
WHY BE A WORLD-CLASS CHRISTIAN?

Once you decide to ask Jesus Christ to take control of your life, involvement in world missions is no longer optional.

PETER WAGNER

We live in exciting times. Historians' veins pump with adrenaline when they observe the changes, events, developments, and growth in our world. As Marshall McLuhan predicted years ago, our world has become a "global village." Electronic communication, jet travel, international networks, and interdependent economies have simultaneously shrunk the world while vastly enlarging the amount of information we try to manage.

In the midst of this expanding base of information and the shrinking global picture, we find ourselves striving to live on a "world-class" scale. Multinational corporations attempt to compete in a global market by reaching the elite distinction of becoming "world-class." An airline described itself as "World-Class, Worldwide." Television and sports networks introduce us to "world-class" athletes, and concerts highlight the performances of "world-class" musicians.

The adjective “world-class” now describes automobiles, computer technology, hotels, foods, lifestyles, and even disasters.

Dr. Howard Foltz, founder of Accelerating International Mission Strategies (AIMS), writes, “What does it take to be world-class? Florence ‘Flo-Jo’ Joyner, the tough and flashy runner who won several medals at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, is a world-class athlete who breaks world records. World-class autos are those which forge a sales niche in the world market, so how would you describe a world-class Christian?”¹

If the business, sports, and media worlds strive to compete on a “world-class” scale, what about the followers of Jesus Christ?² Should we too be aiming at world-class excellence in our obedience? Are we to try to relate to the contemporary world so that the Christian faith addresses world-class problems?

The obvious answer is YES! God has given us the privilege of living at one of the most exciting, unique junctures in human history. Through a worldwide community, modern technology, and unparalleled global resources, we in the church of Jesus Christ have the opportunity to interact as never before on a “world-class” scale.

God invites us to join his world-class action. How will we respond?

But How?

We respond with a resounding, “Yes, Lord, I want to get on board!” That is, until we start to picture the magnitude of earth’s problems:

- More than 6 billion people live on earth at this writing (and increasing daily!).
- Perhaps one-third of these have never heard of the love of God through Jesus.
- Millions of kids are starving, homeless, and hopeless.

- Megacities—with populations of 10, 15, or even 20 million people—are overloaded with social, economic, spiritual, and logistical challenges.

We do not need to carry the descriptions too far. We all experience it—the phenomenon known as “compassion fatigue,” the feeling of frustration that laments, “What possible difference could one person or family or church make?”

The challenge of world-class living overwhelms us—until we begin to reduce the task to manageable chunks. One person likened getting a world vision to eating a five-hundred-pound marshmallow: we know what needs to be done, but we simply have neither the confidence that we can do it nor any idea where to begin.

Welcome to a book about beginnings. If *How to Be a World-Class Christian* were a college class, it would be titled something like “Becoming a Globally Aware Christian 101.” If it were a seminar, it might be titled “Local Living, Global Impact.” The pages that follow are simple steps all of us can take to find our part in God’s global action.

But first, let’s make a few observations about motivation. What will keep us going as we tackle this immense task?

But Why?

With the myriad of challenges we face in our personal lives, we need to choose wisely how to invest our time. Is this global pursuit worthwhile? Even if we decide to start toward the world-class growth goal, what motivates us to endure?

Only a few of us will admit it, but we may be quietly asking, “What’s in this for me? If I aspire toward ‘world-classness,’ how will I grow? Will the reward justify the effort?”

Without indulging our self-centeredness to excess, we find motivation as we observe the tangible results in the lives of those growing to be world-class Christians. Let’s consider seven areas.

Stimulation

The media and entertainment worlds have convinced our generation that life is a spectator sport. Like Chauncy, the gardener in Peter Seller's film *Being There*, "We like to watch." We watch while superior athletes compete. We experience adventure vicariously through movie superheroes or Indiana Jones-like pioneers or James Bond-like international spies.

For followers of Christ, even our faith can become an experience in watching as motivational preachers or dynamic personalities talk or sing or preach to us. Some have become "pew potatoes" — watching rather than participating.

