The Four Barriers

by Jason Benedict

It's been almost 2000 years since Jesus gave the church the commandment we call the great commission (Matthew 28:18). Arguably, this generation of believers has a greater opportunity to finish the task than any previous generation. This is truly a unique time in history! Let's review some of the factors that make this true.

• **Access to Adequate Information:** Previous generations of believers have only had an inkling of the unfinished task. Today, we can quantify it with considerable accuracy. Missions pioneers have attempted to do this as far back as 1792 when William Carey published his "Inquiry." Nevertheless, only since the advent of the unreached peoples movement has the "finish line" truly come into view. I was serving as a field missionary in West Africa in the mid 90's when the peoples research for that area was being done. In fact, GCOWE 1995 in Seoul, Korea was a significant milestone in the process of bringing focus to the picture: closure (in terms of a church for every ethne) was not only defined but quantified for the church.

• **An Abundance of Resource:** This generation of believers has unprecedented access to financial resources (we shall discuss this more later). The global church not only has phenomenal economic liquidity, but we also have tremendous human resources. In the year AD 100 the ratio of unbelievers to believers was approximately 360:1; today it is less than 10:1 (It could be as low as 6:1).

• **A Truly International Harvest Force:** The last 100 years of missions endeavor have been by far the most fruitful. We have seen a significant shift in the average demographic of the Christian church. One hundred years ago only about 10% of the church was non-western. Today the average Christian is non-western: 60% of all believers live in places like Latin America, Southern Asia and Africa. This global force includes many who are near neighbors and potentially the best force for evangelism to the world's unreached.

To these three factors we can add others like globalization, urbanization, the information revolution, ease of transportation, the Pentecostal/charismatic movements and others. These things are beyond the scope of this article, but each has earthshaking potential.

With the significance of these events in view, and with the approach of the 2000th anniversary of the ascension of Christ, the question remains. Why haven't we finished the task? Why are there still over 6500 (IMB numbers) ethnic groups without the gospel?

Over the years I have developed a conceptual model for answering this question called "the four barriers." I first formulated it in its current form in 2004, and for the last two years AIMS has been using this model in our training and consulting activities around the world. In this approach we are assuming that there are a discrete number of barriers to the completion of the

Jason Benedict is the Executive Director of AIMS (Accelerating International Mission Strategies, http://www.aims.org).

great commission and that if we address these barriers systematically and in the power of the Holy Spirit we can overcome them. We have found this approach very helpful when applied to our consultations with the leaders of national missions movements. We believe that for a missions movement to be ultimately successful it must have the capacity to deal with all four barriers. Therefore, it provides a baseline for missions leaders to evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of their movement.

Identifying the four barriers

The four barriers are: The Spiritual Barrier, The Socio-Political Barrier, The Logistical Barrier, and the Cultural Barrier. Each barrier is seen as a category into which smaller sub-components fit. For example, the Cultural Barrier would include the sub-component of the language barrier. We believe the barriers are discrete in number—there are only four barriers—but we do recognize that there is overlap between the barriers. For example, seen from different angles language might be seen as both a logistical barrier and a cultural barrier. The easiest way to proceed at this point is with a description of the barriers.

The spiritual barrier

The Spiritual Barrier is a supernatural resistance to the gospel. Historically, discussion of this barrier has corresponded closely with which side of the cessationist divide someone found themselves on. While this still holds true to some extent, there are more and more people of every denominational stripe talking about the reality of malevolent spiritual forces. In Ephesians 6 Paul described these forces as principalities and powers. In 2 Corinthians Paul writes, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." (2 Cor 4:4). This verse describes spiritual reality for huge blocks of the world's population.

A significant amount has been written on this topic in recent years, and discussions of this reality are becoming more common. This is even true among western Christians with materialistic worldviews and denominational backgrounds that de-emphasized the supernatural components of life. I have noted that in missionary circles the lines blurred long before they did with denominations back home. Most of those attempting to pioneer work among unreached peoples quickly come to grips with supernatural realities, like the existence of demons, and the need for spiritual warfare regardless of their theological predisposition. Thankfully, the scriptures are an ample resource in this matter.

The socio-political barrier

The Socio-Political barrier is described as organized resistance to the gospel coming from social, socio-religious or political systems. Over 80% of the unreached peoples of the world are in some way affected by this barrier. There are obvious examples of this barrier in communist, Muslim, and Buddhist societies where the resistance is official and backed by legislation and other

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regulatory powers.

We call this barrier Socio-political because it is also manifest through the social systems of religious and cultural communities. Sometimes this is simply an added level of resistance in places where official resistance is legislated. In many other cases we find this kind of resistance in countries that have official religious freedom.

A team I was leading discovered this while trying to reach out to a Muslim people in Africa's Sahel. This group was located in a country that had considerable religious freedom; however, the barrier for the gospel was very high with this ethnic group. Young men within the group would actually approach our workers by night and say, "we are very interested in becoming Christians, we like your message, but we can't convert until our uncle Abdul dies, it would be too hard." The social structure of this community exerted incredible pressure on its members.

The logistical barrier

This is the barrier of misallocation of resources (human, financial, etc), the inappropriateness of systems and the challenges of environment (remoteness, hardship, etc). So far the barriers we have mentioned exist outside the church. This barrier has elements that are both internal and external to the church. The challenges of environment are still a significant factor in world missions, but not to the extent that they once were.

