



REVITALIZING HARVEST THEOLOGY FOR AN EFFECTIVE MISSION TODAY

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Abstract

There is a decline in the population of Christians in the world from 2010 to 2020, and the primary cause is the slowing down of mission and evangelization efforts. Christians no longer see the urgent need of reaping the harvest of souls. Therefore, there is a need for Harvest Theology based on a solid biblical foundation to revitalize today's mission. This paper uses exploratory and explanatory research methods to come up with a conclusion that churches need to develop Harvest Theology that creates effective strategies as well as focuses resources to reach receptive people; especially among the unreached people group. Harvest Theology is a counter to search theology that emphasizes finding the lost and multiplication of churches. Harvest Theology is very important to be revitalized because of the declining percentage of Christians in the period 2010 to 2020. Through exploratory and explanatory research methods, the author tries to convince readers that Harvest Theology is based on a solid biblical foundation and is vital to revitalizing today's mission. In revitalizing Harvest Theology, we need to develop mission strategies that focus on receptive people, which will give a great harvest in today's mission.

Keywords: Harvest theology, receptive people, relocating, repositioning, Revitalizing

I. Introduction

Harvest Theology was first introduced by Donald McGavran to counter what was known as search theology. Harvest Theology, which emphasizes not just seeking but finding the lost, has received many responses, from both who are criticizing and supporting Harvest Theology. Many people have conducted research related to McGavran's views on Harvest Theology, such as students who completed doctoral programs, such as Robert Gale Glahn,¹ Raymond Waldock,² and Todd Alan Benkert.³

Harvest Theology encourages Christians to find the lost, multiply the church, and emphasizes the numerical growth of the church, often gets criticism from Christian theologians. In fact, some think that church growth as measured by numbers is unbiblical, and shows only poor theology.⁴ On the other hand, if the church has implemented Harvest

¹ Robert Gale Glahn, "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Church Growth Principles" (Ph. D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980).

² Raymond Waldock, "Current Theological Issues in Donald A. McGavran's Missiology," 1990.

³ Todd Alan Benkert, "A Biblical Analysis of Donald A. McGavran's Harvest Theology Principle" (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008).

⁴ Elmer Towns et al., *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* (Zondervan, 2004).

Theology since ancient times in its mission, which focuses on finding the lost and multiplication of churches, there should have been a doubling of the number of Christians. However, the facts are very surprising. Of the world's population, there are more than 4 billion people who are not Christians and 40 per cent of them are unreached groups.⁵ Furthermore, the facts from the research in the last ten years, from 2010 to 2020, the percentage of Christians in the world has decreased. Data from 2010 shows that the population of Christians in the world are 31.5 per cent;⁶ in 2015 it decreased to 31.2 per cent,⁷ and in 2020 decreased to 31.1 per cent.⁸ The data explained that there is no growth or multiplication of Christians.

Based on the issues and facts raised, the author will conduct a study and discussion that emphasizes the importance of revitalizing Harvest Theology in the mission today. In this paper, the author will emphasize several things, including the biblical basis of Harvest Theology, the challenges faced in revitalizing Harvest Theology and opportunities to revitalize Harvest Theology in missions, in order to complete the missions mandated in the Bible.

II. Research Method

The author uses qualitative exploratory and explanatory research methods, by using books and journals as primary resources. Qualitative research is appropriate in this paper because the primary purpose is exploration, then the description in order to explain⁹. Furthermore, qualitative research helps us to achieve a better understanding of the subject¹⁰. Qualitative research also helps us to develop concepts and understandings through the patterns of the data which will be presented.¹¹

The author takes the scriptural text from John 4:35-36, as the foundation of Harvest Theology. The reason for the determination of the text is not just because the text describes Harvest Theology, but also because it was directly spoken by Jesus. The next step is, the author will proceed to grammatical and syntactical analysis. The author also uses books and journals to examine and discuss the challenges and opportunities in revitalizing Harvest Theology in mission today.

III. Findings and Discussion

The Harvest is Ready

Harvest Theology has a solid biblical foundation. Jesus said, "You have a saying, 'Four more months and then the harvest.' But I tell you, take a good look at the fields; the crops are now ripe and ready to be harvested! The man who reaps the harvest is being paid and

⁵ R W Lewis, "Clarifying the Remaining Frontier Mission Task," *Clarifying the Frontiers*, 2018, 154-68.

