

Pro Pastor

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A JOURNAL OF GRACE BIBLE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY



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Making Sense of Missions

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Pro Pastor

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Making Sense of Missions

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**GRACE BIBLE
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY**

Editor's Introduction

We are thrilled to release the second volume of *Pro Pastor: A Journal of Grace Bible Theological Seminary*. Our journal aims to communicate deep theology in plain language for pastors, missionaries, and even laypeople. The response to our inaugural issue (Fall 2022) was above and beyond what we could have anticipated. Our readers confirmed our suspicion that Christ-followers have an unrelenting desire to hear the Word of God brought to bear on timely topics and pressing issues of our day.

Our journal's current issue addresses a persistent need for the church of Jesus Christ—to define and articulate the divinely given task of the Great Commission—namely, that of *missions*. Christ has commissioned his church to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:18–20), but what exactly is the role of a missionary? What are the necessary qualifications of a cross-cultural Christian worker? Is a missionary's main responsibility verbal or nonverbal in nature? How are local churches expected to take part in missions, and should churches ever collaborate in such work? Should missionaries provide ministries of mercy in their communities, or do such efforts result in humanitarian legalism? Should we always seek to present the Christian message dressed in the forms and fashions of the target culture?

Most of the contributors in the present issue are seasoned missionaries who serve Christ throughout the globe. Paul Snider (Indonesia) opens by highlighting an often-neglected task that must take place even *before* missionaries are

sent out into the fields of harvest. Ryan Bush (HeartCry; GBTS) makes a convincing case that a missionary cannot just be “a guy who loves Jesus” who has an affinity for adventure; rather, he must be a man of God who embodies the highest of qualifications. E. D. Burns (Southeast Asia) uses his deft pen to contend that the primary tool God uses to win the lost and edify saints on the mission field is gospel preaching.

In this issue's fourth article, Taylor Walls (Ecuador) explores two of the most undervalued letters in the New Testament, 2 and 3 John, and demonstrates their importance for understanding the relationship between missionary senders and sendees. Salvador Gomez (Dominican Republic) reveals the impossibility of the task of “making disciples of all nations” apart from healthy interchurch collaboration. Jeff Bys (Kenya) provides first-hand testimony that mercy ministry is a vital counterpart to the ministry of the Word. Finally, Scott Aniol (G3; GBTS) analyzes compromised forms of “contextualization” in missions that have arisen in recent decades before arriving at a paradigm for a more biblically based approach.

Every Christian has a role to play in the task of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. Join us as we embark on a journey, together, in a principled pursuit—of making sense of missions.

JEFF MOORE
Editor

The Prerequisite of Missions: Praying for More Missionaries

by Paul Snider

“After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him, two-by-two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. And he said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves.” (Luke 10:1–3)¹

INTRODUCTION

Luke 10:1–3 is rarely discussed by theologians and given too little consideration in the life of the Christian church. I believe this oversight is a tragic loss to us in the body of Christ. As local congregations, are we following the command given by our Lord in this text? Is Christ’s command as binding on us today, two thousand years later, as when it was first given? Jesus’s command is for his people to petition him to raise up future missionaries who will go into the fields of harvest. In this passage, believers are specifically urged to pray for more laborers, for laborers who will be willing to minister even among spiritual wolves, and for a plurality of laborers.

This article will be structured according to the following three divisions:

- (a) the necessity of praying for more missionaries;
- (b) the necessity of praying for more missionaries willing to suffer; and
- (c) the necessity of praying for a plurality of missionaries.

THE NECESSITY OF PRAYING FOR MORE MISSIONARIES

What is the church’s role in missions? Some believers might answer the question by quickly responding: “Tell people about Jesus, plant churches, win souls for Christ, and help the poor and sick.” All of these are good and worthy goals for Christ’s kingdom, but something is missing! The well-known text of Matthew 28:19–20, the Great Commission, features a biblical mandate for missionaries to go into “all nations” in the name of the triune God. No believer would ever question that command. Local churches have an enormous responsibility in missions because God has given the privilege to the church to be the driving force behind the sending out of missionaries. But is there something that must take place even prior to the Great Commission?

Luke 10:1–3 takes us a step back to a task that must *precede* the Great Commission, an even more

¹ Scriptural references in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

pressing priority. What, exactly, must predate the sending out of missionaries? The answer, according to Jesus, is asking the Lord of the harvest to fulfill Luke 10:2 by sending out more laborers into the fields of harvest! The missionary-sending task is not accomplished merely by focusing on the act of sending or on the external results of those who are sent, but by begging God to bring about Luke 10:2. Our Lord commands the church to pray faithfully for the sending out of missionaries into the world.

On August 23, 1743, the missionary David Brainerd wrote: “In evening prayer, God was pleased to draw near my soul, though very sinful and unworthy, and I was enabled to wrestle with God and persevere in my requests for grace.... My soul was concerned not so much for souls as such, but rather for Christ’s kingdom, that it might appear in the world, that God might be known to be God in the whole earth.”² Brainerd was a missionary and pastor to Native Americans in Delaware. He prayed for the advancement of God’s kingdom on earth through his mealy efforts. We must not miss the striking irony of Brainerd’s prayer. A missionary was praying for God to raise up *missionaries!*

What might happen if we really beseeched God in our missional endeavors? What about asking him to do a miraculous work of grace in the pursuit of missions—namely, to send out more laborers to make his truth manifest to the world? We should desire in our souls to hear what Solomon heard from the Lord: “I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you have made before me” (1 Kgs 9:3). There is nothing greater in this world than to commune with the Lord of heaven and earth to send out more missionaries. Do we have such great concern for the world that we make it our constant aim to pray in accordance with Christ’s command from Luke 10?

If we, as a church, are honest, we have not obeyed this command from our Lord as we ought. Perhaps we have never prayed for the Lord to send out more laborers into his harvest, or perhaps we have only prayed this prayer once at a missions conference, only to find ourselves forgetting it the rest of the year.

Charles Spurgeon wrote these excellent words concerning prayer:

What we desire in prayer is an audience with God. If the Lord does not hear us, we have gained nothing. And what an honor it is to have an audience with God! The frail, feeble, undeserving creature is permitted to stand in the august presence of the God of the whole earth, and the Lord regards that poor creature as if there were nothing else for Him to observe, bending His ear and His heart to listen to that creature’s cry.³

If we have a God like this—and we do—why would we not pray with intensity over the lack of missionaries, asking that God would thrust out thousands into the world?

How should such laborers be sent out into the ends of the earth? How are men and women to be raised up for such a task? How are we to see the world as Christ sees it—as a plentiful field of harvest with too few laborers? Just as farm hands might go to the farmer and ask for more helpers to bring in the harvest, so the servants of God must ask the Lord to send out more laborers. We must ask God, trusting that he will gladly answer our feeble requests, because when our requests are placed into the palm of his hand, he is glad to accept them and answer with fatherly kindness.

² David Brainerd, *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd with Notes and Reflections by Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Jonathan Edwards (Cornerstone Classic Ebooks, 2013), 123, Kindle.

³ Charles Spurgeon, *The Power of Prayer in a Believer’s Life*, ed. Robert Hall (Bend, OR: Emerald Books, 1993), 142–43.

THE NECESSITY OF PRAYING FOR MORE MISSIONARIES WILLING TO SUFFER

In Luke 10:1–3, not only is there a command for God’s people to raise up petitions for more missionaries, but those individuals must be *willing to endanger themselves* for the sake of missions. Our God is a missional God who commands us to pray for more laborers to be sent forth into difficulties and dangers. Notice that the command to pray is ever-binding on the situation. Jesus’s command to pray is *in* the sending, *in* the going, and *in* the extreme danger. There is never an indication to stop this charge. This is how the church must think. The church’s role is not just to pray for the sending out of laborers, although that is a preeminent command. The church’s role is to continue to be faithful in prayer for the sending out of more missionaries into extreme danger. Until the Lord returns, danger will always await missionaries in the field.

John Calvin said, “As no man will of himself become a sincere and faithful minister of the gospel, and as none discharge in a proper manner the office of teacher but those whom the Lord raises him up and endows with the gifts of the Spirit, whenever we observe a scarcity of pastors, we must raise our eyes to him to afford the remedy.”⁴ God’s instrument to bring about the remedy is prayer. Prayer is the gift of communion with our heavenly Father, and in this communion, we plead with him to send out more missionaries.

Luke 10:1 sets the stage for what follows. Luke writes, “After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town that he himself was about to go.” This verse follows the sending out of the twelve disciples in Luke chapter 9, but this

account of the seventy is distinct in that this appointment is meant to prepare designated places for Jesus’s visitation.

The seventy here are the ones who took Luke 9:23 seriously: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” They are willing to take up their crosses daily and follow the Lord’s direction for their lives. They are the true disciples who care not for themselves while embracing Jesus’s lordship. They take seriously their commitment to him, unlike the three would-be disciples of Luke 9:57–62, who chose comfort, a funeral, and family over Christ. Even though the seventy know the cost will be great—incurring death, if necessary—they go joyfully “as lambs in the midst of wolves” with no argument (10:3). As Leon Morris observes, these gospel workers “are in no enviable situation,” since they are exposed “to danger and to helplessness.”⁵

These seventy men were ordinary, everyday men. First Corinthians 1:27–29 tells us: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” This reality leaves the church with a clear indication as to how to pray biblically for more missionaries. Missionaries are ordinary men and women with a fallen nature who, like other believers, have been given the Holy Spirit through Christ’s mercy.

Praying for ordinary-yet-biblically qualified missionaries must be the church’s vigorous passion. There is no missionary sent out by his or her own strength. Praying in accordance with this

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 3 vols., trans. William Pringle, vol. 16 of *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 1:421.

⁵ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 200–01. Morris continues: “God’s servants are always in some sense at the mercy of the world, and in their own strength they cannot cope with the situation in which they find themselves. They must look to God.”

weighty command is the only way for churches to see the gospel spread like wildfire throughout the world. We must be confident that God hears our prayers and is pleased to answer them.

These “others” (v. 1) whom God had predetermined to send out for his own special purpose were the first missionaries to proclaim the same message as that of the apostles. However, these “others” were not apostles. They had no special qualifications that made them send-able. They simply denied themselves and were willing to bear Christ’s cross and, if necessary, to die.

This truth ought to spur us to consider the modern missionary movement. Never in all of history has there been such a great need for men and women to deny themselves, hate their possessions, hate their families, and take up his mark of suffering—namely the cross—and follow him into all the nations (Luke 14:26). Not that we truly hate our possessions or our families, but when compared to the infinite beauty and majesty of Christ, our forsaking of these things would look like hate.

I have been to many churches and have shared the work to which God has called us in Indonesia, and sometimes people have approached me and said, “I have always wanted to do something like that because it looks cool.” When I ask these individuals why it looks “cool,” they respond, “Because it is a fascinating life.” This response, however much of a compliment it is intended to be, is regrettable because it is nothing more than a romanticizing of missions. When Jesus urged believers to ask him to send workers into the fields of harvest, he was not talking about a fascination with adventure. Missions will cost you everything. But in losing everything in this present world, you gain the only one who truly *is* everything—Christ, the all in all—so what you gain is infinitely better. When each

local church faithfully prays for biblically qualified missionaries to be sent out, even from among their own congregations, there will be a weeding out of those who are looking for an adventure and a drawing forth of those who are serious about laying down their lives for the gospel.

Luke 10:1 says the Lord “appointed” (*anadeiknumi*) seventy others.⁶ This word is used only one other time in Scripture—both times in Luke’s writings. Acts 1:24 says, “And they prayed and said, ‘You, Lord, know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have *chosen*’” (emphasis mine). Judas was to be replaced, and the Lord chose Matthias. Just as the Lord chose the twelve disciples in John 15:16, stating, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you,” so it is that no one can become an apostle or a disciple by his own will. The same principle holds true in missions. No missionary is sent out by his own will. God is the one who sovereignly chooses and sets apart people for the task of going to unreached people groups who have never heard the message of the gospel. “Appointed” means that Jesus selected these “others,” these seventy men (Luke 10:1), by his own doing and by his divine plan.

Jesus’s appointment of designated representatives still must happen today. God’s ways and purposes are immutable. He still sets people apart to go to the different countries of the world. He still appoints and selects, by his sovereign decree, to send out men and women to cross ethnolinguistic barriers where his name is not known. In God’s choosing those whom are sent out, he accomplishes his purposes through the prayers of the church. If a church is faithful to pray for more missionaries, God will be pleased to answer by setting apart a specific number of workers, even if it may be only one person from that congregation.

⁶ The reason for the number “seventy” in Jesus’s sending mission in Luke 10 might be salvation-historical in nature—forging a connection to the seventy elders in Israel during the time of Moses (Exod 24:1; Num 11:16). See Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, New American Commentary 24 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 304n15.

THE NECESSITY OF PRAYING FOR A PLURALITY OF MISSIONARIES

In Luke 10:1–3, Jesus urges his followers to pray for more laborers to be sent into the fields of harvest and to pray for those who are willing to go into harm’s way for the sake of the gospel. At the same time, Jesus also urges Christians to pray for a third matter; he urges his followers to pray for a *plurality* of laborers.

In missions today we often hear of “teams” being sent, or “teammates” joining together in their missional labors, or missionaries “partnering” with other missionaries, or nationals “co-laboring” together with cross-cultural missionaries. All of these terms stem from the way Jesus sent out his workers—he did not send out lone individuals. Luke 10:1 says that Jesus “appointed seventy others” and “sent them on ahead of him, two by two.” This means that if seventy men were sent as missionaries, Jesus sent out thirty-five pairs.

Why did Jesus send them two by two? There is a biblical principle in Ecclesiastes 4:9–10, which says, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow.” There is greater fruitfulness in pairs. There is encouragement and accountability in pairs. The missionary task is not carried out alone, and it does not consist of having one’s own idiosyncratic ministry, although that type of wrongheaded thinking permeates many missions methodologies. What Jesus communicates to us here is that sending missionaries out in teams is an instant way of testifying that what they say is true. What better way to authenticate the message of the gospel than to have multiple missionaries proclaim it? Team ministry must be what the local church prays for and desires. God is not too small to send out pairs of missionaries. Churches must believe that what they ask in Christ’s name, the Father will be pleased to do.

