

Raw Passion and Messy Missiology

A Tribute to George Verwer (1938–2023)



by John Piper

One of my heroes died on April 14, 2023. His personal and global influence was inestimable.

In 1967, my fiancée and I attended the student missions conference at Urbana. George Verwer was one of the speakers. That was my first exposure to the raw passion of one of the greatest missions leaders of the last one hundred years.

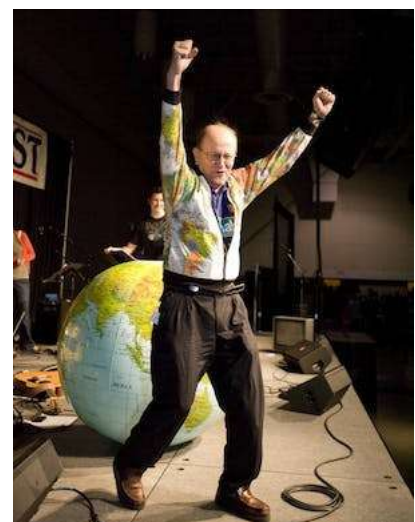
He held up the two-volume set of sermons by Martyn Lloyd-Jones and said something like, “This is the greatest book of the last fifty years.” I bought the two volumes and read them that summer between college and seminary. I have been rekindling my flame with Verwer and Lloyd-Jones ever since.

Burning for Christ

However, it’s not certain that Verwer had read Lloyd-Jones all the way through because, in 1996 at a missions conference in Dalfsen, Holland, when he recommended my book *The Pleasures of God*, Greg Livingstone asked him if he had read it, and he said, “I get revival just by reading the covers.”

I’ve never forgotten that line: “I get revival just by reading the covers.” It didn’t mean, “I don’t need the fuel of truth in order to burn for God.” It meant, “My gunpowder blows up at the smallest spark of God’s saving grace.”

I have always tried to take seriously Paul’s command, “Do not be slothful in zeal, *be fervent* in spirit” (Romans 12:11). “Be fervent” means, “Boil!” It really does. The Greek *zeontes* means “to boil, to seethe, to be fiery



hot,” as in Ezekiel 24:5: “Pile logs under it; *boil* it well; seethe also its bones in it.” This is not a personality type. It’s a flame of the Spirit burning in different personalities.

John the Baptist sang a dirge. Jesus played the flute. Both burned (Matthew 11:17). It’s an apostolic command.

One Night to Change the World

God lit the fire of Verwer’s faith when he was 16 years old. Before he graduated from high school, two hundred students had professed faith through his spreading flame. He went to Moody Bible Institute, and when he was 21 he led an all-night prayer meeting for the unreached nations of the world. The ripple effect was incalculable. Probably more so than the historic “haystack prayer meeting.”

**“I thank God for George Verwer.
For his raw passion.
For his indomitable faith in Jesus.”**

Hoping to find donuts and girls, a Wheaton student named Greg Livingstone showed up at the prayer meeting. Instead of girls, he found a group of young men kneeling over world maps on the floor. Verwer put his finger in Greg’s face and said, “What country are you claiming?” Having no idea what that meant, Greg said, “What’s left?” Verwer said, “You’ve got Libya.”

The reason that story matters is that George Verwer’s passion for the nations led to not just *one* large missions organization but two. Everyone who knows Verwer knows he founded Operation Mobilization, which today “has 3,311 workers representing more than 110 nationalities . . . bringing God’s truth to millions every year.” What most people don’t know is that Greg Livingstone went back to Wheaton that night a changed man. He switched his major to Bible and went on to found Frontiers, the largest missions agency in the world devoted entirely to inviting Muslims to Christ.

Livingstone’s autobiography is titled *You’ve Got Libya*.

Verwer’s global impact did not go to his head. He was radical down to his toes. I invited him to speak at our pastor’s conference in 1998. He walked to the pulpit in his usual global windbreaker, carrying a thirty-inch beachball with a map of the world. He didn’t stay in a hotel like the other speakers, but lived in an RV near the church and jogged through the neighborhood. Then he and his traveling companion drove on to other cities to do it all again.

He was one of a kind. Which could also get him (and others) in trouble.

‘God’s Bungler’

In August 1984, our family drove to Washington, DC, to attend the annual meeting of the Association of Church Mission Committees — mainly because George Verwer was speaking. The effect of this trip almost got me fired.

I was four years into my pastorate and wanted to put my flickering torch into Verwer’s flame. The cutting-edge technology of Sony’s Walkman enabled me to listen to Verwer tapes all the way to the conference, and back. He spoke about how sexual sin among young single men was keeping them off the mission field because of guilt. He preached grace and forgiveness — lifelong themes he never tired of.

I was so fired up for missions that when I got home I wrote an article for our church newsletter titled “Missions and Masturbation.” In spite of the fact that the chaplain at West Point said he photocopied it for all the cadets, the ladies among our mostly older members did not find it edifying. Some wise older men took me aside and helped me see that not all passion for a good cause results in good strategies. This is partly what I mean by “raw passion.” Verwer (and Piper) made mistakes. I have never known anyone whose passion was more self-deprecating than George Verwer’s. In comparing himself with Brother Andrew, “God’s Smuggler,” he referred to himself as “God’s Bungler.” Which is why he loved the gospel of grace and forgiveness so much, and why, in his final podcast before he died, he said he wanted to be remembered for the message of his book *Messiology*.

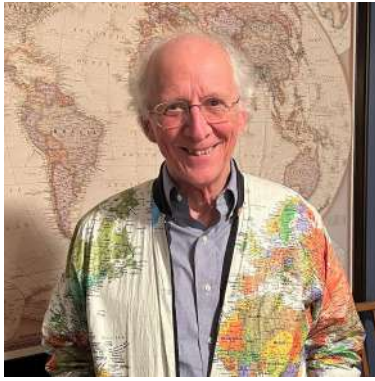
**“Let us take heart in our resolves to
make our lives count for the cause of Christ.”**

He summed up the content of that book like this: “I believe history will show that God was doing way more in the midst of our messes than we realized at the time.” As if to illustrate the point, it was Greg Livingstone who wrote the foreword for the book — the fruit of a messy late-night prayer meeting.

Only One Life

I thank God for George Verwer. For his raw passion. For his indomitable faith in Jesus. For his perseverance in messy missiology. And for his kindness to me personally. More than once, he called me out of the blue (once while driving along a Los Angeles freeway) just to encourage me.

So let us take heart in our resolves to make our lives count for the cause of Christ. “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).



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