

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

Fall 2015

# IX 9Marks Journal

adding  
wisdom

MISSIONS

to  
zeal



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Jonathan Leeman

## Editor's Note

**M**ark Dever recently began a sermon on the topic of missions with this illustration:

There once was a delicious drink with powerful positive side effects. Everyone that drank it loved it. It not only tasted good, it was healthy, too!

The business consultants saw marvelous possibilities. This drink could go everywhere! So they convinced the man who created the drink to leave business expansion plans in their hands.

Within weeks bottles of the drink began appearing in vast numbers, first in nearby cities, then all around the country. A vast ad campaign joined the rumors spread by the few people who drank the original product.

Yet as bottles were snapped up, opened, and drunk, people were underwhelmed. It was a good drink. But it wasn't what they had heard from their friends, or seen advertised on the billboards. It was...another drink, like so many others on store shelves.

When the original owner heard people's response, he couldn't believe it. His product had never failed. How could this be? He went to a store where several shelves were lined with every size of bottle of his drink, opened one, and drank.

Then he understood.

In order to produce and sell his drink so quickly on such a vast scale, the consultants had changed and cheapened it. It was no his longer his original drink.

But now his opportunity to introduce the drink to the nation was lost. He had started with one problem—no one knew about the drink. Now he had a far worse problem—everyone knew about it. Or at least they *thought* they did! But what they had was a fake. Had the man's opportunity been forever lost?

Mark concluded his parable with this lesson for missions:

There is no doubt that Jesus' commission to take the Good News around the world has become more challenging by those who—in the name of reaching more numbers more quickly—have ended up substituting a watered-down product for the real one. They have succeeded in growing *something* quickly, but it is not entirely clear what that *something* is.

Zeal without knowledge hurts missions; it can even lead to damnation (see Rom. 10:1-3). Yet too often churches assume the sincerity of their efforts makes up for any deficiencies in their methods. The sense of urgency especially leads toward hasty, unhealthy, and foolish missions work.

What's needed are healthy churches, and a vision for the crucial role of churches in doing the work of missions. In this 9Marks Journal, we start by addressing some of the problems in missions today, particularly with regard to the role of churches.

Then we ask the question, what exactly should churches do to engage wisely in missions? We try to answer that question in the second half.

So many topics we could have addressed in the Journal, but hopefully it offers a useful starting point to the conversation for pastors. Start, perhaps, with Aubrey Sequeira. It offers a useful picture of what can go wrong. Mack Stiles then offers the counterpoint: what does healthy church engagement look like.

And pray that God would use this Journal to help churches more faithfully fulfill the Great Commission, particularly to the ends of the earth.



By Aubrey Sequeira

# A Plea for Gospel Sanity

## Part I: Obsessed with Numbers

## Part II: Over-awed by the "Supernatural"

## Part III: Over-Eager for Contextualization

I feel like I've had the conversation more than a thousand times. In my years living in the United States, believers often meet me and, having learned that I'm from India, they ask: "Oh! Have you heard of the Indian minister \_\_\_\_?"

"No, I haven't. How do you know him?"

"Well, our church supports him—he's an amazing evangelist who has planted churches in the last 5 years, has opened 5 orphanages, and runs a Bible College to train pastors!"

"Really? Do you know him personally?"

In most cases the reply is, "Sure, we've met him. He visited our church and shared his testimony. He has such an amazing testimony. His vision is to plant more than 30,000 churches in the next 10 years."

It's been hard for me not to grow cynical and feel frustrated each time I have conversations like these. Because what my Western brothers and sisters often don't understand is that most Indian "ministries" have learned what excites people in the West. Indians have learned that massive numbers and astounding testimonies dazzle the Western church—and when supporting partners in the West are impressed, that typically means the dollars rush in. Unfortunately, Western churches seldom, if ever, learn that in many cases the numbers are inflated, the testimonies are fabricated, and the "gospel work" they've been investing in is actually a mirage.

The conversation I've described above illustrates some particular issues in missions that I've watched with growing concern, and as an Indian, who was born and raised in India and came to the saving



knowledge of Jesus Christ through the faithful labors of a Western missionary in my city, I feel responsible to voice my concerns.

In turn, I hope to address some of the major problems in missions in India—problems that arise from certain emphases in the West. These problems are perpetuated and exacerbated both by Western missionaries who go to India, and Western churches who support indigenous Indian ministries. My desire is not to be pessimistic and critical, but to call us all to be faithful and obedient to the biblical commands to “make disciples” and proclaim the “whole counsel of God.” Consider this a plea from East to West for gospel-centered sanity in missions.

## **PART I: OBSESSED WITH NUMBERS**

First, it's important to discuss one of the primary problems in missions in India—the Western drive for numerical efficiency, that is, the idea that large numbers are a validation of God's blessing and ministry success.

The corporate world is infatuated with numbers. Big numbers. Numbers are the order of the day in every sphere of life, and the drive for impressive numbers has found its way into the church and the church's mission, both in the West, and—as a result of Western influence—in India. Most missions buzzwords are in some way colored by the notion of numerical efficiency: “rapid,” “multiplication,” “strategy,” “growth.”

Every “vision” and every “report” has some kind of a numerical tag attached to it. 5000 churches in 5 years. 30,000 baptisms in 3 years. Bigger and faster = better. Right?

Wrong!

Sadly, the Western church's obsession with numbers has had a destructive effect so that the name of Christ is blasphemed in India.

A sinful craze for bigger and better numbers has tainted both indigenous ministries *and* the work of Western missionaries in India. The notion that numerical growth is an indicator of faithfulness is foreign to the Scriptures and actually arises from the “church-growth movement.”<sup>[1]</sup> But sadly, most churches—even those that hold to a more robust God-centered theology of the gospel—have bought into this false idea that “rapid growth” is the primary sign of God's blessing. The faster you grow, the more faithful you are.

I hope to debunk this false idea by discussing some of the disastrous effects that it's had on missions in India. But more than that, I hope to rouse my Western brothers and sisters to a more sane, faithful, and gospel-centered approach to missions. We may certainly celebrate numerical growth if it accords with the Scriptures. But when numerical growth replaces Scriptural priorities, the gospel is compromised and Christian witness is tarnished. By pointing out some of the devastating results of the emphasis on numbers, I hope to encourage Western churches to be discerning in the missionary works they support while also encouraging my Indian brothers to seek true gospel growth in their ministries, regardless of whether that looks impressive to the West or not.

## **The Scourge of Christian Nominalism**

Missionary reports from India are filled with the news of amazing “people-movements” to Christ that are apparently taking place all over the country. Missionaries I’ve talked to have described their work in these terms: “7000 churches were planted in Kashmir in the last 5 years.” “50,000 new believers were baptized in New Delhi last year.” “Hundreds of thousands of low-caste ‘Dalits’ (untouchables) are coming to know Christ.” We are told that things are happening in India on an “unprecedented scale,” matched only by the opening chapters of the book of Acts. Is this for real? Let me respond with 3 points.

### *i. Where are the churches?*

A fellow Indian co-laborer in the gospel (who labors in one of the hardest regions in North India) tells me that when he hears Western friends talk about these thousands of churches planted, without blinking, he wryly asks for their address and postal code, so he can go visit at least one of them. His point is not that all churches must have a physical address, but that these numbers are reporting phantom churches that don’t exist in reality.

In short, the numbers are a delusion. These so-called “churches” are typically nothing more than a group of three or four people made to gather together once or twice casually. They hear a couple of watered-down Bible stories, and vanish into oblivion after that.

In most Western missions work in India, pragmatic priorities have supplanted biblical ones. A Western missionary friend recently told me that upon his deployment to India, superiors in his organization insisted on being “strategic” to “stimulate rapid growth” by planting “rabbit-churches” that are quickly established and multiply fast, rather than “elephant churches” that take a long time to establish and then require much labor in discipleship, which slows things down. My friend’s forthright response: “But rabbit churches get devoured by hawks and wolves.”

The craze for numbers and the push for rapid growth results in “churches” that have no gospel, no trained leadership, no theology, and no depth—making them easy prey for the heresies of prosperity theology, syncretism, and other false teachings.

### *ii. What kind of “conversion”?*

Even worse, the scourge of Christian nominalism brings reproach on the name of Christ from unbelievers in India. The push for numbers and rapid growth in missions has resulted in much distortion and dilution of the gospel message today. People are taught to “believe in Jesus,” “receive Jesus,” or “make a decision for Jesus” without any of the biblical teaching on repentance. The so-called “conversions” that result are nominal at best, manipulative at worst.

Disregarding the biblical mandates and qualifications for church elders (1 Tim 3:1–7, esp. verse 6: “he must not be a new convert”), missionaries appoint unqualified indigenous “leaders” whose only “training” is a week-long seminar with a missionary team.

In many cases, people “convert” in droves, believing that converting to Christianity will bring them certain social or economic benefits. Missionaries triumphantly send reports back home with testimonies featuring stupendous and unfathomable statistics of people converted and churches established. Ken R.

Gnanakan, an Indian theologian, responding to the church-growth movement several years ago, phrased it well: “In our zeal to report back numbers to our prayer partners, we have left congregations to continue to follow their Hindu thinking, and apart from a change in name and place of worship there is little difference between the so-called Christians and their Hindu neighbors.”<sup>[2]</sup>

### *iii. False Conversions Lead to Persecution.*

The plague of false conversions also has political ramifications which leads to persecution. Hindus accuse Christians of luring uneducated people and those of the lower castes by promising them benefits. Group conversions and nominal Christianity finally result in mass reversions back to Hinduism when underprivileged populations, who originally converted to Christianity hoping that it would raise their social status, find that Hinduism may have more to offer them politically.<sup>[3]</sup>

Most of these “reconversions” are accompanied with the testimonies that say, “I used to be a Hindu, and I converted to Christianity on the basis of several false promises. So now I’m coming back to Hinduism.” Does not all of this raise the question of precisely what sort of “conversion” is taking place? Certainly not the kind of divine-wrought turning from darkness to light that we see on the pages of the New Testament.

### **Indigenous Missions and the Inflation of Numbers**

The other outgrowth of the Western obsession with numerical growth is the large number of Indian “ministries” who have caught on to the trend and are riding the wave—all the way to the bank. Yes, the church in India is corrupt, as Yahweh says of Israel—“like a raw wound” (Isa 1:6). I speak as one who knows *first-hand* of the kind of corruption that is pervasive across ministries in India.

Many Indian ministries gladly inflate their numbers and deceive Western supporters into believing that a great gospel “harvest” is taking place. After all, it’s the numbers that bring in the cash.

The techniques are tantamount: A large crowd of people is assembled in a field and someone on a podium asks them how many ate “puri-bhaji” (a staple in North India) for breakfast. Hands go up, a picture is taken, and a picture report is published, reporting “decisions for Christ.” In other cases, people are asked if they want to receive a financial blessing or healing. Those who desire it raise their hands, pictures are taken, and more “decisions for Christ” are reported.

On occasion, Western supporters visit, and some of them even to “pastoral training and teaching.” So the Indian ministry will pay a few pastors a token amount to show up for a couple of days. They do. And the Western missionary goes back, happy and satisfied that they have not just supported financially, but have “invested” in the lives of people who are “hungry for the Word” (and the free lunch).

Many of these Indian ministers live in the lap of luxury, wining and dining at 5-star hotels and getting driven around in luxury cars, as a result of the dollars rolling in to their ministries.

It is with great sorrow I admit that my Western brothers and sisters are very gullible—happy to give and support any ministry that boasts big numbers. The statistics make their eyes glaze over, and they are blinded to what actually takes place.

## A Better Way

Is this a rebuke? Yes, in some ways it is. But I write out of heartfelt love, and with a passion to see soundness and truth begin to take root in missions work in India. Big numbers simply feed big egos with the notion that we are doing something worthwhile for God. But God's real work simply cannot be measured by numbers alone.

Last summer, I sat with a faithful Indian brother, an older man of God who has labored for several decades in one of the hardest and most unreached states in North India. He told me of Western churches over the years who offered to support him, if only he would diligently report a certain number of baptisms each month. In every case, he refused, because he has always believed that conversion is God's work and cannot be manufactured. This man has not planted thousands of churches. The numbers are not sexy and spectacular. But the churches he has planted are sound, faithful, gospel-preaching, and disciple-making. They are not phantoms. The disciples he has made are those who know the Lord, and in them the Word of Christ dwells richly. The fruit of his ministry shines like gold in the dung-heap of other so-called "ministries" all around. And God will reward his faithfulness.

Let me share with you another personal story, this time, of a foreign missionary. I knew a missionary who lived and worked in India for years—well over a decade. He established a business in a major city and labored slowly and patiently. He barely had any converts—in fact, he probably had only one. He died in India and within months of his death, his business was destroyed. By numerical standards and "strategic" considerations for "rapid growth," he was a total failure. By the standards of many Western mission agencies, the many dollars given to support him over the years were a total waste.

So was his ministry a waste? I think not: I was his one convert. He taught me the gospel. He proclaimed to me the excellencies of Christ. He taught me how to read the Bible and how to discern truth from falsehood. He spent his life in service to his King, and my eternity is changed as a result.

So I plead with my brothers and sisters in the West: In your sending of missionaries and in your support of indigenous gospel-laborers, please prioritize faithfulness over efficiency, quality over quantity, and growth in truth over growth in numbers. Am I opposed to the growth of the church and the multiplication of disciples? By no means! I long to see a great revival sweep across India. Indeed, I pray that masses of people are evangelized and that countless churches are established all across the nation.

But let us not strive for manufactured numbers and "growth" that come from sacrificing truth on the altars of efficiency and perceived success. In the New Testament, the concern for numerical growth *never* drives the mission of the church—a concern for the glory of Christ does (Rom 1:5). Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit who calls spiritually dead people out of darkness into the marvelous light of the Lord Jesus as the gospel is proclaimed with boldness and clarity. Therefore, do not use numbers as a yardstick to measure God's work, but rather let God's work be measured by the lives of people who "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt 3:8; Rom 15:18). Rapid growth and multiplication may well be one indicator of God's blessing, but they are certainly never the primary indicator. May our work be driven by Scripture rather than statistics and strategies!

## PART II: OVER-AWED BY THE “SUPERNATURAL”

I sit there, intrigued, as I listen to the man’s story. We are in an important and extremely unreached city in North India. Detail upon intricate detail mounts as he narrates the amazing events that caused him to renounce Sikhism for Christianity. I listen intently as he tells us of the healing his mother received from a life-threatening illness, his subsequent rise from rags to riches, the persecutions he has faced, and, most importantly, the supernatural vision in which he saw a figure cloaked in white who squeezed his hand and told him “I will bless you.”

He rubs his moistened eyes, wiping away tears—and then he tells us that though it has been over 20 years now, he can still feel the hand of that otherworldly figure squeezing his hand today. My Western friends listen, some of them wary, but a couple of them are absolutely enthralled.

My Indian co-laborer nudges me. We are all too familiar with the gimmick; this is something we’ve seen and heard many times before. The man finishes his story, and one of my Western friends, a sincere brother—in fact, one who is fairly solid in his theology—remarks, “Wow! Praise God! That’s such an awesome testimony brother!”

Inwardly, I am flabbergasted. *How is it that even people who know their Bibles and understand the gospel well get duped by this stuff? Isn’t the complete absence of the gospel in his testimony obvious?*

My Indian friend and I begin to explain to the man about the true forgiveness of sins that only Jesus can provide, about Christ’s death and resurrection and his sin-bearing substitutionary sacrifice on the cross. He looks puzzled, for he has no idea what we’re talking about! All he knows is that “Jesus is the only god who will *bless* you.” That’s why he became a Christian. That’s why he became a pastor. And he’s been a pastor for 20 years! He used to be a poor Sikh, but now he’s driving a posh SUV as a “Christian bishop.” He drives us to his “church” building, a multi-story mega-church that seats 3000, and tells us that he’s the “bishop” over a ministry that plants several hundred churches every six months. But one could replace the name “Jesus” everywhere in his testimony with the name of any other god, and it wouldn’t make a difference.

To make matters worse, this “bishop” has a Western missionary, totally taken in by his story, functioning almost like his foot-servant. Why not, since the missionary can report back all this bishop’s numbers as his own!

Clearly, the West has an enchantment with the “supernatural.” My intent here is not to enter into the debate over whether God still operates supernaturally or not. Rather, I hope to alert my brothers and sisters in the West to the dangers of being allured by sensational stories that are devoid of the biblical gospel message. I also hope to call my brethren in both India and the West to keep the gospel message central in all our gospel work, and to prize the power God’s holy and authoritative Word above all else.

### Has the Holy Spirit Migrated?

The Beatles. Madonna. Julia Roberts. *Eat, Pray, Love*. College students without a job. One can think of a long list of people in the West who are fascinated with the otherworldliness of Eastern spirituality. And this trend has found its way into the church as well. I’ve grown weary of hearing it over and over: “We Western Christians are so narrow-minded. We put God in a box! We place limits on what he can do.

That's why we don't see God work supernaturally here like he does in the East." Many of my brothers and sisters in the West have bought into this false idea that the Western church is devoid of the Holy Spirit's *supernatural* work today; meanwhile, they say, the third person of the Trinity is greatly active in the East in places like India and China, where people are purportedly seeing dreams and visions and miracles are happening all over the place. So in the West, people are fascinated and allured by all the amazing testimonies and reports they hear from what is happening "out there" on the mission field.

But sadly, this fascination with the "supernatural" is often accompanied with a loss of discernment. At times, Westerners get so googly-eyed with sensational stories from the East that they don't even notice the non-existence of any form of the gospel message.

Beloved friends, wake up! The Holy Spirit has not transferred locations. He is just as active in the West as he is anywhere else in the world, doing what he has been sent to do—empowering witness to Christ (John 15:26–27; Acts 1:16; 1 Pet 1:12); convicting the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8); leading the church into all truth (John 16:13); glorifying Christ by drawing people from darkness to light as the gospel message is proclaimed (2 Cor 3:12–4:6); and sealing God's people for the Day of Redemption (Eph 1:13).

Oh, that we would recognize that the greatest, most supernatural work of God is when the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of sinners to the glory of Christ, regenerating and renewing them through the proclamation of the gospel, so that they are transferred out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. Do we not realize that the Spirit of God is sovereign and active, accomplishing this work in every place where Christ is faithfully proclaimed from the Scriptures?

I know of so many dear brothers and sisters in the West whose testimony goes something like this: "I grew up in a Christian home. From my youngest years, my parents taught me the Bible. My parents loved the Lord. They pointed me to Christ and told me of his sacrificial death on behalf of sinners. I was very young when I heard the gospel, repented of my sins, and trusted Christ for salvation. And so I've grown up almost all my life knowing the Lord." Beloved friends, is this *less* glorious or *less* supernatural in any way? Is this not a demonstration of the Holy Spirit's power to raise dead sinners to life? Have we forgotten the glory of the gospel? Have we forgotten that all of heaven celebrates when one sinner comes to repentance?

Let us *not* emphasize other things, for this has disastrous consequences.

Similar to the Western obsession with numbers, the West's fascination with sensational stories has had a similar corrosive effect. Testimonies are fabricated in order to dazzle and daze Western believers into generously giving financial support. And once again, I am sorry to say that my Western friends, even the theologically sound ones, are gullible.

In India, I have encountered professing Indian believers who don't say much to me by way of testimony—and why would they, since I am just a fellow Indian? But these very people, when they meet a Westerner, as soon as they see white skin, are quick to narrate stories of dreams, visions, and amazing supernatural experiences.

On more than one occasion, I have had the heartbreaking experience of meeting churches and believers in the West who have had the awful experience of being duped by Indian “ministries.” For instance, one Indian “evangelist” hoodwinked a whole network of churches with his fantastic testimony.