When missionaries are sent out in pairs, one of them says, “This Jesus Christ who came in the flesh, although he was rich, he became poor, lived a perfect and sinless life, died on a cross for the sin of man, was raised three days later, and sits now at the right hand of his Father. Now this same Jesus commands everyone to repent and believe, to turn from sin and live for him.” When one missionary proclaims these things in solidarity, his partner affirms, “That is true!” One of the missionaries says, “There is a King coming and his name is Jesus Christ. He is coming back, and when he comes again, he will come in full fury with flaming fire to pour out his wrath on those that do not know him.” When one missionary declares this, his teammate says, “That is true!”

Wherever a missionary is sent, wherever a witness goes forth to speak of Christ, it is for the purpose of preparing people for Christ’s second coming. In this preparation abides a response of either acceptance or rejection, and when missionaries go forth in pairs, the gospel can be affirmed by more than one witness. Two witnesses are better than one. On the mission field, every matter immediately can be established by the testimony of two or more witnesses (Deut 19:15; cf. also Matt 18:16; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28). This pattern of missionary pairs serving together is the model throughout the New Testament, which is evident in the ministries of John and Peter (Acts 8:14), Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2ff.), Paul and Silas (Acts 15:40), Barnabas and Mark (Acts 15:40), and Paul and Timothy (Acts 16:1ff.).⁷

Jesus commands his followers to pray for more missionaries, for sacrificial-minded missionaries, and for a plurality of missionaries, and yet Luke 10:2 says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” Why does Jesus give this sobering statement about the difficulty of finding true laborers?

⁷ Stein, *Luke*, 304n17.

Matthew 9:37 is identical to Luke 10:2, but Matthew 9:35–36 gives us additional information. It tells us *why* Jesus said what he did. Verses 35 and 36 say, “And Jesus went throughout all of the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, *he had compassion* on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd.”⁸

Notice the words “he had compassion.” When the Lord Jesus looked upon the crowds of people, he was moved within by feelings of deep pity. Perhaps he was so moved by love in his whole being that he felt physically sick. This is what the word “compassion” sometimes indicates. We see great compassion on Jesus’s part throughout his earthly ministry, such as when he wept over Jerusalem, saying, “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matt 23:37).

Imagine that your child was sick to the point of death and the only cure was a life-threatening surgery demanding the most capable doctors and nurses. As the child’s father or mother, you would feel such enormous compassion in your profound love for your child that you would be physically sick. This illustration shows the degree of compassion Jesus felt in Luke 10:2 when he said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.”

When our Lord makes this statement, he is asserting that there is a massive harvest taking place in the present time of the new covenant, during the fulfillment of the ages, right before the final judgment. The harvest is plentiful, it is immense, and Jesus’s disposition for the sheep without a shepherd is one of profound compassion. As Christ’s church, we must have this same

compassion for the nations—a sympathy which leads us to corporate prayer, as well as to private prayer, to beg God for more missionaries.

We must not get the wrong picture here. Jesus knew exactly who would come to him and those whom the Father had chosen before the foundation of the world, but he still experienced sorrow and deep anguish for the lost. Jesus is not resigned to the fatalism that says, “Well, my Father has this situation under control. I don’t need to feel anything because my Father has already chosen the many.” No, as he looks upon the multitude, he is sick inside, moved by love. God’s sovereign election should be no excuse for the church’s lack of compassion for the lost. Neither should God’s sovereignty lead to any negligence to pray for more missionaries. In fact, God’s sovereign election should draw our souls deeper and more intimately into his presence through prayer in asking for the sending of laborers. John MacArthur said, “If your doctrine of sovereignty robs your evangelistic zeal, then you have a sinful reaction to that truth.”⁹

Why are the laborers so few? As Jesus looked with compassion and beheld the wrath and judgment that was to come, he also saw that there would be only a few issuing a warning. Only a few! It is estimated that there are between 11,000 to 13,000 ethno-linguistic people groups in the world. The total number of cross-cultural missionaries reported at the beginning of the twenty-first century was 143,189 individuals.¹⁰ If every person in North America went to the nations as missionaries, that still would not be enough to minister to the peoples of the world. The reality is that the Father sent his Son, and now he calls on his own children—you and me—to go into the world. Andrew Knight rightly observes, “God is not done sending after sending his Son. His plan all along has been to send the saved. His aim is to

⁸ Emphasis added.

⁹ John MacArthur, “Attitudes of Effective Evangelism (Luke 10:1–4),” sermon at Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, May 18, 2003, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/42-134/attitudes-of-effective-evangelism>.

¹⁰ Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World* (Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 2001), 4.

instill his Son's faithfulness and passion in human hearts through the Holy Spirit, and to multiply his Son's missional life countless times over in the body of Christ."¹¹

CONCLUSION

Jesus says, "Pray earnestly" (v. 2). The sense of this word is "to plead, to beg, to ask for with urgency" (cf. Luke 8:28). I could list statistic after statistic of all the majority-unsaved people groups and the very small percentages of Christians among them, but this would serve no useful purpose.¹² In the pursuit of missions, what *will* serve a purpose is to pray as Jesus commanded in Luke 10:2: "Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out more laborers into his harvest." Every local church must make it a matter of urgency to prioritize, in their corporate prayer, the beseeching of God for many missionaries to be sent in pairs to the hard places. When churches make it their aim to ask God for more missionaries, God will in turn bless those congregations with more opportunities in the world.

In Luke 10:2, Jesus effectively says to his church, "Beg me to send out more missionaries." We are not just to pray for the salvation of souls. We must do that, but we are to beg the Lord to send out workers to tell them of Christ. Oh, that the Lord would use our daily prayers to "fan the flame" to thrust out more workers, just as he answered Hudson Taylor's pleas to send out more workers to China.

As Christ's church, what are we doing in the pursuit of world missions? Are we begging God to thrust out more missionaries to the nations? Are we begging God to start such a work in our own congregation? Do we see the urgency of more missionaries as Jesus saw in verse 2? We must understand that the strength of the church is not found in various activities or man-made events. The strength of the church is found in a

congregation pouring itself out in prayer for more missionaries to be sent out to proclaim the good news to the lost.

Praying for God to send out more missionaries should be one of our first responses in our corporate and private worship. Praying for more laborers is not a prayer to be offered solely by the missionary or the pastor. Praying for more laborers is a privilege—and a *prerequisite* in missions—for the church of Jesus Christ. The sovereignty of God gives no excuse for us to neglect prayer to the Lord of the harvest. The church has been given a clear command by the one who felt compassion to the point of sickness and unfathomable anguish for sheep without a shepherd.

The primary question for a Christian should not be: Do I have the missionary call? Rather, the primary question should be: As a member of the body of Christ, what role can I first play in praying for God's pursuit of missions? Every one of us should be asking that question! Every local church that desires to follow Christ's commands must pray for the sending out of missionaries as if their life depended on it. In our prayers—both corporate and private—we must follow this command with all of our might in order that God, in his perfect wisdom, might be pleased to flood the nations with laborers unto harvest. •

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¹¹ Andrew Knight, "Four Reasons Why We Leave," *Desiring God*, May 26, 2016, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/four-reasons-why-we-leave>.

¹² For a compilation of such statistics, see the latest edition of Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation*, 7th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

A Case for the Missionary as Pastor

by Ryan Bush

INTRODUCTION

The one true and living God chose people from every tribe, tongue, and nation in Christ before the foundation of the world so that they should be holy and blameless before him (Rev 7:9).¹ Why would the Eternal One predestine people for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ? The question is answered in two phrases found in the first chapter of Ephesians: “to the praise of his glorious grace” and “to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:6, 12).² God dwells in a high and holy place (Isa 57:15), and it is fitting for creatures to ascribe to their Creator glory and honor. It is right that we would render to the Lord the glory due to his name. O that all peoples on earth would worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness! He will not give his glory to another, and for this reason missionaries exist.³

Jesus Christ was slain, and by his blood he ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 5:9). Christ makes them priests to God who offer up the sacrifice of praise to him. It is the Father’s will that these worshippers be made alive in Christ through the proclamation of the gospel of his Son.

Remarkably, God has entrusted the great privilege of heralding salvation to fallible men. God utilizes ordinary people employing ordinary means (the spoken word) to redeem sin-choked souls from death so that they might worship the one true and living God. Furthermore, he uniquely calls some of these heralds to cross cultural barriers so that the message might be announced to people groups devoid of the gospel light.

The Bible has much to say about the enterprise of gospel proclamation among the nations. For instance, the following words of Christ reveal central principles for the task of missions:

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Matt 9:35–38)

¹ Regarding this verse Charles Spurgeon declares, “If there will be in heaven a multitude surpassing all human calculation, then the gospel is certain to achieve a great success. We are always fretting; we are in a great hurry for results. Let us be patient but diligent. Let us work as we wait. Let us serve, for the cause is in good hands. The pleasure of the Lord will prosper in the hands of Christ. He will not have died in vain; he will not lose the purchase of his blood.” *The Spurgeon Study Bible* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2017), 1703.

² Scriptural references in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

³ John Piper states, “[W]orship is the goal and the fuel of missions: Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Missions is our way of saying: the joy of knowing Christ is not a private, or tribal, or national or ethnic privilege. It is for all. And that’s why we go. Because we have tasted the joy of worshipping Jesus, and we want all the families of the earth included.” John Piper, “Missions Exists Because Worship Doesn’t: A Bethlehem Legacy, Inherited and Bequeathed,” sermon, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, October 27, 2012, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/missions-exists-because-worship-doesnt-a-bethlehem-legacy-inherited-and-bequeathed>.

In the ninth chapter of Matthew's gospel, we find a synopsis of the ministry work in which Jesus of Nazareth has been engaged. Matthew reports, "Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction" (Matt 9:35). Thus, Jesus labored among the people as both their prophet who spoke the words of God to them and as their king who had power over their physical weaknesses. His work as priest was still before him.⁴ Golgotha awaited.

DIVINE COMPASSION

Something of the heart of Christ is made known to us in Matthew 9:35–38. Christ had compassion for the distressed Jews of his day. Christ's pity ought to be an encouragement to Christians today if they ever feel as though their cries for the lost go unheard. Jesus Christ was moved with compassion by the harassed and helpless crowds. Matthew Henry comments on this passage, "Jesus Christ is a very compassionate friend to precious souls; here his bowels do in a special manner yearn. It was pity to souls that brought him from heaven to earth, and there to the cross."⁵ Truly, the compassion of the missionary for the multitude to which he has been sent is evidence of the formation of Christ in the redeemed soul (Gal 4:19).⁶

See what moved the heart of Christ—nothing less than the desperate spiritual condition of the human beings before him elicited our Lord's compassion. He saw that they were "like sheep without a shepherd." Our natural state limits us to behold only material matters, which orients our compassion toward physical needs. Surely, we ought to be moved to compassion in response to the besetting material needs of our neighbors, yet even so, compassion for physical matters, if isolated, misses even weightier spiritual matters.⁷ We tend to be anxious and troubled about many things, but only one thing is necessary (Luke 10:41–42), and Christ saw it vividly as he beheld the crowds. Our Lord was primarily concerned with the souls of men, more than their beleaguered bodies. Jesus healed numerous people of physical maladies, yet his ultimate purpose in taking on flesh was to bring glory to the Father by giving abundant, eternal life to many (John 3:16; 10:10). If the design of Christ was the spiritual good of sinners, should the souls of men not be made a priority in all of the church's endeavors, especially in efforts to send out missionaries to foreign lands? Will churches not be held accountable for the talents they bury in the ground when they merely meet physical needs (Matt 25:14–30)?

Notice the exact cause of the spiritual plight of the people which prompted the compassion of

⁴ The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (8.1) states, "It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, according to the covenant made between them both, to be the mediator between God and man; the prophet, priest, and king; head and savior of the church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world; unto whom He did from all eternity give a people to be His seed and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified." William Collins et al., *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* (repr., Sand Springs, OK: Grace & Truth, n.d.).

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1658.

⁶ Christ the Son intercedes for his people before the Father (Heb 7:25). He betroths himself to a bride (2 Cor 11:2). Does an earthly son have to be entreated to petition his father for a blessing? Does a husband have to be persuaded to cherish his wife? Yet, these human relationships are but a small drop compared to the overflowing love and care that Jesus Christ has for his own.

⁷ The nefarious doctrine known as the "Social Gospel" has taken root among many who claim the name of Christ. This aberrant doctrine claims that Jesus's mission was to do away with social ills and inequity. This snare of Satan sneaks its way into churches pretending to be a fulfillment of the command, "Love your neighbor." Christian love, however, is to act in a way that will result in their eternal good. To love someone according to our culture is to act in a way that will result in their temporal comfort and happiness. The Social Gospel says that Jesus came to do away with those things that disrupt temporal comfort and happiness. The problem with this way of thinking is that Christ did not come to make people *happy*, but to make them *holy*. When a church believes that what it has to offer to the world is an upgrade of physical circumstances, then it has replaced the true gospel with the Social Gospel. Of course, what the church has to offer the world is not acts of service. Any mosque or temple or government agency can do that. What the church has to offer the world is the message of the cross, the gospel of Jesus Christ; this message alone has the power to save souls from hell.

Christ—an absence of faithful shepherds. The spiritual guides of the people were the Pharisees, who loaded up burdens on people’s backs when they should have comforted them (Matt 9:36; 11:28). The phrase Matthew uses here, “like sheep without a shepherd,” is borrowed from 1 Kings 22:17: “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the Lord said, ‘These have no master; let each return to his home in peace.’” The religious leaders of Israel claimed to be the shepherds of the people, but they led the people astray and fleeced the flock instead of feeding it. Israel was hindered from entering the kingdom of heaven by the Pharisees because of the burdens that they placed on the people.⁸ These blind guides presented the law with all its thunder and smoke. Instead of proclaiming “the righteous shall live by faith,” their message was “the lawful shall become righteous.” Such a lack of shepherding moved our Lord to compassion. His disciples saw the multitudes going about their daily business. Christ, however, saw a valley of dry bones. Who would prophesy to them?⁹

EARNEST PRAYER

Jesus Christ recognized a crisis among the people. He perceived a drought of faithful shepherds. No ministers were calling Israel to the Good Shepherd (John 10:7–8). It would seem the solution must be for the disciples and even Christ himself to go to the people to shepherd them. Yet here we find a surprising command: “Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt 9:38). The sensible-minded disciples would have taken offense to Christ’s instruction. Surely, the bolder disciples would have felt slighted. Were

they not able to carry out this work? Does Jesus’s command to pray for workers for the harvest not imply that the disciples lacked fitness for the task?