Getting involved in the global scene stirs us to action. As a graduate student, I had the privilege of traveling to Haiti on an "Exposure Trip" designed to show us several international ministries there. When contemplating the trip, I confronted my first obstacle: finances. Yet God miraculously made it possible for me to go. Then the next barrier came: I had never flown before, and I (who as a child vomited when being rocked) feared my motion sickness. God took care of me—even on the twelve-seater flight to southwest Haiti, where we had to "buzz" the grass runway to clear off the grazing cows.

Every day for seven days—whether meeting Haitian Christians or speaking through a translator for the first time, whether eating unusual food or confronting a tarantula in the bathroom—I learned afresh what it meant to trust God, especially in the face of my own powerlessness. The involvement in Haiti invigorated my faith.

Very few people have ever come to me for counsel on how to quiet down their personal faith; actually, I can remember no such request. Most of us look for ways to enliven our faith, not deaden it.

Growing as a globally aware Christian stimulates our faith to develop, even as aerating soil stimulates growth in plants. It stirs us up. The pursuit of becoming world-class launches us into a world

where we must trust God. Whether it means praying for the funds needed for an international project or walking out to minister in an unfamiliar neighborhood, an outward orientation of our faith encourages us to trust God in direct and practical ways.

One participant on an educational/service project to Egypt wrote: "I think the greatest lesson I learned on this trip was how to deal with difficult situations. . . . I learned this lesson because, with the nature of the trip, one had to learn these lessons to endure the experience. The work was hard, conditions uncomfortable, and amenities barely adequate—but with God's help I could withstand this and grow in my faith through the experience."

Pursuing the world-class goal puts us personally into the action. Rather than experiencing life vicariously through those we watch, we move from being spectators to participants. Reaching out in what might be risky relationships or volunteering for sacrificial service moves us out of our comfort zone into the arena of dependence on Christ. And, like Peter on the water, when we step out in faith, Jesus meets us there!

Focus

Don observed his own ability to be swayed by cultural opinions and current trends. He concluded, "I am the disciple of the last man who spoke."

Don illustrates the tensions we all face regarding priorities, choices, and a clarified focus in our lives. Advertisements dictate to us what we must have to be acceptable—whether cars, clothes, vacations, or perfume. We follow the advice of a pluralistic world that dictates standards of success, but we find ourselves being torn apart. In one way or another, we fall prey to becoming cultural Christians rather than true disciples.

Tom Sine, futurist and consultant, writes: "We all seem to be trying to live the American Dream with a little Jesus overlay. We talk about the lordship of Christ, but our career comes first. Our house

in the 'burbs comes first. Upscaling our lives comes first. Then, with whatever we have left, we try to follow Jesus."³

We need help in focusing our lives.

In spite of the magnitude, a global awareness helps us do just that. Alertness to the needs of others, concern for the broken people of our world, and ideas of how to respond practically give us a new sense of priorities. Rather than an unhealthy preoccupation with the question, "Am I fulfilled?" we find ourselves asking how we can help others—and, in so doing, we find the fulfillment we were looking for in the first place.

A businessman in the financial district of Boston told me that serving meals at a soup kitchen for Boston's homeless clarifies the meaning of his life. "It makes me see myself as a fellow-straggler with these people, and this helps me keep my world and my problems in perspective."

An older couple has dedicated over twenty years to raising awareness in their home church of the needs in the tiny country of Moldova (population roughly 3 million). They've organized short-term mission trips, built an ongoing partnership between Moldovan churches and their own, and coordinated in their home church an annual event that provides clothing and supplies to over five hundred Moldovan orphans. They describe their experience this way: "When we were younger, we dreamt about changing the world, but *the world* was too overwhelming. By getting involved in serving Moldova, we found a new focus for our lives. We might not be able to change the world, but we can help change the life of a child or a church or a village in Moldova. It's been amazingly rewarding, and it's invigorated our faith here at home."

Joy

Similar to the businessman cited above, the Lands family added perspective to their lives by serving the Thanksgiving meal at a shelter for the homeless. Rather than gorging themselves on

the typical "I-ate-too-much, pass-the-Alka-Seltzer" Thanksgiving dinner, they decided to go out to serve. Their practical yet sacrificial service produced greater thankfulness than they had known on any previous Thanksgiving.