⁶ "The Global Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, 2016.

⁷ Conrad Hackett and Dacid McClendon, "Christians Remain World's Largest Religious Group, but They Are Declining in Europe," Pew Research Center, 2017.

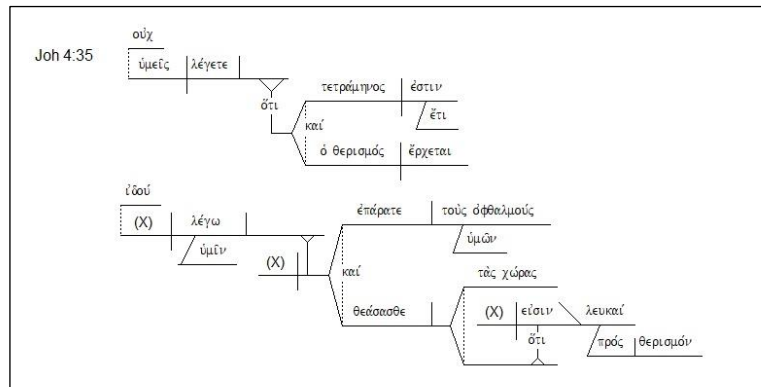
⁸ Benjamin Wormald, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, 2015.

⁹ Patricia Leavy, *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-Based, and Community-Based Participatory Research Approaches* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2017).

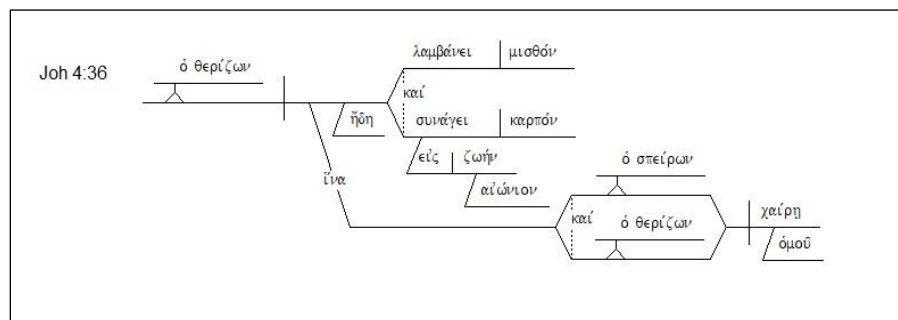
¹⁰ Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011).

¹¹ Steven J Taylor, Robert Bogdan, and Marjorie DeVault, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

gathers the crops for eternal life; so the man who plants and the man who reaps will be glad together.” (John 4:35-36). In conducting the biblical analysis, it must first be considered the structure of the sentence diagram as described below.¹²



Through the sentence structure in verse 35, it is clearly seen that the phrases *ἰδοὺ λέγω ὑμῖν* (behold I say to you) countered the first phrases *οὐχ ὑμεῖς λέγετε* (not you say). Since the first and the second phrase used the same verb, which is verb present indicative active, it can be interpreted that Jesus immediately corrected the wrong thought of his disciples, that the harvest time was still four months away. Jesus confirmed that the harvest period was not four months away but was at hand. The word *εἴσιν* uses the verb form present indicative active which is mean that there were indications that the harvest is ready. This argument also explains or was emphasized in verse 36, as described in the sentence structure below.¹³



The sentence structure in verse 36 explains that this sentence is a prepositional phrase substantival, which is mean that verse 36 explains and supports the argumentation of Jesus in verse 35 that the harvest time was at hand. Jesus encouraged his disciples to pay attention to their surroundings and to think again about the time of the harvest. Jesus taught that the harvest is much faster than the disciples thought. The verb used in this text is present indicative active, therefore the argument of Jesus is valid until now.

Jesus' statement at the same time reminds Christians who hold the view that the task of a Christian today is only to sow, while the harvest is God's business. It is unfortunate if there are people who think that our main task is to sow, not to reap. Jesus emphatically taught that the time of harvest was at hand and he commanded the disciples to reap immediately.

Churches in Indonesia also are not focused on harvest, and one of the reason was because most of churches in Indonesia, have traditions originating from the west, where

¹² L C C BibleWorks, “BibleWorks” (BibleWorks Norfolk, 2017).

