

Biblical Eldership and Global Missions
A Vital and Necessary Union

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How are the biblical qualifications of a pastor-elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) related to our divine responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20)? This question is absolutely vital and has a direct bearing on the degree of impact - or "fruit" - a missionary has on the field.

The kind of missionary a church sends out - whether qualified or unqualified - is ultimately rooted in the sending church's understanding of the nature of the church. In other words, how that church **does** church, how they plant churches, how they train faithful pastors and elders, how they worship, how they evaluate people for church membership, how they conduct church discipline, will inform and shape how that church does missions. There is a cause and effect relationship between a church's ecclesiology and its missiology; the former **will** impact the latter, even if the sending church does not recognize this principle. So, if a church desires to have an effective, Spirit-wrought impact in foreign lands, and if it desires to see God-glorifying indigenous churches planted abroad, then it behooves that church to begin by **first** understanding what it means to be a church. Good missiology is ultimately rooted in good ecclesiology. The two must never be divorced from each other. Building healthy churches abroad begins by learning how to build healthy churches at home. Flawed, dysfunctional churches at home will send out missionaries who will plant flawed churches abroad.

The means by which ecclesiology influences missiology is through modeling: we learn - for better or for worse - by hearing and seeing how a pastor plants a church based on their understanding of what it means to be a church. The New Testament is filled with examples of the Apostle Paul encouraging his pastors-in-training to be living illustrations of the Gospel to the local church. His thinking reflects good pedagogy that will be obvious to any effective teacher: people learn best by seeing concepts and ideas actually lived out in the lives of others. Listen to Paul's counsel: "In everything, set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us." (Titus

2:7-8. See also 1 Timothy 4:12-15; 2 Timothy 1:13 and 2:2) As the congregation follows the pastor's lead, the health and evangelistic witness of the church grows. In fact, this teacher / disciple dynamic is even more critical for missionaries because the foreign field may have little or no prior perception of what a healthy church looks like.

However, in my experience, the question of how ecclesiology relates to missiology - specifically, how biblical eldership relates to fulfilling the Great Commission - is not even on the radar of most American evangelical churches.¹ To be sure, there is much zeal and good intention, and a genuine desire to have a global impact for God's Kingdom, but very little understanding of the symbiotic nature of ecclesiology and missiology. Most churches are completely unaware of the consequences of failing to build a foundation of biblical ecclesiology. Let me illustrate with two examples - one from abroad and one from North America.

Asia - From 2006 to 2016, I served as a missionary in Asia (for security reasons I need to be vague here), and it was disturbing to discover missionaries who did not have the biblical qualifications to be there. For example, there were missionaries who did not know their Bible or taught doctrines contrary to the Bible - some even openly hostile to it (Titus 1:9), they did not have the ability to teach (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9); virtually no one had been tested in either of these areas (1 Timothy 3:10), most were recent converts to the faith (1 Timothy 3:6); some had significant character flaws (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7); some did not know the local language or have good cross cultural skills. After one to three years, they returned to their home countries permanently and took up secular work. My rough estimate is that about 50% of the missionaries in my neighborhood fit this description.

Unfortunately, so few sending churches saw this! Nor was this unique to my region. I saw these same heartbreaking phenomena in several countries in Asia. For many years I have wanted to charter an airplane and invite the missionary committee members of these sending churches to travel with me to Asia so they can see with their

¹ A partial explanation for this neglect is due to Christian publishing itself. If you look at the books published on biblical eldership over the past 30 to 40 years, there is almost no mention of the importance of missionaries being qualified as elders. The same is true for books on missions. This is a significant blind spot in Christian publishing.

own eyes the actual impact of their decision making. **Vast** amounts of time and money are squandered on missionaries who lack the biblical qualifications to be there. The rapid growth of short-term missions in recent years has only made the problem worse.² For some parachurch short-term mission organizations, it is no exaggeration to say that if you have a pulse, can pay your own way, and can recite a few biblical terms and phrases, then you qualify as a missionary.³

