

God Is the Mission Superpower

“Christ also suffered” (1 Peter 2:21). With these words Peter directs his readers’ attention to Jesus. The whole Bible, in fact, points to Jesus Christ as Christians’ everyday preoccupation. And as indicated by Christianity’s best-known symbol, the cross, at the center of our field of vision is to be Christ’s *suffering*.

Peter’s original readers knew suffering all too well. These followers of Jesus were scattered throughout Asia Minor at the eastern end of the Roman Empire. They experienced the unnerving suspicion directed toward any unauthorized minority religious movement. Made scapegoats of the A.D. 64 fire in Rome, they and Christians throughout the empire suffered persecution under Emperor Nero.¹ That their suffering was unjust only compounded their discouragement.

It was into that bitter experience that Peter sent his encouraging message: no matter how unjust or painful the Christians’ suffering was, they could rest assured that Jesus Christ had also suffered. Indeed, his suffering had been even more unjust than theirs, since “he committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (2:22). Christians could be further encouraged by knowing that in suffering honorably they were following Jesus’ example: “When he was reviled, he did not revile in

1. As noted in the introduction, we do not know exactly when Peter wrote his letter in relation to the persecution of A.D. 64.

return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (2:23).

Most importantly, Christ’s suffering had been a substitutionary sacrifice, “the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (3:18). Peter’s graphic description was that “he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (2:24). With the penalty of their sin thus paid for, and as those who were undergoing the healing transformation of learning to live as God’s new people, these minority Christians could thus “suffer according to God’s will [and] entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (4:19).

Suffering as American Christians

All Christians, of any era, can relate to Christ’s substitutionary death. That definitive defeat of sin’s penalty and power—a victory guaranteed by Jesus’ resurrection—has freed all believers to know and serve God personally. It has also broken the back of the societal curse under which “the whole creation has been groaning” (Rom. 8:22) ever since Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. With respect, then, to Jesus’ unique suffering as the Sacrificial Lamb of God, American Christians certainly can, must, and do relate.

There is an obvious gap, however, between the suffering that Peter’s original readers faced and what we contemporary Americans experience (or do not experience). Because we do not suffer persecution and sociopolitical suspicion the way they did, we might find it hard to relate to the Christian suffering that 1 Peter addresses so prominently. How, then, should we American Christians apply that type of suffering to our lives today?

Challenges

I believe one crucial aspect of what the suffering in 1 Peter means for us American Christians today, particularly in relation to missions, is the call to relinquish our assumed and subconscious control, rights, and privileges with respect to God and to other people. Internally we must wrestle with inherited instincts that, feeding off sinful human

self-centeredness, make us assume that the American way of life, along with American Christianity (at least our particular form of it), should be the world's standard and template. Externally we must wrestle with the implications of the actual economic-political-military superpower status of our country in today's world. That status on the one hand affords American Christians the financial and security resources to travel internationally as missionaries in ways that many other Christians cannot even imagine. One resulting problem is that American Christians might confuse being able to *afford to travel* abroad with a missionary *call to go* abroad (especially with regard to the recent flood of short-term missions, a subject we will pick up later). Also, much of the rest of the world has a conflicted and multifaceted resentful/admiring posture toward Americans and the United States. That widespread posture is due to the fact that individually and nationally we Americans freely exercise various forms of the control, rights, and privileges afforded us in our superpower status: our individual and corporate financial investments bring us earnings as they send material and cultural products worldwide; our military provides security for many countries while posing a threat to others; in general, our individual and national presence around the world leaves few human beings untouched by American influence, be it good, bad, or neutral.

Wrestling with these internal and external challenges is no simple matter. We must be wary on the one hand of our postmodern, multiculturalist environment. Religiously, that environment seeks to strip Jesus Christ and the Christian faith of any claims to exclusivity or uniqueness. Politically, postmodern and multiculturalist agendas can go to the extreme of criticizing any exercise of power (while using political power themselves), irrespective of that power's legitimacy. These emasculating religious and political attacks must be discerned, honestly appraised, and properly dealt with. Furthermore, we who are American Christians must not let ourselves off the hook, or at all dampen our zeal, as we play our parts in the ongoing responsibility of the worldwide church in serving Christ in his mission to save the world. Relinquishing our control, rights, and privileges within these circumstances is no small, easy, or crystal-clear task.