Here, followers of Christ are kept from embarking upon the missionary enterprise with shrouded confidence in the flesh. We must not hurry past this reminder of our weakness. Those who would trust in their own abilities fall into the same snare as the Laodiceans. They believe themselves to be capable and adequate—without realizing that they are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev 3:14–18). The Lord gives grace to those who know their impoverished spiritual state and come to him in prayer. The Scriptures provide ample testimony that God’s “delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love” (Ps 147:10–11). Christ’s command to pray for laborers is an abrupt reminder that however well-equipped and zealous he may be, apart from Christ, a missionary can do nothing (John 15:5). Those who would see the lost come to Christ must first sing with Isaac Watts, “A guilty, weak, and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall.”¹⁰

What folly it is for such weak and fallible creatures to conclude that the power to carry out the great miracle of salvation in the soul of man somehow lies within themselves. Yes, Christians should pity the lost and be compelled by godly compassion, but they must also be aware of their hopeless inability. Having both of those realities in view will lead believers to pray earnestly. Churches and the missionaries whom they send must humble

⁸ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1933), Matt 9:36.

⁹ Reader, are you moved with compassion for the lost? Jesus did not fear or disdain the masses of sin-dead souls. His heart was broken over their plight. Oh, that we would grieve and groan for the lost. Look across the globe and see the multitudes like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless. None will be saved apart from the proclaimed gospel. Do you weep for sinners? Do you beg the Lord’s mercy for the nations? Like Jesus, we ought to be moved to compassion for Christ’s sheep who have yet to come into the fold—those who currently have no faithful witness among them to point them to the shepherd (Acts 4:12; John 10:16).

¹⁰ Isaac Watts, “How Sad Our State by Nature Is” (1737), in *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1961). It is reported that George Whitefield, three days after his ordination in June of 1736, wrote to a friend. He asked his friend to pray for him saying, “Help, help me, my dear friend, with your warmest address to the throne of grace. At present, this is the language of my heart—A guilty, weak, and helpless worm ...”

themselves under the mighty hand of God and repent of leaning on their own understanding (Jas 4:10; Prov 3:5–6). The feeble man who would be wise fears the Lord and leans upon him fully; he prays unceasingly. The weak pray. In prayer the weak become strong for “[t]here is no mightier influence exerted by creatures than that found in prayer. The history of human salvation is a history of the power of prayer.”¹¹

Prayer is a precious but often-neglected gift. It is one of the primary means by which God preserves his people. It is also one of the means by which God calls lost sheep to himself. God truly responds to his people’s prayers for sinners and saves souls in response to the intercession of his people. Furthermore, God calls laborers for the harvest in response to the petitions of his children.¹² Many Christians have made a grave error by concluding that prayer is nothing more than a spiritual discipline. They claim prayer is nothing more than a tool of sanctification. That view, however, guts the biblical testimony of this golden instrument that can be employed to propel the gospel to the ends of the earth.¹³ The Scriptures are clear that the prayer of a righteous man avails much (Jas 5:16), and it is no threat to God’s sovereignty. In fact, God has promised to listen to the meager prayers of his people and to use them as tools in accomplishing his mighty purposes.

An important implication of Christ’s compassion and command is that the missionary enterprise is the will of God, not the design of any church or man.¹⁴ From the beginning, God has been the initiator of missions. God sought out Adam, called Abraham, formed Israel, and sent Jesus Christ into the world. Christians have the great privilege of participating in the missionary work of God. William Owen Carver puts it this way, “[I]n the work of missions ... the Christian puts himself in the way of realizing the promises of Jesus.”¹⁵ How privileged we are to be instruments of the fulfillment of the promises of God! The fact that God is the source of missions should override any temptation that churches might have to forego participation in the Great Commission.¹⁶

SET APART & SENT OUT

Less obvious in Matthew 9:35–38 are two implicit principles that clarify the nature of the laborers who will go into the harvest. First, our Lord specified that “the laborers are few.” Should we conclude that he used “laborers” as a synonym for Christians? Did he mean that all Christians are called to go into the harvest? Was Spurgeon right when he said, “Either every Christian is a missionary or an imposter”?¹⁷

While all Christians ought to be missions-minded and evangelistic, not all Christians are called by

¹¹ William Swan Plumer, *Truths for the People* (New York: American Tract Society, 1875), 163. Swan’s statement is corroborated by many missionaries throughout history, including A. B. Simpson, who said, “Prayer is the mighty engine that is to move the missionary work.”

¹² John Paton, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary, took his first steps toward faithful and sacrificial service at a specially called meeting of churches to pray for missionaries to be set apart for service in the South Sea Islands of the South Pacific. Paton ended up ministering to cannibalistic tribes in New Hebrides. This account is related by Paton in his autobiography. See *John G. Paton, John G. Paton, Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography*, rev. ed. (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009).

¹³ I am aware of the danger of misrepresenting prayer in such a way that it is an assault upon the perfections of God. There are two dangers: (1) a human-centered view of prayer in which God is made out to be something of a genie in a bottle or a vending machine; and (2) a fatalistic view of prayer in which prayer is thought to be ineffectual and merely a means of personal discipline. Both of these ditches are dangerous. Here I hope to remedy the prevalent tendency toward the latter.

¹⁴ Missionaries must “be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). John Gill explained that missionaries “should be quiet and easy, resigned to the will of God, and live in an assured expectation of the appearance of divine Providence in their favour,” while all the while acknowledging “that he is God, a sovereign Being that does whatsoever he pleases; that he is unchangeable in his nature, purposes, promises, and covenant.” John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, The Baptist Commentary Series (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1810), 720.

¹⁵ William Owen Carver, *Missions in the Plan of the Ages* (New York: Revell, 1909), 84.

¹⁶ Ven Rheenán exulted, “[God] is always giving, relating, reconciling, redeeming! He is the spring that gives forth living water—the source of mission!” Ven Rheenán, *Missions: Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 14.

¹⁷ Charles Spurgeon, ‘A Sermon and a Reminiscence,’ *Sword and the Trowel* (March 1873), accessed at <https://www.spurgeongems.org/sermon/>

God to cross cultural barriers for the purpose of taking the gospel to a people and to plant a church among them.¹⁸ In one sense, all Christians are missionaries in their individual vocations and spheres of influence, but neither Spurgeon nor our Lord meant that all Christians are missionaries in the same way that William Carey, Adoniram Judson, David Brainerd, and others were missionaries. The Scriptures make it clear that there are a select number of Christians who are sent into the harvest as laborers.¹⁹ Implicit in Christ's words in Matthew 9:35–38 is that laborers have a unique calling that is distinct from the general call of all believers to be witnesses about Jesus Christ.²⁰

The Bible is unambiguous about the fact that the missionary call is distinctive. Moreover, Christian prudence leads us to the same conclusion. While all believers have the ability to participate in the Great Commission, not all should go to distant nations. Consider the American effort in World War II. Many husbands went to battle in foreign lands; many housewives grew "Victory Gardens" or went to work in factories to replace those who had gone to war. All contributed to the effort, but only some were sent out to be soldiers. This reality touches on the second principle found in the Matthew 9:35–38 text. Christ said that the laborers were to be sent out into the harvest, which indicates a sender with

authority. Missionaries are not self-appointed or self-directed. Rather, missionaries are instruments in the hand of God, which sending mechanism he entrusts to local churches for the realization of kingdom advancement among every tribe, tongue, and nation. C. Gordon Olson contends, "Missions is the whole task, endeavor, and program of the Church of Jesus Christ."²¹ Similarly, Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert explain, "The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ."²² Missionaries are not independent workers laboring according to their own whims and preferences.

These two principles, that missionaries are uniquely called and intentionally sent, point to a foundational truth that undergirds a biblical understanding and practice of missions—namely, that the divine enterprise of taking the gospel to the nations is given to local churches. Thus, missionaries are set apart and sent out by local churches, and they are overseen by local churches as they conduct their labor in the field. A grave and common error in many missional endeavors is the view that the missionary is an independent agent receiving immediate direction from God, and the church's role is simply to support the work with resources. On the other hand, we must also acknowledge the agency and responsibility

chs3112.pdf. E. D. Burns comments on this citation: "The full context of Spurgeon's quote indicates that if Spurgeon would have spoken in contemporary terms, he would have likely maintained that every Christian is an evangelist or an imposter." E. D. Burns, "I Disagree with Spurgeon!" Founders Ministries, <https://founders.org/articles/i-disagree-with-spurgeon/>.

¹⁸ C. Gordon Olson states, "All Christians are to be missionary-minded in obedience to the Great Commission, but not all Christians can be missionaries in the proper biblical sense of the word." C. Gordon Olson, *What in the World is God Doing?* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2003), 12.

¹⁹ Missiologist Herbert Kane, in seeking to answer this question, wrote, "In the traditional sense the term missionary has been reserved for those who have been called by God to a full-time ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:4), and who have crossed geographical and/or cultural boundaries (Acts 22:21) to preach the gospel in those areas of the world where Jesus Christ is largely, if not entirely unknown (Romans 15:20). This definition, though by no means perfect, has the virtue of being biblical." Herbert Kane, *The Making of a Missionary*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), 14.

²⁰ When international air travel became accessible to middle-class America in the 1960s, short-term mission teams began traveling overseas on a regular basis, which exposed laymen to missions first-hand like never before. This, of course, had many benefits, but it also paved the way for a gradual amateurization of the missions force. The field seemed more accessible, and the idea began to take root that all one needed to be a missionary was a Bible and a passion for the lost. Speed and pragmatism came to characterize the modern missions movement. The primary questions became: (1) How can we get the most missionaries to the field in the shortest amount of time? and (2) What strategies are producing the most professions of faith and starting new churches the quickest?

²¹ Olson, *What in the World is God Doing?*, 13.

²² Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 241.

of the missionary to labor according to his conscience and unique gifting. Thus, both the church and the missionary take an active role in missions by collaborating to carry out the work in a faithful and fruitful way according to the Scriptures. However, the local church oversees and holds accountable the missionaries whom she affirms, sends out, and supports.

The narratives of Paul's missionary efforts and his relationship with churches in Acts provide a healthy paradigm for missions accountability today. Time and again Paul looked to local churches for help, instruction, and confirmation. Prior to his first missionary journey, the church at Antioch confirmed Paul's fitness and calling before sending him out (Acts 13:1–3). After completing his first missionary journey, Paul went back to his sending church in Antioch (14:26–28). He also gave an account of his work to his home church in Antioch after his second missionary journey (18:22). Paul obeyed the instructions of the Jerusalem church (15:22–35) and submitted to the counsel of the elders at Jerusalem to participate in a Jewish ritual (21:20–26).²³ One may argue that the calling and directing of missionaries is only God's business, but throughout the New Testament, the means by which God carries out these responsibilities is a local body of believers.

FAITHFUL LABORING

God calls churches to prayerful participation in the Great Commission through the setting apart and sending out of missionaries to foreign lands.

These missionaries submit to the sending church by laboring according to her will. This begs the question, however: What should laborers do once they arrive at their field of service? What is the rule by which a local church should direct the missionary? Matthew 9:35–38 provides a general framework for the missionary enterprise, but the particulars of the work to be carried out are not addressed here. What is the work of the missionary? How does a faithful missionary spend his days? This question is a thorny one because ideas about missionary work are often informed and clouded by various extra-biblical influences. Of course, Christian history and experience can be helpful, but all matters of faith must be tethered to sacred Scripture as the only infallible rule of faith and practice.²⁴

The challenge of determining the nature of faithful missionary work is due, in large part, to the fact that the term “missionary” is not found in the Scriptures, much less a passage containing the job description or qualifications of missionaries. The word “missionary” made its way to the English language through the translation of the Greek word *apostolos* to the Latin term *missionarius*, which was eventually transliterated into English as “missionary.”²⁵ The lack of a clear biblical connection to the term has resulted in inconsistent and often anti-biblical views of the role of a missionary. It is possible and worthwhile, however, to endeavor to recapture the biblical essence of the work of this role. That effort begins by simply recognizing the adjacency of the term “missionary”

²³ A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 164. The authors note, “Some might argue that at times Paul went against the directions of the church, such as when he ignored the community's exhortations not to go to Jerusalem at the end of his third journey (Acts 21:7–14). It is true that in this case Paul overrode the will of the community, and there still are times today when God's leading is so clear that a person may have to do likewise. At the same time, however, over and over again in Paul's life, Acts portrays the involvement of the church community in confirming God's leading ... Paul's going against the church was an exception rather than the rule.”

²⁴ It is my conviction that an approach to missiology must carry with it the presupposition that God has provided for his people a clear and authoritative record from which they can and must draw wisdom and truth. Sacred Scripture is the supreme authority of the church, and all other sources of knowledge and wisdom must bow the knee to what God has said. I hold to *Sola Scriptura*. *Sola Scriptura* means that all the truth necessary for the justification and sanctification of God's people is taught in Scripture. Conversely, that means that Christians do not need any other source to know God's will and be obedient to it. There are many wonderful helps that the Lord provides to help Christians grow in their knowledge and faith. However, any sources that believers look to for help outside the Bible ought to be consistent with the Scriptures.

²⁵ Olson, *What in the World is God Doing?*, 10. Both *apostolos* and *missionarius* mean “sent out one.”

to “apostle.” “Missionary” is rooted in *apostolos*, and thus was built upon the idea of one who is sent out. Recall that Jesus said, “pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest *to send out laborers*” (Matt 9:38, emphasis mine).²⁶

The apostles of Jesus Christ, along with the prophets, have completed their work of laying the foundation of the church of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:20), but still, the work of caring for souls continues until the end of days. Such work is carried out not only by those who are called to be pastors but also by those who are called to be missionaries. Furthermore, the work of soul care was clearly set forth by the apostles of Jesus Christ, and it follows that this precedent ought to be upheld by those who are called by God to shepherd his church. Both pastors and missionaries are called to carry out spiritual work, and the Bible is quite clear about the means for that work. In fact, I contend that the role of the missionary is fundamentally identical to the role of the pastor, the chief differences being: (a) the cross-cultural element; in addition to (b) a slight difference in emphasis upon certain elements in the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*).²⁷ Thus, if we understand what the apostles of Jesus Christ taught concerning their own spiritual work and the role of the pastor, then we are well on our way to apprehending a faithful conception of the role of the missionary.

