Luke 14:23

Then the master told his servant, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.”

In the earliest years of Christianity, there was profound conflict over how to interpret Jesus’ teachings, his life and death, and how his followers should respond. It was unclear whether Jesus was opening the way for gentiles to become part of the Jewish story or not. On several occasions the Gospel writers describe a scene where the apostles are confused and do not understand the meaning of what Jesus is saying.

One of the most difficult teachings had to do with Jesus’ following. Who gets to be a follower of Jesus? Were his teachings just for Jews? Can gentiles join? It was not clear. It took the apostles some time to form a consensus, and had it not been for James—Jesus’ brother—Christianity might have turned into a mere Jewish sect. We do know that the apostle Peter struggled during his lifetime over
whether to allow gentiles into the club of Jesus followers, and what that might look like. The apostle Paul worked enthusiastically to bring gentiles into the movement through his impressive missionary travels across the Mediterranean world.

A Banquet and a Sower

It was no easy task to figure out what Jesus meant by some of his parables. For example, in the parable of the Great Banquet there is a scene where a man prepares a great feast but none of the invitees show up. They are too busy. Offended, the man instructs his servants to invite “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.”1 When they came, the man urged that his servants go out into the countryside to find anyone else who could attend, “so that my house will be full.”

What does this parable mean? Typically it is explained that the banquet represents the new era that Jesus inaugurated, the “new testament” or “new covenant.” The original guests were the Jewish leaders, but they did not come. Later, the outcasts get invited, meaning the marginal within Jewish society and even gentiles.

As we know, the marginal ended up in the house, sitting around the table. Within a short period of time, in fact, Christianity had more gentiles than Jews. But the transition was not without its problems. Acts 15, the famous Jerusalem Council, is a clear example. The apostles struggled with what Christian belief entailed. Must gentiles become like Jews in order to be followers of Christ? Should they become circumcised? Must they refrain from certain foods, as the Torah commands? Should they abide by the same sexual ethics as Jews, in spite of the fact that they come from very different worldviews?

In other words, “To whom does Christianity belong?” To the Jews or to the gentiles? The conclusion of that first Christian council was summed up by James: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the gentiles who are turning to God.” Their conclusions were written down in a letter addressed to the gentile believers. Paul and some others were commissioned to deliver it to the churches.

With the stroke of a pen, Christianity was well on its way to becoming a gentile faith. No longer did it belong solely to Jews. That letter, sanctioned by the first Christian council, opened the floodgates when it was delivered to believers in Antioch, where the word Christian originates. The gentiles pulled up to their place at the table. And they were given their slice of the pie—a pie that had belonged to the house of Israel for a very long time.

A very similar process is going on in Christianity today. For centuries, Christianity has been associated with European civilization. And for good reason. Most Christians were Europeans. However, in the last century, that situation has changed dramatically. Christianity has become a religion that is more associated with the Global South, while Europeans continue to distance themselves from it.

And similar to that letter penned at the Jerusalem Council, the implications are huge. A whole new group of people will come to the banquet. So many people have come that now Christianity seems to be entering a new phase. The African, the Asian, and the Latin American masses have come to the banquet and they are changing the identity of Christianity in ways unimaginable only a few decades ago. As a result, much of the baggage associated with European Christendom is being shed. The state church idea is nearly dead. Missionaries are sent to Europe rather than being sent from

Europe. Young Europeans know little of Christian identity while entire civilizations in the Global South have adopted a Christian identity as their own.

In another story from Jesus, the parable of the Sower, Jesus describes a farmer sowing seed. Some of the seeds were quickly devoured by birds. Some fell onto rocky places or onto soil that was too shallow. Some seeds ended up in the thorns, which eventually choked the plants. Of course some seed fell onto good soil and took root, producing a harvest. And the sheaves are coming in bountifully.

Christian seed was sown in the Global South, and for complex reasons the soil once thought to be barren has turned into a rich and plentiful garden. Christianity is strong and flourishing in surprising places. Who would have thought that the “Dark Continent” would rather quickly endorse the Light of the World? Why did China and the former Soviet Union open to Christianity after decades of official atheism? Who could have anticipated a pope from Buenos Aires? How did Korea become home to some of the largest Christian congregations in the world? Why is the seed suddenly bearing so much fruit?

Likewise, why are so many sprouts choking in formerly Christian Europe? Why have they, seemingly, gone to the birds?

To whom does Christianity now belong? Can we still properly call it a Western religion? Or is it now better described as a Global South phenomenon? The religious studies courses that offer Christianity as a Western faith need to be revised. The old models—perpetuated still in Western universities—are obsolete. Christianity has gone global. It no longer makes sense to teach it as a Western faith. A new teaching model, one that takes into consideration Christianity’s global presence, must emerge.