The challenge of the 1 Peter type of suffering also comes from its unfamiliarity to us. American Christians are living and serving in a new day: attitudes and actions associated with missions therefore cannot be exactly the same today as they were two hundred, one hundred, fifty, or even ten years ago. A fundamental reality that we will examine later is that, thanks be to God, the church is more worldwide than ever before. Moreover, today's post-9/11, post-Cold War, post-colonial, technologically interconnected, and ever-urbanizing world presents missions challenges unforeseeable to our predecessors. Of course, some attitudes and actions should always remain the same because God's covenantal commitment to his needy world remains the same: lost people always need to hear about Jesus, Christ's worldwide church always needs to grow and mature, and the wider aspects of God's *shalom* (peace, wholeness, and blessing) always need to be stressed throughout the world's societies. But specifically how God will use and shape his people, including American Christians, in meeting those needs will change along with how the world changes.

Clarification

In studying 1 Peter, we will primarily focus on only one particular facet of what we might call an American "missiology of suffering." As I hope to demonstrate, relinquishing what we assume to be ours is a matter of basic and wide-ranging importance. As the book progresses, we will also delve into a related aspect of suffering as American Christians—namely, that which can come from thinking critically, listening well to others, and speaking prophetically about the prevailing U.S. sociopolitical environment (as part of our missions responsibility). Suffering associated with such ventures consists of having a humbling lack of clarity or certainty; of experiencing inner confusion about our own patriotism; and of being misunderstood or even opposed by those who see us as being overly critical. While sociopolitical themes should be unmistakable when we take them up, our study's ongoing emphasis will be that of giving up our presumed control, rights, and privileges in relation to God and others.

Other facets of suffering are pertinent to Americans and missions, including the need to co-suffer with, or to have *com-passion*

for, believers and others throughout the world who live in oppressive sociopolitical contexts resembling that of 1 Peter's original readers. Another is suffering alongside the world's poor and marginalized, including orphans and widows—"religion that is pure and undefiled" (James 1:27). More space could also be given to the suffering required to see that unreached peoples hear the gospel and are gathered into the fold of God's people. The apostle Paul refers to such hardships that he endured in gospel ministry: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col. 1:24). These are all crucial aspects of a "suffering missiology."

While in no way do I want to diminish the importance of these other types of suffering, suffering the loss of our assumed exclusive control, rights, and privileges cuts across the whole range of American involvements in worldwide missions. This is because it is a form of suffering that deals with a subliminal American view of the world, which all of us U.S. Christians have absorbed in our own individual ways. There are both good and bad, right and wrong, positive and negative elements in such a view. Much of this book's focus will be on exposing relevant hues and patterns embedded within certain American assumptions, as well as on inserting new colors and designs to invigorate us for twenty-first-century missions service.

This form of suffering as American Christians involves more than a one-time intellectual, emotional, and volitional acknowledgment of God's sovereign control over our lives. It is a complex process of growth in Christ that involves uncovering and dealing with deeply held assumptions and attitudes, then reforming some of our corresponding actions. Indeed, we have already entered a vital stage of the process by setting the framework of what this type of suffering means for us in the contemporary United States. By focusing here on twenty-first-century American Christians' suffering as an ongoing process of relinquishing our assumed and subconscious control, rights, and privileges with respect to God and to other people, we have identified the root from which the rest of the book's discussion can grow.

Suffering in 1 Peter

Let's focus some more on connecting this understanding of our suffering with 1 Peter. In Peter's words, we American Christians are among those who

were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for your sake, who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1:18–21)

Many American Christians trace our national ancestries to northwestern Europe. Our forefathers were not all bad, but religiously speaking, the way of life we would have inherited from them was “futile.” God by his grace brought (several centuries ago for most of us) the good news of Jesus' person and work into our heritages. We trust and hope in God, not in ourselves or our ancestors, because our salvation is all of his grace in Christ.

Furthermore, we are among those who are now “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *his* own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of *him* who called you out of darkness into *his* marvelous light” (2:9). Left to ourselves, we “were straying like sheep, but [by God's grace] have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of [our] souls” (2:25). It thus makes perfect sense for all of us who are Jesus' followers to heed Peter's instruction to “humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (5:6–7).

Suffering for American Christians thus includes learning to rest in God's work—not my, our, or any other individual's or group's efforts—of saving all his people. It also includes giving him all the credit for achieving that salvation. Put differently, for us to “die to sin and live to righteousness” (2:24) includes increasingly believing that God alone has all the control, rights, and privileges in saving all his people, across all generations and national boundaries.