The apostle Peter summed up the work of the pastor in this way, “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet 5:2). The

apostle Paul gave this description: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Hence, the role of the pastor may be summarized in this way: to shepherd the blood-bought flock of God by caring for their souls.

How does “soul care” relate to the role of the missionary? Quite simply, we can reasonably conclude that if the essence of the role of the pastor is to care for souls, then the work of the missionary is also to care for souls. How might a missionary care for souls where there is no church or even no Christians? Indeed, it is not accurate to claim that a missionary is simply a pastor where there is not yet a church; there is a distinct difference. The pastor is a man of God who is first ordained by God to care for the church, and then, to aid in planting more churches; the missionary is a man first ordained by God to plant a church and then, afterwards, to care for it. Even while affirming this distinction, however, we must maintain that when missionaries go into a context where there are no Christians at all, they are still doing “soul care.” Thus, the role of both the pastor and the missionary is the care of souls.

Now we must consider the way that shepherding work ought to be carried out. What is the biblical pattern for the care of souls? In Acts 6:1–6, the apostles make plain that the work of caring for souls consists of two means: (a) prayer; and (b) the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). The work of the man who is called by God to care for souls is accomplished through prayer and preaching.

²⁶ While the Greek word for “send out” (*ekbalē*) in this verse is different than the verb form of *apostolos*, the ideas are equivalent, namely, that one is sent out in order to accomplish an objective.

²⁷ Timothy’s work and calling provide a helpful case study. Born in Lystra, his Jewish mother heard the gospel and became a follower of Jesus. She taught him the Scriptures from childhood. His father was a Greek Gentile. Paul met Timothy during his second missionary journey, and he became Paul’s companion and a fellow missionary (Acts 16:1–3). Later, however, Paul asked Timothy to stay in one of the mission cities, Ephesus, where he was to care for the souls of those who had come to Christ (1 Tim 1:3–4). In other words, he was to shepherd the flock of God there. Thus, Timothy was a missionary as well as a pastor, and the distinction between the two roles was hardly discernible in his case.

Therefore, the work of the missionary, like the pastor, is to care for the souls of those to whom he is sent through these twin activities.²⁸

Nevertheless, the role of a missionary is distinct from the role of a pastor in that the missionary deploys the means of prayer and the ministry of the Word with a view to *establishing* a local church, whereas a pastor deploys these same means with the intention to build up members of an *already-established* local church. Missionaries also tend toward laboring through prayer and the ministry of the Word for the *conversion* of souls, at least at first, while pastors focus on *building up* those souls once faith is birthed. If we examine three primary elements of the *ordo salutis*—election, conversion, and sanctification—the roles of missionaries and pastors become obvious. God independently elects his people. God converts his people through the faithful work of missionaries. God sanctifies his people through the faithful work of pastors.²⁹ To put it another way, God elects his church, missionaries establish God’s church, and pastors care for God’s church. Both pastors and missionaries care for souls; both pastors and missionaries care for souls through prayer and the ministry of the Word. However, while missionaries primarily labor in the *conversion* of God’s people, pastors primarily labor in the *sanctification* of God’s people.

Missionaries deploy the means of prayer and the ministry of the Word by witnessing about Jesus Christ, doing evangelistic work, and baptizing new believers in an effort to establish healthy churches (Acts 1:8; 8:4; Matt 28:19–20). Pastors also carry out these duties, but generally to a lesser degree. Pastors teach disciples all that Jesus commanded by preaching the Word, reproving, rebuking, and encouraging with every form of patient instruction (Matt 28:19–20; 2 Tim 2:15; 4:2). Missionaries also labor in these tasks, but to a lesser degree than pastors.³⁰

A KEY IMPLICATION: QUALIFICATION

It is essential for a local church to be led by qualified elders who meet the standards laid out in the Scriptures. Likewise, when a body of believers endeavors to plant a church in a foreign land, it is essential for the new church to be led by qualified elders who meet those same scriptural standards (1 Tim 3:1–7, Titus 1:5–9). Thus, wisdom cries out that the missionary who is sent from the local church to establish a church in a foreign land should himself be elder-qualified.³¹ The wise military general places highly qualified soldiers at the borders for the protection and prosperity of his kingdom. He places equally qualified soldiers at the front lines of the battle to ensure the advancement of the mission and the expansion of the kingdom. Though the tasks are different, one is no less

²⁸ A compelling testimony of faithful deployment of prayer and the ministry of the word in missions is David Brainerd’s journal. Brainerd’s account of his work among the Native American tribes in New England is full of descriptions similar to the following: “July 24—Rode about seventeen miles westward, over a hideous mountain, to a number of Indians. Got together near thirty of them: preached to them in the evening, and lodged among them. Was weak, and felt some degree disconsolate; yet could have no freedom in the thought of any other circumstances of business in life. All my desire was the conversion of the heathen; and all my hope was in God.” “Dec. 7—Spent some time in prayer, in the morning; enjoyed some freedom and affection in the duty, and had longing desires of being made ‘faithful unto death.’” Jonathan Edwards, *Life & Diary of David Brainerd* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 38, 43.

²⁹ This distinction was summarily articulated by Jesus Christ to his disciples in Matthew 28:19–20. He told them to “make disciples” by “baptizing” (conversion) and “teaching” (sanctification).

³⁰ I realize that I might be oversimplifying the distinction between pastors and missionaries. It is not uncommon to find some faithful missionaries whose primary role is to build up believers in the faith. My objective here is to mend misunderstandings about the role of the missionary. Simplifying the matter, I believe, is the first step in eradicating unbiblical ideas about the work of a missionary.

³¹ I am hesitant to bind anyone’s conscience on this point, but I do believe that there is a strong argument to be made that missionaries should meet the same standard as elders. I also recognize that this line of thought results in a flurry of questions about who should be considered a missionary. At this point, I can only offer two recommendations: (1) seek to bring your missions efforts in line with the Scriptures as much as you possibly can; and (2) treat your brothers regarding this matter with overflowing kindness, meekness, and graciousness.

critical than the other. Both require soldiers who are immanently qualified.

Missionaries must be of the highest quality because they are representatives of the local church and of Christ himself in a land that is unfamiliar with the one true and living God. Missionaries represent the one who sends them. They serve as ambassadors representing both the people of God and the kingdom of God. Shall local churches not seek to portray to the nations those who aspire to the noblest of Christian life and practice? Would God not have his representatives be above reproach, sound in doctrine, and worthy of emulation? The difficulties and trials of living among a foreign people are continual. We dare not send out laborers who are ill-suited to withstand the rigors of such work. Those who meet the highest biblical standards are better equipped to endure and to produce lasting fruit.

And what of the identification, examination, and appointment of elders? Many imagine that missionaries are simply evangelists who share the gospel in other cultures. This, of course, is an important aspect of what a missionary does, but it is only one aspect of his calling. Evangelism leads to discipleship, discipleship leads to church planting, and church planting requires the development and appointment of pastors. Is it not foolhardy to send a missionary to appoint elders who must meet a standard that the missionary himself does not meet?

This begs a further question. Can a missionary who has never served faithfully in a pastoral role effectively identify, examine, and appoint future elders? If a missionary has no experiential knowledge of shepherding a flock, how will he teach others to shepherd the flock of God? It seems that it would be wise for local churches to require a missionary to take up pastoral duties in his own *sending* church before going into the mission field.

A final practical reason exists for missionaries to be elder-qualified. It is not uncommon for the Lord to save souls and form them into a local body before

there are any elder-qualified men from within the group to lead. In such cases, the new believers, naturally and rightly, will look to the missionary to shepherd and disciple them. How will he do so unless he is first qualified to assume such a role?

CONCLUSION

Faithful missionary endeavors are those that recognize that God has chosen to save people through the compassionate and prayerful efforts of his church to advance God's kingdom in all nations by sending out missionaries to care for souls through prayer and the ministry of the Word. On a fundamental level, the nature of the role of the missionary is the same as that of the pastor. Nevertheless, the missionary's role is unique because of: (a) his cross-cultural context; and (b) his primary emphasis on cooperating with God for the conversion of souls through evangelism and intercession for the lost. Because of the unique calling and nature of the work of missionaries, churches should exercise great care in sending out only those who demonstrate the calling of God and the spiritual qualifications of those who are fit to oversee the flock. •

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A Case for the Missionary as Preacher

by E. D. Burns

INTRODUCTION¹

In contemporary evangelicalism, there has been a surge (or a “resurgence,” as it has been popularly called) of culturally engaging and doctrinally minded church planters in the United States and around the world. The term “gospel-centered” has become a watchword for many who identify with the values and pathos of this more doctrinal-minded missions movement. In any movement, however, there can be a danger of using common vocabulary and jargon without first defining the meaning behind key terms. In missions, widely used verbiage can often mean different things to different people.

For most individuals who would connect themselves to the “gospel-centered” missions movement, the biblical command to proclaim the gospel remains a priority. However, for others, instead of centering gospel proclamation in the work of the church, the ministry of the Word often becomes connected to generic activity, whether it be mercy ministry, education, lifestyle evangelism, or administration—usually in the context of parachurches. Because of the imprecision in what, exactly, constitutes “gospel-centered” proclamation, a discussion about the philosophy and methodology of gospel proclamation in missions is vital. To be sure, there are a number

of ministries and strategies that fit well under the larger category of kingdom work; however, for the sake of narrowly defining church-centered gospel proclamation for missions, such peripheral ministries will not be in view in this article.

GOSPEL PROCLAMATION AND THE CHURCH'S MISSION

The impulse behind an orientation toward gospel proclamation in missions is a *passion to rouse religious affections for Christ through missions by proclaiming the gospel-centered Word*. This statement is subservient to the church's overall mission statement of the Great Commission. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert have helpfully encapsulated the body of Christ's mission:

The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father.²

For a gospel-proclaiming approach to missions, it is important to locate its philosophy, method, message, effect, and means. The philosophy is that sinners are saved and believers are sanctified through the Word of Christ. The method is

¹ This article is an adapted version of the author's previously published article: E. D. Burns, “Gospel-Proclamation in Missions: A Philosophy and Methodology,” *Global Missiology* 2, no. 12 (January 2015); available online at <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/1754/3895>. Used with permission. Scriptural references in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

² Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 62.

preaching. The message is the gospel-centered Word with its center being the person and work of Christ. The effect is aroused religious affections for Christ the Savior-King. Finally, the means is through targeted missions to the unevangelized and non-discipled.

A philosophy of missions that focuses on gospel proclamation combines reaching the unevangelized with the gospel and teaching those who are saved to live out the gospel. This task necessitates the priority of preaching as the instrument God uses to transform sinners. This particular methodology of missions employs proclaiming the Christ-centered Word in such a way that arouses religious affections for Christ among the unreached and the church.

MINISTRY CONTEXT

In every ministry context, the act of gospel proclamation will look a bit different. If a minister is engaging in first-time evangelism among an unreached people group, the idea of gospel proclamation should be a natural part of evangelism. However, some ministry contexts do not encourage gospel proclamation because certain missionaries perceive it to be an artifact of the Western church. There is an assumption that elder-qualified pastors should remain in their home countries to shepherd churches, while cross-cultural missionaries do not need to be elder-qualified, especially in terms of the qualification of being able to teach (1 Tim 3:2, i.e., skilled in teaching). And so, many missionaries who are indeed elder-qualified with a passion to preach will find themselves feeling useless and out of place after a few years of language-learning and cultural stress. Because of these factors, in certain contexts, few missionaries combine passion, gifting, and elder qualification with actual biblical preaching.

In any missional context, however, the advance of the gospel broadly (evangelism) and the

application of the gospel deeply (discipleship) can be found wherever there is an unapologetic stress on the Word of Christ and preaching. Whether the missionary seeks to evangelize and plant churches in unreached areas or to train believers through discipleship and theological education, both activities should involve gospel proclamation. The culture and the occasion set the *context*, but they should never principally change the *content* (theology) and methodology of the message.

WHY PREACHING?

Numerous missions-oriented strategies use the biblical phrase, “preach the gospel.” But it seems that there is no universal definition of “preaching/proclaiming” assumed by all. Stephen Neill famously said, “[I]f everything is mission, *nothing* is mission.”³ Similarly, if in missions everything is preaching or proclaiming the gospel, then *nothing* is preaching or proclaiming the gospel. Missions debates and discussions rarely deal with what constitutes genuine, biblically defined preaching, and missiologists often defer that discussion to professional pulpiteers, homileticians, or rhetoricians. As a result, the divide between missionary and preacher remains vast. Theologian Eckhard Schnabel aptly says:

Missionary proclamation is never “effective” in the sense that it produces the conditions in which conversions occur, let alone the event of conversion itself. Missionaries, evangelists and teachers who have understood both the scandal of the cross and the irreplaceable and foundational significance of the news of Jesus the crucified and risen Messiah and Savior will not rely on strategies, models, methods or techniques. They rely on the presence of God when they proclaim Jesus Christ, and on the effective power of the Holy Spirit. This dependence on God rather than on methods liberates them from following every new fad,

³ Quoted in DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 15. Emphasis added.

from using only one particular method, from using always the same techniques, and from copying methods and techniques from others whose ministry is deemed successful.⁴

Gospel preaching is our Pauline legacy; we must not surrender the apostolic deposit. Often, and with good reason, discussions of missions strategies deal with degrees of contextualization, cultural relevance, sociological research, intercultural communication, and dynamic equivalence, which can be important issues. Yet, if such discussions are emphasized to the neglect of gospel proclamation, the core method of our missionary calling is in danger of being eclipsed altogether. The methodology of missions is never neutral.