One of the teenage daughters reflected, "At first we thought we would feel more thankful because we would realize how much more we had than these people . . . but the greatest memory of the day for me is joy. These folks who seemed to have nothing could give and experience joy together. Sharing in their joyful simplicity taught us far more than we gave them."

Venturing out into our exciting, frightening, hurting world teaches us that Jesus-type joy is joy in the face of hardship, joy in spite of the surroundings. An outward focus puts us in touch with the joy that Paul the apostle had in jail when he wrote in his most joy-filled epistle: "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4). And this joy keeps us going through the roller-coaster ride of life.

Relevance

A few years ago, I asked a number of unchurched people their opinions about Christians and Christianity: "Who would you say is the best example of Christianity, in the way it's supposed to be lived?"

A few said Billy Graham, because of his public integrity. But the vast majority answered, "Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the Sisters of Charity." Mother Teresa is now deceased, but her impact continues in some of the poorest urban areas of the world through the order she founded, the Sisters of Charity. The reason? "Because these sisters are the only ones we see treating poor people the way that Jesus would."

Nobody commented much about their theology, their nun's habit, or their relative obscurity (few of these nuns are recognized in the way that Mother Teresa was). The dominant feature of Mother

Teresa and her companions, in the minds of these secular people, was an active, demonstrated faith.

These comments reminded me of the rebuke attributed to the existentialist Nietzsche: “His disciples will have to look more saved if I am to believe in their Savior.”

Growing as world-class Christians helps us “look more saved.” When we explain that we spent our weekend helping insulate someone’s home or serving at a nursing home, people may inquire about the faith that motivates such action. When we spend a vacation visiting missionary friends, people ask us about our experiences, which inevitably leads to a discussion of our beliefs.

World-class involvement builds credibility because we begin to take an interest in world-class issues—whether political, religious, or environmental. My wife, Christie, strives to address the gospel values to rain forest destruction in South America. In so doing, she’s able to integrate her faith into issues raised by environmental activists.⁴ One non-Christian man came to hear me preach because I gained credibility in his eyes by my travels into the Muslim world. Another man, who was nominally religious, decided to worship at a Bible-teaching church because the church sent a team to build homes with Habitat for Humanity. Others are attracted to Jesus because they see or hear or read about Christians caring for HIV/AIDS orphans, defending the rights of immigrants, or using their business skills to alleviate poverty.

An outward focus of our faith—integrated into our world and addressed to real needs and issues—establishes our witness of the mercy of Jesus as credible, demonstrable, and relevant. Our world needs to see followers of Christ who indeed love mercy and do justice (Micah 6:8).

In the ever-shrinking global village that God sends us into, the world is asking, “What type of neighbors will these Christians be?” When we dive into service and start participating in the demonstration of Jesus’ love, people start paying attention.

Direction

Stephanie started growing as a world-class Christian several years ago. For her, that growth led to involvement with international students, most notably scholars from the People’s Republic of China. Working together with several friends, she used her gift of hospitality to entertain, feed, and love dozens of Chinese visitors.

After a few years of this ministry, she decided to go to China for a visit. She took a leave of absence from her engineering firm and traveled for five weeks in China, staying with men and women whom she had befriended on their visits to the United States. But Stephanie’s trip was so tough, including bronchitis and a stint in a Beijing hospital, I thought she would quit her ministry to the Chinese—or at least never travel again.

Quite the contrary! After her return, Stephanie made contact with the English Language Institute. She applied, was accepted and trained, and taught English at a technical school in Beijing. Having dedicated the rest of her life to China, Stephanie has learned Mandarin and now helps supervise and coordinate the efforts of other teachers. Reaching out to the world beyond her normal sphere of influence put Stephanie in a new position to hear God. Her firsthand involvement gave new direction to her life.

Not everyone gets so radically redirected. Some find new ways to use their skills to serve—such as Bob, a Boston architect. He heard that an urban mission needed help redesigning and refurbishing their building in order to house those in need. In his spare time, and at no cost to the mission, he used his architectural skills to design a new wing for the mission. In so doing, he saved them thousands of dollars while feeling the satisfaction of using his skills to help others.