Suffering's Complexity

Yet such resting in God and giving him his due credit are not as simple or straightforward for Americans as they might appear, especially in relation to missions. To see the complexity of what we are talking about, let's examine three interrelated, ambiguous, but plausible statements that Americans might legitimately make.

1. "We don't suffer as *they* do." Similar to the gap we feel between our inexperience of persecution and what Peter's original readers suffered, we American Christians are not persecuted for our faith (at least in a coercive, political sense) as are Christians in some other parts of the world. In colloquial language, we've got it easy, but in countries such as China and Saudi Arabia they've got it tough. We thus thank God for the freedom we have to worship openly without fear of reprisal and persecution, and we also pray for those who do not have that same freedom.

In related fashion, Americans regularly receive reports of grinding poverty and disease throughout other parts of the world, from the Caribbean to Africa to south Asia. While domestically there are isolated exceptions to be sure, Americans enjoy a different, comfortable level of affluence and good health as a result of having the world's most powerful economy, coupled with long-term and extensive immunizations (backed by advanced medical technology).

Furthermore, American military might is second to none. On the one hand, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, shattered America's immunity to the brutality that presumably occurred only elsewhere. Part of the psychospiritual trauma that Americans underwent from 9/11 was the capacity of outsiders to strike at our most symbolic sites, which had stood securely within our own borders. Even so, America's military strength has enabled our country to take the lead in waging the worldwide war on terror, including a new devotion to homeland security, in an attempt to purge the world of terrorism as well as to recover a pre-9/11 sense of domestic security against enemy attack.

All three of these conditions—freedom from religious persecution, health and prosperity, military security—are indeed to be highly

valued and appreciated. The American heritage built and passed down from the sacrifices of earlier generations should be treasured and by no means taken lightly. At the same time, out of that gratitude comes the temptation to attach a normative, universal standard to our heritage. Speaking honestly, we might feel that good conditions in other countries cannot quite measure up to what we enjoy in the United States, let alone be better. And if others do happen to approach our standards, we will outcompete them. Hence the “American way of life,” including our brand of socio-economic-political-religious “freedom” that is to be protected at all costs, can become the ultimate goal toward which we believe all other human societies should aspire, helped along by our not-so-subtle encouragement.

Consequently, such an assumed unique and normative status of the American way of life is problematic for American Christians in relinquishing our assumed and subconscious control, rights, and privileges with respect to God and to other people.

2. “*We don’t suffer.*” Along with the real and perceived quality-of-life gap between the United States and many other countries is an understanding that Americans do not suffer poverty, persecution, and related maladies. Put positively, we assume that Americans enjoy comfortable and peaceful lives, all under the just and fair administration of the rule of law. This understanding is in large measure true: the U.S. government is stable, the economy is productive, and most of us enjoy far more than the bare necessities of life.

Yet there are and have been significant exceptions. The catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina exposed ugly socio-economic-political fault lines. Past tragedies, such as the Civil War and the twentieth-century institutionalized racism confronted in the civil rights movement, are living legacies. There was persecution of religious minorities during the colonial period, during which time religious toleration was legally still being forged.

Still today thousands of Americans live under the poverty line, are homeless, have little or no health care, or are otherwise outside the mainstream prosperous lifestyle. Law enforcement can take on different qualities depending on the particular community in which it is exer-

cised. Some of us tangibly suffer from discrimination and other forms of socioeconomic disenfranchisement. To imagine otherwise is to glorify our imperfect U.S. society.

3. “*Missions* involves suffering.” In reference to missions, one widespread assumption is that American missionaries sacrifice a great deal by living and serving elsewhere. Along with the reduced incomes that all religious workers allegedly receive, U.S. missionaries leave the comforts of the American way of life that we have just been describing. Missionary children miss out on going to school in the United States, and missionary families are separated from their extended families in America. The suffering and sacrifice are filled out by having to live in societies that bear deprivation, disease, and disaster not encountered in the United States.

