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Ralph D. Winter: A Man of Many Paradoxes in the Service of One Goal

By Stan Guthrie

In 1905, Albert Einstein described light as a particle traveling through space. Later that year, after further analysis, he described light also as a continuous field of waves. This was no contradiction. Both descriptions—particle and wave—accurately but paradoxically describe the complex phenomenon that we all experience as light. In his subsequent work Einstein chose whichever model best helped him solve whatever problem was at hand.

While Ralph D. Winter (1924-2009) has little in common with the curiosities endemic to quantum mechanics, the founder of the U.S. Center for World Mission was full of his own paradoxes. Many of the man's personal and professional attributes have to be held in tension in order for his wide-ranging impact on the kingdom of God to be fully appreciated.

Winter was many things at the same time: a bold theorist, a constant tinkerer, a warm-hearted friend, a tireless promoter of ideas, a risk-taking institution-builder, and a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. No single aspect of Winter's life and ministry fully captures the light he brought to the global missionary task. But taken together, these elements provide a clear but complex portrait of this self-described "social engineer." This portrait shines brightly in Harold Fickett's compelling new biography, *The Ralph D. Winter Story: How One Man Dared to Shake Up World Missions* (William Carey Library, 2012).

Bold theorist. An engineer by training and inclination, Ralph D. Winter was never guilty of saying, "That's the way we've always done it." Winter had the uncanny ability to size up a problem in a new way, ask questions that no one else had ever thought of, and propose daring solutions that shook up the status quo—and got results.

Such was his paradigm-busting insight presented at the epochal 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. Winter called on the global missionary enterprise to focus not just on starting churches in each of the world's nation-states, but on reaching the then 2-billion-strong contingent of "unreached peoples" separated from gospel witness in hundreds of distinct groups by barriers of language and culture. Fickett says Winter's proposal served the dual purpose of "reigniting cross-cultural evangelism, while restoring to many of the delegates and their organizations a reason for being."

Further, Winter, while a missionary in Guatemala, helped developed a leadership training program that came to be known as Theological Education by Extension (TEE). Winter, ministering among the Mam people with his wife Roberta, saw two glaring weaknesses in training leaders for local churches: (1) traditional seminary education did not prepare them well; and (2) the natural leaders in a Christian community were not the ones who were receiving theological education in the first place.

So Winter devised an approach that removed the need for students to go to school and instead brought it to them through ready-made lessons they could study while they worked and ministered in their own

contexts. The results were so encouraging that Winter would say that TEE “has become the catalyst of a whole movement involving more than 50 other schools in Latin America, and there is serious interest around the world.”

Winter also was unafraid to push the boundaries of convention in his musings on “evil intelligent design” and the need for Christians to become more deeply involved in disease eradication—two emphases dealt with at length in *The Ralph Winter Story*.

Winter’s creativity is esteemed by many others committed to fulfilling the Great Commission. “Ralph Winter seemed the Renaissance man of evangelical missions,” says Gary Brumbelow, editorial director of Disciple Nations Alliance. “He was always several steps ahead of everyone else in applying creative thinking to the missionary enterprise. I once heard him described as ‘the only original thinker’ in the world of missions.”

Billy Graham once said, “Ralph Winter has not only helped promote evangelism among many mission boards around the world, but by his research, training and publishing he has accelerated world evangelization.”

Constant tinkerer. Winter was known for his passion to learn many subjects that could help him more effectively reach people for Christ. He studied linguistics, the teaching of English to speakers of other languages, New Testament Greek, and a grab bag of other subjects, often pestering his professors for the right to learn them his own way. Winter’s tinkering with accepted conventions was not universally admired, however. In fact, it so irritated a fellow missionary in Guatemala that she icily told Roberta, “One of the two of us will have to leave.”

A missionary administrator from the Guatemala days summed up Winter’s tinkering thusly: “A great deal could be written about his transient ideas and schemes, many of them impracticable and not founded upon careful planning. Others of them are actually brilliant. (Most of them are not taken seriously by his fellow workers, which must increase his frustrations.) He is almost a genius, with a versatile, productive mind, and his time and activity cannot keep pace with it.”