He claimed to have been raised as a religious Hindu, and his family owned a snake that they worshipped daily. As an adult, he was gripped with religious fervor and zeal for Hinduism. He was on his way to attack and kill Christians when he saw a vision of Christ that halted him, and brought him to tears. He then became a Christian, resolving to proclaim the faith he once persecuted, and despite being rejected by his family and friends, he is following Christ and serving him as an evangelist.

Several churches and ministries supported this “man of God,” only to later learn that the entire story was made up. This man actually grew up as the son of a pastor in a “Christian home,” and fabricated this testimony because he learned that it is only testimonies like this that generate support from the West. And let me assure you that this story is not an isolated case. There are many, many others like this one, and in every case, my Western brothers and sisters are too quick to be amazed—and sadly—deceived.

Such deception could be avoided by exercising more caution and discernment, by verifying every detail of such testimonies (especially in view of their extraordinary details) on the account of eye-witnesses, and by carefully checking if the person understands the biblical gospel and prizes it above such experiences.

When Western believers unwittingly get carried away with sensational stories of the supernatural, not only does corruption thrive in India, but so does false teaching. Even churches and believers who decry the evils of the heretical prosperity gospel actually promote its growth in India. How? By endorsing and supporting ministries that emphasize great miracles while teaching the health-and-wealth anti-gospel. This is also tied to the craze for numbers: the “prosperity gospel” prospers, and brings in the people by the droves. It thus boasts of both supernatural “miracles” *and* big numbers.

### **Putting the Emphasis in the Right Place**

My brothers and sisters, the only way for true gospel growth to happen in India is for us to remember how gospel growth comes: through the gospel. The gospel proclaims that all people everywhere have sinned and rebelled against God our Creator and stand justly condemned under his holy judgment; but God graciously saves sinners through his Son Jesus Christ, who lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death on the cross as a substitute for sinners, and was raised from the dead, so that all who repent of their wickedness and trust in him alone receive full forgiveness of sins and eternal life through him. The story of God’s great and supernatural plan of salvation must take precedence over all other “supernatural stories.”

Let's not get carried away by stories of dreams and visions, but let's stand firm on the bedrock of God's inspired Word. Even the apostle Peter, who was an eye-witness to the glory of Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration, who heard the very voice of God and saw with his own eyes the Son of God in all his majestic glory, tells us that we have something more sure than his experience. Something “more fully confirmed, to which we would do well to pay attention”—the Bible (2 Pet 1:16–21).

The faithful Indian co-laborers that I know, who sincerely work for true gospel growth in the hardest regions of India do one simple thing when anyone comes to them with stories of a dream or vision or

anything else. Open God's Word. Point them to the Bible. Remind them that such "supernatural" occurrences might be shaky and uncertain, but that Scripture is steadfast and true. Do we thank God for dreams, visions, supernatural healings, deliverances, and any other special acts of God's providence that glorify Christ? Absolutely. But the most supernatural work of all is when the Holy Spirit brings people to submit to the supernatural book.

My brothers and sisters in the West, in your support of gospel work in India, will you be discerning and resolve not to get carried away by the sensational stuff? Will you remember that the proclamation of the gospel and the teaching of the Scriptures are what produces a people conformed to Christ's image? Will you ensure that any "gospel work" that you endorse or support is founded on the message of Christ's death and resurrection for sinners, the gospel of repentance and faith, and God's holy and inspired Word? I pray that you will.

So, the next time you hear a supernatural testimony from India (or anywhere), be careful to discern whether the person has truly understood the gospel. And be careful to ensure that God receives the glory above all else for his marvelous supernatural work in saving lost sinners.

### **PART III: OVER-EAGER FOR CONTEXTUALIZATION**

The scene was so disorienting, it felt like it must be from a Hollywood (or Bollywood) movie. We are in a bustling *bazaar* in a large city in Northern India. A white dude in skinny jeans rides up on a mini-motorcycle to meet us. He guides us through narrow "gullies" (alleyways) into the small and crowded neighborhood in which he lives and works. We hear about the ministry that he and his friend are engaged in here. Their goal: to win a particular people group to Christ. But they don't want to work alongside the established national church. They want to win people groups to Christ, but they don't want to teach these people what it looks like to be followers of Christ. Rather, they want people to be able to follow Christ "from within their own cultures." Yet in many cases, what results is a hodge-podge mix of religion that has virtually no resemblance to biblical Christianity.

There are more than a few such foreign workers laboring in India.

I've already mentioned the craze for numbers and the West's fascination with "supernatural" testimonies. Here, I wish to address another issue that is quickly gaining traction and causing problems in India, much like it has in the Muslim world: extreme forms of "contextualization."

Now, what do I mean by contextualization? The word used in missions scholarship to describe how the gospel should be fleshed out and made clear in varying cultures. Am I opposed to contextualization? Of course not! In my years of ministry in India, I've never worn a tie to preach. I often preach barefoot, and the congregations are dressed in Indian attire and seated on the floor. When I preach in the West, I am almost always in suit and tie. The tone of my preaching is different, the illustrations I use are different, and the matters to which I apply the Scriptures are different, all depending on context. And yes, my wife wore a saree (and not a dress) on our wedding day. Certainly, I am thankful for the many Western missionaries who contextualize the Bible's message in ways that are biblically warranted, helpful, and appropriate to the culture.



My purpose here is not to criticize contextualization. Neither do I wish to get into nuanced discussions about the spectrum of contextualization and how much contextualization is legitimate. Rather, I wish to raise awareness about certain illegitimate forms of contextualization that are taking root in India. These forms of contextualization receive their impetus from Western missionaries who refuse to cooperate with the established national churches, believing that they understand more about Indian culture than anyone else. And much like the [“Insider Movements” of the Islamic world,\[4\]](#) most of these teachings result in false and heretical movements in India, far removed from biblical Christianity. It is my prayer that what I share here would challenge brothers and sisters in the West to cease supporting missionaries who propagate false teachings and practice harmful methods of ministry.

### **Hindu Followers of Christ?**

Some of my encounters with Western Christian workers in India leave me feeling deeply disturbed. Last summer, I was visiting India when my ministry team bumped into one of these guys—an American who has spent almost the last decade in India. He considers us Indian Christians too “Westernized,” and he thinks that he’s more attuned to Indian culture, for he celebrates Indian festivals and practices several Indian-Hindu customs—customs that Indian believers such as myself have rejected. This Westerner believes that the things he does will help remove barriers to belief among the high caste Hindus he’s seeking to reach.

There are others like him who dot the missions landscape. They come from varied backgrounds in the West, but a lot of them are latte-sipping, skinny-jeans-wearing Christian hipsters from the West coast or Canada, who for whatever reason, seem to have grown bored or disillusioned with traditional Christianity. They’re looking for something new. They’ve read the latest and greatest books on missions, contextualization, and culture (and perhaps a smattering of emergent church literature and post-modern philosophy). And so they come to India and try to form communities of “*Yeshu-Baktha* Hindus” or “Hindu disciples of Jesus.” They don’t want to be identified as “Christians” because they consider this “too Western” (never mind Acts 11:26!).

In these communities, a *puja* or Hindu initiation ritual performed in Jesus’s Name takes the place of Christian baptism. The “Lord’s Supper” consists in the breaking of a coconut and drinking of coconut water. *Bhajans* (Hindu devotional songs) are sung in Jesus’ Name instead of Christian hymns. The place of worship is lit up by little *diyas* (Indian oil lamps typically used in Hindu religious ceremonies). Preaching finds no place in these communities, for “monologue” is considered a Western idea. These groups are led by “gurus” instead of “pastors.” And the storyline of Scripture is replaced by a storyline borrowed from the indigenous culture: Jesus is understood in terms of Hindu mythology, and Jesus’s sacrifice is interpreted in light of the Vedas.

Many who propagate such teachings *typically* do it from good motives. They are wary of a colonialist form of missions that imposes Western culture on indigenous Christians. They truly want to see an indigenous Christian movement established. They’ve bought into the latest “missions research” which says that removing cultural barriers to belief is the best way to achieve church growth. And so they dress up Christianity in the garb of specific cultural groups hoping that these groups would accept the Christian faith while retaining their own culture.

## **Shall We Provoke the Lord to Jealousy?**

Sadly, these well-meaning proponents of “contextualized” Christianity do not realize that they are presenting a garbled gospel and forming sub-Christian communities. I will respond here by identifying four serious problems with these “contextualization” movements.

### *i. Syncretism and a Biblical Worldview*

First, the natural result of such kinds of “contextualization” is syncretism of the worst kinds—a dangerous and damning mix of the Hindu and Christian worldviews. In more serious cases, I do not hesitate to call the movements heretical. The eager proponents of “contextualization” think they are preserving Indian culture, but they do not realize that for Indians (unlike in the West), culture, worldview, and religion are inextricably intertwined. Most Indians, including “Westernized Christians” such as myself, as well as former Hindus who have trusted in Christ, recognize this fact.

The close link between culture and religion in the Indian mind is the reason that most Indians have a negative impression of Christianity, for they assume that all Western cultures are “Christian cultures.” But we know Christianity is not a product of “Western” culture. Rather, the Christian message is a worldview that transforms *all* cultures, both Eastern and Western. The gospel demands a renunciation of secular thinking, immorality, and profligate living in the West, just as it demands a renunciation of idolatry and superstition in the East. We must proclaim the trans-cultural lordship and glory of Jesus, rather than hyper-orienting our message and praxis around specific cultural groups.

The Apostles never permitted pagan cultures to influence the biblical message or the form of Christian worship. Rather, even in a pagan culture like Corinth, Paul gives the Scriptures pre-eminence. Writing to a predominantly Gentile congregation in Corinth, Paul calls these believers to see their identity in terms of the biblical storyline (1 Cor 10). Paul prescribes what should happen in their worship services and even dictates to them how they should take the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11–14). Paul proclaims the death and resurrection of Christ in “accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4), and not some cultural metanarrative from Corinth. Scripture forms the people of God, not vice versa. I have often wondered if a connection exists between contextualization movements and the influence of post-modernism. The authority is shifted from the revealed Word to the community of readers.

Proponents of “contextualized” movements disregard the biblical principle that darkness has no fellowship with light, and Christ has no part with Belial (2 Cor 6:14–15). And Christ’s Word is mutilated in the name of “contextualization.”

When Indian national believers advance these criticisms, we are labeled as being “Westernized.” In fact, Indian “Christian background” believers are told that we have no right to speak on such issues at all, for we are the root cause of the problem. But even when “Hindu background” believers voice their concerns—and I know several who do—they are sidelined as having already been “Westernized.” The irony is astonishing: These are *Westerners* claiming that they know more about Indian culture than *Indians* who have been born and raised in India.

### *ii. Christ Commands Us to “Teach”*

Some of the more moderate “contextualization” advocates with whom I’ve interacted tell me that they do not want Western understandings of Christianity to be imposed on people in India. Therefore, instead

of teaching Indians what Christian life and worship looks like, they ask them to read the Bible and come to their own conclusions. Sounds good, doesn't it?

Perhaps, if Christ hadn't commanded us otherwise. The Great Commission includes the call to make disciples, teaching them to obey all of Christ's commands (Matt 28:18–20). And Christ's commands are revealed in the apostolic Word—the Bible. The Bible sets the agenda. The Bible forms Christian identity. The Bible shows us what Christian life and worship looks like. And the Bible tells us that Jesus equips his people through *teachers* (Eph 4:11). This means that we must interpret and apply the Word of God across ethnic and cultural lines—much like Paul the former Jew did in the congregations that he formed in Gentile and pagan cultures. The notion that communities should read and come to their own conclusions is actually rooted in the post-modern mindset that places authority in the community rather than in the text.

### *iii. "Insider Movements" and "Secret Believers"*

Another result of "contextualization" movements is the emergence of Hindu "insider movements." Proponents of "insider movements" teach people to remain as "secret believers" or as "Hindu devotees of Jesus" (*Yeshu-Bakhta* Hindus) so that they will not be excluded from their families and communities but can instead stay on the inside in order to "eventually win more converts to Christ." Furthermore, those who advocate these forms of contextualization—in direct violation of 2 Corinthians 6:14–18 (also 1 Cor. 7:39)—teach people to prefer marriage to unbelievers from their same backgrounds and ethnic caste groups over marriage to believers of other groups. They also insist that "Hindu followers of Jesus" should never intermarry with "Christian background believers."

The pragmatic desires to maintain cultures and grow the church result in a dilution of the gospel message, and a casting aside of the call to follow Christ at the cost of persecution and exclusion from one's kin (Matt 10:34–38; Mark 8:31–38; John 15:18–25; 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12).

This testimony of a sister in Christ from a Hindu background illustrates the point:

When I became a Christian, there were some people in my area who started teaching me that I should remain a "secret believer" and not inform anybody of my faith. They did not want me to be excluded from my family. Therefore they encouraged me to live as a "secret believer" so that I could remain within my family, hoping that eventually my family and community would also come to Christ. When I moved to a different area to start a job, I learned that this teaching was seriously wrong. I found great freedom in finally expressing my faith in Christ openly and boldly told my parents and community. I told them about Jesus and the work he has done in my life. Though I was rejected and ostracized at first, after ten years, my family finally began to respect my decision to follow Christ. They even attended my wedding to a Christian believer in the church!

Indian church leaders like myself and my Indian co-laborers call people to be open and committed followers of Christ and to come under the authority and discipleship of the local church. In response, proponents of "contextualization" condemn us for practicing "extraction evangelism" (taking individuals out of their families and communities) and not "stimulating the growth of people movements." But if I remember correctly, it was Jesus who declared that those who follow him would be hated by all for his name's sake, and that a person would find enemies among those of his own household, yet one must embrace and follow Jesus at the cost of all these (Matt 10:34–39). The New Testament tells us that

Christians are “sojourners and exiles” who have been “rejected by men” but are “chosen and precious in the sight of God” (1 Pet 2:4–11). Believers are called to bear the reproach of Christ, going with him “outside the camp” (Heb 13:12–13).

#### *iv. What They Do When It Doesn't Work.*

The irony of it all is that when it comes to truly winning people to Christ in India, “contextualization” proponents fail dramatically. Virtually no one is won to Christ, for when the gospel is not clearly proclaimed, there is no power to draw people from darkness to light. In fact, very few Indians are interested in joining a movement that looks in every way the same as their own religion but simply has a new god tacked on. One of the Westerners I mentioned above has lived in India for several years and has adopted all these Indian customs, but no one seems interested in his teaching.

And so, desperate for some kind of success, some of these groups resort to shameful and underhanded tactics. They begin to enter the established Indian churches that they once spurned. They give some impression of reaching out for fellowship, and try to gain the trust of national church leaders. And after making their way into the established church, they begin to target new believers who have recently embraced Christ from Hindu backgrounds—those who are weak and facing imminent persecution and rejection, those who are learning what it costs to follow Christ. The “contextualization” proponents then begin to brainwash these weak and fledgling believers, teaching them that they are being “Westernized.” They are told not to give up their Hindu identity: “You don’t need to be a Christian—instead, be a ‘Hindu follower of Jesus.’” This is how many “contextualization” proponents find their “converts.” I know, because I’ve seen it happen over and over, and I’ve known struggling baby believers who have fallen into these traps. When things like this happen, I pray that the Lord would obliterate such “ministries.”

### **Moving Forward**

Okay, perhaps by reading this post you’ve been stirred to take this issue more seriously—what now? How can you help prevent the growth of these kinds of false and destructive teachings?

1. Please be very careful whom you support. Most of these Western workers on the field have been funded by orthodox, evangelical, Bible-believing churches who would be utterly horrified to learn of what those they support are doing on the field. Please be cautious. Hold all your supported missionaries to rigorous doctrinal accountability, and periodically check in on them to ensure that they are teaching the truth.

2. Always be careful to review the values and distinctives of mission agencies and refuse to support any mission agency that advocates these extreme forms of contextualization. Contextualization is necessary in every cross-cultural endeavor, but beware the forms of contextualization that fall short of biblical Christianity.

3. If you’re seeking to be a missionary, resolve that you will not ignore the established national church. Whenever possible, partner with faithful national church leaders, so that you better understand the culture and how the gospel should take shape in that culture. I know this can be challenging, and in many cases national churches are corrupt, unhealthy, or non-existent. But if at all possible, strive to find faithful and doctrinally sound national brothers with whom you can partner. I assure you—they exist. If you are in a pioneer endeavor where no national church exists, be careful to understand the culture well. Make a distinction between those forms of culture that are religious and those that are not. Do not shrink

back from teaching the “whole counsel of God”—which means teaching people to embrace Christianity as an entire worldview. *Teach* them to reject cultural practices where the Scripture demands it, and be certain that all your “contextualization” is biblically warranted.

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*Editor’s note: This article is an edited version of what was originally a three-part series published at Training Leaders International. You can find those articles [here](#).*

## FOOTNOTES:

<sup>[1]</sup> My goal here is not primarily to advance a biblical and theological argument against the church-growth movement or against the more contemporary pragmatic proponents of “church-planting movement” (CPM) strategies. Rather, my aim here is primarily to point out the bad fruit of such methodologies in India. For my critique of the church-growth movement’s principles, see my forthcoming article in the Spring 2015 issue of the Southern Baptist Journal of Missions and Evangelism (will be available online). For an incisive and penetrating critique of CPM methodologies see the excellent articles by Jackson Wu: “[There Are No Church Planting Movements in the Bible: Why Biblical Exegesis Missiological Methods Cannot Be Separated](#)” and “[The Influence of Culture On the Evolution of Mission Methods: Using ‘Church Planting Movements’ As A Case Study.](#)”

<sup>[2]</sup> Ken R. Gnanakan, “Caste and the Indian Church: A Response to Donald McGavran,” *Transformation* 2 (1985): 24.

<sup>[3]</sup> See the recent drive of the BJP government in India to pass an “anti-conversion” law and the spate of “homecoming” (ghar wapsi) reconversion ceremonies to Hinduism. PTI, “BJP Demands Anti-Conversion Law,” *Zee News*, December 29, 2014 [online]; available at [http://zeenews.india.com/news/bihar/bjp-demands-anti-conversion-law\\_1522141.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/bihar/bjp-demands-anti-conversion-law_1522141.html); Pragya Kaushika, “Don’t Want a Religion that Only Rejects Us, Say the Aligarh Dalits on RSS list,” *The Indian Express*, December 14, 2014 [online]; available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/dont-want-a-religion-that-only-rejects-us-say-the-aligarh-dalits-on-rss-list/>. Reconversion of mass groups of people to Hinduism has been fairly common in India for several years. See, for instance, Nirmala Carvalho, “Tamil Nadu: A Thousand Dalit Christians Reconvert to Hinduism,” *Asia News*, April 14, 2008 [online]; available at <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Tamil-Nadu:-A-thousand-Dalit-Christians-reconvert-to-Hinduism-12011.html>.

<sup>[4]</sup> For a quick glimpse into “Insider Movements” in the Islamic world, see this insightful interview with a Bangladeshi pastor: <http://www.wts.edu/stayinformed/view.html?id=1579>.

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By Ken Mbugua

# Africa, the Prosperity Gospel, and the Problem of Unguarded Churches

**T**here can no denying that distortions of the gospel have crept into many churches throughout Africa, chief amongst them being the prosperity gospel. But before effectively dealing with the issue of the prosperity gospel, we must ask why so many in African churches allowed this false gospel to slip in unchallenged. Where were the gate-keepers, the whistle blowers? And even now, why is there such deafening silence from so many of the now-indigenized African churches?