¹³ BibleWorks.

the theme of the mission is marginalized and the Christian are neglected in mission.¹⁴ Mission theology in Indonesia must be contextual if it is to perform the mission effectively. Congregations in Indonesia must be equipped to engage in mission fields outside the church, which focus on harvest.

Harvest Theology encourages disciples to think that the harvest is ready. The disciple of Jesus needs to take action immediately, because the harvest is at hand, and if they are late in harvesting, then the harvest will be very few and many are made in vain. Many people do not have the opportunity to receive salvation, simply because the disciples of Christ are not focused on reaping, that is, by encouraging the person who has heard the Gospel immediately to make a decision to accept Jesus as their Savior. Similar cases also occur in Indonesia, and that is why there was no significant church growth in Indonesia. In fact, church growth in Indonesia is more about the movement of congregation members from other churches.¹⁵ It must be admitted that the church growth in Indonesia until 2020 did not occur significantly, because Christians are not focused on reaping.

Focusing on Receptive People

The present world is now progressing toward a more plural society. Peter Berger defines pluralism as, “a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably.”¹⁶ This situation should encourage Christians to share the gospel with their neighbours, and reach out to those who never heard the good news. All people should hear the gospel because this is the command of Jesus Christ to his disciple. Christians should never ignore any tribe, group of people or even a person not to hear the gospel. It is the calling of every Christian to share the gospel with as many people as possible in his or her life. However, in the case of a mission, we often find that the resource is limited. Thus, an effective mission strategy is needed in order to reach as many people as possible.

Donald Anderson McGavran, who developed Harvest Theology, also urged the same thing that all people must have the opportunity to hear the gospel; however, because we have limited resources, we need to focus on the receptive field.¹⁷ In addition to the efficiency of resources, focusing on receptive people will increase efficiency because when we focus to share the gospel with the person who is ready to hear the gospel, then we will gain harvest.¹⁸ In fact, focusing on receptive people is obedience to the Great Commission and also to be responsive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. All disciples should obey the great commission and at the same time obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit, by asking what He wants us to do or who the people that he has prepared to hear the gospel.

A mission strategy that is effective is Christocentric in nature. We should look at how Jesus led his disciples when doing missions.¹⁹ A suitable example to discuss effective

¹⁴ Ailsa Baker. *Teologi, Studi Biblika dan Misi*. IJT, Indonesian Journal of Theology. Vol 5, No. 1. Juli (2017): 122.

¹⁵ Fransiskus I. Widjaja, Irfan Simanjuntak. *Teologi Misi Sebagai Teologi Amanat Agung*. Thronos. Jurnal Teologi Kristen. Vol 1 No. 1, November (2019): 20.

¹⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 1, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781614516477/html>; cf. David Kristanto et al., “Natural Theology and Its Relevance to Religious Pluralism in Indonesia,” *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili Dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat* 6, no. 1 (2022): 1.

¹⁷ John Michael Morris, “McGavran on McGavran: What Did He Really Teach,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Missions and Evangelism* 2 (2016): 9–24.

¹⁸ Rick Warren, “Why Evangelism Should Focus On Receptive People,” Pastors.com, 2013.

¹⁹ For a broader picture of a Christocentric Christian leadership, see Daniel E Runtuwene and David Kristanto, “Sermon on the Mount and Christian Leadership in the Era of the Internet of Things,” in

mission strategy is when he sent his disciple two by two in Luke 10:1-10. Jesus asked his disciple to focus on the community who were open and accepted them. Even Jesus commanded that they immediately leave the place of those who rejected them and look for people or communities who are open to the preaching of the gospel. This is very important since we have limited resources. David Sills also urged upon the same thing when he explained that the Harvest Theology mission is focused to win the winnable person.²⁰

On the other side, when we focused on the receptive people, we are not ignoring the unresponsive people. John Michael Morris reminded us that responsive people can give impact their friends and also others.²¹ Therefore, the strategy of Harvest Theology also creates an effort to make disciples who are able to reach others and to disciple others. Harvest Theology encourages disciples to make disciples and multiply disciple who has heart, passion and competency to share the gospel. This strategy is also similar to the thought of Rick Warren when he said that the most effective strategy is to reach first those who have something in common.²² We have to focus on receptive people, and when they believe in Jesus Christ, train them to reach their resistant friends, who already have something in common.

