities with venomous zeal.

William Carey, the great Baptist missionary of India, set off in 1793 with little support from the Christian establishment of his day. Robert Morrison, the pioneer English Protestant missionary to China, arrived in the port of Canton (Guangzhou today) in 1807. En route, the captain of the ship on which he traveled asked Morrison skeptically if he thought he could have any impact on a country as huge and remote from the gospel as China.

“No,” Morrison is said to have replied, “but I expect that God will.”

Decades later, when another Englishman, Hudson Taylor, pioneered missionary evangelism in China’s interior, mobilizing missionaries dressed in Chinese style, he was roundly reproved by many Christians, including missionaries, of his day.

In our own era, it often has not been any easier, and not just among Protestants. When Roman Catholic Mother Teresa wanted to begin her ministry to “the poorest of the poor” in India in 1949, the Roman Catholic authorities in her home city of

Calcutta at first tried to stop her.

In fact, female missionaries in both the Protestant and Catholic traditions have had to overcome a double opposition much of the time: from their own families, worrying about their safety, and from male leaders of their church convinced that women should play no leading Christian roles other than wife and mother.

Yet the history of Africa and Asia would be vastly different without the courage of women such as Mary Slessor, Amy Carmichael and Gladys Aylward.

History, which belongs to God, has had a way of vindicating those brave souls often rejected in their own times.

As China approaches the 200th anniversary of Morrison's arrival, to be celebrated in 2007, Chinese Christians are hoping to honor him by sending thousands of Chinese missionaries overseas. Taylor has long been immensely admired by China's Christians. Slessor, Aylward and Carmichael also have found places of honor in the rich history of the gospel's progress around the world.

Yet the challenge remains.

Can we pray that God will protect us from wackos and crooks, even as he continues to raise up Christian pioneers in the face of criticism? Can we pray also sometimes to recognize in these pioneers the greatness that God does? I hope and pray so.