The problem of the prosperity gospel today, as much as anything, roots in an ecclesiological problem from yesterday.

Generally speaking, it appears as though the gospel efforts of years past in Africa did not come with any mechanisms by which professing Christians could protect and preserve the gospel from these constant threats of distortion. For instance, little attention has been given to carefully understanding the doctrine of conversion and what it means for meaningful church membership or church discipline. Likewise, missionaries and pastors have not asked what the gospel has to do with church government, the responsibility of every member for guarding against false teachers, or the need for a plurality of elders. Instead, the gospel is taken for granted and the African church suffers. It remains in desperate need of missionaries and churches who both understand the problems and are equipped with better and more biblical solutions.

## WHERE ARE ALL THE “CHRISTIANS”?

Missionaries who labor in reached parts of Africa are today faced with a society that has been inoculated against the gospel. Cities are filled with people who have been baptized and acknowledged as members of churches from one denomination or another, thus affirming their status as Christians, even though

many live lives that show no fruit of the Spirit's work or evidence of a life of repentance and faith in Christ. For example, 80 percent of my fellow Kenyans would identify themselves as Christians, yet many go to church irregularly, if at all. They do not need the gospel and church, or so they think, because they are already "Christians."

Others who might frequent church more than this former group attend churches where the gospel is not articulated clearly. Though they are fervent in their religion, a great part of this group would struggle to articulate the gospel even in its most basic form. True gospel ministries established decades ago have in many cases grown into theologically weak churches that have given in to teaching variations of the prosperity gospel.

It's no wonder false gospels are wrecking havoc in Africa with little to no resistance. When churches are filled with those who do not know the gospel and are in many cases living lives unworthy of the gospel, then they can not protect themselves from distortions in both gospel doctrine and gospel living, let alone raise an alarm among their community about the counterfeits that are masquerading as truth.

We know God remains faithful, and he has indeed scattered his own in these places. It is our constant prayer and hope that he will raise up many more of that breed so that they one day would define the church landscape of Africa, that the prosperity gospel might die here. But today, the problem persists. So how can we do missions in a way that will protect gospel for the present generation and for the generations to come?

## **IS THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION ENOUGH?**

A great deal of missionary effort is at present being focused on theological education. In many cases the pastors in the cities do not have any form of theological training. Generally speaking, previous missionary efforts did not place an emphasis on equipping the pastors who were left "in charge." This absence of enduring discipleship has resulted in increasingly shallow theology, leaving many local churches susceptible to whatever error its society was infected with at present.

As a response, theological institutions are being established across the continent. Conferences and seminars abound as we play catch up after realizing that past missionary efforts, though helpful in bringing many to the Lord, proved unreliable in preserving the gospel for the next generation. This is a good work, and it is an urgent work. Yet despite the renewed efforts to train pastors, our continent still lacks enough qualified men to do the training as well as sufficient resources to finish the task.

## **A BLINDSPOT REMAINS**

That said, a blindspot still plagues these commendable missionary efforts. Most efforts in church planting and pastoral training lack an emphasis on the local church. Systematic theology and other branches of Christian doctrine are greatly emphasized, as they should be, but ecclesiology remains unfortunately assumed and, as a result, misunderstood. This is a sad reality primarily because these assumed local churches are God's primary plan for how the gospel will be displayed and preserved for the coming generations—not seminaries, not conferences, not theological training centers.

In an ecclesiological heavy letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim 3:14-15). How a church conducts its life together has everything to do with how they preserve the truth.

The present generation in Africa would have been served well by churches that had been just as willing to excommunicate them as they were to baptize them. Having a city filled with people who claim to be followers of Christ but are living lives unworthy of the gospel distorts the truth of the gospel for both this generation and the next. God does not desire to preserve truth through theologically accurate books. He wants lives that reflect that truth by living it out together in local churches.

## **WE NEED FAITHFUL CHURCHES**

If we teach churches today that the buck stops with them and that they are not mere bystanders in the mission but gate-keepers of the gospel, then maybe they might fire the next pastor who starts preaching heresy. If we teach churches that conversion is more than saying a prayer and if we stopped asking people to walk down the aisle or raise their hands to receive Jesus, we might have smaller churches captivated by the awe-inspiring grace of God rather than the eloquent, misguided pastor in a shiny suit. We might have churches that will guard the gospel more fervently for the glory of their God.

The plagues of the prosperity gospel and false converts are not at the heart of the problem for the African church. They are mere symptoms of a more fundamental problem. God wants the local church to be built up so that it can withstand different winds of error. It might be prosperity gospel today and gnosticism tomorrow. Focusing more missionary effort on building healthy churches will help protect the gospel for our generation and for the one yet to come.

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By Mark Collins

# Your Bad Ecclesiology Is Hurting Us

**“W**hat is a church?”

It was the question I dreaded most. I was 28 years old, and had been promoted from a missions team leader to the regional director. I was sitting at our monthly leaders meeting, with 10 other team leaders representing more than 80 full-time supported missionaries who served in the 10/40 window. Our discussions were supposed to be motivating and encouraging, and they often were. We talked about evangelism strategy and fruitfulness, of growing disciples and the potential for multiplication in the future. But then someone would ask THAT question, or one like it. Is our goal to plant churches? Were we doing that? And, oh, by the way, do we even agree on what a church is? What makes a church a church?

I dreaded the question because I didn't know the answer. Worse, I knew from repeated fruitless discussions that nobody in the room knew the answer. We didn't know how to define a church, much less a good one or a healthy one. What was the difference between a church and a gathering of 25 students on a college campus? We had started plenty of those. What was the difference between a church and 30 business professionals gathering for regular Bible study?

It wasn't just an academic question for us. By God's grace, we had witnessed God produce amazing fruit through our labors. So as we held those discussions, we knew there were believers who would gather that very week. These gathering were filled with people we'd discipled, many of whom were looking to us for their sense of direction. Quickly, they had discovered we didn't have a whole lot to offer them.

## **SAME STORY EVERYWHERE**

In the nineteen years since I first stepped onto the mission field, I've seen and heard the same story repeated across organizations and regions. All too often Western missionaries don't have much to say

about the church, at least not with biblical clarity. Among evangelicals, thankfully, the gospel *usually* remains clear, the inerrancy of Scripture is *generally* affirmed, and the importance of theology is *typically* acknowledged. But the church?

Ask some missionaries you know if they can explain how their work relates to the task of church planting, and you'll get fewer answers than you'd expect. Ask them how they define the church and what a healthy one looks like, and you'll get fewer answers still.

The reality is that when you send missionaries, when you support them, and when you partner with others to do so, you are exporting a doctrine of the church. Over the years, I've concluded that far too often *we are exporting bad ecclesiology*.

And the results on the mission field can be tragic.

## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

There are probably lots of things that contribute to the problem. I want to suggest three.

### **1. Sending churches often view missions as something they can outsource to others.**

Church leaders have enough to deal with inside their own church, so overseeing and resourcing missionaries often feels beyond their capacity or expertise.

It's certainly true that sending agencies to meet these needs has many benefits. But the problem here is that churches often overestimate what a sending agency can do. For example, no application process can replace evaluating a person's gifting and qualification through their regular involvement in the life of a local church. This kind of inquiry should begin at the front-end of the process, not as a quick check-list when a church reference form is suddenly required.

### **2. Sending agencies receive the outsourcing but don't have a clear doctrine of the church.**

Sending agencies are either created with a certain ministry focus, or they create one as they go. Some decide to focus on evangelism among a certain segment of the population, like students or business professionals. Other groups focus on training leaders in a certain theological curriculum. Still others focus on starting new churches in a certain region or among a certain people.

What seems rare in these scenarios is for the agency to adequately evaluate "success" by considering the long-term health of the churches they've planted. As a mid-level leader in my sending agency, I remember the struggle of living between the tension of measurable organizational goals (how many new groups have you started?) and the desire for our work to have long-term viability. My attempts to have conversations about the health of our work beyond sheer numbers did not go very far.

### **3. The missionaries themselves don't know what they are aiming for.**

The saying goes, "Aim at nothing and you'll hit it every time." Every missionary on the field tries to do good work. They share their faith, try to disciple new believers, and pray that God will bless the work. It's a good start, but it's not the same as having a clear picture of a planted church functioning in a biblical manner and raising up its own resources for further ministry. They lack this picture because they don't

understand what God's Word says about the local church and the central role it plays in fulfilling the Great Commission.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

What can you do as a pastor to help begin exporting better ecclesiology?

### 1. Practically evaluate your missions program.

Do you as the pastor know the quality of the people you are sending? Do you know what they are really doing on the field? Have you asked them to describe their work in detail? Have you made the progress of their work a part of the prayer life of your church? Are your leaders and members invested in seeing healthy churches planted through your missionaries?

### 2. Take Paul's first missionary journey as a model for missions (Acts 13-14)

Focus on the quality of the missionaries not the quantity. The Spirit leads the church at Antioch to send Paul and Barnabas, two of their best (Acts 13:2)! Look to encourage those already ministering in the context of your church to think and pray about missions.

Make the work of missionaries a central part of the life of your church. The sending of Paul and Barnabas was a church-wide time of fasting and praying (Acts 13:3). Similarly, consider how you can make prayer for your missionaries more consistent in your own church. Use your pastoral prayer and church prayer meetings as times to regularly pray for the work of the missionaries you support, and for the evangelization of people around the globe.

Encourage your missionaries to keep their eyes on the prize of planted healthy churches. Paul and Barnabas didn't *only* preach or *only* disciple; they continued to visit and shepherd until elders were appointed in every church (Acts 14:23). Presumably this is what the church at Antioch expected them to do. So, ask prospective missionaries to articulate a ministry plan that includes both planting churches and shepherding those churches toward health.

Invite furloughing missionaries to make a full report to the church. Paul and Barnabas gathered the church together and "declared all that God had done with them." (Acts 14:27). On a recent furlough I was asked by the elder boards of several supporting churches to make a report to them. I loved it! Deep down missionaries want to know that their supporting churches stand with them in the full task of raising up indigenous churches. We also love the accountability of knowing that we need to share more than just a few pictures with smiling local people in them.

### 3. Consider doing more with less.

At the end of the day, exporting of bad ecclesiology comes from the Western idea that more is necessarily more. We send more workers and ask them for more results. We measure our success in terms of more professions of faith and more churches planted, without asking about the health of either the "converts" or the "churches." I think we inherently know that many of the systems in place aim at breadth rather than depth, but we don't know how to change them.

A simple beginning would be, over time, to move to supporting less people in a better way. Give fewer missionaries more money. Divert some money to regularly sending an elder to visit their work. Make it possible for furloughing missionaries to spend more time with your church. Above all, consider their work your work. Make it your aim not just to lead a healthy church, but to see healthy churches planted in all the places you are sending missionaries.

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By Steve Jennings

# Stop Sending Missionaries: Why More Isn't Always Better

*"Here am I, send me." Isaiah 6:8*

*"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray for the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest." Matt. 9:37-38*

**T**hese passages of Scripture have been slapped on the prayer cards of many hopeful missionaries getting ready to enter the field. They've been burned on the hearts of many churches and people who recognize that we Christians have been given a task: to make disciples of all nations.

These nations were sadly neglected by the church for generations, so it is praiseworthy that, in recent generations, we have corrected our "mission drift" and pursued with vigor its task to make known to a watching world the wisdom of God (Eph 3:10).

But, in my admittedly few years working among the nations—square in the middle of the 10/40 window, surrounded by Unreached People Groups—I cannot help but wonder if the corrective has corrected too much. It appears the pendulum has swung too far the other way and needs a few nudges itself.

The Great Commission is immense, and just like any immense task it requires vision, dedication, and a lot of manpower. That being said, there are many times when I want to stop and say to the Western church: "Stop sending them! Stop sending under-qualified missionaries!"

To be sure, the workers *are* few, and the harvest *is* great. But that does not mean that more workers are necessarily better. It seems that the impatience that so marks the current generation has infiltrated the missionary movement under the guise of "urgency." This impatience, rather than being curbed by church leaders, is often fostered and even encouraged.

And the result?

A lot of people are going to the nations who, frankly, shouldn't be going—at least not yet.

Here's the question I wish more churches would consider: Why would you send someone to plant churches abroad who you would never hire as a pastor or nominate as a lay elder? Why does it seem that "passion" rather than proven faithfulness is the main criterion for sending men and women to support those church planters? Why on earth is the bar set lower for the frontlines than it is for the local church?

The challenges of frontier ministry, its stresses and temptations, are very real, and time and again people are sent to face those challenges who have much zeal but lack understanding. So the wise man rightly said by the Holy Spirit,

"Desire without knowledge is not good, and whoever makes haste with his feet misses his way" (Prov. 19:2 ESV).

This proverb sums up the state of missions among some missions enterprises very well: desire without knowledge. And desire without knowledge in the business of missions is dangerous, even spiritually deadly.

This field that is white for harvest is being filled with laborers who destroy the crop, those who misuse or disuse the tools God has given them. Imagine a field full of people swinging a scythe in the wrong direction and sometimes from the wrong end. And too often—if I dare drag out the metaphor a bit further—they are not using the scythe at all. Their hands are empty—not a pretty picture.

It seems to me that many churches and sending agencies don't spend enough time teaching people to discern between wheat and weeds. So, lacking discernment, these missionaries sheave weeds and write home about their sowing successes. Again, we as the church have been given a mission, a way in which we are to walk, but many feet that set out to proclaim the gospel of peace miss their way because they have desire without knowledge.

Indeed, the workers are few, but our impatience has become our undoing. When churches have initiatives to send a certain number of people by a certain time, their desire to meet that goal can short circuit discipleship and thus propel people into the field that will both be harmed *and* cause harm.

Instead, we should look to Paul as an example of zealous patience. From the moment of his conversion, he was told his purpose. But you'll see in Acts that it was more than ten years before his first missionary journey. In the interim, he spent three formative years in Arabia, time in his home city of Tarsus, and finally a season at the church in Antioch until he was sent out with Barnabas. This is Paul, mind you, who at conversion already had an immense knowledge of the Scriptures. It appears Paul did not begin his mission in earnest until he was sent by his "home" church of Antioch at the Holy Spirit's leading through the elders and congregation.

If you speak to an older generation of missionaries, you'll find that in by-gone days Bible college was a requirement. If you read the biographies of guys like Adoniram Judson, you'll find that ordination was required. But these days, once a church gives approval, folks can pass a few evaluations and attend a

two-week boot-camp and be rather quickly approved for the field. Such a convenient and streamlined system is meant to enable more and more people to go to the unreached.

But more is not always better.

The challenges people will face as they take the gospel to hard places will require character that is mature and proven. The questions missionaries will be asked by those whom they evangelize will often require a theological knowledge that is deep and wide. And the raging enemy that is encountered requires a faith that is dug down deep.

Pragmatism is rampant in overseas ministries because too often ministers don't really know how to talk about their God. Heresy proliferates because they don't really know their message. Worldly living prevails because so many missionaries are spiritually immature and practically unaccountable. Church, stop sending people who don't know their God, don't know their message, and don't know what it is like to submit to authority. Please, for the sake of God's glory, stop.

Desire is commendable, but desire comes and goes. It is calling that should be required and celebrated. Not just any "calling," mind you, but a calling rooted in truth and affirmed by others, particularly those who know you well and have for a long time, one that has accompanied years' worth of fruitfulness, that has as its chief aims the glory of God and the sure promises of the gospel as revealed in Scripture.

Local churches should take the long view in their missions work, faithfully making many disciples who are able to go out and persevere in faithful gospel ministry. They should labor for quantity without sacrificing quality by a single degree.

It should be no wonder that the attrition rate among missionaries is so high, that doctrinal ambiguity is so pervasive, and that missionaries falling into gross sin is so common. People are sent that should not be sent because churches are sending people too soon.

So, at this point I want to leave behind a few suggestions on how to prepare people to go to the nations:

1) Teach them well so that they will be able to teach others well; don't send them until they have shown they can do the same. (2 Tim. 2:2)

2) Make sure that they are able to articulate sound doctrine and refute false doctrine. An inability to answer objections and correct falsehood is a recipe for disaster when encountering other religions or worse—other errant missionaries. (Titus 1:9, Eph. 4:14)

3) Make sure they are able to submit to biblical authority. Are they mavericks who have never really had their autonomy challenged? If this is the case, they need to spend some time with gladly submitting to accountability before they can be sent with confidence. (Heb. 13:17-18)

4) Connected to #3 is the need for proven godly character. This is something that can only be ascertained over an extended period of close interaction and persistent discipleship, not a session with a counselor and a personality profile. Unchecked sins get worse on the frontlines, not better. (Heb. 12:1)

5) If you would not make a man an elder in your church, then don't send him to plant churches anywhere, much less overseas. If you are sending someone who isn't elder material or isn't quite there

yet, then I would suggest sending them somewhere with an established church where you know their spiritual development and ministry will be seen by faithful shepherds. (Heb. 10:24-25)

6) The aim of every pioneer worker you send should be one of two things: joining an existing church or gathering believers to start a new church as soon as possible. If there is no church, then I would suggest moving with a core of people as opposed to individually. No Christians were meant to be alone. Ecclesiology and missiology should be inseparably intertwined. Churches plant churches. Para-church organizations should serve the valuable and specialized role of helping churches do this job, not overtake them. (Acts 20:28, 16:13)

7) Finally, let there be consensus in the sending church that these people being sent are called and ready. This will safeguard the ones being sent and give them an amazing boost of encouragement that they are part of something bigger than their own ambition, which can easily fade or redirect quickly. (Acts 13:3)

I write this not out of a desire to dampen a church's missional drive, but to encourage a long view with enduring faithfulness as the aim. We run a marathon, not a sprint. Ministry is the same way. Godly urgency embraces careful preparation for ministry. This truth becomes unclear if the main aim of our sending is an always-growing number of converts. Instead, the main aim of our sending should be the glory of God—and it is for that we must prepare and be prepared.

So let's feel the urgency, but not at the expense of wisdom. The glory of God is at stake.

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By Zane Pratt

# 7 Things Your Church Should Not Do in Missions

**T**he Great Commission is a clear command of Jesus to his church. By and large, part of what it means to be an evangelical church is to support the spread of the gospel to those who have never heard it. For most of church history, that has meant sending long-term missionaries, giving money to support them, and praying for them. In the absence of air travel and the internet, there simply wasn't much else a local church in the West could do.

Now, however, the opportunities for direct engagement in overseas missions are legion. In the face of so many possibilities, how is a church to decide what they should do? Based on decades of experience on the other side of the equation (as a field worker living overseas), here is a list of things your church should NOT do as it considers its involvement in fulfilling the Great Commission.

## 1. YOU SHOULD NOT IGNORE THE MISSIONARY IMPERATIVE.

Lots of excuses can be given for doing nothing about global missions other than, perhaps, an occasional missions offering. Taking the gospel to the unreached is expensive, uncomfortable, inconvenient, and sometimes even unhealthy or dangerous. There are so many lost people right around you where you live. You have so many needs within your own church. The list could go on.

All of those things are true—and none of them are valid excuses. Jesus didn't call you to safety, or comfort, or convenience. He called you to take up your cross and die. There are indeed many lost people around your church, but you are there to share the gospel with them. Over two billion people in the world have no churches, no believers, no access to the gospel anywhere near them, and they will never hear if no one goes. You should indeed meet the needs of those in your church, but there is a difference between real needs and wants or preferences, and most churches in the West have more than enough of both to cover real needs within their ranks *and* to take the gospel to the unreached.

Sure, doing so may involve some level of sacrifice out of our abundance, but we should be doing that anyway. Do not ignore the missionary imperative, and do more than pay it lip-service. Engage the lostness of the world in a serious way.