Or consider Pat, who uses her teaching skills to tutor urban students once a week. In her time spent with students, she has built a new network of friends, developed a new appreciation for the city, and helped students’ grades go from Fs to Bs.

When we get tired of chasing the “American dream” because we find it empty or dissatisfying, God says, “I have a better way: service on behalf of others.” Jesus taught it: If you want to be great, become a servant; if you want to be first, then become last (Mark 10:43–45). Jesus taught us that, paradoxically, we gain by losing; we lead by serving; we find ourselves by giving ourselves away. In the process of serving, we find new purpose and direction for the skills, abilities, and resources he has given us.

Sneak Previews

Any major motion picture lures us out early to catch the sneak previews so that (I presume) we can be the first to describe the characters and plot to our friends.

God also invites us to a sneak preview. Through growth as world-class Christians, we have the unique opportunity of getting a sneak preview of heaven, where those from every nation, tribe, people, and language will worship Jesus together (Revelation 7:9).

As a participant in several of the Lausanne Congresses on World Evangelization, I have marveled at the opening and closing ceremonies, where representatives of more than two hundred countries—in national dress, some with flags, others with instruments—lead the celebration and singing. People from many races, tribes, languages, and countries gather to sing praise to Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. I’ve thought to myself, *Wow. This is what heaven will be like!*

In a microcosm, we can see similar previews of heaven by worshipping with believers from other countries, believers who worship in other languages, follow other traditions, and sing in different tones. Without traveling more than twenty miles, I can worship with brothers and sisters from Brazil, China, Laos, or Haiti. As I worship with them—with all of the cultural “dressing” their service might include—I develop an enlarged vision of the body of Christ. This in turn enlarges my vision for his world

and my vision of who he is—the Lord of the universe, the hope of the world.⁵

Pleasure

Put simply, our efforts to grow as world-class Christians please God. He is pleased because in the process of growing we imitate Christ (Philippians 2:5–11)—serving without reciprocation. Every year, our church sends volunteers to serve in various ways on mission teams. At least once each summer someone is asked, “Well, who pays you to do this?”

The team member explains, “No one. Actually, we pay to be able to serve on the team.”

The amazed inquirer inevitably responds, “You mean you pay to work?”

They pay to serve because they are following the example of Jesus, who paid (with his own life) for the opportunity to serve us—even while we were still spiritually dead in our sins (Romans 5:8).

Outward-focused serving pleases God because it puts us at his disposal to work in his “harvest field” (Matthew 9:36–38). Developing as a world-class disciple pleases God because, in so doing, we break out of the entrapments of cultural Christianity and open ourselves to see him with greater love and to serve him with renewed vigor.

You Are Invited—Do You Accept?

I feel hurt when I find out, after the fact, that my friends had a party and I was not invited. Whether by unintentional oversight or deliberate rejection, no one likes to be left out.

The good news is this: God invites us into his worldwide action! No one is left out. The magnificent, awesome task requires every Christian to participate. We cannot do it alone. But together, as we grow to be world-class Christians, the world-class church will get God’s work—the Great Commission⁶—done.

David Bryant, founder of PROCLAIM HOPE, teaches that God's primary goal is not to get each of us into the Great Commission. His goal is to get the Great Commission into us! God invites us into his worldwide action in order to change our lives. As we jump in, it will make us more like Jesus and help us experience all that God has for us. Let's go for it!

Biblical Texts to Study

- Acts 17:1–10
- Matthew 9:35–38
- Matthew 28:18–20

Things to Talk About

- Peter Wagner has said, "Once you decide to ask Jesus Christ to take control of your life, involvement in world missions is no longer optional." Why is this so?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 1 and 2. How did Paul minister to the Thessalonians?
- What were his attitudes toward them?

- What were the results of Paul's ministry with them?
- What benefits did Paul personally experience by being a world-class Christian?
- What are other benefits of being a world-class Christian? Why are these benefits important?
- How can they motivate us to become more involved in missions around the world?