These assumptions are strengthened by noting the toil and sacrifice of such early American missionaries as the very first to serve abroad, Adoniram Judson (1788–1850, Burma) and the Southern Baptist stalwart Lottie Moon (1840–1912, China). Many U.S. missionaries have even suffered martyrdom, from Jim Elliot and the other “Auca Martyrs” to more recent deaths in the southern Philippines, the Middle East, and other volatile settings.²

People in other parts of the world often note the sacrifice that American missionaries make in leaving a higher standard of living. When asked why they would do such a thing, U.S. missionaries have a golden opportunity to give testimony to the love of God in Jesus Christ that would motivate them to share that same love with others.

Yet there is a flip side to this notion of missionary sacrifice, a flip side that counteracts a one-sided view of U.S. missionary experience as only loss and deprivation. First is the adventure of cross-cultural living. Experiencing different people, foods, customs, and societies often carries an incomparable richness that most missionaries find broadening and even exhilarating. Besides the experience of a *different* culture, the particular culture that a missionary enters has peculiar

2. Information is readily available about these and other well-known missionary figures. One convenient biographical source is Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

delights and beauties that are wonderful to enjoy—festivals or social interaction, food or sports, a unique history or particular friends. Living in a different setting also brings new insights into American life, through comparison and reflection. As for children, the experience (often involving multiple languages) of growing up with American parents in a different country is usually a great privilege and benefit for the children's entire lives.

Our assumptions, then, concerning the sacrifice connected with missions cut both ways in our coming to grips, as twenty-first-century American Christians, with our assumed and subconscious control, rights, and privileges with respect to God and to other people. Hence suffering in the way we are considering it here is a complex process.

God's *Mission* and Our *Missions*

I believe that fundamental to our being able to suffer the loss, as Christ's followers in the United States, of our assumed and subconscious control, rights, and privileges is to make a healthy distinction between *mission* and *missions*. These two terms are often used interchangeably. Some of us also use the plural form in a singular way—for example, in the grammatically challenged statement above that "*Missions* involves suffering." We speak a great deal about *missions* and seem to know what we mean—but do we? Are Christian missions and Christian mission the same thing? Churches have *missions* conferences, *mission* conferences, and *missionary* conferences. What exactly do those different terms and phrases mean?

Part of defining the terms is distinguishing between them. It is important to see the difference between God's comprehensive, singular *mission* and Christians' various *missions* activities. The latter are subsumed under the former: God's *mission* includes, but is by no means exhausted by, Christian *missions*. God has taken the initiative to act decisively in Jesus of Nazareth in his mission to remake the whole world. He carries his mission forward by bringing unbelievers to faith in Jesus Christ, maturing his people, and giving foretastes of the coming *shalom* of the heavenly city. All three of these aspects are extensively spoken of

throughout the Bible, including in 1 Peter. Moreover, the Bible itself, translated as it is into different human languages, is part of God’s mission initiative to speak to all people in our various mother tongues. We who are Jesus’ followers respond by participating with him, at his gracious invitation and command, in our cross-cultural missions. Such missions activities include the recognition and commissioning of *missionaries*, a vast subject we will discuss as the book unfolds.

I doubt that most people would object to making this distinction between God’s *mission* and Christian *missions*. Some will be aware of the history behind how these two terms have been used, and thus will already have a sense of the nuances of the terms. (I have outlined that history in Appendix A.) Those people might also be aware that the English term *mission*, which has “no direct biblical equivalent,” is “derived from the Latin *mitto*, which in turn is a translation of the Greek *apostellō* (to send).” Some as well will agree that the “debate” over using *mission* or *missions* “continues and [that] consensus over this complex issue remains a goal to be reached in the future rather than a present reality.”³

Some Christians have advocated using exclusively one term or the other, depending on their particular viewpoints (some ecumenicals and Roman Catholics use only *mission*; some evangelicals insist on speaking only of *missions*). For myself, I believe it is important and helpful to use both terms in an appropriate and self-conscious way. Doing so facilitates suffering after Christ’s example as we confront our assumed and subconscious control, rights, and privileges with respect to God and to other people.

How so?

The Importance of Both Terms

Christians have used the term *mission* in order to focus on God’s initiative, not ours. That is a good motivation, and thus *mission* is a helpful word to employ. Yet eliminating the plural term *missions* can lead to losing Christian distinctives. What tends to happen is that

3. These quotations are taken from the beginning and end of A. Scott Moreau’s article entitled “Mission and Missions,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau, Baker Reference Library Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 636–38.

everything—Christians’ lives in the world, Christian ministries, even socio-economic-political events—gets swallowed up by God’s mission, such that in the end the distinctiveness of *Christian* mission(s) just evaporates. If everything becomes mission, then nothing ends up being mission.