North America- Oftentimes the problems overseas can be traced back to a weak or unbiblical ecclesiology among the sending churches. For example, among North American churches, different areas of spiritual leadership in the church often have different sets of qualifications. The senior or associate pastor, generally speaking, must be ordained; must have the ability to teach or preach; must know their Bible; and must have godly character qualities. Each church and denomination applies these qualifications in different degrees, but usually the bar is set fairly high. For lay elders, the bar tends to be lower. More often than not, merely having godly character qualities is sufficient; a knowledge of the Scriptures and the ability to teach is helpful but not critical. If a lay elder can occasionally lead a prayer meeting, count the money collected on Sunday morning, and generally support the pastor's decision making, then he will most likely be approved as an elder. At the bottom is the missionary, who typically is the least qualified. They tend to be young, just out of college; they love to travel and experience new cultures; are filled with lots of zeal and enthusiasm, but generally lack the qualifications of spiritual leadership as described in the Bible.

Both of the above examples are rooted in the same error. They both stem from an unbiblical ecclesiology that views biblical eldership as wholly unrelated to how missions is done. This opens the door for individuals to step into leadership positions in the church even though they do not have a firm grasp of biblical truth, nor the ability to

² Short-term missions has seen extraordinary growth over the past 30 years. "From around 120,000 short-term missionaries in 1989, the movement grew to more than 2 million in 2006." Zane Pratt, M. David Sills, Jeff K. Waters, *Introduction to Global Missions* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 248.

³ I once saw a poster for recruiting new missionaries at a mission organization which had four photos of people from different occupational backgrounds - a doctor, a teacher, a fireman, and a policeman. They were trying to convey the idea that a missionary can be anyone from any background. Underneath these photos they stated their qualifications for prospective missionaries: "All it takes is a willing heart!"

effectively convey that truth through teaching and preaching. This is a pastoral theology that culminates in the formation of a church where the blind lead the blind. A missiology rooted in this particular ecclesiology sets itself up for failure and the consequences can be devastating

There are dozens of ways to expand upon this topic (which could easily be enlarged into a book), but to narrow our focus it will be helpful to zero in on the heart of the problem: how missionaries are selected and financed. It is here where a flawed ecclesiology impacts missiology the greatest.

The Selection of Missionaries - If biblical eldership requirements are excluded from the formation of a global mission strategy, then often the result is the perception that everyone qualifies. The sending churches are no doubt motivated by a desire to be obedient to the Great Commission, along with a desire to be good stewards of their financial resources. They may even be deeply moved by the willingness of others to sacrifice their comfort and safety to live in a hostile region of the world. But whatever the motivation may be, the perception that virtually everyone is qualified can lead to an overwhelming number of individuals applying to become missionaries. In fact, it is quite common for churches to have between 25 to 50 missionaries on their monthly payroll. My wife knows of one church in West Virginia that, until just a few months ago, supported 150 missionaries! (Yes, 150! That is not a typo. They recently cut back to 65 due to COVID-19 limitations.)

How Missionaries are Financed - With so many missionaries to support, the missionary budget is stretched so thin that the sending churches are only able to support their missionaries at a miniscule amount of their total need.⁴ Specific dollar amounts tend to be a *very* small percentage of a missionary's total need. It is almost unheard of for churches to support missionaries the way Paul encouraged Titus to "Do everything you can to help Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their way *and see that they*

⁴ "Both denominational and interdenominational missions have struggled with the problem arising from a missionary having thirty or more supporting churches, some of which are 'nickel and diming it.'" C. Gordon Olson, *What in the World is God Doing? The Essentials of Global Missions: An Introductory Guide*, (Cedar Knolls, NJ; Global Gospel Publishers, 5th edition in 2003), page 352.

have everything they need" (Titus 3:13). The reality is that it is quite common for financial support to range between \$25 and \$250 per month, and if the salary requirements range from \$4,000 to \$8,000 each month (obviously, depending on a whole range of factors), this then forces the missionary to seek financial support from dozens of churches - typically between 25 to 50 churches and individuals.