The Receptive People

The next important question is how do we know which ones are receptive people? Ellyn Lyle said that one of the characteristics of receptive people is the willingness to engage with a new idea. Receptive people are curious to know something new by asking questions.²³ Furthermore, Patrick L. Schmidt explained that the receptive person is someone who is more open-minded than willing to accept other cultures or values from outsiders.²⁴ Meanwhile, Afrah Abdulla stated that receptive people are the people more likely to accept and develop beliefs and opinions that will prove to be true.²⁵ The following are some of the receptive people that we need to focus on.

The Unreached People Group is one of the most receptive people but most neglected.²⁶ Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch reported that only 3 per cents of missionaries reach the unreached people group.²⁷ One example of a very receptive unreach people is the Madiga community in Ongole, India. American Baptist Mission started its ministry in 1840 and reached Telugu in Nellore. This ministry was fruitless for 24 years (1840-1864), reaching high-caste Hindus called Brahmins. In 1864 John Clough went to India and followed in the footsteps of his predecessors by serving Brahmins for 13 years with very few coming to the Lord. John Clough decided to leave this field and moved to Ongole in 1877. A few months later, on July 1878, John Clough baptized 2,222 in one day and within

International Conference on Theology, Humanities, and Christian Education (ICONTHCE 2021) (Atlantis Press, 2022), 111-14; the principle is also applicable to Christian leadership in the context of mission.

²⁰ M David Sills, *The Missionary Call: Find Your Place in God's Plan for the World* (Moody Publishers, 2018).

²¹ Morris, "McGavran on McGavran: What Did He Really Teach."

²² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Zondervan, 1995).

²³ Ellyn Lyle, Lyle, and Janssen, *At the Intersection of Selves and Subject* (SensePublishers, 2017).

²⁴ Patrick L Schmidt, "Understanding American and German Business Cultures," *A Manager's Guide to the Cultural Context in Which American and German Companies Operate*, 1999.

²⁵ Afrah Abdulla, *Readiness or Resistance?: Newly Arrived Adult Migrants' Experiences, Meaning Making, and Learning in Sweden*, vol. 203 (Linköping University Electronic Press, 2017).

²⁶ Global Frontier Missions, "Learn About Unreached People Groups," n.d.

²⁷ Ralph D Winter and Bruce A Koch, "Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge," *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement 3* (1999): 509-24.

six weeks he baptized almost 9,000 new believers from Madiga, the unreached people group.²⁸

This is one of the reasons why is needed focusing the unreached people group in revitalizing Harvest Theology. However, one of the biggest challenges in revitalizing Harvest Theology is repositioning mission workers and relocating mission funds. There is currently an imbalance and injustice in mission work. The results show that 87 per cent of mission funds are allocated among Christians and only 1 per cent is allocated to unreached people groups. The data also shows that 72 per cent of missionaries work among Christians and only 3 per cent work among unreached people groups.²⁹ We must dare to take radical steps to reduce the unfair and unbalanced situation in the work of the mission. Mission organization should refocus their target from reaching people groups to the unreached people groups. Mission organization should reduce their focus on Christians, and target unreached people groups by sending more mission workers and investing more funds in unreached people groups.

Other receptive people are those who are facing challenges or going through a crisis. There is much evidence in the Bible which shows that people came to Jesus when they were in trouble. It was the same in the days of the apostles. For example, the jailer and his household believed in Jesus, when they were in despair (Acts 29). McGavran who did ministry in India also had a similar experience, when he pays attention to the poor.³⁰ Rick Warren also urged that someone who experiencing shock and change is more open to the Gospel.³¹ Billy Graham in his preaching also took this advantage. He knew that the person who came to the evangelistic crusade, hoping for help to solve his problem. Therefore, the objective of his preaching was to help this person to realize that only One can help them, and that is Jesus Christ.³² This was the strategy that Billy Graham used to harvest people for the Lord.