WHAT IS A WORLD-CLASS CHRISTIAN?

Anthropologists . . . explain that at our core is a basic view of reality—a worldview. That worldview determines who we are, what we value, and how we behave.

GORDON AESCHLIJMAN

Back in my years as a youth pastor, I was invited to Youth Specialties' national convention as a seminar leader. The West Coast version of the convention that year took place in San Francisco. I anticipated the trip for months. As a native of the Northeast, I had never been to San Francisco, although travel brochures, television shows, and other travelers had enticed me many times. I admit that part of my reason for accepting the invitation to speak was the time it would give me to explore San Francisco.

The seminar was about five hours old when the room began to shake. It felt as if a gigantic underground train was passing directly below our room. People clambered toward the door. The earth was moving, and we ran out just in time to see the elevator shaft of the hotel across the street rip away from the building and collapse.

It took several minutes for us to realize that we had just survived the worst earthquake San Francisco and the Bay Area had experienced in many years. Within twelve hours, the seminar was canceled, and we were all scrambling for any flight that would take us out of town. My “tour” of San Francisco never occurred.

As I sat on the airplane en route back to Boston, I was impressed by the number of times I had heard the term *world-class* in the past thirty-six hours. I recorded them in my journal. I had flown on a world-class airline into a world-class city, stayed at a world-class hotel where they claimed to serve world-class cuisine. Then there was the world-class disaster that would receive world-class news coverage around the earth.

I concluded my journal entry by asking, “What does it mean to be ‘world-class?’”

Contemporary Definitions

When I started challenging Christians with the term *world-class*, the responses were mixed. Some loved it, thinking that I was encouraging an excuse to live a lavish lifestyle, fly in private jets, and indulge in rich foods. Others were deeply disturbed because they felt that no Christian should care about the things our culture calls world-class.

There is no consensus on what this adjective means. For some, it means “able to compete with the finest athletes in the world.” This is certainly the meaning when we call Olympic competitors “world-class athletes.” In business, the term usually refers to the ability to compete in a global economy, so a hotel chain or an airline advertises itself as “world-class.”

World-class might mean “lofty,” as was used in a *Reader’s Digest* note advocating unstructured time that allowed one to think “world-class thoughts.” It could simply mean “international,” such as the label on a salad dressing mix that described the ingredients

as “world-class spices.” It may be used to set something apart from the average or mundane, as in the “world-class wardrobe” of some billionaire.

Any of these definitions could carry over with meaning to followers of Jesus Christ. We should aspire to be relevant on a worldwide scale, able to hold our own in discussions about world events, concerned about a faith that is truly international, and committed to being above the average in all our endeavors. But there is more.

The Definition for Followers of Jesus

A brochure came in the mail, inviting our investment in international stocks. On the cover was a map of the earth, but all countries had been deleted except the United States, which had been expanded to cover all of the global landmass. The caption read, “Because the World Doesn’t Look Like This, Neither Should Your Investment Portfolio.” Inside, the advertisers tried to convince us that an international, interdependent world demanded world-class investing in both foreign and domestic accounts.

The caption stirred my thinking about us as followers of Jesus Christ. Because the world does not look like just the United States, neither should our world vision. Because the world is much larger than U.S. culture, our prayers should be larger than just our normal sphere of influence. Because God is God of all nations, we dare not imply that he somehow belongs exclusively to ours. He calls us to be world-class Christians.

But what does that mean? Consider this definition of a world-class disciple of Jesus Christ: “A world-class Christian is one whose *lifestyle and obedience* are *compatible*, in *cooperation*, and *in accord* with what God is doing and wants to do *in our world*.”

Let’s evaluate the key words.

A World-Class Christian: Lifestyle and Obedience

We are not talking about some compartment of faith that affects only our concepts and perspectives. Trying to obey Jesus affects every part of our lifestyle. To borrow the analogy from Robert Boyd Munger's *My Heart, Christ's Home*, if our lives were a house, then each room would represent some specific aspect of our lives. Our kitchen would represent our appetites, our bedroom our sexuality, our recreation room our leisure, and our closets the things we keep hidden from outsiders.