In order to uphold the distinctively Christian character of what Jesus’ followers are to be doing throughout the world, evangelicals have focused on using the term *missions*. That term connotes the uniqueness and exclusivity of Jesus Christ as the Savior and hope of all people, the necessity of repentance and faith in Jesus for salvation, and the need for all people to hear the verbal proclamation of the news about Jesus and his death and resurrection, lest they die in their unbelief and experience a Christless eternity in hell. For fear of losing such central Christian tenets, some altogether avoid speaking of God’s *mission* in the singular. (Also, as Appendix A describes, some evangelicals have wanted to avoid any association with ecumenicals and liberals and their socio-economic-political involvements.)

The problem with using only *missions*, however, is that too much emphasis can be placed on what *we do*, at the expense of our necessary attention to God and his plan, command, decisive acts in Jesus Christ, sovereign leadership, and empowerment of everything that we his followers can ever do in missions. The modern missions movement of the past two centuries—during the latter half of which Americans have had the leading role—has been action-oriented at the expense of adequate theological reflection.⁴ American pragmatist philosophy, which arose in the late 1800s in association with such names as William James and John Dewey, reinforced the missions movement’s focus on action and effect, and away from theoretical reflection and inquiry. A “just do it” posture has had its strengths as well as its weaknesses. One weakness is that an activist posture does not lend itself to recognizing God as the One who is orchestrating, empowering, and ultimately responsible for carrying out his *mission*.

4. To give my students at Covenant Theological Seminary a historical understanding of the modern missions movement and of where things stand today, I have them read Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 28 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999). On this activist tendency of modern missions, see *ibid.*, 33, 35, 47, 163.

Americans have been described as liking to “get to the point” and take action.⁵ It is too easy for us problem-solvers to run out and try to fix the world on our own instead of consciously participating in God’s initiative and commitment to restore the world to himself in Christ. We thus need the term *mission* to help us go through the suffering of relinquishing before God our control, rights, and privileges with respect to our *missions*. He is the One in charge, and we need every reminder of this truth that we can get.

The International Status of the United States

Besides having an activist bent, we live in perhaps the most powerful economic-political-military nation the world has ever seen—and we know it. We claim to have the world’s best workers, athletes, soldiers, scientists, engineers, technologies, economy, and political and legal systems, and the list goes on. If we somehow lose at something, it is because either we did not put forth our best or there was not a level playing field. We will admit that we have flaws, but in the end Americans are convinced that ours is the greatest and most powerful country on earth.

That conviction is reinforced by the constant influx of encouragements to patriotic devotion, such as singing the national anthem before sporting events, or regular holidays commemorating nationally significant people and events. Some encouragements are more subtle but at least as powerful. Recently a local high school administrator concluded his appeal to us parents to support a proposed tax increase because of the need to invest in our children, the future leaders of our “nation.” He could have referred to our “community,” “city,” “state,” “region,” or “world,” but instead he pulled us toward our common *national* identity, the one that demands the deepest of our loyalties. Public references to “sacred” and “hallowed” national duties or traditions also reinforce Americans’ patriotic devotion.

In the midst of such a deeply patriotic and superpower-status environment, the “big stick” of U.S. military power ever looms in the

5. In order to have my students understand general American cultural traits, I also have them read Gary Althen, *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 2003). See in particular *ibid.*, 58–60.

background, in case other nations disagree, get out of line, or upset the world's balance. While U.S. Christians would not, of course, call on military might to aid missions efforts, the all-encompassing reality of how the world operates in light of unmatched U.S. military firepower infiltrates, I suggest, our assumed and subconscious control, rights, and privileges with respect to instructing and guiding others. American Christians can hardly help but see the rest of the world as inferior, religiously and otherwise. Instinctively, then, *missions* should be the special prerogative of Americans, at least in terms of directing and training Christians of other nationalities.

The American Missions Legacy

In reflecting on how Americans have contributed to missions efforts over the years, Christians have much cause for thanksgiving and celebration. The zeal and sacrifice offered, including martyrdom, have been greater than any of us will ever know. American leadership, funding, creativity, and technical expertise have greatly stimulated the recent surge in global networking, demographic tabulation, and resulting new initiatives to take the gospel to those who have never heard it before. Many other blessings have been spread throughout the world through American missions efforts, including medical relief, educational opportunities, and economic development.