Just as there is a danger of not defining missions biblically (which can lead to viewing every Christian activity as missional), there is a similar danger of not defining preaching biblically. The famous social justice maxim, “Go into the world and preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words,” reveals our woeful ignorance of the biblically prescribed act of preaching the gospel.⁵ It makes as much sense as saying, “Go into all the world and feed the poor, and if necessary, use food.” Works without words will lead the lost only to hell. The preached Word is the engine of missions. David Hesselgrave’s definition of the mission of the church helpfully combines evangelism and discipleship with the chief action being proclamation: “The primary mission of the church, and, therefore, of the churches is to proclaim the gospel of Christ and gather believers into local churches where they can be built up in the faith and made effective in service.”⁶ Similarly, DeYoung and Gilbert argue:

Essentially, the mission of the church is summarized in the Great Commission passages—the climactic marching orders Jesus issues at the ends of the Gospels and at the beginning of Acts. We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling.⁷

Preaching is fundamental for both evangelism *and* discipleship, reaching *and* teaching. This point is made clear by the bookends of Paul’s stated ministry philosophy in Romans, which is essentially a missionary support letter that must be read both theologically and missiologically. In the first bookend of Romans, Paul states that he has been given his apostolic ministry “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:5–6). How does Paul accomplish this task? By preaching the gospel, “for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (v. 16).

In the second bookend of Romans, Paul restates the same idea as in Romans 1 to form a missiologically-theological *inclusio*, circling back around to reaffirm the point with which he began. Paul declares, “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith ...” (Rom 16:25–26). Paul is under obligation

⁴ Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 404.

⁵ Though Francis of Assisi is commonly credited with making this statement, it is just a legend. Francis was actually a powerful street preacher. The closest statement to this comes from his Rule of 1221, Chapter XII on how the Franciscans should practice their preaching: “No brother should preach contrary to the form and regulations of the holy Church nor unless he has been permitted by his minister... All the Friars ... should preach by their deeds.” See Joe Carter, “Factchecker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi,” The Gospel Coalition, July 11, 2012, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/07/11/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>.

⁶ David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 17.

⁷ DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 63.

to preach the gospel in every context. So, he preaches it *evangelistically* to unbelieving Greeks, barbarians, wise, and foolish; likewise, he preaches it *evangelically* as a means of building up the faith of Christians. Paul's philosophy and methodology of missions includes preaching the gospel of Christ for the *evangelism* of the nations and for the *discipleship* of the church. Schnabel explains, "Paul's description of his missionary task focuses on the preaching of the gospel as the primary goal."⁸

WHAT IS GOSPEL PROCLAMATION?

For the sake of clarifying this Pauline missionary methodology, we must biblically define "preaching/proclamation."⁹ In the New Testament, preaching is the predominant (though not exclusive) method of communicating the gospel.¹⁰ In 1 Corinthians Paul defends both the centrality of the gospel and the centrality of preaching the gospel to believers and unbelievers alike. He uses at least four different verbs to portray such action:

1. "[F]or Christ did not send me to baptize but to *preach the gospel*" (1 Cor 1:17)—*euangelizō*: "to announce good news ... proclaim, to preach."¹¹
2. "[I]t pleased God through the folly of what we *preach* to save those who believe" (1:21)—*kērussō*: "to proclaim aloud, to publicly announce ... an authoritative and public announcement that demands compliance."¹²
3. "I did not come *proclaiming* to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom" (2:1)—*katangellō*: "to announce, with focus upon the extent to which the

announcement or proclamation extends."¹³

4. "[M]y message and my *preaching* were not in persuasive words of wisdom" (2:4)—*kērugma*: "proclamation, preaching ... the phenomena of a call which goes out and makes a claim upon its hearers."¹⁴

It is helpful to differentiate between preaching and other positive missionary methodologies. Preaching includes teaching. Yet, it also entails text-based application and urgent appeals to repentance, faith, and obedience. Teaching, however, is not always preaching. Teaching is the communication of truth in a clear, reasonable way, which informs and reminds hearers. Preaching takes what is taught and presses it in a convicting, comforting, and challenging way. Preaching implores for a response. Teaching asks about the text, "What does this passage mean in its historical, literary, and theological context?" Preaching asks this same question and more. It moreover asks about the text, "What was the Holy Spirit's purpose in inspiring this text, and what is he saying to us today? How is the Holy Spirit using this truth to lay a claim upon me and the people entrusted to me?"

God summons all men everywhere to repent and believe (Acts 17:30). Once they have done so, they are expected to live a life of continual repentance and belief. Preaching is the method that the gospel (*evangel*) demands. Proclamation essentially seeks to elicit a response of repentance and belief. Pauline-esque proclamation is necessary because of the nature

⁸ Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 210.

⁹ I cannot claim originality in my convictions about what constitutes solid preaching. The following is a distillation of what I have learned from professors, pastors, and colleagues over the years. I am grateful to the churchmen in my life who have pushed me to view preaching as my central task as a missionary.

¹⁰ See the pervasive use of "preach" and "proclaim" in Matthew 3:1; 4:17, 23; 9:35; 10:7, 27; 11:1, 5; 12:18, 41; 23:3; 24:14; 26:13, and in Mark 1:4, 7, 14, 38–39, 45; 2:2; 3:14; 5:20; 6:12; 7:36; 13:10; 14:9; 16:15, 20.

¹¹ Walter Bauer et al., eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. "euangelizō."

¹² Colin Brown, ed. *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), s.v. "kērussō."

¹³ J. P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), s.v. "katangellō."

¹⁴ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 10th ed., vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), s.v. "kērugma."

of the gospel call; it is a divine command, not a pious suggestion.

In missions, our evangelistic preaching (i.e., evangelism) and evangelical preaching (i.e., discipleship) must not be more culturally relevant than God. If a Jew, Muslim, or Buddhist were to hear our moral or theocentric communication and agree with it without feeling conviction from everything we say, we have not communicated the *evangel*. In such a scenario, we would have failed to call attention to Christ. Paul says there are three possible responses to the gospel when it is proclaimed faithfully, communicated clearly, and understood truly: it is foolishness, offensive, or the wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:23–25). It is not an opinion. It is the truth whether anyone believes it or not.

Gospel proclamation is verbal communication characterized by the following: It is Christ-centered in its interpretation of Scripture; it is biblical truth mediated by the Spirit (through the missionary) in the God-created cultural and linguistic context; its immediate purpose is to draw out appropriate human responses; and its ultimate purpose is to glorify God. Preaching the gospel does not consist of merely sharing a story, using trendy communication techniques, or engaging in an open-ended religious conversation. Preaching is declaring truth in a way that directly, unambiguously, and urgently demonstrates the burning Word of the Lord. It fundamentally reveals God to people in their particular context. The central means of God's self-revelation in the Bible is his speech. Preaching involves rearticulating God's speech.

GOSPEL PROCLAMATION IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

In the contemporary American Christian worldview, preaching is almost always associated

with a formally trained minister standing in a pulpit, teaching topically or expositively, in an established church, and to a Christianized audience. The biblical understanding of preaching is not limited, though, to a professional orator standing in a formal atmosphere, addressing educated and literate people, with a sound system, in a church building, on Sunday, and in a country that was founded upon principles of religious freedom. The form and style of the preaching act can vary depending on the audience, occasion, time period, nationality, and culture; however, the content and substance of the preaching act is biblically prescribed and transcultural, and indeed, it is the apostolic philosophy that drives apostolic methodology.

The apostles preached Christ to unbelievers (Acts 20:21); they also preached Christ to believers publicly and from house to house (v. 20). The apostle Paul would stand in the public square or Jewish synagogue and contend for the gospel with unbelievers. He would also disciple leaders in house churches through more personal forms of preaching. Whether he was sitting in a home with believers, equipping local elders, or standing up in a public theater or square, he proclaimed the gospel from every corner of the Scriptures. He demanded the same response from everyone—repentance of sins and faith alone in the resurrected Lord.¹⁵

HOW DOES THE BIBLE PRESCRIBE PREACHING FOR MISSIONS?

We must contend for preaching Christ because it is the chief theological method and means prescribed in Scripture for evangelism and discipleship. It is sufficient for communicating the gospel to both unbelievers and believers, for reaching and teaching, for evangelizing and disciple-making. Because we often narrow the context of preaching to a formal

¹⁵ For a further study of the apostolic message and method of preaching, see Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8; 5:2; 8:5, 35; 9:20; 10:40–42; 11:20; 13:26–39; 15:35–36; 17:1–3, 16–18; 18:5; 19:13; 20:18–21; 26:19–23; Rom 1:15; 10:14; 1 Cor 1:17, 23; 9:14–18; 15:12–15; 2 Cor 4:5; Gal 1:8–9; Eph 3:8; Col 1:24–25, 28.

act in an already-established church, we overlook the fact that preaching is also the chief theological method and means prescribed in Scripture for the mission field. It is the primary task of ministers of the gospel, both at home and abroad. Accordingly, there are five truths we need to highlight about gospel proclamation.

First, one very succinct statement of Paul's missionary philosophy and methodology is: "We proclaim him, warning and teaching you with all wisdom" (Col 1:28). Since all Scripture (including the Old Testament) is able to make one wise unto salvation in Christ (2 Tim 3:15), all Scripture is sufficient to equip the man of God to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). This is done primarily through preaching the Christ-centered Word (2 Tim 4:2).¹⁶

Second, Christ demonstrated that preaching was paramount in his ministry. He called people to repentance and faith (Mark 1:15; Matt 4:17) and proclaimed the message of the gospel (Matt 4:23). As Isaiah 61:1–2 prophesied, Jesus was anointed to evangelize, to proclaim liberty, and to preach the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18–19). Throughout his ministry, Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom.

Third, it is the missionary's holy duty to preach Christ. Jesus commanded his disciples to go into all nations and proclaim the gospel (Matt 28:18–20). The apostles were compelled by the fact that Christ "commanded us to preach to the people" (Acts 10:42), which shows that Christ underscored the communicative *act* of preaching itself, not only the content to be preached.

Fourth, preaching the gospel is the principal method of apostolic practice. The apostles were relentless

in their commitment to preach Christ every day, from house to house (Acts 5:42; 20:20). Paul often went first to the synagogues to preach Christ (Acts 9:20; 13:4; 17:1–3). The apostles insisted that their primary mandate, even above ministries of service and mercy, was to preach the Word (Acts 6:2–4). Those who labored in preaching and teaching were worthy of double honor (1 Tim 5:17). Paul's life was marked by preaching the gospel (Acts 19:23; 20:18–20), and in preaching the gospel, the apostles were to earn their living (1 Cor 9:14–18).

Fifth, when the Christ-centered Word is preached, God speaks with authority and urgency. Jesus says, "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16). Paul's ministry was one of imploring men to be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:19–20). He was earnest in his pleading and preaching. Now we are his ambassadors, and God makes his appeal through us when we implore men to be reconciled to him.

Furthermore, this truth is seen even more clearly in Romans 10:14 when Paul says, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" (cf. NASB). Note the specific language here: "How will they believe in *him whom* they have not heard?" When the missionary preaches, people hear *God*. When the missionary proclaims from the Word of God, it is *God* who speaks through his human mouthpiece. If believers and unbelievers alike are to believe in the gospel of God and obey it, they need to hear God. They will grow in their faith as disciples when they hear God speak. And they will hear God speak when the missionary declares the Word of Christ (Rom 10:17).

¹⁶ Roland Allen perceptively comments: "We do not as a rule find it easy to teach heathen converts to use the Old Testament properly even when they have the whole New Testament with which to illuminate it. It does not seem to us the most convenient of text-books [sic] to put into the hands of new converts.... [Yet] St Paul plainly lectured using the Old Testament as his text-book [sic]." Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 88–89.

The main barriers to conversion and discipleship are not ultimately sociological or cultural. They are theological. Moreover, they are ecclesiological. A developed ecclesiology that sends out elder-qualified missionary-preachers is necessary for the gospel to run and triumph among the nations through the proclaimed Word.

A PERSONAL EXAMPLE OF GOSPEL PROCLAMATION IN MISSIONS

Serving in Southeast Asia, the focus of my missionary labor is primarily discipleship—training indigenous pastors and Christian leaders. It is a specialized ministry that focuses mainly on training already-existing pastors and missionaries through theological education. The courses are one-week intensives so that the pastors and missionaries can remain in their ministry roles.¹⁷ If church-planting were like designing and building a car at a manufacturing plant, then theological education would be like fine-tuning and repairing a worn-down car at an automotive shop. My missionary role is more like a mechanic than an engineer. Because of the specialized context of my ministry with already-existing pastors, I apply my philosophy and methodology of proclamation differently than if I were pioneering and church-planting. My philosophy of gospel proclamation through the seminary where I teach seeks to accomplish for Asian pastors/missionaries what Hesselgrave recommends: “We must find ways of bringing the church and the school closer together by providing training where churches exist and where they are yet to be established.”¹⁸

Preaching the gospel is my method of discipleship, but I must consciously adapt it for the audience, culture, and occasion. In the classroom I do not preach three-point sermons as might be culturally

appropriate in an American church. When I am in front of my students, I train them how to understand Scripture (hermeneutics, biblical theology, canonical theology, systematic theology, and historical theology); I teach them practically how to apply and obey Scripture (spirituality, ethics, pastoral theology, evangelism/discipleship, and missions); and I train them how to teach/preach Scripture (homiletics and teaching principles). I push them to think like a scribe and burn like a prophet—to display, in the words of David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “logic on fire.” I train my students in a manner consistent with their God-given calling to be missionaries, pastors, and evangelists (i.e., not laymen).¹⁹

Consequently, the form and structure of my ministry is that of a formal professor, but the substance and pathos of my communication is that of a gospel preacher. As Paul modeled in each of his epistles, my aim is to teach gospel doctrine and to proclaim its gospel application—gospel truths first, holy commands second; orthodoxy first, orthopraxy second.²⁰ I aim to teach theology in such a way that it lays claim on my students to rest in Christ, the Savior-King, and to obey his gospel. My goal is that the pastors would be competent to proclaim the Word and likewise train their churches. My desire is that my students would learn to keep Christ’s Word (Matt 28:20) by hearing from Christ in the Christ-centered text in order to be built up in faith (Rom 10:17; John 17:17).