I met senior missionaries on the field in Africa who first came to the field by ship. They described being dropped off at sea, where they boarded dugout canoes and were rowed ashore. Logistical challenges associated with remoteness and hardship are still very real, but have been mitigated to a great degree by the forces of globalization and technology. With modern transportation you can travel from any international airport to most of the

world's unreached peoples within 48 hours.

It is the other part of the logistical barrier that poses what is perhaps the greatest challenge to world evangelization. This generation has access to far more resources than any preceding generation; however, we also have a massive problem with misallocation. We have plenty of human and financial resources, yet we are only sending two percent of our workers and 5 cents per $100 to reach one-third of the world's population. The logistics associated with getting these resources where they need to go comprises the greatest part of this barrier. This is a mobilization issue, and that is why AIMS considers mobilization to be both the greatest need and opportunity in world missions today.

The final part of the Logistical barrier relates to appropriate systems, strategies and structures. Jesus spoke in terms of appropriate wineskins (Matthew 9:17). We believe every missions movement must adopt appropriate systems, strategies and structures if the movement is to be truly effective. The development of the mission society and systems like deputized fundraising are examples of wineskin innovation in missions history. The question is, what new missional wineskins are needed in this generation? It seems developments like church-centric missions, business as missions, non-residential missions and others are attempts to develop new wineskins for missions activity.

The Cultural Barrier

The final barrier is seen in terms of the classical missiological barriers of understanding and acceptance. The barrier of understanding is overcome through activities like language acquisi-

tion, translation, interpretation and illustration (i.e. redemptive analogies and the like). The barrier of acceptance correlates to the problem of foreignness. Not only do people have a tendency to reject what they don't understand, they also reject that which seems foreign. It is through incarnational ministry and contextualization that these challenges are overcome.

Solutions for the barriers

Now that we have defined the four barriers, let's propose solutions for overcoming the barriers. For our purposes at AIMS we have defined these solutions in terms of mobilization.

The chart below shows proposed solutions for overcoming each barrier. Some of these the reader may find intuitive, but others may seem less so. In our experience in consulting with national missions movements around the world, we have found the following with regards to each barrier:

The mobilization of prayer as a solution for the spiritual barrier is intuitive enough for most. However, we have discovered that in some countries there has been such an emphasis on the reality of this barrier that their default answer for the question, "why do so many remain unreached?" is the existence of spiritual barriers. While this barrier is certainly real, it should not eclipse the other barriers. We have observed that a lack of perspective on the existence of other barriers has led leaders in some nations to exaggerate the effectiveness of demonic entities in resisting the gospel. Jesus tells us, "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you" (Lk 10:19 NIV emphasis mine). For

Table 1. Barriers and solutions		
Spiritual (internal/external)	This is supernatural resistance to the gospel. 2 Cor 4:4	The mobilization of prayer and other forms of spiritual warfare.
Socio-Political	This is organized resistance to the gospel coming from social (socio-religious) or political systems.	The mobilization of transformational ministry strategies (i.e. good works). 1 Peter 2:12, 3:16 and Mt 5:16
Logistical (internal/external)	This is the barrier of misallocation of resources (human, financial, etc), wineskins and those of remoteness, hardship, etc.	The mobilization of the local church and ministry sodalities for strategic missions ministry.
Cultural (internal/external)	These are the classical missiological barriers of understanding and acceptance.	The mobilization and training of missionaries.

example, frontline workers in Muslim lands might be tempted to lose this biblical perspective and entertain thoughts of a really big and eminently powerful "demon of Islam" because they have not considered the role of the socio-political barrier.

The book of First Peter gives us considerable insight into the role of good works in overcoming resistance to the gospel. 1 Peter 3:16 indicates our good conduct can actually silence those who would slander us and our message. While good clean living certainly keeps us from compromising our message, it is not probable that a hard core Muslim will fall to his knees and confess Christ because you simply obey the 10 commandments.

Typically, it is extraordinary demonstration of virtue that overcomes this barrier. Steven's forgiveness of his murderers, Paul and Silas singing praises to God in shackles, and similar demonstrations of the love of and love for God that make a difference. We have all heard modern day examples of Christ-like love opening doors for the gospel among resistant peoples. Recent examples of this came from the experience of aid workers following the devastation of the tsunami in Southeast Asia. Typically resistant Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu peoples all showed increased openness to the gospel following demonstrations of Christian charity.

Another slightly less intuitive approach to this barrier is business as mission. Business when it is done for kingdom purposes can demonstrate God's love, blessing and goodness. As such, it shows real potential in overcoming the socio-political barrier.

The Logistical barrier is overcome through mobilizing local churches for missions involvement. It is through this means that sufficient human and financial resources can be released for strategic missions ministry. Additionally, we need to see special purpose entities (mission sodalities) mobilized for missions. Similarly, the cultural barrier is overcome by mobilizing a special kind of human resource, specifically missionaries (cross-cultural workers).

The AIMS team is continuing to refine its use of "the four barriers." Some have proposed the addition of a fifth or sixth barrier to the list. Though we are not attempting to be dogmatic, we do feel the simplicity of a short list of barriers is helpful. We simply want to provide a helpful tool to the body of Christ that will further clarify the task and accelerate the completion of the Great Commission. ∎

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