When we come to Jesus, he asks for entrance into every room. If he is Lord of our lives, we cannot be satisfied to keep him in the sterile hospitality of the living room. He wants free rein of the house.

Peter's encounter with Cornelius, the God-fearing Gentile of Acts 10, illustrates God's ability to break into our closed "rooms" so that we might submit totally to his control. In Peter's worldview, excluding Gentiles from the gospel was legitimate. As a member of the chosen people of Israel, Peter could assume that the Messiah Jesus had come for only his people. But God broke through, using a repeated dream. When Peter was obedient, he realized that "God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34–35). When Peter allowed the Holy Spirit to have free rein, his world vision was enlarged.

My friend Marion illustrates an obedient lifestyle in another way. As she approached retirement, she could have followed the cultural norm of keeping those years of rest to herself. She might have thought, *I've had a tough life. I'm a widow. I've raised my kids as an urban, African-American single mom. I've worked long and hard for the benefits of retirement; I deserve a few years in the sun.* Instead, she let Jesus into every "room" of her life, including the room called "retirement" or "entitled rest."

Marion committed her retirement years to the Lord's service, including her years of accumulated experience as a nutritionist supervising the mass production of healthy meals, first at a hospital and later at a military compound. After two months of retirement from the food service industry, at age sixty-seven, Marion departed for a children's orphanage in Haiti. She served there for five months, training people to produce healthy meals for the children. When she arrived, they were feeding six hundred children per week; by the time she departed, her skills and knowledge of food technology had enabled them to feed two thousand children per week.

Several years ago, I had the chance to preach at Marion's funeral. She died at age eighty-five. After eighteen years of retirement and over forty trips to Haiti (forty!), Marion had spent plenty of time in the sun—but not for leisure. She used that time to establish Hope for the Children of Haiti, an organization committed to care for and feed hundreds of children in that economically troubled country. The ministry has built a school for children who otherwise would have no opportunity to gain an education.

Through her Christian lifestyle and obedience, Marion influenced dozens of others to go to Haiti to offer some sort of service. Now, her dream being carried on by Haitian pastors and church leaders, hundreds of children have had nutritious meals and a quality education. Her obedience helped give these children of poverty a brighter hope for the future.

A World-Class Christian: A Compatible Lifestyle

As Christie and I were wrapping up our day at Walt Disney World, she decided to take a few more pictures. I asked if I could wait for her on the benches at the end of "Main Street USA." As I rested in this re-created town square, which was supposed to be an image of average American life, I started listening to the conversations around me. One exhausted family argued with each other in

Spanish. Another family spoke German, and others conversed in Japanese. Within about twenty minutes, I heard six languages being spoken.

The experience reflects real life. On “Main Street USA,” the multicultural dynamic of our modern world was being played out. The image stuck in my mind as a picture of the ethnically diverse, internationalized world into which we are called. Even if we live in places that were once shrines to Americana, they are now pictures of the global village. This is where we strive to be compatible with what God wants to do through us.

The dictionary defines *compatible* as “existing together in harmony.” World-class Christians desire their lives to be in total harmony with God’s purposes for his world. In other words, they want to find themselves in line with his will.

Jonah illustrates one who, at first, resisted being “compatible” with God’s purposes. He ran in the opposite direction from God, but through some gentle persuasion by God’s sovereign intervention, Jonah turned around. He decided (somewhat by force, I suppose) that being in harmony with God’s purposes was better than running.

But Jonah is an example for all of us. When I read a futurist’s prediction that the world’s economy cannot support the current affluent lifestyle of the United States, I would rather run like Jonah than ask hard questions about what needs to be cut out of my lifestyle to be more in harmony with God’s worldwide purposes.

The world-class Christian is willing to wrestle not only with what it means to be compatible with God’s purposes but also with what it means to live in harmony with our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. As we grow to understand what God is doing in the world, we cannot help but be challenged by our fellow believers in the non-Western world about our lifestyles, our commitment, and our zeal.

A World-Class Christian: In Cooperation with God

When Christie and I get into a canoe, we are good candidates for an entry in *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. If we don’t tip over, we row in circles, or we simply swamp the canoe slowly. Even though we’ve been told what we do wrong, we struggle to work together for effective forward progress.