Pandemic Covid-19 has caused crises all over the world including Indonesia. A report from UNICEF says that 80 million children and adolescents in Indonesia are experiencing a crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding health and education. The report also stated that three out of four households in Indonesia experienced a very drastic decline in income, and this caused depression in the household.³³

Meanwhile, the latest report from the Association of Clinical Psychologists, which analyzes 14,619 individual clients explained that 23.9 per cent of clients experienced stress and 18.9 per cent experienced anxiety.³⁴ Furthermore, the latest findings from the Association of Indonesian Psychiatrists, explained that of 5,661 people who do a self-examination of mental health conditions conducted online through the website, 74.2 per cent experienced symptoms of psychological trauma. This symptom is most commonly found in the age group of 30 years. The data also found that 67.3 per cent also experienced

²⁸ Donald A McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd editio (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999).

²⁹ Winter and Koch, "Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge."

³⁰ George H Martin et al., "Donald McGavran and Church Growth, A Quarter Century after His Death," 2016, 15.

³¹ Warren, "Why Evangelism Should Focus On Receptive People."

³² Michael Hamilton, "From Desire to Decision: The Evangelistic Preaching of Billy Graham," in *Billy Graham: American Pilgrim* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 45.

³³ Kinanti Pinta Karana, "80 Juta Anak Di Indonesia Menghadapi Dampak Pandemi COVID-19 Yang Meluas," *Unicef.Org*, 2021.

³⁴ Tim CNN Indonesia, "6 Masalah Psikologis Tertinggi Di Indonesia Selama Pandemi," CNN Indonesia, 2020.

symptoms of depression with 48 per cent of them thinking they would rather die or want to hurt themselves.³⁵

Since the crisis moves people to seek comfort in spirituality, the current pandemic has made people more receptive to the gospel. We have to take this opportunity to reach them. One effective way to reach them during the COVID-19 pandemic and also in the upcoming new normal is through online counselling. Many organizations, including educational institutions, are developing online counselling services. According to a report from Atmajaya University, online counselling has several advantages such as flexibility in determining session schedules, and practicality, thereby reducing potential barriers that can cause counselling to be cancelled, avoiding potential problems. fear of meeting relatives/acquaintances at the counselling location and clients can feel more comfortable because they are in their homes.³⁶

The Association of Indonesian Psychiatrists also realizes that technology is very helpful in reaching more individuals who need professional assistance. Therefore, they developed an application called Good Doctor Tech Technology Indonesia. They reported that from April to October 2020, the number of people receiving telemedicine consultations increased sevenfold³⁷. This can be an inspiration for mission organizations to use technology to reach more people. Through counselling services, Christians can direct everyone to come to God as the main source of help, and help them to believe in Jesus Christ.

Millennials are also a group that is receptive to the gospel. Ed Stetzer states that millennials the most spiritually receptive in our lifetime is today because they have a very strong curiosity. According to him, many millennial non-believers call on Christians to share Christ with them³⁸. This fact is an advantage and the concern of Harvest Theology. Barna's research which was released on May 28, 2019, also supported Stetzer's statement, that millennial non-Christians show greater interest in spirituality, especially in Christianity. They reported that 26 per cent of millennial non-Christians expressed personal interest in Christianity. Further, they explained that millennials explore the Christian faith through one-on-one conversations with a Christian. Data shows that 53 per cent of millennials prefer a private conversation with a Christian, to understand more about Christianity.³⁹

In line with Stetzer and Barna's research results, Rick Richardson explained that many millennials are more open to the gospel than we realize.⁴⁰ Through all of these facts, we should focus on reaching the millennial of non-Christians, who are more open to the gospel in our mission today.

In reaching the widest possible millennial group, we must think of a specific strategy. David Stark reminded us that if we want to reach a younger generation, namely the millennial group, we need to apply a different approach, a specific and effective approach.⁴¹ The millennial group has its own uniqueness and must be learned by

³⁵ Tim CNN Indonesia.

³⁶ Nidia Muryani, "Hidup Di Masa Pandemi: Ketika Semua Serba Daring, Termasuk Konseling," 2021.

³⁷ Tim CNN Indonesia, "Jumlah Konsultasi Psikologi Telemedis Meningkatkan Saat Pandemi," CNN Indonesia, 2020.

³⁸ Ed Statzer, "Culture, Evangelism and Discipleship, Leadership, Missiology. The Re Is Probably the Most Spiritually Receptive Week in Our Lifetime- Will You Share?," Christianity Today, 2020.