## **2. YOU SHOULD NOT GO IT ALONE.**

While it is true that the evangelization of the world is the responsibility of the local church, mission agencies and field partners can be incredibly useful to you as you fulfill that responsibility. Mission agencies have experience in sending and supporting missionaries, both long term and short term, and they also have perspective on what needs to be done and how to do it.

Likewise, field workers on the ground overseas have experience, connections, and know-how that can be invaluable to a local church as it seeks greater involvement. Both with mission agencies and with field partners, the local church should do its homework and make sure that there is real compatibility both in theology and in mission philosophy between the church and those with whom they will work. Once this is established, however, the church will find that good partners make missionary involvement both more manageable and more fruitful.

## **3. YOU SHOULD NOT TRY TO RUN THE SHOW ON THE FIELD.**

If you are in a partnership with workers or an agency on the mission field, your local church in the West should not try to be in charge of what happens over there. Cultures, peoples, and situations vary wildly around the world. The people on the ground understand those variables in ways you do not. If you want to send a short-term mission team, send them to do what the field workers need done, not what makes the short termers enjoy the trip or feel good about themselves. Go with a spirit of humble servanthood, not with a spirit of entitlement. Follow the customs and practices that your field hosts ask you to follow, even if they don't make much sense to you. Make sure your contributions fit into the long-term strategy of the field team. In your use of money, allow yourself to be guided by the wisdom and experience of the field workers when deciding what should and should not be funded. If you cannot trust your field partners to this extent, you have the wrong field partners. Simply remember that they have to live with the consequences of your actions long after you have left.

## **4. YOU SHOULD NOT TRY TO DO EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE.**

Churches that have recently acquired a passion for reaching the unreached often engage in a shotgun approach to global mission. They want to go everywhere, and sometimes they try. They may send a short-term team to one place and a long-term worker somewhere else, all while funding a project in a third location and committing to pray for a fourth. This zeal is commendable but not very helpful. It is much better to start with a clear focus on partnership with an overseas worker or team, or with a specific people group or place. Over time, the capacity of the church may grow to include other peoples or places, but you will do far more good, both for the church and for the field, if from the start you focus on one or a very few long-term commitments.

## **5. YOU SHOULD NOT FORGET YOUR WORKERS ONCE THEY ARE OVERSEAS.**

All too often, overseas workers feel like they are “out of sight, out of mind.” Given the possibilities of modern communication technology, there is no reason for this to happen in most overseas locations.

As a sending church, stay in touch with your overseas workers. Make sure that your congregation hears from them, knows about them, and prays for them regularly. Make a point of praying for special strategic initiatives they take, and also make a point of praying for mundane things in their lives. Send them cards and care packages as much as possible. Pay them a pastoral visit at least once per term if it’s feasible. Keep the communication deep enough that you know about their struggles as well as their triumphs. Welcome them, love on them, and listen to them when they return for short breaks from the field. Don’t let overseas workers feel as though they have been abandoned.

## **6. YOU SHOULD NOT LEAVE MISSIONS TO CHANCE.**

Too often, local churches are more reactive than proactive, endorsing missionary candidates who come to a sense of calling on their own, and supporting mission causes that happen to interest someone in the congregation. Instead, the church should provide opportunities for cross-cultural ministry, identifying those who show gifts in this area, encouraging them to pursue missions, and training them in being disciples and making disciples globally. The church should also be thoughtful and strategic in its own missions involvement, prioritizing those who still need to hear the gospel, and focusing on the church’s long-term overseas partnerships. Local churches should pray, prioritize, and plan their missions involvement carefully.

## **7. YOU SHOULD NOT LET MISSIONS BECOME JUST ONE SPECIAL INTEREST AMONG MANY IN THE CHURCH.**

Missions needs to be integrated into all the normal components of church life. To this end, the senior pastor must be fully committed and must lead the way. Prayer for missions and testimonies about missions should be incorporated into the main worship service, the small group meetings, and whatever else the church does regularly. The pastor should preach on missions and God’s heart for the nations whenever it comes up in the text of Scripture, not just during one special missions service a year. Missions education should be delivered to everyone in the church, not just to a small interest group. Missions giving should be prioritized in the church’s budget and emphasized as a normal component of discipleship. The global advance of the gospel is not just a niche interest of a small elite within the church. Every believer shares this responsibility, and the entire church needs to be mobilized to take the Good News to everyone who has yet to hear.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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By Mack Stiles

# 9 Marks of Healthy Missions

**“W**ell, Mack, what can we do for you?”

So came the good hearted question after a—dare I say it?—powerful presentation I had just made about our mission work in a difficult area of Guatemala.

If you know me, and you ask that question, you better hang on to your wallet. Years ago I learned that I rarely have enough funds for the vision set before me. And this man knew me; he was not so much asking *what* I needed but *how much*.

My answer surprised him.

“The best thing that you can do for me,” I said, “is to make sure you keep your church healthy. I can’t do the work there if churches are unhealthy here.”

I really believe that. And here are the reasons why:

## **1. HEALTHY CHURCHES CLING TO THE GOSPEL AS THE CENTER OF MISSIONS. UNHEALTHY CHURCHES ARE SWEEPED AWAY WITH THE LATEST FADS IN MISSIONS.**

A healthy church will carefully and gently direct support toward gospel-centered missions, and they are careful to understand and teach about the limits and temptations of cultural sensitivity and contextualization.

There is such pressure and temptation to try and make ourselves “relevant” to a culture that it becomes dangerously easy to make the mistake of changing the message of the gospel. I’ve come to believe that

the quickest route to heresy is relevant and over-contextualized missions. We should never forget that Paul's hardest words are reserved for those who preach another gospel (Gal 1:8).

Cultural context is always a challenge, but it is not a trump card. Put another way: Anthropology never trumps theology. It's above our pay-grade to change the message of the gospel to fit context.

## **2. HEALTHY CHURCHES ARE GENEROUS. UNHEALTHY CHURCHES MERELY TIP MISSIONARIES.**

Just as you call your church members to be generous and cheerful in their giving, so the church as a community has a chance to model what it preaches. Don't tip missionaries; really get behind them. Pick good people and support them for the long haul—and support them generously.

I remember visiting a small church where I was told that the sun never set on their missions empire. This was signified by the pins in a map in the foyer. But as I probed, their map seemed more to be about the desire to look as if they were an expansive missions church than actually advancing the gospel in a significant way. That church did support dozens of missionaries, but it was with small \$25/month gifts. Don't tip missionaries. It's better if you get behind just one than spread it all over the map.

## **3. HEALTHY CHURCHES SUPPORT THE RIGHT MISSIONARIES. UNHEALTHY CHURCHES SUPPORT THE WRONG MISSIONARIES: A DOUBLE PROBLEM.**

When churches are unhealthy they tend to be confused about who should go and who should be supported.

I call it the 747 principle. That is: Getting on a 747 won't make you holy. Sin here will follow you there. I wish it could be so easy as to develop holiness by simply buying a plane ticket, but there is no transformation by aviation.

Churches need to affirm the calling of the individual by a record of deeds done where they live. If the person isn't fruitful in ministry where they live, they generally won't be overseas.

And can you believe this? Some church leaders have even confessed to me they got rid of a difficult person to overseas work.

Friends, please don't send us people unless they can do ministry where they are. Send us people you would hire on staff or put on your elder board. In Acts 13, the church at Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas. What a sacrifice! God will honor you and your church if you do the same.

The reason it's a double problem is that good missionaries have to undo the work of bad missionaries, especially when it comes to church planting. It is so hard to undo what has been done badly.

#### **4. HEALTHY CHURCHES HAVE HELPFUL AND SUPPORTIVE MISSION POLICIES. UNHEALTHY CHURCHES TEND TO HAVE SELFISH MISSION POLICIES.**

The litmus test to healthy missions policy is to check if your support is field driven or home driven. This is not about you and your church; this is about them, there.

Perhaps the trip to Mexico for the youth is a good thing; at least in that it helps the youth. But let's not think that it's making disciples of the nations; it is support for the church youth program. And I have no problem with that, but let's call it what it is. That same mentality easily bleeds over to more important areas of missions.

For example, a number of years ago I was forced to turn down significant missions support since the church required us to host their short-term teams. I've written a book on short terms; I like short terms. But in that context I didn't know how I could host a short term without doing damage to the fragile work, but the policy was inflexible and work in a very urgent place was hindered because of it.

#### **5. HEALTHY CHURCHES SUPPORT SOLID, GOSPEL-CENTERED TEACHING. UNHEALTHY CHURCHES EXPORT HERESY AND BAD TEACHING.**

Have you heard the saying: "misty in the pulpit is foggy in the pews"? Overseas it becomes Stygian darkness.

Programmatic, methodological, and results-driven glitz and glam seem to have greater traction overseas, perhaps because it comes with the authority of a missionary. Regardless, it destroys healthy churches.

The health and wealth gospel is a great example. What tends to be merely annoying to many in the US becomes a scourge overseas.

And whether we want to admit it or not, the prosperity gospel is an American export. Of course, in one sense it is only the gods of Molech and Baal repackaged in shiny modern garb. But it's destroying the true gospel in the worst possible places. The lands that need a robust theology of suffering and perseverance through trials—Africa, the Middle East and India—are riven with the yeast of the health-wealth gospel.

My friend Joanna was talking with a Muslim student and discovered to her surprise that this student watched Joel Osteen. "But," this bright young woman said, "you can tell that his message is not for people who really suffer." We were touched with her insight, sobered by the reach of TV preachers, and saddened that a Muslim sees what Christian-background people can't.

## **6. HEALTHY CHURCHES REPRODUCE MISSIONARIES AFTER THEIR OWN KIND. UNHEALTHY CHURCHES REPRODUCE MISSIONARIES AFTER THEIR OWN KIND.**

Programmatic churches produce programmatic Christians who become programmatic missionaries. Inculturated churches produce inculturated missionaries. Sentimental churches produce sentimental missionaries. Christ-less churches produce Christ-less missionaries. And so on.

Healthy churches produce healthy Christians who become healthy missionaries. We need people over there who come from healthy churches and have seen them in operation here.

## **7. HEALTHY CHURCHES KNOW WHAT THE CHURCH IS. UNHEALTHY CHURCHES ARE FUZZY ON CHURCH.**

When I say “healthy churches” what I mean is churches that are established on solid and clear biblical principles. Missionaries who come from a healthy church have seen it in operation, and know what to shoot for.

For example, few would deny that church is central to mission. Yet when I talk with missionaries who are committed to church planting they are often fuzzy about church. And these are the very same people who are attempting to establish churches! I’ve even had discussions with people who were in high levels of their mission organizations who argued with me that there is no distinction between church and para-church. This is nonsense—and I’m a para-church guy.

So, as a para-church guy, let me affirm that the church is Christ’s primary strategy for missions and it is absolutely essential for missionaries to know basic principles of what a church is, and how to establish one biblically. Knowing what the church is will help missionaries keep their eye on the ball, as it were, whereas unhealthy understandings of the church will often direct missionaries to other work.

For example, I had a guy who raises money from foundations tell me, “You guys shouldn’t just raise money to build a church, you should build a hospital, too! We could get a lot more money.”

I’m serious, he really said that. And I suspect what he said was true. And since he and so many like him don’t really have a gospel center they chase after things that seem right to a man. But remember where Proverbs 14:12 says that ends up.

Avoid the temptation to get off the clear path that Jesus set before the church to make disciples. Am I opposed to building hospitals? Not at all. If it’s part of a thoughtful long-term strategy to advance the gospel in a difficult place, go for it. Just make sure you’re advancing the gospel not just chasing money or any other possible rabbit trail that gets us off making disciples of all nations.

The Great Commission is not just to go and do stuff. It’s to go and make disciples.

## **8. HEALTHY CHURCHES PRODUCE A LOT OF MISSIONARIES. UNHEALTHY CHURCHES, NOT SO MUCH.**

There's not much to say here; I've just noticed over time how many missionaries come from healthy churches, per capita. I just wish there were more healthy churches.

## **9. HEALTHY CHURCHES PRAY AND BACK THEIR MISSIONARIES. UNHEALTHY CHURCHES ARE MISSING IN ACTION.**

A couple arrested for being Christians in Iran were suddenly released from jail in Tehran and hounded out of the country. They were on the run, they didn't know where to go, they were frightened and alone, and they showed up at our house. I made five phone calls to five churches, healthy churches that back missionaries. They each prayed—and in one hour the money needed was there for this couple to rent a place, and begin ministry to Iranians in the city in which we lived. This ministry lasted for years. I knew that those churches had my back. There was a trusting relationship that was critical to the mission, so I knew I could count on them.

Suddenly, I knew the answer to “Mack, what can we do for you?”

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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By Mark Dever

# 4 Practices of a Great Commission Church

*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from Mark Dever's forthcoming Understanding the Great Commission, in the Church Basics series (B&H, April 2016). Reprinted by permission of B&H.*

**T**he Great Commission does not call for churches to act like the department of motor vehicles. Nor does it call for them to act like information booths. These were the conclusions of previous chapters. Now I have one more for you: the Great Commission does not call churches to act like professional sports teams.

The staff of my church likes to make fun of me for not knowing much about sports, which might be fair. But I do know the goal of every sports team is to win the championship. A team will try to hire the best players, build the best training facilities, and optimize its coaching staff all to win its league's top trophy. Sure, a team is glad other teams exist. Without them there would be no league. But its main goal is to beat those other teams.

Now, I doubt very many, if any, churches explicitly think to themselves, "We have to beat those other churches!" But let me ask a couple of diagnostic questions to test for an our-team-is-best mentality:

- Do you happily give away your best players to other churches?
- Do you rejoice if, after praying for revival, revival comes to the church down the street? (Thanks to Andy Johnson for this great question!)
- Do you pray regularly for the church down the street as well as the other churches in your city?
- Do you give any portion of your budget to revitalizing old or raising up new churches in your city, around the nation, or abroad?

Too often, a grotesque competitiveness between churches marks evangelical churches. But a Great Commission church does not compete with other gospel-preaching churches because it knows every gospel-preaching church *is playing for the same team*

## **GREAT COMMISSION CHURCH = CHURCH PLANTING CHURCH**

Here's the broader point: a Great Commission church is an evangelizing and discipling church, but it is also a church-planting and church-revitalizing church. It wants to see the kingdom of God grow through its own ministry, but it also wants to see the kingdom expand beyond its own walls through other churches.

So a Great Commission church is interested in facilitating lots of evangelistic activity going out from itself in order to draw outsiders back to itself. But it is also interested in seeing its efforts culminate in planting or supporting other local churches. It is not satisfied with its own health, it wants to see lots of other healthy, Bible-believing, gospel-preaching congregations.

Such a church encourages other evangelical churches and plants, even if they are several blocks away. And it prays for them by name. It is willing to send out good folks who will help those other churches. It also works to plant or build up other churches on the other side of the world.

A Great Commission church works and prays to raise up men qualified to be elders, and then selflessly sends them out.

It works to align its budget with these Great Commission priorities. Some money is kept for ministry in its own location, but some money is assigned to helping other works, both near and far.

It works to reclaim dying congregations wherever it can.

It works in all sorts of public and private ways to cultivate this team mentality with other gospel-centered churches among its own members. The members and leaders are as happy about a new gospel-preaching church as they are about a new restaurant opening in a land of starvation.

So what does a Great Commission church do? I want to offer four strategic steps.

## **CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF DISCIPLING**

First, a Great Commission church will cultivate a culture of discipling among its own members. It helps every member own the responsibility for helping other believers grow in the faith. Pastors equip the saints for the work of ministry, says Paul (Eph. 4:11-12), which means the work of the ministry belongs to all the saints. The whole body, speaking the truth in love, grows as it builds itself up, each part doing its work (Eph. 4:15-16; see also 1 Cor. 12,14).

Discipleship is my following Jesus. Discipling is me helping someone else follow Jesus (e.g. 2 Tim. 2:2). And in a Great Commission church, *older* men in the faith disciple younger men, and younger women seek out the older women. For instance, if you are a single woman, you might offer a stay-home mother in your church help with the laundry in exchange for the opportunity to ask lots of questions! If you are a

lay-elder teaching an adult Sunday School class, you are sure to recruit a junior teacher. And your goal, in a sense, is to train and hand over the teaching job to him. Then you can go and start another class and bring on another junior teacher.

A Great Commission church possesses the geographic sensitivity implied by Jesus' command to "Go." For those who stay, therefore, "going" may well mean moving closer to the church or groups of its members. That way it is easy to minister to others throughout the week. Where do you live? Are you helping to cultivate a culture of discipling in your church in where you chose to rent an apartment or purchase a home?

A Great Commission church should be uncomfortable, even provocative, for a nominal Christian. If you show up as such a guest in such a church on Sunday only as part of your casual religious duty, you may not like it very much. You would be welcomed, but its members would not be what you are about. They are about giving their whole lives to follow Jesus, and they commit to help one another follow Jesus. Such a commitment and such activity is part of the very culture: intentional questions, meaningful conversations, prayer, and continual reminders of the gospel.

Take a look at Robert Coleman's *Master Plan of Evangelism*, Colin Marshall and Tony Payne's *The Trellis and the Vine*, or my own *Discipling* for more on this topic.

## CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF EVANGELISM

Second, a Great Commission church will cultivate a culture of evangelism. On the one hand, members know that the gospel will be preached in every weekly gathering. So they are excited to invite their non-Christian friends. The gospel radiates through the singing, the praying, and every sermon.

Are you confident that any non-Christian you bring to your church will hear the gospel? If not, what can you do about it?

On the other hand, a Great Commission church works to train its members in evangelism, because it knows they will collectively see more non-Christians throughout the week than will ever be able to fit in the church building. So "success" in evangelism is not simply bringing your non-Christian friends to church so that they hear the gospel. Success is sharing the gospel with your non-Christian neighbors and friends.

So the church works to equip its members in evangelism so that they know how to share the gospel with others. My own church does this through adult Sunday Schools devoted to evangelism. I try to model how to engage with non-Christians in my preaching, particularly in the way I explicitly address non-Christians. We try to equip our members by offering them evangelistic tools like "Two Ways to Live" or resources like "Christianity Explained" or "Christianity Explored." We hand out lots of Greg Gilbert's *Who Is Jesus?* to members for them to give to their non-Christian friends. We also share about evangelistic opportunities through our Sunday evening meeting. Hearing and praying for other members' evangelistic opportunities encourages people's own attempts to spread the good news.

What does the Great Commission mean to you? It means Jesus has called you to be a disciple-maker. He calls you to both evangelize unbelievers and disciple the believers. You should be doing this

personally—at home, at work, in your neighborhood, among your friends. You should be doing this in and through your church.

Therefore use your fellow church members to help you. Invite an elder to lunch, and ask him for counsel. Share and pray with your small group. Go out and evangelize with your friends.

For more on this topic, look at any book by Mack Stiles, especially *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus*, or my book *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*.

## WORK TO REACH THE UNREACHED THROUGH MISSIONS

A Great Commission church, third, works to reach the unreached through missions. What's the difference between missions and evangelism and church planting at home? Really, missions is just what we call evangelism and church planting when it travels across ethnic, cultural, and typically national boundaries.

Jesus commands us to “go and make disciples of all nations.” I have not said much on this topic because so many other books cover this idea so well. But it's hard to know how a church might read this command and not commit itself to taking the gospel to nations that have never heard the gospel before.

No congregation can aim everywhere around the planet. Therefore I think churches are wise to concentrate their own mission efforts on a few places. My own church, for instance, concentrates on several countries in the so-called 10/40 window, which is that region of the Eastern hemisphere between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator. It's the area of the world where there are the fewest percentage of Christians.