In the end, what is the result of this dysfunction? What "fruit" do we see? Rather than leading to a greater Kingdom impact, it leads to a chain reaction of additional problems:

- *The sending churches do not have a meaningful relationship with their missionaries.* How can a church - whether large or small - have a meaningful relationship with 25 to 50 missionaries? How can the elders of the church provide meaningful pastoral oversight to that many missionaries? The answer is that they can not. I know of one missionary who is supported by a church that has about 30 missionaries on their monthly payroll. Recently, he told me that this church contacted him for the first time in 20 years and asked him how he was doing.
- *The missionaries do not have a meaningful relationship with their sending churches.* How can a missionary focus on serving the church overseas, and at the same time, have a meaningful relationship with the 25 to 50 churches who support him? When they do return on furlough, they must spend several months traveling to visit the large number churches who support them. The end result is that most missionaries only see a small fraction of the church members from their supporting churches. When they do actually visit, it is only for a few days once every few years. Over time, that missionary becomes little more than a tack on a map on the missionary bulletin board in the church basement.
- *Churches set up an alternate set of qualifications to screen missionary candidates.* When there is not a clear relationship between ecclesiology and missiology, **churches then create an alternate set of extra-biblical**

qualifications as a way to pre-screen the flood of missionary candidates.

For example, they may require their missionaries to:

- be a member of their particular church⁵
- attend the sending church's annual missions conference once every two to three years
- produce a video describing their ministry on a periodic basis
- find ways for members from the sending church to actively participate alongside them on the field - regardless of whether they are qualified or not⁶
- submit a quarterly report to the supporting church - this report is in addition to the quarterly or bi-monthly 'prayer letter' missionaries typically send out
- provide monthly prayer requests to supporting churches—again, in addition to the standard prayer letter.

Some of these additional requirements may - *on the surface* - appear good. But here is the key concern: *multiply the above requests by the number of churches who support a particular missionary*. If a missionary has 25 to 50 supporting churches, these additional requirements quickly add up! Typically, most churches only see their own small requests and so think they are insignificant. They do not see the big picture. The reality is that missionaries are inundated with a whole range of these additional requirements as a condition of ongoing support. The trend that I have seen over the past 10 to 15 years is that these requests have only been increasing - which then creates an additional, even

⁵ Some limitations on supporting missionaries from other churches are certainly understandable - a Presbyterian church may not want to support a Baptist missionary. However, I am referring to churches unwilling to support a qualified missionary from another church even though they both share the same beliefs and practices.

⁶ Greg Jao, the vice president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship wrestled with this as he interacted with one of his supporting churches: "I had a church tell me, 'We love supporting you, but we're going to reduce your support because we can find no way to volunteer and actively serve alongside you. We want to have a deeper relationship with the people we are supporting.'" quoted in Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Are Evangelicals Donating Too Directly to Missions?" Christianity Today, accessed June 21, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/july-august/are-evangelicals-donating-too-directly-missions-gmi.html>

more serious problem: with these requirements increasing every year, it diverts the primary focus of the missionary from the foreign field to maintaining the relationship with the 25 to 50 supporting churches. Thoughts of Acts 6:1-4 come to mind here. The Apostles were well aware of the danger of their ministries being divided between other valid concerns (“waiting on tables”) and their God-given calling of prayer and teaching / preaching the Scriptures. They took steps to ensure that their ministry focus was not compromised. In our day, missionaries need to do the same. Their ministry focus can easily be diverted away from their God-given calling on the foreign field in order to satisfy the requests of 25 to 50 supporting churches.⁷

But the root of the problem, I believe, is that the sufficiency of Scripture is not understood or applied at this point. There is no need to create an alternate set of extra-biblical qualifications as a way to pre-screen the flood of missionary candidates when the Bible has clearly stated what the qualifications are.

- *The foreign field is filled with people who lack the biblical qualifications to serve as missionaries. Tragically, the result is little or no fruit.*⁸ One way to illustrate this point is to look at several examples in mission church history where the sending churches did not ensure that those who went out were qualified.