³⁹ "Millennial Non-Christians Show Greater Spiritual Curiosity Than Older Adults Research Releasesin Faith & Christianity May 28, 2019 <https://www.Barna.Com/Research/Millennial-Spiritual-Curiosity/>," 2019.

⁴⁰ Rick Richardson, *You Found Me: New Research on How Unchurched Nones, Millennials, and Irreligious Are Surprisingly Open to Christian Faith* (InterVarsity Press, 2019).

⁴¹ David Stark, *Reaching Millennials: Proven Methods for Engaging a Younger Generation* (Baker Books, 2016).

everyone who wants to reach out to this group. We need to know the characteristics of millennials so that we can easily approach them.

It has been stated previously, that the millennial group prefers one-on-one conversation or dialogue, therefore, in reaching millennials, it is more effective if we create private conversations with them, and not in public. Face-to-face conversations are often difficult to carry out, but private conversations can be done via telephone, video calls or with the WhatsApp application. Mission workers need to be trained on how to start a conversation with millennials over the phone. Starting a good conversation will have a good impact. Mission workers need to create a good impression so that millennials are encouraged to ask questions, which in the end we have the opportunity to explain the Christian faith to them. Mission workers need to be trained on how to create interesting conversations, as well as how to encourage millennials to make the decision to follow Jesus.

Meanwhile, Deb Aikat said that digital technology is a very essential element in the life of the millennial group. Digital technology is inseparable from the lives of millennials. Mission workers must take advantage of opportunities to reach millennials. Mission workers must be digitally savvy. They must use every digital platform to reach as many millennials as possible. Deb Aikat said that millennials prefer storytelling media with multi-faceted images, such as videos, and data-driven content that engages them.⁴² In an effort to reach the millennial group, mission workers must have the skills and creativity to create interesting video content, with animations that attract the attention of millennials.

Wided Batat explained that there are two digital media applications that are very popular with millennials, namely Instagram and TikTok. Wided Batat said that the majority of TikTok users are under the age of 18, while Instagram users are between 18 and 34 years old.⁴³ According to this data, mission workers can use the two digital media platforms according to the age group they want to reach. Mission workers need to create highly engaging content in a very short timeframe. These two digital media platforms, only serve as bait, therefore, they must be followed up with intensive and interesting conversations about the gospel.

IV. Conclusion

Claims or statements that say that Christians are growing in numbers and increasing in percentage are not true. In the last ten years, from 2010-2020, Christians have decreased in percentage. The insignificant growth of Christians is not only happening in the global world, but the same problem also occurred in Indonesia. We need to revitalize Harvest Theology which emphasizes finding and multiplication, to respond to this situation. Harvest Theology which is based on a solid biblical foundation has a strategy to win as many people as possible to Christ is a very important and urgent theology to be taught and applied. Harvest Theology challenges every Christian to act, to reap the fields that are ready to be harvested, to win those who are winnable, and to preach the gospel to people who are open to the gospel. Harvest Theology calls on every mission leader to develop an effective mission strategy that is Christ-centered in nature.

At least, there are three groups of people who are open to the gospel, which is the focus of Harvest Theology in bringing as many people as possible to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, namely the unreached people group, people who are experiencing heavy

⁴² Deb Aikat, "Millennials Usher a Post-Digital Era: Theorizing How Generation Y Engages with Digital Media," in *Mediated Millennials* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 9–29.

⁴³ Wided Batat, *Youth Marketing to Digital Natives* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021).

struggles or going through a crisis and millennials. Of course, mission workers will use different strategies in reaching these three groups, because they have their own uniqueness and characteristics. Mission workers are challenged to apply the right principles and strategies, so they can reap as much as possible. The openness to talk over different beliefs and worldviews in our present plural society should be seen as a chance to spread the gospel to as many people as possible.

There are several recommendations submitted after discussing the results of this study. First of all, mission workers and mission organizations need to do justice and balance in the world of missions by repositioning mission workers and relocating mission funds which so far have only been spread among Christian communities. The second thing is that every Christian should be more earnest in preaching the gospel. Third, the preaching of the gospel must be more focused on people who are receptive to the gospel. Fourth, Christians have an eagerness to win souls, not just carry out the great commission. The last, every Christian should develop a finder mentality, not just a seeker mentality.

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