Canoeing dramatically illustrates the need to work together. If she rows one way and I another, we go in circles. If we do not balance our weight, the canoe tips over. To get the canoe to do what it’s supposed to do, we need to work cooperatively.

In the same way, to accomplish what God intends for us in his world, we must work cooperatively with him and with each other. This means basic obedience to the truths revealed in his Word, but it also means a radical willingness to turn away from aspects of our culture that may be acceptable in popular opinion but that “row” counter to the purposes of God.

Peter did this when he reached out to the Gentiles (Acts 10), engaging himself in a ministry that his culture called unclean but God declared clean. Jesus also cooperated with the purposes of God by reaching out to lost, lonely, rejected sinners. To be a friend of tax collectors and prostitutes was more important to him than popular opinion, because he was committed first to declaring the mercy of God.

Ananias was perhaps the most dramatic biblical “cooperator” of all (Acts 9). We know only that he was a “disciple in Damascus.” God calls him to go minister to Saul, the terrorizing fanatic of the Pharisees who had overseen the stoning of Stephen and was presently on a rampage against the church.

Ananias voices his concerns (Acts 9:13–14), but the Lord says, “Go!” Ananias obeys, takes his life in his hands, and enters the house where Saul is staying. Cooperating with God’s purposes

took priority, even over his own safety. His opening words reveal the depth of his obedience: “Brother Saul” (Acts 9:17). It was as if a Jew said to a Nazi, “Brother.” If we have never faced an enemy who has done us physical or emotional harm, we cannot fathom the depth of emotion that must have filled Ananias. He faces a man whom he had probably prayed against only days earlier, and he says, “Brother!” Actions of the past dissipate like smoke, and Ananias opens his arms to welcome Saul into God’s family. Ananias knew what it was to keep his own feelings secondary in exchange for cooperating with the higher purposes of God.

Cooperating with God may not be as drastic as Ananias experienced, but we’re still called to pursue God’s higher purposes—even when we don’t understand what God is doing. There was, in the 1980s, an extreme anti-USSR, anticommunist sentiment in the United States and, correspondingly, in many churches. In the summer of 1989, a sixth-grade teacher from a Christian school in Maryland used her summer vacation to visit what was then East Germany. The sight of the Berlin Wall, which separated East from West Germany, overwhelmed her because of the oppression it represented. When she returned that September to teach in her sixth-grade class, she asked her students every day to join her in prayer for the leaders of East Germany and for political and religious freedom in that country.

These children joined in prayer, cooperating with God through their requests and heartfelt cries for oppressed people. Only a few months later, against seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the Berlin Wall began to be dismantled, and East Germany gained its political and religious freedom. The boys and girls of that sixth-grade class exulted with an amazing sense of having cooperated in prayer together with the purposes of God.

A World-Class Christian: In Accord with God

I mentioned earlier the results of my informal survey about outstanding Christians. Almost without exception, Mother Teresa and her Sisters of Charity stood out in people’s minds. Why? Because these servants live their lives in accord with what God wants to do in the world. Their treatment of the poor renders their faith credible. Their actions speak louder than their words. And their lifestyles preach the love they profess to believe.

To be credible is to be genuine. James exhorts us toward credibility when he tells us “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26 NASB). He writes, “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:15–16).

It’s far better to document our faith by works than to have faith alone (James 2:18); even the devils have a semblance of faith (James 2:19). James exhorts us to live a credible, demonstrated faith.

The apostle John reiterates the point as he defines love based on our demonstrated acts of mercy toward those in need: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17–18). The world-class Christian is committed to growing toward a credible demonstration of faith “with actions and in truth.”

Even Jesus demonstrated his credibility by his outward good works. When the disciples of John the Baptist asked for proof of Jesus’ messiahship, Jesus responded by highlighting his treatment of broken people: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11:5).

