

A Life Lived to God's Glory Among the Nations: Ralph Winter 1925-2009

by Coty Pinckney 5/22/2009

Ralph Winter died on Wednesday night, at the age of 84. I am confident that the Lord Jesus welcomed Dr Winter into His presence, saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master!" In the new heavens and the new earth, when we recount the history of the greatest accomplishment of all time - God bringing all the nations to Himself - Dr Winter will be among the most prominent figures who by God's power worked to fill the earth with His glory as the waters cover the sea.

I only met Dr Winter once. When he was about 80, after being diagnosed with an incurable cancer, during a period of remission, he came to Columbia to teach. He flew into Charlotte, and met with several of us that evening. Our conversation showed him to be what I already knew - an academic in the best sense of the word. Dr Winter was a man of ideas - and he was always looking for people to challenge those ideas, to engage him in debate over those ideas, to sharpen his thinking and to stretch him further. So when I thanked him for his profound impact on me and on the worldwide church, he brushed it off, and immediately began asking me questions. In short order, he discovered an area of disagreement: He believed each local church should be focused on one small slice of the demographic pie, in order to most effectively reach unbelievers like them; I believe God is most glorified when the local church transcends the cultural boundaries that so often separate believers. He wanted to debate the issue, and I gave him that pleasure, uncomfortable as I was - despite being a former academic myself, I was there that evening to honor him!

But that interaction displays the character of Dr Ralph D Winter: He was an incredibly creative man of ideas. He was always searching, always thinking. In my view, he propagated a few wrong ideas. But in God's providence, he was the man most responsible for pushing the worldwide church to embrace a whole series of right ideas - biblical truths that had been overlooked, or not widely known. Here is a list of some of Dr Winter's key ideas. (See more of my favorite Ralph Winter quotes at the DGCC blog).

God's missionary mandate to the church is a cross-cultural mandate. Dr Winter's address to the 1974 Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelization was perhaps the most important paper presented at any conference in the last century. At that time, almost every mission agency thought of the biblical missionary mandate as a command to reach every nation - that is, country - with the Gospel. Dr Winter argued persuasively that the biblical mandate was to reach every culture with the Gospel, every *people group*, every *ethno-linguistic entity*; that's the biblical definition of "nation." God's design is for His church to plant a thriving, evangelizing church in every people group of the world. Thirty-five years later, almost every missions agency agrees with this analysis. This insight led to the founding of the [US Center for World Mission](#) and the development of the [Perspectives on the World Christian Movement course](#).

God's cross-cultural mandate to His people permeates Scripture. Dr Winter emphasized that our God is a missionary God, calling all the nations to Himself, and

that this has been His purpose from the beginning. The calling of Abraham in Genesis 12 is itself part of the cross-cultural mandate. Missions is thus not a mandate resting on a few, isolated verses here and there; it is the central part of the biblical storyline.

God has been working throughout history to fulfill this cross-cultural mandate. In telling the story of missions, many have written as if nothing happened prior to 1792, when William Carey sailed for India. Dr Winter emphasized that God has been at work in fulfilling the missionary mandate throughout time, using different methods in different periods of time. For pedagogical purposes, he broke history down into 400-year eras, and argued that one way of advancing the Gospel was prevalent in each era. I am not alone in rejecting some of those generalizations as too broad and thus unhelpful. But his emphasis was right: God has indeed been at work over the centuries, well prior to 1792.

God's church needs bands of people focused on missions to assist in the fulfilling of the cross-cultural mandate. Building on the functioning of Paul's missionary band, Dr Winter argued that such groups of missionaries are a vital part of the church. Indeed, he argued that each missionary band was fully a church in its own right - just a different type of church than the normal within-one-culture church. Here again, in my view Dr Winter took a valuable insight and went too far with it. By all means, mission agencies have a vital role to play in fulfilling the task. But each missionary should be part of a local, home church, living as one extended arm of that local church, as the local church plays its role in obeying the cross-cultural mandate.

Use all that you have, throughout all of your life, for God's glory among the nations. Dr Winter exhorted others time and again to live this out, and then set a sterling example of what this means. He worked for God's glory among the nations until the day before he died. He left a safe and secure job to start the US Center. He called all of us to a war-time lifestyle, and then he lived such a lifestyle, never accumulating possessions, always giving away much of what he received. Furthermore, he called the church to prayer for cross-cultural missions, and then prayed diligently himself.

For those of you who have been part of Desiring God Church for some time, these points may seem almost passé. You have heard me say them - as well as variations on these themes - time and again. That's the impact of a man mightily used by God - His profound insights and ideas become so widely taught that we begin to take them for granted.

So let us thank God for this man:

I praise you, Lord God, for the gift of Ralph Winter to your church, and to me in particular. May you raise up many more like him because of his faithfulness to Your calling. And may we fulfill your cross-cultural mandate to the church in this generation - in part because of the faithfulness of Ralph D Winter. All glory and praise is Yours, O Lord.

(For more on Ralph Winter, see the links available at the DGCC blog version of this article)