Perhaps the most stirring example is the history of Christian missions to China - particularly from 1807 to 1949. During the early years, the sending churches tended to screen missionary candidates with far more care, and, subsequently, sent out a number of exceptional missionaries such as Robert Morrison, William Chalmers Burns, and Hudson Taylor. But as time went on the emphasis shifted

⁷ This raises still another question. Who is serving who? Is the sending church supporting the missionary or is the missionary supporting the sending church? Is the goal of the Great Commission for churches to raise up and send out missionaries to evangelize and disciple new believers in foreign lands? Or, is the goal for churches to send out missionaries to foreign lands with their time divided between the foreign field and their supporting churches who continually need ongoing maintenance?

⁸ It is unequivocally true that God is sovereign over the number of people who respond to the salvation call - whether great or small (1 Cor. 3:6). But it is also true that there are examples in mission church history where the church saw little or no fruit due to unbelief - not believing in the clear promises of God or relying on the God ordained means of church growth. Chinese church history (1807-1949) is a perfect example of this.

from sound doctrine and faithfulness to Scripture to merely zeal and passion with few or no commitments to truth. In 1922, for example, one missionary observed that “Missionaries have generally been chosen by the large [mission] boards because of their spirit rather than their doctrine...”⁹ Another was even more broadminded: “Don’t apologize. All Americans are missionaries.”¹⁰ With all limitations set aside, the door was wide open for everyone to go, so that by 1925 China had 8,325 foreign missionaries - one of the largest concentrations of missionaries in the world.¹¹ In due course, the missionary community established 180 colleges, 262 hospitals, 19,500 churches, and 69 seminaries and Bible Schools.¹² Yet, despite all this investment of money and personnel over their 142 year presence in China, what was the result? What was the “fruit” of their work? The number of Christian converts never exceeded 1% of the Chinese population.

¹³ Samuel Ling observed

...it was widely conceded by Christians and non-Christians alike that the missionary movement had failed to achieve its goals in the largest mission field of the church....In retrospect, the Chinese communist movement alone could claim success; all other systems of ideas and social movements failed to make a comparable impact on China.¹⁴

A Watershed Moment

This divorce of ecclesiology from missiology has gotten the North American evangelical church into a rather deep hole. But there is hope! The Scripture is sufficient and has given very clear direction on how to move forward. The recovery of a

⁹ Paul Hutchison, “The Conservative Reaction in China,” *The Journal of Religion* 2 (July 1922): 341. In the 1920s, one candidate director lamented that among the prospective missionaries “We find so many men who do not know what they believe, who are drifting on an azure sea of general good hopes in the belief that Jesus was ‘a perfect gentleman’ (as one man said) and little more.” Valentin H Rabe, *The Home Base of American China Missions, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 99.

¹⁰ William R. Hutchinson, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1987), 1.

¹¹ Overseas Missionary Fellowship, *China Awareness Seminar Handbook* (Littleton, CO: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1992), 46.

¹² *Ibid*, 66.

¹³ Jessie G. Lutz, *Christian Missions in China: Evangelists of What?* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1965), vii. See also Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *Missions Tomorrow* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 95.

¹⁴ Samuel Ling, “The Other May Fourth Movement: The Chinese Renaissance, 1919-1937” (PhD. diss, Temple University, 1980), 8-9.

healthy missions program begins with the rediscovery of the Bible's view of eldership and the church. For some churches this may require a watershed moment in the life of their church as they completely rethink missions from the ground up by looking through the spectacles of biblical ecclesiology. When carefully understood, and each truth carried to its logical conclusion, a proper view of the church will have a domino-like effect, touching every area of your church outreach. In fact, many of the problems described above will be addressed and rectified, and will begin the process of moving churches toward a more effective missions program.