If you are a member of our church, and you express an interest in pursuing missions, we will be able to put more of our resources behind you if you go to one of the locations we already invest in. We are simply unable to sponsor a hundred people going a hundred different places. By that token, we prefer supporting few missionaries with more money rather than lots of missionaries with only a little money. That enables the missionaries we do support to spend less time raising money and more time doing the work of church planting. Plus, it helps us to have a relationship with them and offer accountability.

Our church works with missionaries directly, and we work through missions organizations like the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board. We also work with amazing groups like Access Partners, who helps to place business people in strategic spots around the world in their business vocations, so that they can assist the long-term missionaries on the ground.

What role should you have as an individual Christian helping your church to reach the unreached? Certainly you should pray for your church's missionaries. Get to know them when they are on furlough. Perhaps look into short-term mission trips that will allow you to support the long-term workers. Read missionary biographies. And maybe think about going. We will come back to that question a couple chapters from now.

There is one last thing you and your church can do for reaching the unreached: look for internationals in your own city. My own church works hard at reaching international students, but what international

groups live in your city? If you reach them with the gospel right there in your hometown, there's a pretty good chance that the gospel will spread back to where they came from.

Take a look at John Piper's *Let the Nations Be Glad* for more on this topic.

## WORK TO STRENGTHEN OTHER CHURCHES

Churches commonly have a missions budget line. I think it's worth adding a "Fostering Healthy Churches" budget line as well. Working to strengthen other churches is a fourth practice of Great Commission churches.

My own church uses this line for supporting a number of things, such as our pastoral internship program. We pay twelve guys a year to do an internship with us, most of whom end up pastoring or otherwise serving other churches.

We also use the line to support the ministry of 9Marks, a ministry devoted as a ministry to building healthy churches.

We intentionally structure our staff so that guys get trained and are sent out. Pastoral assistants serve us for 2 to 3 years and are then expected to go. Assistant pastors serve us for 3 to 5 years and then go. Only myself and the associate pastors (together with any non-staff pastors or elders) are expected to remain in our church long-term. The rest we equip to go.

Our church sponsors weekend conferences, where pastors from around the world join us for our regularly scheduled meetings as well as several special lecturers and times of Q&A. I also participate in weekly phone calls with several other networks of pastors from around the world for the same purposes. Each one of these conversations gives me the opportunity to pray and work for healthy churches all around the world.

Much of the work we do of strengthening other churches through church planting and church revitalizing we do in our own area, which is the topic of the next chapter. (That whole chapter, in other words, is an extension of this section.) But we do some planting and revitalizing around the world, too. For instance, we sent one brother, John, to a church in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, when that church was looking for a pastor almost a decade ago. God has used John in mighty ways to revitalize that international church. One of his key elders, who helped to bring John there, was Mack, an old friend of mine. Once John and Mack got the church to a healthy place, Mack and another brother, Dave, left the church to plant another church 30 minutes away. We also sent a former pastoral assistant and a former intern to help Mack and Dave in that new work. Simultaneously, we sent another former pastoral intern to plant yet another church in another city of UAE.

Now we have three healthy churches up and running in this Muslim country. None of this was a part of some grand plan of ours. In fact, neither the one revitalizing opportunity nor the two planting opportunities were initiated by us. We were just there to pray, help, and send financial and human support where we could. By the way, a number of our members have relocated their jobs to the UAE to help the work of these churches. Our church gains in no particular way other than the sheer joy of seeing God's kingdom expand in this foreign land.

A lot of these examples have focused on what I as the pastor have done. But assuming you are an ordinary church member, what can you do to help strengthen other churches, whether in your area or around the world? Obviously, you can pray for other works personally. You can pray for other works with your family at dinner. You can support other works financially.

Certainly you should be careful about criticizing other churches. Yes, there are places where your church's practices or secondary doctrines might differ from those of other churches. And yes we have deliberate reasons for those areas of disagreement. I am not telling you to throw those disagreements out the window. But keep in mind that those secondary matters over which your church might disagree with other churches are as never as important as the gospel we all share. So guard against a critical spirit, and look for ways to rejoice in shared gospel partnerships (see Luke 10:49-50 for Jesus' warning to his overly-narrow disciples).

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By David Platt & Paul Akin

# 5 Ways Your Church Can Get Involved in Global Missions Starting Tomorrow

**T**oday, there are more than 7 billion people in the world. Missiologists estimate that over 2.8 billion of those people have little to no access to the gospel. Practically, this means that billions of people are being born, living their entire lives, and dying without ever hearing the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This reality cannot be tolerable to pastors and the people of God in the church.

With this in mind, we want to share 5 things that your church—regardless of size, location, or situation—can do to get involved in God’s global mission.

## **1. TEACH GOD’S WORD TO YOUR PEOPLE, INFORMING THEM HOW TO LIVE IN THE WORLD.**

George Pentecost once wrote, “To the pastor belongs the privilege and responsibility of the missionary problem.” Pentecost maintained that mission boards could (and should) do what they will—organizing methods, devising movements, and raising money—but it is the responsibility and privilege of pastors to feel the weight of the nations and to fan a flame for God’s global glory in every local church.

From cover to cover in the Bible, God shows his passion for His glory in all nations. So pastors, teach God’s Word to your people and let them see that God’s heart for the nations jumps off the pages of Scripture. Then, as you study God’s Word, make sure you apply it in light of urgent spiritual and physical needs that surround us in the world. We are surrounded by lost peoples who speak different languages from different nations, and they need the hope that can only be found in Jesus Christ. Pastors and

church leaders, help your people see God's heart for the world in his Word and let that Word shape and inform how your people live in the world.

## **2. COMMIT YOURSELVES TO CORPORATE PRAYER AND FASTING.**

As the church at Antioch fasted and prayed, God set apart Saul and Barnabas to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-3). For many local churches, prayer and fasting like this is supplemental. But in the New Testament, prayer and fasting like this were fundamental for the people of God as they engaged in mission. Today, through corporate prayer, local churches can take an active role in the Great Commission task.

By God's grace, helpful resources like Operation World, Peoplegroups.org, and Joshua Project have been developed to aid and assist churches as they intercede on behalf of unreached peoples and places around the world. Intercession is the means by which we join in the daily activity of God in other people's lives, and this includes people in our neighborhoods and peoples around the world that we may never meet. Through prayer, God allows local churches to join him in the reconciling work that he is doing right now among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and people of all religions around the world. Desperate prayer and fasting are a vital way that local churches can be involved in the mission of God among the nations.

## **3. GIVE SACRIFICIALLY.**

One of the most practical ways for local churches to get involved in global mission is through sacrificial giving. God has blessed many local churches with financial resources that stewarded carefully and given wisely can help fuel disciple-making and church planting around the world. Regardless of church size or the socio-economic makeup of the congregation, every local body can be involved in the advancement of the gospel through the sacrificial giving of financial resources.

In the NT, there are examples of local congregations giving to support local churches in different geographic locations (Rom 15:25-28), as well as local churches giving out of their poverty and sacrificially beyond their means to support gospel advance (2 Cor. 8:1-4). Today, local churches can use their financial resources to support gospel-centered missions organizations. They can also give more specifically to meet the needs of persecuted brothers and sisters or to fuel disciple-making and church planting projects among unreached peoples. This list of worthy causes related to global mission is endless. Sacrificial giving to global mission enables the whole church to be involved. Children, youth, adults, and senior adults can all contribute together for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

## **4. WORK HARD TO CARE FOR, SERVE, AND BE A BLESSING TO CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARIES.**

God has uniquely equipped local churches to care for and extend hospitality to missionaries. Regardless of whether or not your local church has sent out a missionary, you are able to provide care, support, and encouragement to cross-cultural missionaries. A few of the practical ways in which local churches can best care for and support missionaries are:



- Commit to regular communication (email, phone, texting, Skype, etc.).
- Sending care packages and gifts
- Assisting with furloughs and stateside assignments (provide housing, vehicle, mobile phone, help with schooling, childcare, and offering focused time away for rest and retreat)
- Allowing them the opportunity to report back and share in a corporate setting when they return and visit
- Listening to them and demonstrating your interest and commitment to their work

Life on the mission field can be challenging, exhausting, and difficult. In the midst of the stress and the struggles, many missionaries often feel disconnected and forgotten by their sending church. Therefore, one of the most practical ways local churches can get involved in global mission is by working hard to care for, serve, and be a blessing to cross-cultural missionaries.

## **5. SEND QUALIFIED DISCIPLE-MAKERS OVERSEAS.**

Perhaps the most obvious way that local churches can get involved in global mission is by sending out qualified and equipped disciple-makers to directly engage in Great Commission work. On a local level, this includes releasing people out in your city to minister to lost neighbors, co-workers, and family members. Believers will not do overseas what they do not do at home, so the starting point for mission must begin in local communities.

Then, as men and women are making disciples where they live, issue a periodic call for some to leave your local community to go to the nations. Under the direction of God's Spirit, this will lead to your church sending people short-, mid-, and long-term to proclaim the gospel, make disciples, and fuel church planting efforts among unreached people and in unreached places.

The local church is the means that God is going to use for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. In a world filled with billions of lost people, many of whom have never heard the gospel, it is unacceptable for global mission to be relegated to a compartmentalized program in the church for a select few people. Surely God is calling his entire church to be involved in strategic ways in making his glory known among the nations. Our prayer and desire is that more and more pastors will take hold of the privilege and responsibility God has given local churches in his global mission.

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By Steve Jennings

# What Would Happen if You Sent Your Best?

**T**here are few things more predictable than the weakness-to-greatness plot of a good sports movie. Imagine a story where a championship team decides to let their star players go to other teams to improve the quality of the league. You can picture how the plot would go. The team is mocked in the press. But the star players change the face of the league as their skill and love of the game pushes their new teams to elite status. Meanwhile, back on the original team the plot would surely involve some scrub player with personal issues who was almost cut but rises to greatness.

Most of us have seen movies like this and we know the narrative trajectory. But this kind of story isn't really representative of reality, is it? How many of us would actually do something so counterintuitive? Churches are not sports teams, their work is certainly more meaningful, yet could it be that our churches should pursue that same story arch by being willing to give up some of our best people, trusting God to raise up others?

I think so. According to their gospel purpose and commission, churches are designed to raise up and send, raise up and send, raise up and send—all the while replenishing their own ranks through faithful and regular discipleship.

God's ways of winning are sometimes counterintuitive to the pragmatic mind. And we should expect this. After all, isn't the church designed to put God's wisdom on display, not our own? Consider God's greatest triumph—sin atoned for, wrath diverted, curse broken, and death defeated through the binding, beating, dying, and rising of the Son of God, all on the behalf of sinful man! Victory secured in the hour of greatest weakness – humanly speaking.

So what if your church did what seemed counterintuitive to health and growth? What if you disciplined and sent out your best and brightest people to start other churches? Would your church actually get weaker?

I can hardly tell you that this is the right thing to do every time. There are different stages of life as a church and churches with different needs. This is matter of wisdom, not a mandate. But I can speak both from experience and God's Word that the general practice of sending your best people means:

- new and healthy churches will be planted,
- and your congregation will mature.

## **1. NEW AND HEALTHY CHURCHES WILL BE PLANTED**

Living overseas and seeing scores of missionaries pass through, I've been surprised to see that churches often send the unprepared and immature to plant churches among the unreached and least-reached. Meanwhile, the home churches have brilliant staffs with theological training and ministry acumen.

But imagine with me what it would be like if churches sent the people they have invested countless hours and solid resources into, people with strong theological footing, well-honed gifts, time-tested discernment, proven holiness, and a thoroughly gospel-centered philosophy of life and ministry. If churches did that, what do you think would happen? Precious seed would be planted in the barren corners of the earth – that is what would happen.

Unreached peoples are an urgent reality, but to reach them they need more than just warm bodies and boots on the ground. They need healthy, gospel-centered churches planted in their midst. And this happens when established churches prepare and send their best people to plant those churches.

Look at Paul. He sent guys like Timothy and Titus, bright guys whom he had poured himself into. And in Paul's writings we see that he did this because he had an ambition to reach those who had not yet heard the gospel (see Rom. 15:20; 2 Tim. 2:2).

Of course, you may wonder if you do this what will happen to your church. But don't fear. It's a win-win. The health of your church will also benefit. When you send your best...

## **2. YOUR CONGREGATION WILL MATURE**

In sports they sometimes call this "churning the bottom of the roster." When you get rid of people who have risen up as the best and brightest, it compels you to raise up others in their place. When this is happening regularly in a church, by God's grace, that church is going to mature.

Please understand that churches should not send everyone. And some of your best people you should keep! You want a strong heart that can keep pumping blood. Still, it can be easy for churches to settle down with a staff of dependable people where everything seems to be going smoothly, but without that "churning" the congregation could actually begin to stagnate and atrophy. The Scriptures give us a pattern of discipling and sending out, discipling and sending out. This should be normal life for a church so that when the younger Christians witness the older Christians walk this path, they better understand what path they have to walk, what shoes they need to fill.

Maybe it's time for your church to consider sending some of your best people to plant gospel-centered churches across town or among the nations. Maybe it's time to send them to support a work that has already begun. Don't fear a void in your ministry. Through faithful discipleship God can and does raise up people to meet every need.

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By Ryan King

# The Great Commission: Fulfilled by Churches and for Churches

**C**hrist's Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 is most often coupled with an appeal for individual Christians to consider their calling to go into the world as missionaries. While it is certainly a text that every follower of Christ ought to meditate upon and apply, it would seem that a *primarily* individualistic application of this command is more a product of our Western culture than from a natural reading of the text.

## **CHRIST'S COMMAND WAS GIVEN TO THE CHURCH.**

According to verse 16, it was the eleven disciples who were the original hearers of the command. The apostles were more than individuals seeking to privately obey Christ's teachings. These men stood as founders and leaders of the Church that would be established and multiplied through their testimony and the power of the Holy Spirit. It was understood that every member of the church would be taught to obey everything that the Lord commanded, including the command to make disciples of all nations.

## **CHRIST'S COMMAND WAS GIVEN TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH.**

It's a common joke that "Missions Sundays" are reserved for weeks when service attendance is at a low. The assumption, it seems, is that messages about the nations are particularly for a subset of the congregation: men and women who are already predisposed to thinking about or interacting with internationals. This would make sense if (a) an affinity for peoples and cultures was the primary motivation for reaching the nations with the gospel; and (b) the only means of obedience to Christ's command was to actually leave home and live elsewhere for the sake of the gospel.

However, neither is true. The ultimate motivation for proclaiming the gospel and making disciples is not rooted in sociology. It is Christ's immeasurable worth and glory that compels us to spread the message of the gospel. When anything about our marvelous God stirs our affections toward worship and obedience, a natural overflow ought to be a desire to see others who don't know him yet stirred to worship.

Furthermore, the application of the Great Commission is not solely to go, but to pray to the Lord of the harvest for more laborers (Luke 10:2), to send them out as the church of Antioch did with Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:2-3), and to support missionaries as "fellow workers in the truth" (3 John 8). It is a corporate endeavor that involves every member of Christ's body. Thus, our goal is not to persuade everyone to become a missionary, but to help everyone in our congregations think and act with a global evangelization mindset.

## **CHRIST'S COMMAND WAS GIVEN TO ALL CHURCHES**

The mission to go and make disciples of all nations was given to churches in every nation. The gospel continues to spread around the world, and as churches have multiplied and matured, they, too, have engaged in sending and supporting missionaries. The reality is that churches all around the world are deeply engaged in international missions; it's not an exclusively Western enterprise.

There are two potential pitfalls for Western church leaders in light of this. On one side, we might fall into the trap of believing, "*If WE don't go, how will they hear?*" The mission of spreading the gospel to every tongue, tribe, and nation can be seen as a task solely for the churches in America without a thought of our brothers and sisters around the globe who are laboring alongside us. The other danger is believing, "*There are so many others going, so we are no longer needed.*" Yes, countries like South Korea and India are sending tens of thousands of missionaries, but this does not mean we may abdicate our responsibility.

A few years ago, while I was in South America, I asked a respected Brazilian missiologist and church planter his opinion regarding the claim that the era of Western missions was over and that it was now time to "pass the baton." His response was gracious and sincere: "I've heard this before," he said, "and my question is, 'Why did you think the baton was yours to pass in the first place?'" He's right. The Great Commission doesn't belong to any particular era or region of the church; rather, all churches at all times and in all places must endeavor together in making disciples of all nations. Our opportunity in light of these global trends is not only to send from our congregations but to partner with international churches in sending, supporting, and serving missionaries among the nations.

## **CHRIST'S COMMAND WAS TO MAKE DISCIPLES, WHO WOULD BECOME CHURCHES.**

The goal of missions is not to evangelize all peoples, but to make disciples who observe all that Christ commanded. The former can be accomplished rapidly through individuals, whereas the latter takes time and requires community. Therefore, fulfilling the Great Commission necessitates church planting.

Any effort in missions ought to be connected to the goal of reproducing local bodies of believers through the declaration and demonstration of the gospel. Mercy ministries are good and healthy but they will

remain stunted if stone hearts are not made flesh through the power of the Spirit of God by the Word of God. Conversely, proclamation ministry is necessary but intangible without the outworking of the Word in service to the felt needs of the community. The goal then is to see communities of disciples raised up who both proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ and display the fruit of the Spirit through their love for their neighbor.

If it is the role of every local church to obey the Great Commission for the sake of birthing new local churches locally and globally, where do we begin? I would suggest we start at the same point as Christ's disciples. As church leaders, we must consider the Lord's commands and we must seek the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit as we step out in faith. No matter our church's size, age, resources, or challenges, we are not powerless, poor, or alone. Christ's promise is for us today. He rules all things, earthly and heavenly, and he is with us to the end of the age. He will complete his mission.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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By Matt Mason

# How to Tie Global Missions into the Regular Diet of Your Preaching

**F**rom the earliest days of our life as a congregation, by God's grace, The Church at Brook Hills has been a people who wanted to be "different to make a difference." Pastors have urged members to a faith that works itself out in love, a faith that shows and shares Jesus with the lost. Under David Platt, this focus sharpened even more. There are many ways in which we have seen God graciously bring forth fruit. As members of this church, a passion to take the gospel to the nations is evident in our praying, our giving, and our going. We praise God for this!

But that's not all. God reminds his people of the vital importance of global missions by giving them pastors who shepherd the church through the week-by-week instruction of God's Word.

As the senior pastor, I very much feel a responsibility to maintain and contend for this essential, biblical emphasis in the life of our congregation. These are three categories I try to keep in mind as drift-preventers.

## 1. COMMIT TO EXPOSITORY PREACHING.

God's commitment to the nations is one of the great threads that runs through the whole Bible. Graeme Goldsworthy helpfully summarizes Scripture with this single sentence: "God is bringing his people into his place under his rule and blessing." As we read through the Bible, it becomes apparent that the people whom God is intent to *bring into his place* is a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

As we teach passage after passage, seeing the promises and purposes of God and his divine claim on our lives, we will increasingly discover that Matthew 28 doesn't just live in Matthew 28. We indeed have a Great Commission Bible and serve a Great Commission Savior, who came into this world to seek and save the lost.



This emphasis features prominently throughout the Bible. That being true, perhaps the best safeguard to ensure that we don't forget that God wants to save sinners from every tribe is simply to commit to preach the Bible, chapter-by-chapter and verse-by-verse.

## 2. CREATE A TRACKING SYSTEM.

A few years back I created a document in which I include the date, title, text, and theological/pastoral themes treated in any given sermon. (Click [here](#) to see a typical sample that covers four consecutive weeks.)