Upon further reflection on the growth of American missions around the globe since the early 1800s, one can see a pattern corresponding to the expansion of the United States' international power and influence. (One can see a similar, general pattern of spreading religion together with national or imperial influence throughout the two millennia of Christian history—and indeed throughout all of religious history, for that matter—so it is not as though Americans are unique in this regard.⁶)

6. Buddhism's spread throughout the Indian subcontinent, starting in the third century B.C., that resulted from the Mauryan King Asoka's edicts is a classic example of religion's spreading under imperial influence. Analyzing the early spread of Islam can be a bit more problematic, since there are conflicting interpretations of the relative importance of violence and political influence on the one hand versus trade on the other. However those complicated matters are sorted out, the consolidation of Islamic influence throughout North Africa and the Middle East unquestionably coalesced with the strength of Islamic dynasties. Clear examples in Christian history include

World War I, a time when the United States' role in international affairs increased dramatically, was when America took the mantle from Britain as the country sending out the most Christian missionaries, a distinction that the United States still comfortably maintains. Following World War II, when America became the leader of the liberal democratic world, there was a sharp upsurge in American missionary personnel and agencies. Here in the early twenty-first century, the power and reach of both the U.S. economy and its military presence have enabled the recent explosion of American short-term missions: the former provides the funding for the travel and projects that are carried out, whereas the latter provides the protection that Americans need during their international travels (whether as a warning against those who might take harmful action against American citizens or to rescue Americans out of dangerous situations that might emerge).

Similarly, American missions have tended to follow geopolitical developments. The unexpected disintegration of the Soviet Union, for decades our Cold War archenemy, led to a massive movement of American missions into eastern Europe, Russia, and central Asia in the 1990s. China's economic openness, again following decades of communist-capitalist suspicions, has spawned significant (if quiet) initiatives by American Christians going there for all sorts of reasons, including religious ones. Most recently, the 9/11 attacks of 2001 and the subsequent war on terror have been accompanied by widespread interest among American Christians in Islam. This interest has been fed by a burst in publications meant to equip Christians for interacting with Islam and Muslims, as well as by a surge in missions endeavors to Muslim peoples.

Pointing out these connections is not at all meant to accuse, malign, or discourage. Rather, seeing how American missions have, quite naturally, developed in sync with wider economic and political realities should drive us to two conclusions. First, Christians live within human history, exhibit qualities of our respective contexts, and act in ways that unavoidably have sociopolitical implications. As much as Christians might like to think that we, as well as our missions activities, flow along in a sort of

ways that missions efforts were facilitated by the political, military, and economic support of the Roman, Byzantine, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, British, and (oddly enough) Japanese empires.

spiritual jet stream that is unaffected by the realities of this world, that simply is not the case. Second, the real Superpower of gospel mission, the triune God of the Bible, has afforded American Christians increasing opportunities for building on their wonderful missions heritage by serving as part of his international community of believers.

The first conclusion is a reality to be accepted, period. We are diligently to exert Spirit-enabled effort to fulfill Jesus' declaration that we are both *in* the world and *not of* it (nor any of its particular geopolitical expressions, including the United States of America). The second conclusion should give great hope and encouragement, even as it presents great challenges and largely uncharted paths ahead. Given this country's superpower status, serving Christ as citizens within today's United States of America, as well as within the rest of today's world, will demand humility and cooperation with others—the degrees of which I sense we have yet to fathom.

The reality of *God's* control, rights, and privileges with respect to his mission and indeed his whole world must thus always check our twenty-first-century American-Christian tendency to assume *our* control, rights, and privileges over carrying out what we view to be the highest of callings, Christian missions. Such a tendency, fueled by the current international economic-political-military environment, is at its root a manifestation of self-centeredness and sin. Hence, for us to “die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24)—a process of suffering—includes increasingly believing that God alone has all the control, rights, and privileges in saving all his people and redeeming his world.

God alone is the mission Superpower. All of us who name the name of Jesus are simply his unworthy servants, blessed by his grace to know him and to suffer after his example.

Reflection Questions

- What are some concrete possibilities of the type of suffering recommended in this chapter that my church and I currently are facing?

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- What comparisons have I made to life in the United States versus visiting or perhaps even living in another country?
- Does my church have a *missions* conference, a *mission* conference, a *missionary* conference, none of these, or something else? What would I like there to be, and why?