Warm-hearted friend. Many former colleagues testify to this genius’s personal concern for them and what they were doing. Fickett, his biographer, said, “Unlike almost every other Christian leader with whom I’ve worked—and I’ve known my share—he didn’t pretend to be interested in you; he actually was interested, because God’s drama engaged him far more than his own part in it.”

John Maust, a missionary journalist who now heads Media Associates International, also says Winter took a personal interest. “He encouraged me to write a book about the birth of the evangelical church among the Quichua peoples of Ecuador,” Maust recalls, “and when it became hard to find a publisher, he instantly said, ‘Then we’ll publish it!’ I wonder how many hundreds, if not thousands, of other people he similarly inspired in his quiet, behind-the-scenes way.”

Similarly, missionary researcher Justin Long, while acknowledging that he and Winter didn’t always see eye to eye, called him “passionate and generous.” I would agree; Winter readily agreed to endorse a “delightful, readable little book” (his words) I wrote about missions trends, happy to lend his name and expertise to a relative unknown.

Tireless promoter of ideas. Seeing a need to communicate a vision for world evangelism both to opinion-shapers and to the masses, Winter did whatever it took to get the word out. Maust says, “Ralph Winter’s mind and heart always seemed to be running out ahead of the rest of us. Whenever I heard him speak, he expanded my vision for world missions and left me with a fresh insight or new motivation

for serving Christ cross-culturally. I remember him carrying cardboard boxes filled with missions books to conferences.”

Risk-taking institution-builder. Winter founded a publishing enterprise, the William Carey Library, when finances were dodgy at best. He also helped found the American Society of Missiology and its journal, *Missiology*. Two periodicals that the U.S. Center produced during his leadership were the highly influential *Mission Frontiers* and the *Global Prayer Digest*. His “Perspectives on the World Christian Movement” course offered in churches has touched thousands.

Tetsunao Yamamori, Senior Fellow, Center for Religion and Civic Culture, University of Southern California, says that Winter had a practical method to his theoretical madness: “He established, and challenged others to establish, institutions and channels of communications to reach the unreached for the glory of God.”

Perhaps because of his and Roberta’s commitment to what they called a “wartime lifestyle,” Winter took great personal risk in founding the U.S. Center and leaving a safe appointment at a seminary. Money seemingly was always tight, the fund raising endless. Winter and company arranged for the purchase of a college campus in Pasadena despite the opposition of a cult that had occupied the premises. Yet Winter was willing to do whatever it took to build the institutions necessary to implement his vision—everything from the Frontier Mission Fellowship to the International Society for Frontier Missiology.

Faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. Early on in life, the progress of the kingdom of God became Ralph Winter’s central concern. More intelligent and energetic than most, Winter was unafraid to try new things—and even to fail—in order to discover what his role would be in the spread of the gospel. He gathered quite a collection of academic and ministerial degrees and experiences, even helping to found an enterprise called the Afghan Institute of Technology. He was willing to put everything in his life—even his romantic interests—in the service of the kingdom.

For example, when he met his future wife, Roberta Helm, Winter was intrigued by her forthrightness and willingness to be different—perhaps because those traits matched his own. But unsure that God wanted him to be entangled with married life, he asked her a series of questions to discern whether they were spiritually compatible.

And even at the end of his life, Winter measured all things by Scripture, even when he suspected that long-accepted understandings of God’s Word might be off kilter. Reading the Bible was one of Winter’s lifelong passions, which gave him the vision to see the continuous expansion of God’s good rule across the barriers of time and geography.

It is impossible to completely sum up the complex influence and impact of Ralph D. Winter in a book (much less an article). Winter could at times be a mystery not just to others, but to himself. But that did not deter him, as his eyes were usually focused elsewhere anyway.

“I am willing to fail,” Winter said. “Risks are not to be evaluated in terms of the probability of success, but in terms of the value of the goal.”

For Winter, who was a scientist for the kingdom, and for all those he inspired, the goal was always the same—the glory of Jesus Christ.

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