This document is updated each week and the past month of updates are shared each month with our elders. I have found this helpful for all kinds of reasons, not just as it relates to tracking the regularity of this particular theme, but others as well. Being able to look back on it each month with the elders provides a sense of accountability to teach the whole counsel of God. I don't feel any pressure to force a missional connection into a sermon; nonetheless, having a tracking system allows me to make sure I am touching on missions on a regular basis. Given the previous point, if there isn't a clear connection this week, I can rest confident that there will be one soon.

## 3. CONNECT GLOBAL MISSIONS TO EVERYTHING.

As just stated, there are many passages of Scripture of which global missions isn't the main point of the text, and yet, even there, we can help the church appreciate the way global mission connects to a vast range of biblical and pastoral themes. On the one hand, when a person answers God's call to engage in global mission, they are not answering a call to do something different than they were doing before. They are answering the call to do the same thing—namely, love God and make disciples—but in a different place and among a different people. God calls every Christ-follower to share and show Jesus to the world around them. This is what we want to see believers doing in Birmingham, Alabama, and this is what we want to see them doing in Bihar, India.

Something is lost when an aged believer in a congregation gets the impression that the only meaningful contribution she can make to global missions would be to pick up her life and move to the 10-40 window. Of course, we *need* believers to continually respond to God's call by actually moving to hard places and acquiring the language skills necessary to share the gospel with those who've never heard it. But it's not as though, short of that, the believer has been missionally sidelined. Paul, for example, asks church members to pray that he would speak with boldness as he ought to speak (Eph. 6:19) and that the word of the gospel would speed ahead (2 Thess. 3:1). Clearly, Paul gives the impression that prayer is a key factor in the success of gospel witness, even in distant places.

Missions should not be thought of as this flurry of activity happening in isolation from the rest of a local church's corporate life. The primary tasks of worship, nurture, and mission are not meant to be three separate entities contending for bragging rights, as if some should be allowed to say, "I am of worship," or "I am of nurture and biblical fellowship," or "I am of mission." No, rightly considered, worship, nurture, and mission, are mutually reinforcing.

Think about it: Our love for one another grabs the attention of a watching world (John 13:35). Our honorable conduct silences those who speak against us as evildoers (1 Pet. 2:12, 15), so that when they

see our good deeds they may glorify the Father (Matt 5:16). Our working together to share Christ with those around us also reaches back into our experience of spiritual community, deepening the bonds of fellowship. Even the elements of our worship gatherings—seeing God as high and exalted and sovereign and beautiful, reveling in the abundance of his grace in the gospel—are meant to fuel gospel witness.

When we preach from certain texts that focus on different topics—prayer, evangelism, compassion, the kingdom of God—there are countless natural (not contrived) on-ramps that can link to global missions. If this is done with care, over time our people will see more clearly the big picture of what God wants to do in the world and in history. Indeed, the Bible is so cohesive that one can hardly preach a message that doesn't have *any* missional implications.

All the while, then, as we uphold God's Word and see God's missionary heart, let's pray that God's Spirit would empower and embolden us to be a people who proclaim, here and throughout the world, the praises of him who called us out of darkness and into his wonderful light (1 Pet. 2:9).

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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By Andy Johnson

# Take Your Job Overseas: Introducing Business for Missions

**H**ave you ever thought about doing *business for missions*? You should. Let me give you a couple of illustrations of what it looks like.

I was recently sitting in an Asian-fusion restaurant in London, talking with a former member of the church I help pastor in Washington, DC. He and his young family had relocated a year earlier to London, specifically to help with a struggling church nearby. He would do that as a faithful church member with a normal job. Just recently he had become an elder in the congregation, and his pastor (also a friend of mine) confided later that the presence of this faithful family helped to keep him laboring in the rocky soil of post-Christian London.

That's one illustration. Here is another. Just a month earlier, I sat in a less fashionable Kabob restaurant in a troubled corner of Central Asia. I was visiting another young family from our DC church. They too had recently relocated with their jobs to a city just miles from the front lines of ISIS. They were joining a full-time missionary couple sent out a year earlier. They didn't see themselves being full-time church planting missionaries. They simply loved running their non-profit doing educational work with refugees. But quickly, they were becoming useful to their small, international church. To be sure, there were spiritual struggles all around them, but this family seemed excited about their future.

It's been a joy watching these kinds of scenarios play out again and again for two decades. Ordinary folks discover how to use their skills and vocations to support gospel work in difficult places, not as church planters or "missionaries," but as regular, faithful Christians.

People call this kind of activity by a lot of different names: Business as Missions, Tentmakers, Mobilized Marketplace Professionals (MPPs). Some terms are better than others. Some bear a bit of unhelpful theological baggage. But all of them are variations on the same idea: Christians who enter a culture

through the marketplace may enjoy access as well as financial and relational advantages that people in vocational ministry do not. Plus, they will be able to help those in fulltime ministry minister in difficult places.

If you have never thought about taking your marketplace job overseas for the sake of the gospel, you might think about it. Here are a few things I've observed over the past 20 years of encouraging this kind of thing.

## **1. REALIZE YOUR NEED FOR COMMUNITY.**

When folks first start to think about moving overseas with their jobs for gospel purposes, some imagine pioneering work in unreached places. Instead, most should think of joining already-established churches overseas, not blazing new trails among the unreached. Everyone needs community, accountability, and help in ministry. Community support structures from 10,000 miles away are not exactly ideal. Instead, you should go to a place where there is a good local church in a language you understand, or at least a very strong local missionary team that can fill in the gap. It is a rare individual who can work a 40+ hour work week, in a new culture, and sustain themselves and their family without a church.

## **2. REALIZE A LOCAL CHURCH IS A PLATFORM FOR MINISTRY EVERYWHERE.**

Not only should you consider relocating to a place with a healthy local church in a language you understand, even better, you should support that church as the main focus of your ministry. The most obviously fruitful marketplace Christians I have observed do just this.

It's often difficult to see how so much fruitful ministry comes through the fellowship, cooperation, and witness of a local assembly of believers. But such fruit can become obvious in a new culture. The teaching, networks, and collective public witness of a local congregation is an even more powerful gospel picture than our private conduct at work. True, there may be places where there isn't yet a church with which to link arms, and there may be places where marketplace Christians will need to gather with a few missionary families. But most people flourish spiritually when they have a local church that functions as the center of their lives and ministry. And there are little churches like that all over the world.

## **3. HAVE OPTIMISTIC AND REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS.**

Most Christians don't desire or feel equipped to be a full-time staff member for a local church. And most of them are quite happy in the lifestyle and relationships that God has given them. I personally spent almost 20 years of my life as a business owner or an employee and found great joy as a Christian in that season. And yet, such people will generally have a lot less discretionary time to give to ministry than a full-time church staff person.

The same is true for people who move overseas with a job to come alongside gospel work. They will not have the same amount of time to study language or to support many aspects of ministry, like a full-time

missionary will. The good news is, what they do may be more strategic if they are in a place where biblical Christians are few and far between.

#### **4. UNDERSTAND WHY THIS IS NOT THE SAME AS BEING SENT AS A MISSIONARY.**

In 3 John, the Apostle John describes the kind of person whom Christians have historically referred to as a missionary. It is someone who has been sent out by a church for the sake of making the name of Christ known, and he or she relies on the church (not the pagans) for their support. And John commands Christians (he uses the pushy word “ought”) to support such persons and partner with them in the truth of the gospel.

In other words, moving overseas with one’s job in order to come alongside a church or a missionary team is not the same thing as being a missionary, but it’s absolutely valuable. I realize that some people will be offended by this distinction. But I think most of us understand it. Not all are teachers or elders in the church, but each still has a valuable role to play (1 Cor. 12:12-31). “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.” You need not have a title or a specific office to be a blessing to the work of Christ.

#### **5. UNDERSTAND WHY BUSINESS FOR MISSIONS IS SUCH A GOOD THING.**

Most of us must support ourselves with a job. Most of us won’t ever enjoy the benefits (and burdens) of laboring full-time in gospel work. Both 1 and 2 Thessalonians paint a pretty clear picture of the normality and the goodness of the ordinary, self-supporting Christian life. But many of us can choose where we live. And here, Christian liberty gives us a wide array of choices. Some may choose to leave a church they love to help with a church plant on the other side of their city. Some will drill down deep and stay in that same church, even at the expense of exciting new jobs or opportunities. And some may choose to uproot their life and move to a different country to encourage gospel work where laborers are few. All are great choices. All are parts of the normal ways God intends his churches to grow in maturity and for his gospel to spread. So think about what might be possible for you, and where your life might be most fruitfully spent.

#### **6. GET HELP EVALUATING YOURSELF AND INVESTIGATING OPTIONS.**

Christians should think very carefully before they relocate with a job and move away from a church where they are currently prospering. Spiritual health is not something to be treated so casually. But this is especially true for Christians thinking of moving specifically to join a local witness in another culture. Not everyone should do this. We need to be open to hearing trusted friends tell us to stay put. Good candidates for moving overseas are Christians who will be engines of ministry, not Christians whose needs or challenges require lots of pastoral care. A great deal of humility is needed to hear this kind of feedback. Some of us can be most strategic by staying put and continuing to grow, for now.

For those who do consider gospel-focused relocation, humility may mean getting help thinking through a few places rather than viewing the whole world as your oyster. Start by considering the overseas locations where your church is already invested. Is there an international church or a solid missionary team in a city where you might consider moving? How might you be able to come alongside and encourage the leaders as a member of that congregation? It might not be your first choice, but eventually you'll realize that working with the right people is almost always more important than finding the perfect place.

Consider also any mission organizations with which your church cooperates and whether they have any resource. My own church works with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. That mission organization has a Global Cities Initiative intended to help churches consider how to help members to use their jobs to come alongside full-time missionaries in a few selected cities. Your own missionaries or organizations may be able to provide similar support.

## **7. BUSINESS FOR MISSIONS IS NO “GOLDEN KEY”—BUT WHAT IS?**

Many who begin the process of relocating soon discover that finding a job and moving across the globe takes a lot of work! And once there, people are sometimes disappointed to discover how similar their life is to their former life in their home country. You take care of the kids, go to work, get to know neighbors, talk about the gospel when you can, sustain the ministry of a local church, continue to sow seeds, and wait, in hope. But now, the barriers of language and culture may make everything slower than at home.

Business for missions is no “golden key” for missions—as if this strategy will revolutionize missions and make everything easy.

But just because something does not guarantee a route to fast and easy gospel fruit doesn't make it bad. Rather, it just makes it real and normal and what the Bible tells us to expect.

As we hold out the Word and cherish the gospel, as we live lives of holiness and love, as we proclaim the gospel to the world and disciple those in the church, as we train pastors and send missionaries and plant new churches and encourage faithful lives among all—God promises our ordinary efforts will result in an extraordinary ending. In the hand of God, small and ordinary faithfulness impacts eternity.

So maybe you or someone in your church might be able to live out the ordinary life among fellow believers in a place where faithful Christians are one in a million rather than one in ten. What do you think?

Your ordinary gifts and talents might be a treasure to a congregation in Malaysia or London or Istanbul or Dubai. Yes, there will still be a huge need for full-time, church-sent pioneer missionaries. Yes, this won't be the one tool to break open the world for Christ. Certainly this isn't the strategy for totally unreached places or lone rangers. But it might just be a wonderful way for many Christians to leverage their lives as one small, glorious part of Christ's wise plan to use the simple, ordinary, and even mundane faithfulness of his people to display his glory to the universe (Ephesians 3:10). And that's not a bad way to do your job and spend your life.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Andy Johnson is an associate pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC.



By Tim Keese

# A Cross-Shaped Calling

*Now, as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” (Acts 9:3-6)*

**W**hen it comes to missionary calling, Saul of Tarsus had the ultimate one—bright light, a voice from heaven, along with clear instructions. It doesn’t get any better than that! But the rest of us mere mortals should manage our expectations when it comes to the ways in which the Lord will direct us. As David Sills points out in his helpful book *The Missionary Call*, there is much mystery and misunderstanding about “the call.” He observed that with the Damascus Road encounter, “We must keep in mind that this experience was descriptive of what happened to Paul, not prescriptive of how every missionary call should be.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, I have had countless conversations and cups of coffee with Christians who are often sincere but genuinely confused about “being called.” I’ve encountered two sides of the pendulum’s swing in regard to “the call.” The first is those who “are called” but seem to be the only ones aware of it. They toss around the word “burden,” as if it weighs nothing at all. And they love to travel to “the mission field,” which by definition is everywhere outside the Lower 48. While I appreciate their initiative and enthusiasm, it’s sometimes difficult to distinguish between their personal calling and their personal ambition.

Often, this group has little connection to the church—outside of the need for financial help. Churches exist mostly to enable them to fulfill “God’s calling”—and if they ever make it to another country, they will likely expect the local believers to continue to make their missionary dreams come true. Counsel regarding getting involved in disciple-making now (before attempting it in another language) is met with a polite smile. Some of these individuals are head-strong, but many have just never had the opportunity to be discipled by mentors in the church, mentors who themselves have a big view of God and the gospel.



On the other end of the spectrum are those who are waiting for “a call” that never comes. They are faithful in their church, are there whenever the doors are open, and are seriously and prayerfully interested in missions—but they haven’t had a Damascus Road-type experience. Without such a calling or a sign or a soaked sheepskin, they are afraid to venture out. While it’s true that God doesn’t call everyone to serve him on the foreign field, it is equally true that we build walls out of our own fears. Often the first obstacle to overcome en route to reaching the gospel-destitute half of the world isn’t border crossings or barbed wire or ISIS; it’s the truly good walls of the truly good works that surround our current comfort zone.

In counseling, the place to take both the “frequent flyer” and the “pew sitter” (and everyone in between) is the cross. In Matthew 16, Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, has just told his disciples that suffering and death are at the other end of that road and that “he must go.” The Lord went on to say, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25).

*This calling—this radical, death-and-life demand—has already been given to every believer. This stunning, cross-shaped call is better than a lightning bolt and more enduring than feelings or fleeces. Christ’s followers are, in fact, to follow him. They are to fully identify with him, fully embrace him, fully follow Him—whatever that will cost and wherever that will lead. Unlike the disciples who first heard this call when crosses were not ornamental, by grace we receive this call on the other side of Golgotha and the empty tomb! He is risen. He is with us. Always.*

This is why the “missionary call” that I most hear described by those who have served Christ for years in hard, distant places is a settled, life-changing conviction that Jesus is alive and present—an all-important realization that they share with Paul on the Damascus Road. And because of that, whether they are serving in Afghanistan or China or North Africa, what I have heard repeatedly is, “Coming here was just the next step for me in following Jesus.” Though they have felt the bruising weight of the cross, they have caught a glimpse of Jesus and are hastening after him.

I think Hudson Taylor’s missionary calling is typical. You would think that Taylor, the pioneer missionary who opened up the interior of China for the gospel and mobilized thousands to eventually follow his footstep, would have a dramatic encounter with God. Well, actually he did—but without lights and voices. After his conversion at 17, Taylor poured himself into his church’s outreach and, according to one biographer, he “soaked up Scripture until he thought in its language.”<sup>2</sup> Later, Taylor described a day when alone in prayer, he met with God:

In the gladness of my heart I poured out my soul before God, and again confessing my grateful love to Him who had done everything for me . . . I besought Him to give me some work for Him, as an outlet for love and gratitude; some self-denying service, no matter what it might be, however trying or however trivial. . . . The presence of God became unutterably real and blessed, and . . . I remember stretching myself on the ground, and lying there silent before Him with unspeakable awe and unspeakable joy. For what service I was accepted I knew not. But a deep consciousness that I was not my own took possession of me.<sup>3</sup>

Hudson Taylor's missionary calling was the joyful overflow of the Gospel. It was his Damascus Road encounter with Christ, who said, "Follow me." And he did. The missionary calling is not about us going so much as it is about us following in the bright wake of our risen King.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. Sills, M. David. The Missionary Call, Moody Publishers, 2008, p. 55.
2. Broomhall, A. J. The Shaping of Modern China: Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy, Volume 1, Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 2005, p. 156.
3. Broomhall, A. J. The Shaping of Modern China: Hudson Taylor's Life and Legacy, Volume 1, Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 2005, p. 157.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Tim Keesee is the founder and executive director of Frontline Missions International, which for the past 20 years has served to advance the gospel in some of the world's most difficult places.

By Ken Caruthers

# Is Every Christian A Missionary?

**I**s every Christian a missionary?

It turns out this is not an easy question to answer—it's kind of a loaded question whose answer really depends on how you use the term "missionary."

Some people use the term conventionally and by "missionary" they mean those who answer the call of God and go to foreign lands to advance the gospel. In this view, everyone is not a missionary, but only those who leave home. We need to be careful to emphasize everyone's involvement in advancing the gospel. If those in this group somehow begin using the term in such a way that God's own "mission" in the world is only for those who go far, far away and those who stay home are somehow failing to advance the gospel where they are, then the church will be harmed and Christians will be in danger of holding a Christianity that is disconnected from God's purposes in the world.

More recently, some use the term "missionary" to mean anyone who enters into God's mission to save his people in the world. In this view, every Christian is a missionary and missionary activity is what all Christians following Jesus do as they go about their lives. We also need to be careful here to have a category for those whom God has scattered to live and evangelize in far off places. If those who use the word "missionary" more broadly fail to do so, then the church will be harmed and Christians will be in danger of overlooking those Christians whom God has gifted to help lead the church in advancing the gospel.

In the Bible, some of God's people were especially called out to advance the gospel in new areas. A Christian like this should lead all of God's people as they advance the gospel—much like the one gifted with service should lead all Christians as they serve.

## MOVING FORWARD

Some say, "Yes, everyone is a missionary," while others say, "No, everyone is not a missionary." But the term "missionary" is an extra-biblical term that has been coined to help label biblical concepts. So, let's examine the biblical concepts because our obedience to those are most important.

God the Father has saved his people, the church, from among all the peoples of the world. All of us as believers have heard the gospel and were raised to life by the pouring out of the love of God into our hearts. We then received the Holy Spirit and were simultaneously incorporated into the fellowship of the

Spirit. By virtue of this incorporation, we have been uniquely prepared to fellowship not just with God but with one another.

So, whenever Christians live together in fellowship, we constitute local churches that display the gospel through our lives and worship. The church is Christ's Body, uniquely prepared by God in Christ and equipped with the power of God's indwelling Spirit for acts of service toward one another and our neighbors, both here and abroad.

Christ's Body—the church—works. Churches are outposts of the coming Kingdom of God. Until that Kingdom fully comes, God wants the church to express submission to the reign of King Jesus in all peace while laboring to advance his rule throughout all creation. The book of Acts shows that God's continued activity in the world is for this purpose. God wants his people to worship him in purity, unstained by the world, to live with one another in love, and to proclaim his gospel everywhere.

And God has not left us alone to accomplish this task. Through the Spirit, he has equipped us to do what he wants, and through the Spirit's indwelling he transforms us slowly, gloriously into the image of Christ. What's more, this Spirit has gifted to the church servants who help his people know where and how to act. He has also given to each of us spiritual gifts so that we would find our "fit" in this comprehensive work.

## **GOD'S "MISSION"**

God has done all of this, and he continues doing all of this, so that his greatness will fill the earth. He will not rest until he has saved a people for his great name, a people from every tribe and tongue and nation. We call this God's "mission" in the world, the work he's determined to accomplish.

This mission is ultimately God's, even as it's designed to be worked out in and through God's church. Everyone who follows Jesus as Lord is commanded to make disciples of Jesus. To be sure, our opportunities of service will vary. We all have our apportioned times and places vocations that are to be stewarded within the context of specific "stations" of our lives (e. g., family, singleness, church membership, citizenship, etc.).