What Happened?

While Christianity still has a presence in the West—particularly in the United States—it is probably better described as a Global South phenomenon today. Several key statistics illustrate why.¹

- Globally, religion is on the rise. In 1970, around 80 percent of the world’s population was religious, but by 2010 that number had risen to nearly 90 percent.
- In 1970, around 40 percent of all Christians were from Asia, Africa, or Latin America. By 2020, that figure will be around 65 percent.
- Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians are growing about four times faster than other Christians. In 1970, Pentecostals/Charismatics claimed around 5 percent of the world’s Christians; in 2010 that number was around 26 percent.
- Christianity’s spectacular growth in Africa continues, from 143 million in 1970 to an estimated 630 million in 2020. About one out of every three of these Christians will be Roman Catholic.

¹ The statistics in this section come from the work of David Barrett and Todd M. Johnson. In particular, I am using the “Key Findings of Christianity in Its Global Context, 1970–2020” by Gina A. Bellofatto and Todd M. Johnson, International Bulletin of Missionary Research 37, no. 3 (July, 2013): 157–64. The full report can be downloaded for free at http://www.gordonconwell.com/netcommunity/CSGResources/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf. Todd Johnson was the primary research associate of David Barrett—the scholar who led the work of the World Christian Encyclopedia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) for many years. That work has evolved into the World Christian Database, which is housed at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and is supported by Brill Publishers. The World Christian Database has been described by eminent sociologist Rodney Stark as “the very best” source for statistics on worldwide religious affiliation. See Stark, The Triumph of Christianity (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 388 and 493n6. Similarly, Robert Wuthnow discusses Barrett and Johnson’s work in Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 41. His conclusion is that “Barrett’s particular set of statistics comes as close to being ‘official’ as any such statistics could be.” He refers to Barrett and Johnson’s work as being “the most authoritative source.” He also cites an important independent study of Barrett and Johnson’s statistics (by Becky Hsu, Amy Reynolds, Conrad Hackett, and James Gibbon) that “largely confirmed the validity of Barrett’s statistics.”
• Christianity is the fastest-growing religion in Asia right now.

• In Europe, Christianity is in decline as many embrace agnosticism or atheism.

• Christianity in Latin American continues to rise. As many people convert to Pentecostalism, the Roman Catholic Church has adapted in creative ways. The election of Pope Francis from Argentina has energized Catholicism there.

• Christianity is declining in the United States. Agnosticism is growing nearly four times faster than Christianity in North America. In 1970, around 91 percent of North Americans were Christian. That number will be around 77 percent in 2020.

• The “reverse missions” phenomenon continues apace—Global South churches are sending missionaries to the North.

• Nearly half of the world’s migrants are Christians. And these people take their faith with them. Many of them function as missionaries.

These “key findings” certainly provide much food for thought, but what is striking is just how unfathomable these statistics would have been just a century ago. The demography of world religion, and especially world Christianity, has changed dramatically. One thing is certain, however. It is not clear any more what we mean by Christianity in this new and globalized context. When gentiles began to outnumber Christian Jews, the faith began to take on a drastically different identity. That same process is underway as the Global South becomes the heartland of a faith that was so solidly Western for so long.
“Global Christianity” or “World Christianity”?

We have seen that Christianity experienced a major paradigm shift in recent years. While it may look like this change happened very recently, the fact is that the seeds were planted decades ago. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church’s global expansion, the seeds go back to the rise of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. The Jesuits (or, the Society of Jesus), founded in 1534 by Ignatius Loyola, took Christian teaching to the ends of the earth with their epochal missionary work. Most impressive of them all was Francis Xavier—truly one of the great missionaries of all time. Protestant missionaries did not begin in earnest until the early 1700s. Nevertheless, the fact that sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and pockets of Asia are strongly Christian has much to do with the countless missionaries who went abroad during those years. The European powers were rising in influence and expanding globally, and Christianity traveled with them.

While global Christianity and world Christianity are concepts that go back at least to the era of Jesuit missions, general usage of those expressions is rather recent. In his excellent book Boundless Faith, sociologist Robert Wuthnow competently explains where the expressions come from. In 1943, a Methodist pastor named Walter A. Graham gave a lecture in Baltimore on “Global Christianity at Work.” In 1979 the Washington Post used the expression in a story about a papal visit. The New York Times did not use the phrase until 1994. The following year, a book by F. J. Verstraelen was published containing the expression in its title: Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction, Texts and Contexts of Global Christianity. It was Philip