CONCLUSION

Gospel proclamation is the predominant missionary method prescribed in Scripture, though not to the exclusion of other edifying ministries. It is a work that should flow out from the local church as it is undertaken by gifted and qualified

¹⁷ An “advantage of a short training course is that there is less danger of overloading the student with knowledge beyond his spiritual capacity. Training should keep pace with spiritual development.” Melvin Hodges, *On the Mission Field: The Indigenous Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), 55.

¹⁸ Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*, 107.

¹⁹ For an important distinction between the training of laity and the training of clergy when it comes to discipleship, see Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*, 105.

²⁰ Compare the similar ministry philosophy advocated in Tom A. Steffen, *Passing the Baton: Church Planting that Empowers* (LaHabra, CA: Center for Organizational & Ministry Development, 1993), 197.

men. Thus, we can call it a churchly work and a manly task. Missionaries will not aspire to such an elder-qualified preaching office without their home church's encouragement and guidance. Overall, the work of a gospel-proclaiming missionary is, ultimately, to bring glory to God in Christ by bearing fruit through preaching. This requires being mighty in prayer and the Word (Acts 6:2–4; 1 Tim 4:15). It is Christ who powerfully works in the missionary (Col 1:28–29) to preach the gospel—reproving, rebuking, exhorting, with complete patience (2 Tim 4:2). For the missionary, no other means of communication is adequate to convey the eternal urgency and the divine gravity of God's gospel. For how will both unbelievers and believers alike hear God speak—unless someone preaches the Word of Christ? •

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“Fellow Workers for the Truth”: The Relationship between Missionaries and Missionary-Supporters in 2 and 3 John

by Taylor Walls

INTRODUCTION

All that we have in this life soon will be gone! The money in our wallets, the goods in our charge, and the stocks in our portfolios will pass away in the blink of an eye. No amount of diversification can shield us from this inevitable end. For the person whose hope is in this present life and in material belongings, such a thought is, no doubt, bleak and depressing. However, God’s Word teaches us that temporal possessions can be invested in a treasure that never diminishes and never fades (Matt 6:19–21). There are many important ways in which Christians can invest their fleeting resources in activities that carry eternal spiritual value.¹ This article will focus on one specific type of eternal investment that appears in the teaching of 2 and 3 John, namely, the call of Christians to support missions through financial backing.

The Second and Third Epistles of John are often overlooked in expository sermon series and

Bible studies. It’s easy to pass over these books because they only fill up two or three pages in most Bibles. 2 John is the shortest book of the Bible with respect to verses, while 3 John is the shortest book with respect to words in the original language. Though pithy, these letters contain crucial teaching on relationships in the body of Christ, necessary steps to confront sin and false teaching, and godly goals for healthy interaction between congregations. In 3 John 5–8, John provides details about the report that he has heard concerning his beloved friend Gaius, and he concludes with an illuminating principle about missionary support that serves as a guide for churches and missionaries today. In the teaching of 3 John (in conjunction with 2 John), we find important, paradigm-shifting teaching concerning: (1) requirements for missionaries; (2) encouragement for missionary-supporters; and (3) reflections on the profound partnership between missionaries and missionary-supporters.

¹ Some of these activities include serving the poor and needy, particularly those in the household of faith (Gal 2:10; Eph 4:28; Jas 1:27), supporting the ministers of the local church (Gal 6:6; 1 Cor 9), and showing hospitality to fellow Christians (Rom 12:13), among other endeavors.

REQUIREMENTS FOR MISSIONARIES

In 3 John 7–8a, John says, “For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these”² In this passage, we see that John is setting out a particular category of Christians who should be supported by fellow believers and local churches. He gives two main characteristics that every missionary should embody before being sent out or supported by a Christian church—the missionary acts “for the sake of the name,” and he conducts his ministry in a manner whereby he “accepts nothing from the Gentiles.”

“For the Sake of the Name”

John says that missionaries should receive support “for they have gone out for the sake of the name” (3 John 7a). The “name” in this verse is a reference to the name of Christ (cf. Acts 5:41; 9:16; 15:26; 21:13; Rom 1:5; Phil 2:9)—the precious name that has been exalted above all others both in heaven and on earth (Phil 2:9), and the name for which the apostles rejoiced to be counted worthy to suffer (Acts 5:41).³ In the context of John’s writings, this name should be viewed with a particular focus in light of his twin themes of “truth” and “love.”

John views truth and love from three main perspectives: (1) a proper doctrinal understanding—a confession of Christ having come in the flesh from the Father and for the propitiation of believers’ sins; (2) a proper way of living—obedience to God’s commandments and a proper reflection of what believers have received from him in the gospel; and (3) a proper personal relationship, both vertical and horizontal—having

fellowship with God through the Spirit and fellowship with his people.⁴ John summarizes these ideas in 1 John 3:23–24.

First, John’s understanding of truth and love includes a doctrinal standard. John was concerned with the faithful preservation of the true apostolic teaching concerning Christ. Unfortunately, at such an early stage in the church’s development, there were already many who had forsaken the truth about Christ but continued to act in his name and in the name of his churches. We see this reality most clearly in 2 John 9–11:

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

There were some missionaries in John’s day who were making the rounds in various churches, seeking to take advantage of Christian hospitality and generosity, and, at the same time, infecting congregations with the poison of their false teaching.⁵ Like a parasite, these men were latching on to a church and enjoying its life and nutrients but leaving disease and pain in their wake. In the context, John says that they “do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh” (2 John 7). John has very strong words for how a church should treat such pseudo-missionaries.⁶ Faithful churches should not show such men Christian

² Scriptural references in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

³ Darian R. Lockett correctly notes: “The Name [sic] refers to the name Jesus Christ; thus these are missionaries proclaiming the good news of the gospel, which the elder understands as Jesus Christ come in the flesh and as keeping the commandments.” Darian R. Lockett, *Letters for the Church: Reading James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, and Jude as Canon* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 182.

⁴ Robert W. Yarbrough summarizes these three aspects of truth in John’s teaching in a similar way: “John’s Letters we may think of truth in terms of the sum of the teaching, the ethics, and the love that Christ has brought into the world and that humans are called on to receive and then live out.” Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 375.

⁵ Stephen S. Smalley sums up such nefarious activities by noting: “The implication is thus that, whereas the orthodox followers of Jesus are sent out into the world to preach the truth, the heretics went out, as itinerant emissaries of the devil, to teach error and gain converts for their own cause.” Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary 51 (Dallas: Word, 1984), 328.

⁶ I. Howard Marshall states: “There could be no stronger condemnation of error and deceit in the realm of Christian doctrine. But it should be noted

hospitality, they should not contribute to their ministries, and they should not welcome them (i.e., in the sense of extending brotherly recognition). The reality is that to support such men would be equivalent to participating with them in their wicked teaching.⁷ Any missionary sent or supported should be examined, first and foremost, with respect to doctrine to ensure that what is being taught is in accordance with the truth of Christ delivered through the apostles.

Second, John is just as concerned with how doctrine affects one's life. If we say that we know the one who is light, but we walk in darkness, we are liars (1 John 1:5–6). In John's rejection of the false teachers, he combines his criticism of their errant teaching about Christ with a concern about their "wicked works." For John, a true understanding of the gospel produces a life of love and obedience to God's commands, and a deviation from gospel doctrine will result in disobedience and sin. For this reason, any missionary sent or supported should be examined with respect to his life, to ensure that one's course of behavior is in accordance with the gospel.

Third, John understands truth and love as a reality that is visible in the context of an individual's fellowship with God and his people. When we walk in the truth and live according to the truth, God abides in us, and we abide in him. Though it is difficult to measure or examine the internal and personal relationship a man has with God, John mentions one area of examination that is more easily accessible. In 2 John 4 and in 3 John 3, 6, and 12, John talks about the testimony that

is given by other Christians. A missionary should not simply have a personal profession of truth and love but should also have the testimony of *other Christians* who can bear witness to his truth and love. The missionary already should have displayed these characteristics in the life of fellowship and communion with his fellow believers who can attest to this reality.

Though it is impossible to peer into a person's soul, our motivations and desires often reflect what is there. For this reason, John talks about missionaries who went out "for the sake of the name." Primarily, they were motivated by a love and submission to Christ. They wanted to heed his call, fulfill his commands, and serve his people. They were not motivated by money or fame or glory (cf. 1 Thess 2:3–6), rather they were motivated by a deep love for Christ and his church. They simply wanted to serve Christ in the opportunities he provided and with the gifts that he had given.

"Accepting Nothing from the Gentiles"

The second characteristic that John mentions of the missionaries who should be supported is that they did not accept anything from the Gentiles (3 John 7b). In other words, in the ministries of these men, they did not receive material help from pagan unbelievers. John is not talking about people only wanting to receive help from ethnically Jewish individuals as opposed to Gentile individuals.⁸ Rather, John affirms that these missionaries only received assistance from *spiritual Jews*, the people of God. This phrase points to two important considerations for missionaries and the churches that would support them.

that the elder's attack is on those who strike at the heart of Christian belief, not at those who may have happened to differ from him on theological points of lesser importance. When, however, the central citadel of the faith is under attack, there is need for clear speaking." I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 71–72.

⁷ Yarbrough's insights add clarity to the cultural context behind John's counsel: "In John's house-church setting, to receive opponents of Christian belief into your home meant granting to them and their doctrine the honor and respect that are due only to true Christian faith and practice.... John's point is that they stand for something else. What they stand for calls for different treatment. It is entirely consistent, on the other hand, when he commends support for traveling Christian workers who are faithful to 'the name' and 'fellow workers for the truth' (3 John 5–8)." Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 351.

⁸ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, New American Commentary 38 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 243.

On the one hand, John excludes from material support those who have wicked motivations concerning money.⁹ He excludes anyone who views missionary service as a means to becoming rich. When greed is the motivation, people will be willing to compromise truth and love to ensure that they reach their avaricious aim. Missionaries and pastors should never be motivated by money as the basis or goal of their ministries. In other words, missionaries, and similarly, pastors, should never labor *because* others pay them nor should they ever labor *so that* others will pay them. John also excludes deceitfulness in seeking funds for personal gain or for ministry that won't really take place. This principle reminds us of one of the qualifications for a church elder in which it is said that he should "not [be] a lover of money" (1 Tim 3:3) nor "greedy for gain" (Titus 1:7).

On the other hand, John encourages material support for those who will be responsible and honest with their funds. We are all stewards of the resources that God has given us, but missionaries should see themselves as special stewards of God's resources and those of his people. Missionaries must show themselves faithful and responsible in their use of the Lord's resources. The trustworthy one who is sent out from a congregation should give an honest account of how funds are used, as well as a tangible demonstration that resources are being utilized in the most productive and fruitful ways.

To summarize, Christians should actively seek to support and send out missionaries who hold and teach sound doctrine, who live according to that doctrine, who enjoy a good testimony among God's

people, and who are motivated by a love for Christ and his people. In addition, missionaries should be responsible financially and should show themselves good stewards of the investment that Christ's churches are making in missional endeavors.

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR MISSIONARY-SUPPORTERS

In 3 John, John also portrays what missionary support reveals about Christian character, he provides advice for how support should be given, and he presents a stark contrast between willing missionary-supporters and those who reject the opportunity when it becomes available. This letter is not written as a desperate attempt to solicit funds from an inactive and uninvolved believer; rather, 3 John is a type of thank-you letter and a word of encouragement for a Christian man, Gaius, who *already* has been active in supporting the brothers who had gone out for the sake of the name.

First, John points out numerous commendable traits in the character of Gaius that are demonstrated through his faithful and generous support of Christian missionaries. In 3 John 3 and 6 we see that "the brothers" had given a stirring report to John's church about the support that they had received from Gaius. In accordance with John's main themes, the missionaries said that Gaius faithfully demonstrated "truth" (v. 3) and "love" (v. 6). Likewise, John says that what he is doing is a "faithful thing" (v. 5).¹⁰ We are called as Christians to walk in love and in a way consistent with the truth that we believe. One way that the Christian manner of life is displayed is through

⁹ The *Didache*, one of the earliest Christian writings (stemming from the late-first century or early-second century AD), provides evidence that there were itinerate missionaries/teachers who took advantage of the type of Christian hospitality that John praises in 2 and 3 John. Such men overstayed their welcome and sought financial gain from fellow brothers. The *Didache* attests to the widespread nature of the missionary phenomenon and gives encouragement for the proper support of genuine brothers, as well as the dangers against which Christians should guard themselves (*Didache*, 11–12).

¹⁰ Hospitality was an important practice, both in the Christian community and in ancient Roman culture. The importance of hospitality can be seen in the frequent biblical commands to practice it (Heb 13:1–2; Rom 12:13; 1 Pet 4:9), in Old Testament examples (Gen 18:1–8; 2 Kgs 4:8–10), and in accounts that disparage the lack thereof (Gen 19; Judg 19). Colin Kruse helps to illuminate the cultural practice of hospitality in the first century AD. See Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 215–16; cf. also Akin, 1, 2, 3 John, 271–72. Another work that describes the cultural context of hospitality that lies behind the directives of 2 and 3 John, in addition to other biblical passages, is Andrew Arterbery, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005).

generosity and hospitality to other Christians and, in this context, to missionaries.

Through hearing of the support that Gaius gave to these brothers, John was convinced that he was walking according to the truth that he had received. Gaius's actions in receiving these brothers—even though he had never met them—emulated the compassion of Christ. Gaius housed them, fed them, and helped them along their journey with the provisions they needed, demonstrating the love of God.¹¹ The Christian who believes the gospel and lives according to that truth will exude generosity and hospitality to those in need and in service to Christ.¹² Such conduct happens because the gospel itself is a picture of generosity and hospitality. The gospel is the glorious story of how God receives strangers, even sinners, into his family and adopts them as his children through the perfect work of Christ and then, through Christ, freely gives them all things (Rom 8:32).¹³

Second, John petitions that Gaius would continue to show generosity to these brothers as they serve Christ and his kingdom “in a manner worthy of God” (3 John 6). John's request communicates to Gaius that he, as a Christian, should seek to love others in a manner consistent with someone who has been loved generously by God himself. What God gives to believers he calls believers to give to others. So, as we have received love and help from God, it is a fitting and faithful practice, founded upon our profession of faith in the gospel, to show love and help to God's people, especially those who have dedicated their life to his name.