Though our specific situations may vary, the calling to be a disciple never does: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luk 9:23). After Jesus was raised from the dead, he charged his followers to join his mission by proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God across land and sea to every people group on the earth. Every barrier that exists between humans is overcome in Christ; thus the gospel of Jesus destroys barriers of class, ethnicity, gender, religion, geopolitics, language, shame, and fear so that humans can be fully reconciled to God and to one another.

Regardless of the labels we use, let's all determine afresh that we will follow our Lord and Savior to do our part in God's mission. As we obey him, we will all cross barriers of some kind with the gospel. God will uproot some of us from where we are so that we can obey him by carrying the barrier-crossing gospel to where it is currently unknown. In conventional usage, though those who stay and those who go are both obedient in advancing the gospel, only the latter have been called "missionaries." But both are necessary. Think about it: if the redemption accomplished by Jesus is so radically great that its

effects are to authoritatively blow down the barriers to every nation of the world, then I should also certainly cross the street to share the gospel with the family in my neighborhood that is hard for me to love.

## CONCLUSION

“Missionary” is simply an extra-biblical term that has linguistic roots in the idea of “being sent.” It has been coined to help label biblical concepts. The church must preserve and teach these biblical concepts.

Whether that concept is the conventional idea of crossing cultural and linguistic barriers in order to make disciples of all people or the missional idea of all Christians making disciples wherever they are, we should not use labels in such a way that either of these biblical concepts disappear.

Instead, let’s follow Jesus faithfully and obediently. Let’s follow him in our homes, across our streets *and* to the poorest and most overlooked in our cities, to the most unreached and most difficult places in the uttermost parts of the earth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

More than a decade ago, Ken and his family moved to Turkey where they served on a church planting team to Muslims. Since that time he has served in various leadership roles while continuing to multiply disciples among Turkish Muslims. Currently, he lives in Virginia with hopes to return overseas.



With Sebastian Traeger & 9Marks

# One-on-One with the International Mission Board's Executive Vice President

**A**m I right in saying the International Missions Board (IMB) is the biggest missions organization in the world?

While I can't definitively say whether the IMB is the largest missions sending agency in the world, it's certainly safe to say we are among the largest. Our size and experience gives us the opportunity to influence and serve churches and other missions agencies.

**The way you fund people for overseas missions, therefore, has lessons for everyone. And you have made a number of announcements lately that you guys are going to change the way you do things. Can you describe for a non-IMB audience some of the measures you have recently announced? Help the person who has not been tuned into this story to get caught up.**

In short, while the IMB has an unbelievably generous support base through the partnership of Southern Baptists across the country through the Cooperative Program and the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, we have been spending more than we bring in through those ways, and we were faced with the reality that we must reduce the number of our personnel for the sake of short-term financial responsibility and long-term organizational stability. So, in September, we announced a Voluntary Retirement Incentive in an effort to reduce our total number of personnel. In November, we announced that, based on projections, we would reach the stated goal of at least 600 people accepting the Voluntary Retirement Incentive.

All of the talk of reducing personnel has left many to wonder if we ever intend to grow the number of missionaries we send. The answer to that question is a prayerful and emphatic "Yes!" The

announcements you reference in your question relate to our desire to grow the number of pathways we send missionaries through. We want to keep doing what we've been doing for 170 years—sending full-time church planters to unreached people and places. In fact, it's our prayer that we can grow the number of full-time church planters we send. In addition, we want to create as many pathways—think 'possibilities'—as possible for Southern Baptists to serve on cross-cultural church planting teams. If we are going to enable doctors, teachers, accountants, salespeople, fitness instructors, students, and retirees to go, we recognize this necessitates we consider how to open up the pipeline for more and different types of people to join in the task.

**I assume that you had both circumstantial and philosophical reasons for making these announcements. Is that correct? What were they ?**

Yes, that is correct.

Circumstantially, the financial picture I laid out is certainly a part of the reason. Another circumstantial reason is the rapidly changing global marketplace we live in. We have historically unprecedented access to the nations through the global marketplace. There are likely thousands of Southern Baptists living and working around the globe. Many are equipped and eager to take part in cross-cultural church planting if there is a way for them to be involved. Many others are willing to look for work globally if given the opportunity. These marketplace circumstances are leading us to explore ways to see how God may use these marketplace Christians.

Philosophically, we believe the task of global missions is given to every follower of Christ. We certainly affirm that God sets apart some to uniquely lead efforts in cross-cultural church planting, and we have no plans or desires to shift our focus away from training and sending those types of people. However, we see many others who do not have a clear way to be involved in a task they biblically desire to be involved in. Therefore, the question of how best to involve all Christians in the global missions task is one worth our time, energy and resources

In light of these and many other reasons, we have recently announced a pilot project we are working on called the Global Cities Initiative (GCI). In addition to our ongoing missions work all over the globe, we are focusing on 5 megacities in an attempt to answer two questions: 1) Can we successfully integrate students, professionals and retirees into cross-cultural missions teams? 2) Can we have comprehensive city strategies to account for various people groups represented within a complex megacity? Right now, we have men serving in each of the five cities as "City Leaders." These men are working to lay the relational and strategic foundation for the teams that will be forming in the days ahead. In addition, we also have a number of students, professionals and retirees in the US exploring what it would look like to join these teams, and we have 'city guides' for each city to help people consider options for them—all of which you can learn more about at [imb.org/cities](http://imb.org/cities).

**What is your own role at the IMB?**

My title is the Executive Vice President. Essentially, this means that I work closely with our president, David Platt, and other key leaders at the IMB. David casts vision and I lead our efforts in translating that to strategy and implementation. Additionally, much of my time is spent on the health of the organization—from our Support Services to our Training to our Mobilization and to our Global

Engagement. I am constantly asking, “How can we best steward the people and resources the Lord has entrusted to us for the sake of His global glory?”

**One of the key distinctives of the IMB is its reliance on the Cooperative Program for funding missionaries. The Cooperative Program has allowed missionaries to be missionaries instead of being fundraisers, because the IMB fully funds them. With the different pathways you are discussing, I assume that means funding may change as well. Is it fair to assume that IMB missionaries in the future will need to go from church to church to raise money?**

No, it does not mean that. The Cooperative Program is an unbelievable blessing to the IMB and all Southern Baptists. We encourage more churches to give more dollars to the Cooperative Program! When you step back and look at the SBC ecosystem, it is truly breathtaking. We praise God for the cooperative efforts of Southern Baptist churches and count it a privilege to partner together for the sake of gospel advance. So, to be clear, we are not making any changes to how our current missions force is supported.

As I’ve stated, we are exploring additional pathways to expand the number of people who can join missionary teams, and, we’re expecting that some of these people will be funded by the companies they’re working for!

One thing to note is that while the bulk of our missionaries are funded through the IMB directly, we do have a number of churches participating in sending missionaries directly through an IMB program called GC2. These churches fund the missionary themselves and continue to actively support the Cooperative Program and the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. The bottom line is that we want to send many more with the good news of Christ and will continue to pray about and evaluate how best to do so.

**It sounds like sending churches will have a larger role to play. Can you elaborate on that?**

The task of missions belongs to the church. The IMB exists to equip and support churches as they send missionaries. We do not want to replace the church in sending missionaries - but be partners in the truest sense of that word. I could give a variety of examples of how we are seeking to strengthen our partnerships with churches, but let me give one to start.

Our training team, under the leadership of Zane Pratt, is developing a 6-month Discipleship Course. This course will be a prerequisite for any future IMB missionary. The prospective missionary will be required to walk through this discipleship course with a church leader from their sending church. It is through initiatives like this that we hope to serve and equip our partner churches as we come alongside them in the process of sending members of their churches to the nations.

**What criticisms have you received for this new strategy?**

The single biggest criticism is that many simply think it won’t work to incorporate those who do not have deep language and culture skills. “If these mobilized Christians are working jobs or taking classes full-time, how can they ever meaningfully be involved in cross-cultural church planting?”

On some level, this is a question all Christians in all cultures face. We are all called to meaningfully engage the lost in the midst of the other assignments that God gives us (e.g. our jobs, families, civic duties, etc.). While we recognize there are significant challenges represented by learning new cultures, it



is our hope that kingdom-minded professionals who are intentionally pursuing vocation in cross-cultural contexts and being integrated into IMB missions teams will see fruit as they are intentional in sharing Christ with those they come in contact with.

And so the Global Cities Initiative is a pilot in which we are working even now to integrate a small number of students, professionals and retirees into missionary teams so we can prayerful and actively see how fruitful this approach is.

We have announced a plan to pilot this integration of mobilized Christians in our strategy in 5 global cities. The project is called the Global Cities Initiative. It is our hope to see a small number of Christians mobilized to these cities under the peer leadership of some of our current, fully-funded missionaries. Once in place, we are praying that God will answer the above question and many others we have so that we can see healthy churches planted and reproduced throughout hundreds of similar cities across the world.

**What risks do you see in your new strategy?**

The biggest risk is distraction. That's not the biggest risk for the sake of the IMB's reputation or David Platt's reputation or my reputation. That's the biggest risk because the stakes are so high. At last count, there are over 6,700 people groups in the world with little or no access to the saving name of Jesus. The risk of distraction is that even more will die without the good news of life in Christ. This is what is driving us to pursue new means of sending—our hearts break to know that billions around the world have still not heard the good news of the gospel.

**Are there any decisions yet to be made about the IMB's strategy in years to come? In other words, should we expect more announcements, and, if so, about what?**

We don't have any big announcements up our sleeves that we're hiding - so no plans for a big announcement. But we absolutely want to communicate well and keep churches updated consistently and frequently on what the IMB is doing. To that end, David already led one virtual live-stream that was open to anyone in the SBC to learn more about IMB, ask questions and learn how they can partner to take the gospel to the nations and we plan to provide more forums like that in the days ahead.

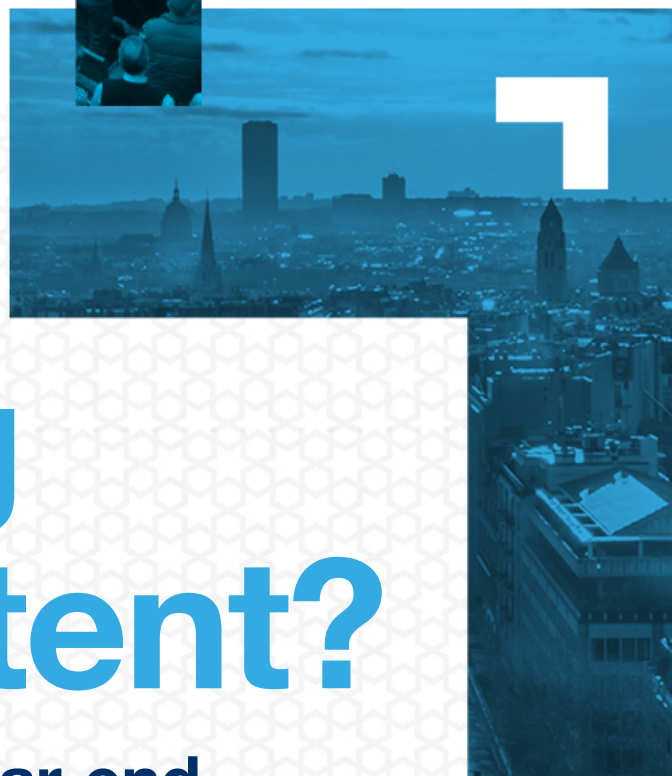
**If everything goes as you hope, what will we see looking at the IMB five years from now?**

My prayer is that we will see a dramatically enlarged and engaged missions force comprised of teams made of church planters as well as students, professionals, and retirees. It is also my prayer that we will have increased partnerships with local churches—partnerships that equip churches to lead people to see God's heart for the nations. We also are praying that local churches would own global mission, and that internationalization efforts would grow where national believers and churches are themselves taking ownership of the mission in their own cultures. May God grant an enlarged mission force that will take the gospel to global cities, extreme places, and everywhere in between for the glory of God among all peoples.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Sebastian Traeger is the Executive Vice President for the International Mission Board.

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# A Collection of Book Reviews on the Church in China

Reviewed by Eric Beach

**B**y all accounts, the church in China grew exponentially from 1950 to today. With this expansion, a cornucopia of books emerged chronicling the Chinese church. Below we discuss a number of the most popular books on the topic to help those interested in learning more know where to begin. A very brief description and review will be offered for each book.

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## ***JESUS IN BEIJING* BY DAVID AIKMAN (REGENCY PUBLISHING, 2006)**

Aikman discusses the history of Christianity in China starting from its beginning in the 600s to the present, with particular focus on the period from 1949 onward. The book is based in part on the author's interviews with many major figures such as Wang Mingdao and Samuel Lamb. The author pays considerable attention to the so-called house church movement, though other groups in China do receive some treatment. Aikman's writing belies a sympathy to the unregistered congregations in China.

While the book is close to 400 pages, the author writes in a storytelling format that is interspersed with vignettes from the author's extensive personal experience in China as a reporter for *Time* magazine. This style makes the book exceptionally easy to read. The author assumes no prior knowledge of the topic yet manages to provide detailed discussions of the theology of both the major house church leaders and the government church leaders.

*Jesus in Beijing* is an excellent book for those interested in an accessible, lively, and yet thorough history of the church in China from 1949 onward.

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## ***A NEW HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA* BY DANIEL H. BAYS (WILEY-BLACKWELL, 2012)**

*A New History* is the foremost brief academic history of Christianity in China available today. Unlike a number of other similar works, Bays' book gives roughly equal treatment to the entire span of history.

The copious endnotes are invaluable for those who want to either learn more about a topic or find the source of a particular claim. Bays does not discuss the recent developments in either the Catholic church or the underground church as much as some other authors do, but both Western Protestant missionaries and 20th century indigenous Chinese church leaders receive extensive discussion. The author is sympathetic to Christianity but is appropriately critical of some parts of the historic Western missionary establishment.

*A New History* is dry reading compared to other books such as *Jesus in Beijing*, but Bays' work provides an excellent jumping-off point. Anyone interested in a broad, well-researched, brief, yet academic treatment of Christianity by a first-rate scholar who is sympathetic but still critical needs to read this book.

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## **CHINA'S REFORMING CHURCHES, EDITED BY BRUCE BAUGUS (REFORMATION HERITAGE BOOKS, 2014)**

*China's Reforming Churches* is part history and part ecclesiology with some sociology and theology interspersed. The book stems from a conference held in the United States to discuss the church in China. The chapters are contributions from a variety of individuals including Chinese house church leaders, historians, and American theologians. The goal of the book is developing churches in China that teach Presbyterian theology and polity. As such, the contributors write from an explicitly Presbyterian perspective. The book contains some unique material such as a detailed discussion of Christian publishing and Reformed education in China today.

*China's Reforming Churches* excels in its unique contributions and its focus on fostering healthy churches. The book addresses the city context extensively, meaning those pastoring in rural areas or those working with rural pastors may find some of the discussions less relevant. In addition, the picture painted in chapter 7 about the level of resistance unregistered churches face is markedly different than that of other books such as *Jesus in Beijing* (see chapter 17 and Appendix E of *Jesus in Beijing* for comparison). Nonetheless, Christians, both in the West and in China, who care about the further development of reformed and especially of Presbyterian churches in China, will find much useful material in *China's Reforming Churches*.

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## **GOD IS RED: THE SECRET STORY OF HOW CHRISTIANITY SURVIVED AND FLOURISHED IN COMMUNIST CHINA BY LIAO YIWU TRANSLATED BY WENGUANG HUANG (HARPERONE, 2011)**

*God is Red* is a collection of roughly 15 interviews conducted with Christians about life under the fierce persecution of Mao Zedong's government. The author pays particular attention to Christianity in the Yunnan province of China, though some chapters touch on events in other parts of the country. In general, each chapter opens with a brief background about the person Liao Yiwu is interviewing. The rest of the chapter is the transcript of the interview. Although Yiwu is a "nonbeliever" (xiii), he is

sympathetic towards Christianity and intrigued by both its growth and the lives of its adherents. While Liao Yiwu originally wrote the book in Chinese, the version reviewed here is a translation by Wenguang Huang.

The biggest strength of *God is Red* is its gripping, informative, and personal accounts of Christians living under Mao. Many chapters of the book are exceedingly difficult to put down as the stories are harrowing yet instructive. Further, the interviews highlight an evangelistic zeal among Chinese Christians that should be a model for the West. Finally, it is encouraging to hear repeatedly how elderly Christians in rural China see a number of Western missionaries from a century back as positive instruments of God's work in China. *God is Red* would be an excellent read for anyone who wants a personal understanding of life as a Christian under Mao.

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### **REDEEMED BY FIRE BY LIAN XI (YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2010)**

*Redeemed by Fire* provides a very detailed description of the indigenous Chinese church from about 1900-1950. While Xi discusses other time periods, he primarily focuses on native religious movements and their leaders. Xi provides extensive treatment of the True Jesus Church, Jesus Family, John Song, Watchman Nee, Wang Mingdao, and others. The writing is academic and dry compared to some other books on the same topics, but the documentation is exceptionally copious and the level of detail paid to a few movements such as the True Jesus Church, Jesus Family, and Little Flock makes Xi's discussions of those topics a valuable contribution.

While Xi discusses indigenous Chinese Christianity during the first part of the twentieth century in great detail, he does not provide the same level of depth in discussing the major house church movements and their leaders during the end of the twentieth century. There is no substantive discussion of documents such as the 1998 Confession of Faith or the 1998 United Appeal. Further, both Catholics and historically Reformed indigenous Chinese receive minimal treatment. Unfortunately, Xi's historical theology is inaccurate at times. For example, he incorrectly refers to Hong Xiuquan as developing "a Chinese form of Protestantism" (24) when in fact Hong's teachings contravened historic Protestantism on many essential points such as the Trinity and the doctrine of Scripture (see page 299 of Moffett's work below for details). Nonetheless, *Redeemed by Fire* is an excellent book for those wanting a very thoroughly researched and well written academic discussion of indigenous Christian movements from 1900-1950.

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### **THE POWER TO SAVE: A HISTORY OF THE GOSPEL IN CHINA BY BOB DAVEY (EP BOOKS, 2011)**

*The Power to Save* chronicles the history of Christianity in China from the 600s to the present day, paying roughly equal attention to each time period. Davey manages to provide reasonable detail on a large number of figures in Chinese church history without getting into too many specifics for a broad overview book. Davey, by his own admission and design, writes from an explicitly Protestant viewpoint and this is evident throughout the book. Consequently, the author does not address the Catholic

communion at any length. Davey is quite sympathetic to Western missionaries and Chinese Christians. At times, this causes the book to border on hagiography.

*The Power to Save* is an easy and quick read. The author does not assume any prior knowledge of China or its history with Christianity. The lack of endnotes coupled with the fact that the book makes many claims that would not be common knowledge makes investigating interesting points further or checking the grounds of specific assertions nearly impossible. Nonetheless, *The Power to Save* is a worthwhile read for those who want a very accessible history of Protestantism in China that is written from an explicitly evangelical standpoint and covers the entire relevant history without focusing on any particular period to the exclusion of others.

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## **A HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN ASIA (VOLUME II) BY SAMUEL HUGH MOFFETT (ORBIS BOOKS, 2005)**

*A History of Christianity in Asia*, written by the late renowned scholar of Christianity in the East, Samuel Hugh Moffett, seeks to tell the story of Christianity in Asia from 1500 to 1900. As such, the book covers not only China, but also India, Korea, Japan, and more. The book contains three chapters specifically devoted to China: (1) Catholic missions in China 1500s-1800, which is the most thorough treatment of Catholics during this time available of any book on this list. (2) Protestants in China (1807-1860), which discusses Robert Morrison's arrival, the Opium Wars, the Taiping Rebellion and more. (3) Western Missions and China's Christians (1860-1900), which outlines Hudson Taylor's work, the Boxer Rebellion, and more.