Our world desperately needs Christians who live in accord with God's will and demonstrate in their lives credible faith. Consider Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship. Perhaps the reason he has maintained such high respect in our world has little to do with his books, his radio commentaries, or his speaking engagements. Instead, his life consistently demonstrates his affinity for and commitment to prisoners—outcasts in every society. Referring to Colson, an inmate in Latin America said, "Anyone who will come into this stinking prison and share his food with me is worth listening to." Credibility provides the foundation for effective witness.

A World-Class Christian: In Our World

A pocket-sized book sits on my bookshelf. The cover promises that it contains a "compact guide to the Christian life." But when I scan the pages, I discover to my chagrin that there is no reference in the 228 pages to a Christian's commitment to be world minded, globally aware, or outreach oriented. Sadly, it reflects the attitudes of many who say, "Well, there are so many needs right here at home that we cannot think beyond our own worlds."

In contrast to such a narrow view, Gordon Aeschliman, author and former editor of *World Christian* magazine, describes the globalized world in which we live:

In a village a thousand miles up the Amazon, people are reading the French-owned magazine *Elle* and the U.S.-produced *Better Homes and Gardens*. Guatemalans are ordering chicken chow mein, American youth are wearing Russian designer jeans, the Japanese are displaying their latest cuts at top Paris fashion shows, the French are eating Big Macs, the world is doing the lambada, and Japanese Ninja Turtles have given Batman the boot.¹

In such an internationalized world, even a compact guide to the Christian life must include a global perspective. Our world-class

commitment is to the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), not just the end of the street or the extent of our Zip Code. God calls us out of our church pews and beyond our own comfort zones into other cultures, where we may confront differing worldviews and varying understandings of religion. Like the people of Israel, we follow the Lord of the universe, who reminds us that it is "too small a thing" for us to be preoccupied with ourselves; instead, his plan is to make us a "light" for those outside the gospel so that "you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

Several years ago, while speaking at a nearby seminary, John Stott told the story of a tiny church in rural England that he attended while on a study leave. He worshiped with them every Sunday, participated in their fellowship, and heard their discussions. He related his dismay when, week after week, the pastor would preach about issues facing the village, pray about concerns in the church, and discuss decisions related only to their congregation. "I came to the conclusion," Stott observed, "that these people worship a village God."

Our God is not some sort of "village God," existing for our concerns alone and isolated to our worlds. He is the Lord of the universe, the God to whom all will give an account, the Savior who reaches out through his church to all who need to know his love, regardless of ethnic background, economic standing, or geographic location.

A world-class perspective remembers to focus on a global God who calls us onto his team.

Lessons from a World-Class Disaster

From a world-class disaster in a world-class city, the question arises: What does it mean to be world-class? For followers of Jesus, it means abandoning self to him and his purposes. It means giving ourselves to his world so that people may see our lives as living

illustrations of the gospel. It means being recognized as having been with Jesus (Acts 4:13), because his imprint marks our lifestyles and actions.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck summarizes the lives of several people with these tragic words: “When they died, it was as if they had never lived.” They had no impact, left no legacy, and affected no lives.

In contrast, the teacher in the popular movie *Dead Poet’s Society* challenged his students with the words *carpe diem*—“seize the day.” He stirred them to make their lives extraordinary: “The powerful play [of life] goes on, and you may contribute a verse.” The spirit of such words grips us. We all want to make a difference. We all want to offer a contribution to God’s worldwide purposes.

We fear Steinbeck’s tragic epitaph, but the solution to our fears is found in Jesus. As we give ourselves to be his world-class followers, we can be his agents of change in our broken world. We can be his world-class disciples.

Biblical Texts to Study

- Scriptures regarding Jesus
Matthew 11:1–6

Mark 2:13–17

Luke 7:36–50

Acts 10:38

- Scripture regarding Ananias and Barnabas
Acts 9:1–31

- Scripture regarding Peter
Acts 10:1–48

Things to Talk About

- Referencing the Scriptures above, how did Jesus, Ananias, Barnabas, and Peter demonstrate that they were world-class believers?
- What obstacles did each have to overcome in living as a world-class Christian? How did they do so?
- What were the results of their ministries?
- Read James 2:15–26 and 1 John 3:17–18. Why is our obedience to these passages important in becoming world-class believers?
- Why are good works crucial to a world-class outlook?