If all of this leaves you a bit overwhelmed, or with more questions than answers, may I offer a few suggestions on how to move forward? Start with the biblical foundation by making your first objective to train an elder - not a missionary.¹⁵ This is the more difficult and time consuming path, and will likely involve years of training, but in the end your church will reap rich rewards - both locally and abroad. Let me give a remarkable example of one institution that put this principle into practice. In the 20 years that I have been serving as a missionary, some of the missionaries who were the most influential and had the greatest Kingdom impact were graduates of The Master's Seminary.¹⁶ The reason they were so influential, I believe, is because the Seminary sought to **first** prepare men for the role of a pastor / elder in the church (exegetical teaching / preaching, shepherding, counseling, evangelism, church planting, worship, etc.). The idea of training a person to be a missionary without the qualifications of an elder is completely foreign to them. As far as this author knows, the seminary does not have any mission professors, nor do they offer a degree in missions, yet they consistently produce some of the most influential missionaries. This should not surprise us. A missionary without the qualifications of an elder is not going to plant a church

¹⁵ "The core of missions preparation is not mission studies. It is godliness and Bible knowledge and evangelistic zeal and love for Christ's church and a passion to see Christ glorified." Andy Johnson, *Missions: How the Local Church Goes Global* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 47. At the same time, it is important to remember that there definitely are roles for those who do not qualify as an elder (women missionaries), and for those not directly involved in church planting (English teachers, MK teachers, those serving in business as mission). But no matter what their role may be or what their gender is, everyone must be evaluated in their character, knowledge of the Bible, evangelistic zeal, and passion for God's glory.

¹⁶ I have no relationship with The Master's Seminary or any of the staff.

abroad and then train up a pastor who *is* qualified as an elder. A person can not give what they do not have; they can not lead where they have not first gone before. It is only a missionary with the biblical qualifications who will train up a like minded pastor overseas. As our Lord said, “The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master.” Matthew 10:24

Over time, as biblical eldership becomes more integrated into your missionary outreach, you may discover several very encouraging, albeit unanticipated, results. One of the first things that will happen is a much higher level of discernment in your congregation. There is a direct relationship between the level of understanding of biblical eldership in the local church and the quality of missionaries it sends out. The more a church seeks to understand and apply biblical eldership, the greater impact it will have on the kind of people they send out and the kind of ministry projects they support. As the church’s discernment grows, the flood of missionaries will soon become a trickle because the number of people who are both biblically qualified **and** are able to use their gifts in a foreign language and culture is quite rare. Plus, some may not have an interest in spending the time - oftentimes years - in the local church cultivating the spiritual leadership skills that are so critical to serving overseas. Some members of your church may initially view this as a negative because the number of missionaries is being reduced. But it is important to remember that the Bible never emphasizes numbers at the expense of truth, or in this case, the number of missionaries at the expense of the biblical qualifications for spiritual leadership.

Another benefit of fewer but qualified missionaries is that far more funds will be available for the people and projects that are truly worthy of support.¹⁷ Churches will be able to support their missionaries at a far higher percentage of their monthly need. If a church supports a missionary between 50% and 100% of their monthly need, then one

¹⁷ Today, the popular perception is that funding for missions is very limited. Actually, just the opposite is true. The North American church has massive financial resources at its disposal for global missions. The problem is not limited funding. The problem is that churches invest undue amounts of time and money on an endless array of people and ministry projects that all seem worthy of our support. The result is that the truly vital missionaries and mission projects are underfunded in the midst of a sea of less qualified options.

to three churches may be sufficient. Not only is this good financial stewardship, but it also opens the door for far deeper relationships between the sending church and the missionary. The missionary will no longer need to spend several months on home assignment traveling to the 25 to 50 supporting churches. Rather, he will be able invest the majority of his time in the small handful of churches who support him. But the most important benefit of all is that the missionary will be able to focus more fully on the task to which he has been called: bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to the regions of the world that do not know Him!

Soli Deo Gloria



Phil Remmers has served as a missionary to Asia for the past 20 years. Since 2009, he has served as the president of the Robert Morrison Project, a non-profit organization that seeks to publish reformed Christian books in regions of the world that have little or no access to literature resources. They currently have 115 book projects in ten key languages around the world, including Farsi, Urdu, and Arabic. Phil and his wife Renee live in Durham, NC, and can be contacted at: fusu1734@gmail.com