Given the wide range of topics Moffett discusses in such a short period of time, he manages to provide a lot of detail. The research is probably the most detailed of all the books here. For example, the 40-page section on 1860-1900 contains 162 endnotes. Nonetheless, by nature of covering such a broad geographic region, the author cannot cover a specific period in depth in the same way that *Redeemed By Fire* covers the first half of the 20th century. *A History of Christianity in Asia* would be a great book for someone interested in a scholarly yet readable summary of Protestant and Catholic activity in Asia from 1500-1900.

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## **A STAR IN THE EAST BY RODNEY STARK AND XIUHA WANG (TEMPLETON PRESS, 2015)**

*A Star in the East* devotes considerable space to sociological analysis of Christianity in China and two surveys concerning Chinese Christianity, both its size and its characteristics. The authors examine various theories of sociology that attempt to explain in secular terms the explosion in the number of Christians in China. The authors argue that the best explanation for this rapid growth is a theory of conversion through social influence as well as cultural incongruity that leads to spiritual deprivation followed by conversion. Based upon surveys, Stark and Wang argue that people converting to Christianity in China are disproportionately wealthy, despite stereotypes to the contrary.



*A Star in the East* provides the most rigorous answer to the question “how many Christians are there in China?” Nonetheless, it is not really a history of Christianity in China but it would be useful for those looking for a sociological analysis of the growth of Christianity in China and its current traits.

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## **ROBERT MORRISON AND THE BIRTH OF CHINESE PROTESTANTISM BY CHRISTOPHER HANCOCK (T&T CLARK, 2008)**

*Robert Morrison and the Birth of Chinese Protestantism* is a detailed biography of the life and ministry of the first Protestant missionary to China, Robert Morrison. Hancock’s work aims to provide an up-close account of Morrison based upon an incredibly thorough reading of Morrison’s papers and those of acquaintances. The book is littered with hundreds of quotations from original sources coupled with scholarly analysis by Hancock. While the author is sympathetic to Morrison’s cause, this book is no hagiography. The reader sees Morrison’s struggles and warts up close.

Hancock’s work excels at providing readers a vivid picture of what life looked like as a pioneering missionary. The reader is brought face to face with the immense cultural, physical, geopolitical, and linguistic challenges Morrison faced. Consequently, this book would be an informative read for anyone who wants to understand what life looked like as a pioneering missionary in the early 1800s.



## BOOK REVIEW:

# *The 3-D Gospel*

Reviewed by Jeremy Yong

Jason Georges, *The 3-D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Culture*. 3D Gospel, 2014, 82 pages. \$8.99.

I am a pastor who grew up in an honor-shame culture, so the title *3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame and Fear Cultures* peaked my interest.

The author Jason Georges (M. Div., Talbot) spent nine years in Central Asia. Currently, Georges works among refugees in Atlanta, so he brings quite a bit of experience to the table for this cultural/theological/missiological project of *3D Gospel*.

## SUMMARY

*3D Gospel* seeks to teach primarily Western Christians how to contextualize the gospel, so that it is great news to all cultures (56). The problem is that Western Christians have “unintentionally put God in a box” by sharing a gospel that “emphasizes one aspect of salvation (i.e. the forgiveness of sins)” (13). Western Christians have “only [allowed] him to save in one area” (13), and have “[neglected] . . . other



facets of the gospel” (13). But “the gospel is a many-sided diamond, and God wants people in all cultures to experience his complete salvation” (13). So, “a more complete understanding of salvation” is needed (12).

## STRUCTURE

Georges wants to expose blind spots in Western Christianity while simultaneously helping readers examine the other, under-considered facets of the gospel. He writes about three basic “responses to sin found in human cultures: guilt, shame, and fear” (10). From these responses come three basic worldviews of the Majority World cultures.

- the guilt-innocence worldview (mostly Western; individualistic societies);
- the shame-honor worldview (mostly in the East; collectivistic mindset);
- the fear-power worldview (typically tribal or African; referring to animistic cultures) (10-11).

Georges seeks to recover a 3D gospel, which addresses not only the needs of those from the guilt-innocence culture, but shame-honor and fear-power cultures as well.

In chapter 1, “Seeing New Realities,” Georges’ states the need for a 3D gospel by explaining the three foundational types of culture in Majority World contexts. Chapter 2, “Culture,” offers a sociological/cultural explanation of these three culture types, which includes both their distinctives and how each culture came to be. Chapter 3, “Theology,” shows how “the guilt-shame-fear” trichotomy . . . serves as a framework for interpreting Scripture and contextualizing theology” (35). Chapter 4, “Ministry,” offers practical application on communicating the gospel in a way each type of culture finds “most plausible” (58). Lastly, chapter 5 offers a summary.

## STRENGTHS

I was originally concerned that Georges would say certain cultures are *only* guilt/shame/fear driven. But Georges acknowledges, “Although guilt, shame, and fear are three distinct cultural outlooks, no culture can be completely characterized by only one” (15). This made me anticipate learning more about the 3D gospel and how to appreciate it, no matter the culture background.

Also worthy of commendation is Georges’ desire to increase his readers’ awareness. “Despite the prominence of shame-honor and fear-power dynamics in global cultures,” Georges seeks to expose “conspicuous blind spots in most Christian theology” (13). *3D Gospel* helps Western Christians understand Majority World cultures while at the same time encouraging pastors and church leaders to check their ministries for any evidence of unstated ethnocentrism.

## WEAKNESSES

But there are a number of significant weaknesses as well.

First to be addressed is Georges’ methodology, which seems to work against the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. By all indications, Georges believes that culture essentially determines the

content of the gospel, or at least what people are capable of understanding about the gospel (60). The very structure of the book is indicative of his methodology: cultural observations yield theological conclusions, which then determines practice.

But letting culture determine our understanding of the gospel is not the correct way forward. Instead, what God has revealed in his sufficient and authoritative Word ought to determine the content of the gospel and the church's missiological practices. God's Word is useful for life and godliness in evangelism, and provides the doctrine that makes up the evangel (1 Tim 3:16; 1 Cor 15:3-4). The inevitable fall-out of letting culture determine the content of the gospel is that the Christian will eventually work to undermine it.

Second, Georges trifurcates the three types of culture too finely, even though he admits that every culture is characterized by all three. Based on Gulzal's story, and his statement affirming the presence of the types of culture in every people, readers expect Georges to argue that the 3D gospel, *in its entirety*, is for every type of culture, and then perhaps offer a gospel presentation weaving all three aspects of guilt, shame, and fear together, presenting their logical connections. But he does not. Instead he offers one individual facet of the 3D gospel for one individual type of culture.

This trifurcation is seen in the missiological implications found in chapter 4. Hoping Majority World cultures will engage the gospel "through meaningful forms" (56), Georges exhorts Christians to present the gospel in categories "most plausible" to the hearer (58). Thinking that "a 3D gospel affects both the content of the gospel and the means of Christian witness," Georges marshals scriptural examples of contextualizing the gospel to the culture. The problem is that Georges relies on proof texts, which is to say, texts pulled out of their canonical context and treated separately from Scripture's larger storyline. This allows him to make each text refract his sociological assumptions.

Georges first offers an example of a "truth encounter," which he says aligns with a Western, guilt-innocence culture. Using Acts 13:13-42, Paul is said to proclaim forgiveness of sins, which to Georges is guilt-innocence culture language. As "a legal advocate," Paul "verbally explains and defends the truthfulness of the gospel" (61). This is a propositional truth encounter (61), which appeals to rationality and reason.

For the "power encounter," Georges cites Acts 13:4-12, where Paul is said to be ministering to a fear-power community. A proconsul encounters the power of God, as he witnesses God blind a magician's eyes. Georges explains, "In the power encounter approach, missions is a spiritual battle . . . the church rescues people from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of Jesus" (63). Col 1:13 is cited to further explain and depict the battle between good and evil in Acts 13:4-12.

But notice that Georges divides what the Bible keeps together. First, missions is never *just* a spiritual or rational battle, as the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4); therefore, a "truth encounter" is necessarily a "power encounter." Second, Georges misses the fact that the contexts of Acts 13:4-12 and Col 1:13 demand more than one "encounter." When the proconsul believes, he had not only witnessed the power of God *but had also already been taught the truth by Paul*. In Col 1:13-14 too, more than one "encounter" is demanded. Fear-power culture is seen in that God delivers us from darkness into his Son's kingdom (Col 1:13), but the guilt-innocence categories immediately follow: God delivers us from darkness into his Son's kingdom *in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins* (Col 1:14).

The “community encounter” is where Georges creatively cites the Philippian jailer’s conversion as a shame-honor encounter (Acts 16). He explains, “The conversation process of shame-honor people generally starts with community . . . whereas truth encounter begins by evangelizing individuals into the church” (67). He then claims that this is what happened to the Philippian jailer. He encountered Christian community when Paul yelled out, “We are here!” (67). In this example Georges pushes a shame-honor agenda to its fullest when the situation does not demand it. He does not explain why this incidence is *not* a power encounter even though a miracle shook the prison foundation, flinging the prison doors open. He also does not explain why this is not a truth encounter even though Paul “[speaks] the word of the Lord” (Acts 16:32), and calls hearers to believe in it (Acts 16:31).

Georges rightly affirms that the gospel provides an answer to guilt, shame, and fear. But he effectively separates these things, as if each could be treated separately without regard for the other two. And in so doing he perpetuates the very errors he aims to correct. If Western Christians are guilty of “unintentionally [putting] God in a box,” then those who are converted through the methods Georges advocates will be disciplined to do the same. People from one type of culture will only lay hold to one facet of the gospel: those struggling with shame need the gospel’s answer to *that*; those struggling with fear need the gospel’s answer to *that*; and those struggling with guilt need the gospel’s answer to *that*.

Regrettably, dividing the gospel like this, where one individual facet goes to one individual type of culture, risks undermining the gospel in its entirety.

Take, for example, sin and how Georges might treat it in all three settings.. In a “guilt-innocence” gospel presentation, sin plays a central role. Man is treated as rebellious, and his sins need to be forgiven. Jesus offers a solution by bearing the penalty for sin on the cross. But presenting sin and the gospel this way, Georges might say, only reveals my Western Christianity.

Moving into a shame-honor culture might require a different gospel presentation. Sin is not said to be against God; sin is something done to ourselves or fellow man. Georges definitely mentions that man dishonored God, but this is not called sin. Nevermind Romans 1, where Paul writes that the ungodly and unrighteous “did not honor him as God or give thanks to him,” which leads to Paul’s conclusion, “For all have sinned” (Rom 3:23). Ultimately, sin is diminished in this version of the gospel, which diminishes Christ’s work as well.

How might Georges’ present the gospel in a fear-power culture? Again, he would not present sin as active rebellion against God. Instead, sin is something that merely “enslaves” passive man (43), and the fact that our sin is against God remains hidden. Yet how are people to seek forgiveness for sin when the concept of sin doesn’t happen to be plausible within their worldview? Again, the Apostle Paul thought otherwise. Writing to the Ephesian Christians—a culture Georges would categorize as a fear-power culture—he insists they possess redemption and the forgiveness of trespasses through Christ’s blood (Eph 1:7). Like I said, I’m afraid with the *3D Gospel*, the gospel ultimately gets lost.

What makes Georges so quick to separate the facets of his 3D gospel is that he sees guilt, shame, and fear as separate “moral emotions” (10). But *3D Gospel* would have been strengthened had Georges helped readers understand how guilt, shame, and fear are interrelated and mutually implicated. It would be worth asking questions like,

- How does guilt over transgressing the law of God create shame before God and others?

- How do guilt and shame for sin give rise to the fear of supernatural powers standing opposed to us?

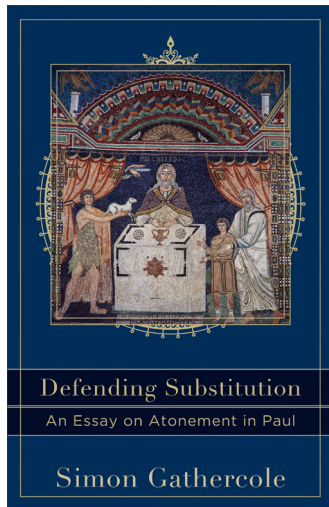
Keeping the guilt-shame-fear trichotomy together, and understanding the shape of each in relation to the others, would have strengthened Georges' case, making it more plausible to the worldview that aligns with Scripture's.

## CONCLUSION

On a certain level, I liked *3D Gospel*. It challenged and increased my awareness of Majority World cultures, which will assist me in ministering in such contexts. That said, I do not advocate Georges' methods—letting culture determine the content of the gospel—nor do I agree with his theological conclusions or missiological implications. I'm afraid the old gospel gets lost in his new gospel formulations. And even though the Bible uses the word gospel in different ways, there is gospel content that must be believed, content “of first importance,” content like “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:3-11).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Defending Substitution*

Reviewed by Sam Emadi

Simon Gathercole, *Defending Substitution: An Essay on Atonement in Paul*. Grand Rapids: Baker Zondervan, 2015, pp. 128.

**M**ost evangelicals understand the work of Christ along the lines of substitutionary atonement. Yet, much of New Testament scholarship has turned decidedly away from substitution as a feature of Paul's atonement theology—preferring instead to speak of Christ's work on the cross as representative. In *Defending Substitution*, Simon Gathercole, senior lecturer in New Testament at the University of Cambridge, lucidly demonstrates that substitution cannot be dismissed from Paul's atonement theology, even appearing prominently in Paul's own summary of matters that were of "first importance" in the gospel he preached (1 Cor 15).

## DEFINING SUBSTITUTION AND DESCRIBING THE OBJECTIONS

In the introduction, Gathercole asks "Why focus on substitution?" He argues that substitution is "vital to our understanding of what the New Testament says about the death of Christ" and is thus also vital for "the church and for biblical scholarship." Additionally, substitution has important pastoral implications such as providing the theological grounds necessary for our assurance of salvation (14).

Avoiding false dichotomies, Gathercole affirms representation as a biblical feature of the atonement while also showing that substitution also has a place in Paul's theology. Both of these elements, along with propitiation, punishment of sin, and expiation, ought to be held together "in a full-orbed understanding of the atonement" (18). As Gathercole explains, representation means that Christ identifies with his people on the cross and we, in some sense, participate in his death for us. In Paul's words "we have *died with Christ*" (Rom 6:8). Substitution, however, highlights the fact that Christ does something *for us* on the cross—he dies "in our place, instead of us" (15). Summarizing Luther, Gathercole describes substitution along these lines: "In a vital sense . . . when Christ was bearing our sins, that meant that we were not bearing our sins and do not have to do so" (17).

Gathercole also indicates in his introduction that his aim is not necessarily to defend *penal* substitution. In his words, "the matter of what precisely it was that Christ bore in our stead will not be treated here" (18). Indeed, Gathercole demonstrates that substitution does not necessarily entail the notion of a substitutionary punishment for another's sin. As he states, "Whether substitutionary atonement should be described *specifically* in terms of *penal* substitution needs to be argued exegetically rather than being seen merely as a logical corollary of substitution *per se*" (19).

The introduction concludes with brief responses to recent criticisms of the doctrine of substitution such as the claims that it is a legal fiction, philosophically objectionable, or incoherent since believers still die even though Christ should have already died *for* them. Gathercole responds to this final objection in an illuminating excursus (80–83) where he argues that Christ's death for us fundamentally changes the meaning of the death of a Christian. Whereas unbelievers "perish" when they die, those in Christ only "fall asleep" at the time of their passing (1 Cor 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; Eph 5:14; 1 Thess 4:13, 14, 15; 5:10). In light of Christ's death for us, Paul "very often speaks in . . . language that relativizes the event of physical death" (81).

Also not to be missed is Gathercole's short but compelling takedown of Steve Chalke's now infamous description of substitutionary atonement as a form of "cosmic child abuse." Gathercole notes that this criticism misses the fact that "the death of Christ is not that of a third party but is the 'self-substitution of God.' . . . Jesus offers himself as a sacrifice *in line with his own will*" (24–25).

In Chapter 1, Gathercole examines three schools of thought that have posed significant exegetical challenges to the doctrine of substitution. The Tübingen view, represented by Hartmut Gese and Otfried Hofius, posits that "atonement takes place not through *substitution* but through a special kind of identification" that reconciles sinners to God (31). The "Interchange in Christ" view, represented by Morna Hooker, suggests that the biblical evidence teaches "not that Jesus swaps places with his people in [his] death on the cross. Rather, he goes to the place where they are and takes them from there to salvation" (39). Finally, the "Apocalyptic Deliverance view," represented by J. Louis Martyn, focuses on how the atonement delivers us from sin as an enslaving power.

Pastors may not be as interested in Gathercole's description of these positions, but his careful evaluation of each position is instructive. Most interestingly, Gathercole notes that the fatal flaw shared by each of these positions is the fact that Christ died not just to save us from capital-s Sin (an enslaving or corrupting force), but he also died to save us from sins, that is, our individual transgressions against the law of God. In fact, this feature of the human predicament, our record of transgressions against God, is what substitution takes seriously—we do not merely need rescue from Sin, we need the removal of sins.

## THE EXEGETICAL EVIDENCE FOR SUBSTITUTION

In the rest of the book, Gathercole provides an exegetical defense of substitution from 1 Corinthians 15:3 (Chapter 2) and Romans 5:6–8 (Chapter 3). First Corinthians 15 is particularly important given that Paul summarizes the gospel according to matters of “first importance” and “according to the Scriptures.” He argues that the “Scripture” primarily influencing Paul’s gospel summary is Isaiah 53, “the only case of a human being who dies a vicarious death and thereby deals with the sins of others” (64). Gathercole’s exegesis compellingly defends the interpretation of the phrase “Christ died *for our sins*” as substitutionary. He explains that the expectation from the OT Scriptures is that men die for their own sins. But in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul stuns his readers with the fact that Christ died to deal with *our* sin; “The default Old Testament position would be ‘*he* died for *his* sins’ or ‘*we* died for *our* sins.’ The miracle of the gospel, however, is that *he* died for *our sins*” (73).

In chapter 3, Gathercole examines how Christ’s death parallels vicarious, noble death stories in classical literature as “good men” die for friends or family. In Romans 5, however, “the theme of vicarious death . . . is radically subverted by Paul” (105). In the cases from classical literature, heroic figures die for friends, family, and those with whom they already have a relationship. The shock of Romans 5 is that Christ dies for the ungodly, for sinners, and for the enemies of God. As Gathercole notes, Christ’s death “does not conform to any existing philosophical norm. In Romans 5, Christ’s death creates a friendship where there had been enmity” (106).

## A COMPELLING DEFENSE

*Defending Substitution* is a compelling, rich, and lucid presentation of substitution in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5. Some readers may express some disappointment that Gathercole did not provide an explicit defense of the penal character of Christ’s substitutionary work. However, this careful distinguishing between substitution and punishment demonstrates the need to defend both elements exegetically without assuming that one necessarily entails the other. I also wish Gathercole might have pointed his readers to what other places in Paul’s writings he thinks are particularly fecund for defending substitution—but these are minor quibbles. My hope is that this short essay will whet the appetite of pastors who may be unfamiliar with Gathercole’s work to pursue his other rich exegetical and theological treatments of [Christology](#) or the [New Perspective on Paul](#).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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