There is a parallel between this idea of receiving strangers and an instruction that Christ gives in Matthew 25:37–40:

Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

Christ so loves his people that when even the smallest of them is loved and served, Christ receives that service as though it were done to him directly. This glorious reality ought to change our perspective about service in our local church and support of missionaries. Small acts of service and love are performed for those who are eternally and infinitely loved by Christ, those who “have gone out for the sake of the name.” Therefore, as Christians we should ensure that we serve and love our brothers in a manner that is commensurate to serving Christ himself. In fact, that is exactly how Christ views acts of Christian love. Such acts exclude any desire for vainglory, usury, putting people into our debt because of love shown, envy, stinginess, or neglect. Instead, these acts encourage a deep, interested, intentional, and overflowing generous love for “the least of these” in our local church and toward the missionary serving overseas.

Third, as we talk about the proper way Christians should display the love of Christ, especially in its particular expression of support for missionaries,

¹¹ Marshall describes some of the ways in which care for missionaries might have manifested itself in the first century AD: “Sending the missionaries on their way involved providing for their journey—supplying them with food and money to pay for their expenses, washing their clothes, and generally helping them to travel as comfortably as possible.... [I]t was perhaps more important to remind the churches not to treat the missionaries like beggars and so bring discredit on the name of the God to whom they were looking for their support.” Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 85–86. A parallel to this type of hospitality is found in the lodging that Paul hoped to receive from Philemon upon his next journey to Colosse (Phlm 22).

¹² Marshall asserts: “Christians must love one another. This is the basis of Christian living to which all believers constantly need to be recalled. For the elder it meant practical, costly caring for the needy, even readiness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of others (1 Jn. 3:16–18); but at the same time it included real affection for one's fellow-believers.” Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 67.

¹³ A contemporary book that develops the gospel nature of hospitality is Rosaria Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

we are struck by the great contrast between the attitude shown by Gaius and the example of Diotrephes. After praising Gaius and encouraging him to continue his good work, John calls out Diotrephes and rebukes him:

I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church. (3 John 9–10)

Diotrephes did not live in a manner consistent with the gospel. In fact, his lack of love called into question his profession of faith. In light of John's teaching in this letter and in 2 John, if Diotrephes really believed the gospel, wouldn't his actions have been different?¹⁴ Diotrephes was self-promoting—a church leader “who likes to put himself first.” His denial of support for others was part of a program that advanced his own self-promotion. Diotrephes was more interested in using his resources for his own advancement or, perhaps, in only helping the brothers if it would result in some favor for him. While Gaius displayed the unconditional love and grace of the gospel, Diotrephes, on the other hand, esteemed his own personal glory as the driving force for his actions.

Diotrephes was self-affirming and acted as an island to himself in ministry—John clearly asserts that he “does not acknowledge our authority.” Diotrephes set himself above even the apostles and was not willing to receive letters of recommendation from one of Christ's churches. Though John and the other apostles had taught about these things and had given testimony to these brothers, Diotrephes still refused to receive

them or support them. Not only that, but in John's words, Diotrephes went as far as “talking wicked nonsense against us.” He did not just set aside John's command and testimony, but he even slighted and rejected John's teaching in favor of his own opinions. Unlike Gaius, Diotrephes would not receive the traveling missionaries of Christ. In fact, he treated them in a way that was only fit for false teachers who were eroding the foundation of the Christian faith. In light of the description above from Matthew 25, a harsh judgment awaits men like Diotrephes who refuse to receive and support those whom Christ himself loves—for in so doing, they reject Christ himself.

This contrast between Gaius and Diotrephes is instructive for missionary-supporters. They should seek to “imitate the good” that they see in Gaius (3 John 11) and avoid the wicked selfishness of Diotrephes. They should check their motivations and remove all vainglory, self-promotion, and power-hungry position-seeking. They should seek to serve Christ with the stewardship he has given and to show the love that they have received from God himself to God's people. They should seek to serve as though serving Christ directly. The goods that believers have—homes, furniture, money, property—are all a stewardship from God. And God is so gracious that he has given us an opportunity to turn temporal items that will soon pass away into heavenly and eternal treasure. This proposition prepares us for the final point that John makes in 3 John 5–8.

REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE OF THE PROFOUND PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN MISSIONARIES AND MISSIONARY-SUPPORTERS

After talking about the nature of the men who should receive support as missionaries and providing advice on the proper way to support them (along with behaviors to avoid), John

¹⁴ The problem with Diotrephes is not simply that he failed to demonstrate polite hospitality to the traveling missionaries. The matter is much graver. Yarbrough rightly notes, “The picture that emerges ... is rather a case of Diotrephes having already thrown down a gauntlet of defiance when it comes ... to the person of John” in terms of John's teaching and directives. Nothing less than standing with conviction as an ally for God's truth—or refusing to do so—is at stake here. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 379.

makes an incredible statement that should fuel the partnership between missionaries and their supporters. This statement is found in 3 John 8: “Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.”

The number of men called into vocational service of Christ through formal pastoral ministry or missionary service is few.¹⁵ Though all Christians are called to shine the light of Christ, to share the hope that is within them, and to take part in the process of disciple-making, some are specifically called to “go out for the sake of the name.” When such Christians meet the missionary requirements discussed above, fellow believers should seek to support them in a manner worthy of God. Remarkably, when a relationship of strategic support and mutual love forms between missionary and supporter, there is a profound partnership in this Christ-exalting labor—so much so that the two groups may be called “fellow workers.”¹⁶

No genuine missionary is called to his own idiosyncratic, self-determined mission. The mission belongs to one higher; it is *Christ’s* mission, and this mission is fulfilled by the cooperation of those sent and their supporters. When a church sends out a missionary, it is not so that he can fulfill his own personal calling and ambition; rather, the missionary is only a particularization of the church’s mission as a whole. The missionary is a visible extension of the local church’s attempts to fulfill the mission that Christ has given to his church. The missionary

is made a steward of the investment of Christ’s people, and when he has proven himself faithful in this area, that investment will pay dividends in the advance of Christ’s kingdom and will result in praise and joy among believers.

John says that missionary-supporters should give in such a way that they too might be co-laborers with the truth (3 John 8). The word “co-workers” is used elsewhere to describe those who were actively serving alongside of other great missionaries, like the apostle Paul (Rom 16:3, 9, 21; 1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25, 4:3; Col 4:11; 1 Thess 3:2; Phlm 1, 24).¹⁷ By using this descriptor, John highlights the fact that “[s]upport of Gaius’s traveling workers, and others like them, is one way to join the ranks of illustrious brethren like those named above and so express love for God.”¹⁸

Just as one can be a co-laborer in righteous endeavors, so too one can be a co-laborer in wickedness. We are reminded of John’s warning about supporting false teachers in 2 John 10–11. When support is given to false teachers, believers participate, inadvertently, in their wicked deeds. Contrastingly, when Christians support faithful missionaries who preach the truth and submit to Christ and seek to carry out his mission, they intentionally participate in the fulfillment of Christ’s call to his church. We are all stewards, and our stewardship is limited. Therefore, we should always seek to make sure that our resources

¹⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (1979; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 169. Boice cites the words of William Barclay that are also very helpful on this point: “A man’s circumstances may be such that he cannot become a missionary or a preacher. Life may have put him in a position where he must get on with a secular job, and where he must stay in the one place, and carry out the routine duties of life and living. But where he cannot go his money and his prayers and his practical support can go; and, if he gives that support, he has made himself an ally of the truth. It is not everyone who can be, so to speak, in the front line; but every man by supporting those who are in the front line can make himself an ally of the truth” (169–70).

¹⁶ Lockett summarizes: “Of course, ‘such people’ are the brothers ... who are missionaries, likely coming from the elder’s church. The elder states clearly that supporting them, through offering hospitality, is to be “coworkers” (*synergos*) with them in their mission. Paul specifically uses the term *synergos* to describe those who helped him in spreading the gospel message (Rom 16:3, 9, 21; Phil 2:25; 4:3; 1 Thess 3:2).” Lockett, *Letters for the Church*, 183.

¹⁷ Thomas Andrew Bennett highlights the glory of being co-laborers for the truth when he says, “The era of the darkness has passed its zenith and is being replaced by the era of light. Wherever the Spirit of Truth goes, the darkness gives way, and the true ordering of the universe according to the nature and character of the Father and the Son is revealed. The Christian community is united in promoting the reign of this true ordering, and whenever Christians aid one another in doing so, they become coworkers or colleagues or co-laborers.” Thomas Andrew Bennett, *1–3 John*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 124.

¹⁸ Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 375.

are given to missionaries who have met the requirements listed above and who promote causes consistent with Christ's mission.

I think an apt illustration of this principle is found in investments in stocks. When someone invests significantly in the stock of a certain company, he now has a particular interest in the affairs and success of that business. He wants to see that business make good decisions, innovate, and prosper. In this way, as the business prospers, his stock in the company increases and his money is being put to good use. In a similar way, missionary-supporters should see their backing, both financial and spiritual, as a real investment in that ministry. There is something more at stake than merely sending a check to a missions agency and claiming to have fulfilled one's part in missions. When you support a missionary, you should be personally interested in the advance and fruit of his ministry. You should pray for his success, encourage him in his work, and long to hear the reports of how God has used him as an "investment" to give a return. That return might be in souls saved, Christians sanctified, men trained for ministry, churches established, or the needy helped.

As we began this article, we faced the grim reality that all that we possess on earth has an expiration date in which it will pass away to nothing (Jas 1:10–11). The worst fear of anyone who owns stock is that the company in which he is invested might declare bankruptcy and close shop. In that case, all the stock purchased would be completely useless. However, God has given us a way to ensure that what we have as a stewardship from him will outlive a market crash. When we invest our money, resources, and time in supporting the advance of God's kingdom at home and abroad, something temporal and fleeting can accrue eternal value. Along these lines, Philip Graham Ryken says, "God invites us to be venture capitalists for the kingdom of God."¹⁹ What a gracious and kind prospect! God

has made a way so that we never have to fear loss, since, if we are good stewards of our possessions through generosity, hospitality, and support of mission work, we can turn earthly currency into heavenly treasure. Only God can make this exchange, and he has made it available to all those who love Christ, his people, and his kingdom.

CONCLUSION

If you serve as a supporter of missionaries, is your backing done in a manner worthy of God? Do you view your support as a true partnership for God's kingdom in which you are personally invested? Do you accompany your financial support with other acts of love to ensure the advance of God's kingdom and the full acquisition of the harvest? Do you pray that God would convert earthly gifts into heavenly riches? Do you, at the same time, love your missionaries and support them as a fellow laborer through prayer, encouragement, visits, and promulgation of news to other churches? Are you grateful and faithful in your role of being a missionary-supporter in expanding Christ's kingdom? There are those willing to go down into the mine, but to use the metaphor of the iconic missionary William Carey, there is also a great need for churches and Christians to "hold the rope." Believer, will you hold the rope for the missionaries whom God has brought into your life? •

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¹⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 256.

Not a One-Local-Church Job: The Practical Benefits of Strong Interchurch Relationships in Missions

by Salvador Gomez

INTRODUCTION

The Lord wishes and desires the unity of his people. Jesus's intercessory prayer in John 17 is answered not only in the unity of a single local church, but also in the unity that different churches experience in relationship to one another. We could provide many reasons for fostering and cultivating solid relationships between churches, but making Christ known is undoubtedly the most important reason for Christian congregations to be unified. The Lord prayed that believers may "be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that you sent me" (John 17:23).¹ It is through the proclamation of the gospel that we will make Christ known to the world. Accordingly, churches should work together toward that end.

The Great Commission is a charge that the Lord gave to all his disciples (Matt 28:18–20). All of us have the assigned task of being faithful disciples who, in turn, make disciples. But we must also look at the corporate aspect of that mission. All churches must be active participants

in Christ's missional mandate of disciple-making among the nations. The purpose of this article is to encourage good and healthy relationships between churches with a view to helping each other fulfill Christ's Great Commission task. If we are to "make disciples of *all nations*," the only way to fulfill Jesus's mandate is for a multitude of churches to get involved. No single church has the giftedness, the manpower, or the resources to complete the task alone.²

We only need to take a look at the New Testament letters as a whole or at John's letters to the seven churches in Revelation (Rev 2–3) to realize that the strengths present in one church are not always present in another. On the flip side, the weaknesses of one church might not exist in another congregation. In the same way that the Holy Spirit distributes his gifts sovereignly in each church, so he also equips the churches as he pleases. What God did with the church in Rome looks very different than what he did through the church in Colosse. In the church

¹ Scriptural references in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

² What unites churches in missions is not that they are all part of the same organization, but that they are attached to Jesus. As Leon Morris notes, "The Master is not giving a command that will merely secure nominal adherence to a group, but one that will secure wholehearted commitment to a person. In the first century a disciple did not enroll with such-and-such a school, but with such-and-such a teacher." Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 746.

at Antioch, for example, we are told that there were “prophets and teachers” in the plural, and then Luke proceeds to name five of them (Acts 13:1). The leadership strength of the Antiochian church was not the same in other first-century AD congregations. Other churches that might not have had such an abundance of gifted leaders, however, might have excelled in another area, like giving. There is not a single church who has a total monopoly of resources to plant all the churches, send all the missionaries, and help support all the missionaries financially.

It is Christ who gives gifts and gifted ones to build up the local church (Eph 4:11–12), and he is the one who sends missionaries into the field. It is Christ himself who supplies some of his churches with important financial resources. It is the Lord who has endowed some of his churches with a spirit of supplication and prayer that will impact time and eternity in an extraordinary way. Therefore, if we do not learn to work together and join forces to fulfill the calling of God, we will not fulfill the Great Commission as we are supposed to do.³

THE NEW TESTAMENT MODEL OF INTERCHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

God will not carry out all of his plans with only one church. He will use a multitude of people and a multitude of churches at different times to carry out his single glorious plan of redemption. However, to work in a coordinated way, churches must learn to cultivate healthy interchurch relationships. The gifts that Christ gives to each local church are not intended for that church’s own exclusive consumption. We must be willing to share what God has given to us with other churches, and in the same way, we also must learn to receive help from others when it is needed.

The apostle Paul did not do his gospel work alone. He surrounded himself with a sizeable team of men and women who assisted him in his ministry.⁴ We read in Romans 16:3 of Priscilla and Aquila, whom Paul calls “my fellow workers.” Paul takes the opportunity to inform the Romans not only of the gratitude he felt because of them, but also of the gratitude of “all the churches of the Gentiles” (Rom 16:4). He gave instructions to the Corinthians, urging them to make Paul’s protégé, Timothy, feel welcome (1 Cor 16:10–11), while also encouraging Apollos to visit them (1 Cor 16:12). At another point in Paul’s ministry, he sent his co-laborer, Tychicus, to Ephesus (Eph 6:21–22).

The apostle also shows a continuing concern for connecting churches together and intertwining their ministries. Paul highlights the key role that the Philippians played “at the beginning of [his] preaching of the gospel” by making significant financial contributions to his ministry (Phil 4:15). Paul organizes a collection of money to take to the poor in the church of Jerusalem on behalf of churches in Greece, Berea, Thessalonica, Derbe, and Asia (Acts 20:1–6; Rom 15:25–26; 2 Cor 8:16–9:5).⁵ The greetings that we find in Paul’s epistles are full of instructions and positive examples of how churches should relate to one another in fellowship.

What we find in the New Testament is a network of brothers helping one another. The goal in our churches should be the same. It is not about our individual kingdoms, but about the one kingdom of God. Missions is not the responsibility of a single church, but of all the churches of Christ. And just as the believer who isolates himself often starts to drift into self-centeredness and sin,

³ Obviously, I am not referring to a church supporting and helping churches that teach a false gospel or undermine the gospel in their ministries—doctrinal standards must be taken into consideration. Rather, I am referring to a local congregation who partners with other churches that, although imperfect and composed of redeemed sinners, faithfully keep the stewardship of the gospel in a lost world.

⁴ E. Earle Ellis, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” *New Testament Studies* 17, no. 4 (1971), 437–452.

⁵ On Acts 20:4–5 referring to Paul’s collection for the poor in Jerusalem, see David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 555–56.

churches that isolate themselves lose their purpose and mission. To be clear, a given local church will not enjoy the same level of closeness with *all* churches. The degree of intimacy with churches will vary greatly from one to another. But we can and should cultivate good relationships with other congregations, whether at home or abroad, driven by our mutual love of the kingdom of God and for the advancement of the gospel on earth.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

The fulfillment of the Great Commission in the missionary task involves a series of aspects that I would like to highlight below. We will view them from the standpoint of healthy interchurch relationships. Churches can and should partner together effectively in at least four undertakings: (1) prayer; (2) identification (and training) of missionary candidates; (3) financial support; and (4) strategizing.

Prayer

“... [P]ray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Matthew 9:38)

1. Every local church should pray that God would awaken and maintain a missionary heart in the entire congregation. God’s mission is everyone’s business. A church may not have missionaries or may not have sent out any missionaries yet. That is not necessarily a trait for which the church should be ashamed. What is inexcusable, though, is for a church not to have a heart that loves the advancement of the kingdom of God among the nations. And one of the tangible ways we give expression to the missionary heart of God is through prayer. Every church should pray for the Lord of the harvest to raise up harvesters.

A healthy church is one that announces the excellencies of the God who called us (1 Pet 2:9). It knows God and worships God, and because it is comprised of a people overwhelmed by the greatness of the Lord, it longs for him to be made known among the nations. A healthy church

values the gospel of Jesus as its special treasure; it understands the great exchange, the glorious reality that through Christ’s finished work we have been transferred out of darkness, death, and slavery, and brought into his admirable light, life, and freedom. For this very reason, a healthy church seeks to proclaim the good news of salvation to the ends of the earth.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge the reality of remaining sin in our lives, and we know the terrible consequences that selfishness produces. Sin can make our hearts cold regarding the spiritual needs of others. It feeds our self-centeredness, making us people who only mind our own business, losing sight of God’s mission and missing the reason why we are here on earth. Paul’s desire was to depart and be with Christ, which would have been so much better, but he also longed, intensely, to be of benefit to the churches of Christ for as long as he was on earth (Phil 1:21–24). Let us make sure, then, among all the prayer requests that we raise before the throne of grace, that we never stop pleading for the Spirit of God to fuel the mission of God here on earth. May our love for Christ be manifested in our desire to see him praised and adored by people of every tribe, language, and nation. A church that prays in this manner will be able to identify itself with the mission efforts that other healthy churches are carrying out, and cooperation will flow more naturally.

2. Every church should pray that God would raise up missionaries. Jesus prayed all night before choosing the twelve apostles (Luke 6:13–16). From the very beginning of the church, we find that the selection of the successor of Judas was carried out through prayer (Acts 1:21–26). Christ is the Lord of the harvest, and he commands us to ask him to send out laborers (Matt 9:37–38). It is often apparent that we must pray to God to raise up the leaders of our local churches, to pray for our own pastors and elders, in addition to missionaries who will be sent out from our own fellowship. But do we really believe that part of our responsibility in prayer

is to ask God to raise up men in *other* churches in order to be sent to distant lands?

The kingdom of God is not restricted to the size or geographical reach of our lone congregation. All of God's children belong to the universal church, to the worldwide fold of the Good Shepherd, regardless of denomination and location. If we pray global prayers, we will be able to recognize God's response to those supplications when men arise from other sister churches.

We can learn much from the attitude of the apostle Paul. He did not care whose name, humanly speaking, was attached to specific accomplishments in ministry—but only that the God who causes all increase would be exalted. Paul asks, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul?” And he answers his questions by declaring: “Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor 3:5–7). Charles Hodge rightly notes, “The people, therefore, are bound to regard the ministry as a divine institution and to value its services; but preachers are not to be regarded as party leaders or as lords over God's heritage.”⁶

We do not labor for the sake of our own personal prestige, or for the fame of our local churches. We work for the advancement of the kingdom of God. Let us pray for God to cause greater growth in missionary efforts around the world, both in our public prayer services and in our private prayer lives.

3. Every local church should pray for those who have gone out to the mission field, and we must plead with God for all aspects of their lives (spiritual, emotional, physical, familial, and economic). Forging close interchurch relationships will allow us to

learn about different missional efforts that other churches are carrying out. We can pray in general for nameless and faceless “missionaries” who are in a certain country right now, even if we don't know any of them. But it is far more exciting, and much more meaningful, to pray for specific missionaries by their first and last names as those who were sent out by a church with whom we have a close relationship. Pastors must encourage their congregations to cultivate the habit of praying for God's mission. The feet of those who announce the gospel are beautiful (Rom 10:15) even if they were not sent out by our own church.

I will never forget the occasion when a missionary from the Far East fervently begged our congregation during a missionary conference to pray for them, because only heavenly missiles could dispel the palpable spiritual darkness that surrounded them in the country where they were serving. When I talk to other pastors and they tell me about the challenges and blessings they are experiencing, I often ask them to send us a summary note to help us intercede for them. The exchange of prayer requests sets the armies of the Lord in motion and brings us to our knees, which is the best posture for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Identification (and Training) of Missionary Candidates

“Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2)

The church does not make missionaries; it only recognizes them. It is the Spirit who calls and enables them. It is the Spirit who separates and points missionaries out, even still today, but not in the same way as we read in the case of Barnabas and Saul in Acts 13:2. The Holy Spirit designated those two men as missionaries *by name*.⁷ It would

⁶ Charles Hodge, *1 Corinthians*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL; Nottingham: Crossway, 1995), 65.

⁷ I. Howard Marshall asserts that this episode in Acts is “the first piece of planned ‘overseas mission’ carried out by representatives of a particular

be much easier if the Spirit would just name his missionaries today as he did in the early church—there would be no margin of error!

Nevertheless, we are not without a list of missionary qualifications. The pastoral qualifications that we find in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9) must also apply to missionaries.⁸ Missionary candidates must display godliness and holiness if they hope to take the gospel to the ends of the earth and to plant churches in foreign lands. We expect that many of the male missionaries who go into the field will serve as pastors in the new churches that are planted, and we are not at liberty to lower the standards for missionary applicants.⁹

If the qualifications are this high, how do we recognize such workers? How do we identify them? The responsibility that pastors have—of the local churches in which missionary candidates reside—is crucial. They know firsthand the work that God is doing in the hearts and lives of these candidates. However, a pastor may lack the knowledge and experience necessary to identify a believer’s missionary call with precision. And that is where pastors from other churches could come to the primary pastor’s aid, men who have learned what questions to ask missionary candidates, who have seen first-hand that not all that glitters is gold. There are also missionary agencies that help churches with the evaluation of missionary candidates, who can even supply questionnaires and forms that can save churches from many stumbling blocks. Why conduct this process by ourselves, in isolation, when the stakes are so high?

On a related note, I have heard seasoned missionaries in the field pleading, “Please do not

send workers to us without the proper calling and training.” Training, thus, is another area in which healthy church relationships are crucial. The elders of a congregation can provide some level of preparation for those who will later participate in missions. Through close discipleship they can guide missionary candidates in studying the Bible, reading good books, and receiving basic theological and ecclesiological knowledge. But pastors do not always have the ability and resources that are required to provide thorough, full-orbed training and theological expertise. This is where the extended body of Christ can come to the rescue! A sister church may have an institute or seminary where candidates can pursue their studies. If God has provided a local church with gifted teachers and spiritual guides, it would be counterproductive to deny missionary candidates the ability to receive such an education. Perhaps that church also has the financial capacity to absorb the costs of those studies, or, perhaps, a different church might be willing and able to cover that cost.

Financial Support

“So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.” (2 Corinthians 9:5, NIV)

The training of a missionary can be very expensive. Sending and supporting a missionary can take a significant portion of the congregation’s budget. A church may be struggling just to support the lone pastor and pay the essential bills. How could a church who is struggling to make ends meet participate financially in missions?

church, rather than by solitary individuals, and begun by a deliberate church decision, inspired by the Spirit, rather than somewhat more casually as a result of persecution.” I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 214, as quoted in Peterson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 376.

⁸ For a longer discussion of this point, see the article by Ryan Bush, “A Case for the Missionary as Pastor,” in the present issue of *Pro Pastor*.

⁹ In another sense, however, we must keep in mind that not all who participate in the broad work of missions will be pastors. There is ample room for other functions to be carried out on the mission field, such as translation of the Scriptures. Pastors, according to the biblical qualifications for the office, must be men (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6); however, some of those who go out into the mission field might not be men at all. Women may faithfully serve God in certain cross-cultural capacities.

The truth is that all churches can and should cooperate in missions with their own resources *to whatever proportion they are able*. Each church should contribute according to the resources and opportunities that God has given them (2 Cor 8:12–15).¹⁰ The general financial principles that we have in the Scriptures should be part of our missionary philosophy. Here are a few of those principles:

- “Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.” (Prov 11:25)
- “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35)
- “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Cor 9:7)

Regardless of the amount a person can contribute, it is healthy to teach every disciple of Jesus Christ to participate in missions with their offerings; the same idea can be said of churches as well. Even as a newly planted church, the habit of contributing financially to God’s mission will have a significant short-term and long-term impact on the spiritual health of the church.

I still remember the comment made to me by a deacon from a church in which I was invited to preach. We talked about the difficulties and dire straits in which believers from another nation lived, but at the same time, they experienced great zeal for the truth and tremendous spiritual growth. Reflecting on the great indifference and coldness to the gospel that he encountered in his own country, this deacon expressed: “Perhaps the Lord is giving *us* the financial resources that *those* brothers need.” And his church provided the financial means so that others could do the labor. I have seen this sort of dynamic partnership take place, time after time, to this day. God supplies the needs of his people in a distant place through the generous offerings of many of his children

across the world. Many of the financial supporters have never been to the target country, but they have been involved in the advancement of the gospel in that nation from afar.

Do you see the importance of healthy interchurch relationships? God may put in the heart of a widow the desire to support a missionary. She may not know where or how to do it. She talks to her pastor, who then contacts the pastor of a local church that already has a candidate for the mission field but lacks the necessary financial resources. The widow’s donation provides the financial backing necessary to launch the missionary candidate into the field of harvest.

The levels of cooperation between churches can vary greatly. Three or four churches may come together to carry out some specific missionary effort. But more numerous and organized efforts can also emerge. An example of such a partnership is Reformed Baptist Network (RBNNet), which is a network of Reformed Baptist churches that have come together to glorify God through fellowship and cooperation in fulfilling the Great Commission.¹¹ Our congregation in the Dominican Republic is a member of this network, and we gladly support it financially, because through our offerings much is done that would otherwise be impossible to do. We thank God for the spirit of humility and brotherly love that prevails in this network.

Strategizing

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Our missionary work must reflect that we serve a God of order. The Lord commands us to calculate the costs before launching ourselves to develop an enterprise (Luke 14:25–33). Just as the worship

¹⁰ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 412–16.

¹¹ For more information on Reformed Baptist Network, see Reformed Baptist Network, “About,” <https://reformedbaptistnetwork.com/>.

services that take place in churches should be carried out with decency and in order (1 Cor 14:40), so too missionary endeavors should be conducted with advanced planning and strategizing.

The first gospel proclamation of the church started in Jerusalem, and from there it spread to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit established and strengthened his churches before moving on to other regions. One can identify those stages in the book of Acts. There is a divine strategy behind all of the missionary activity. Acts chapters 8 through 11 features a succession of events, one leading to the next, as follows:

1. At the end of Acts 7 we have the first mention of Saul (v. 58), who later becomes “Paul,” and then in chapter 8 he is introduced to us as the great persecutor of Christians (8:1–3). Persecution against the church of Jerusalem leads to church members being scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1). These scattered believers share the good news of the crucified and risen Christ (v. 4).
2. In 8:4–8 Philip appears, preaching the gospel in Samaria.
3. In 8:14–25 we see the Jerusalem church sending the apostles Peter and John to become witnesses of God’s work in Samaria and to strengthen the believers there.
4. In 8:26–39 we read of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch on his way from Jerusalem back to modern-day Africa. The gospel is crossing borders!
5. In chapter 9 we find the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who will be designated by God as the apostle to the Gentiles.
6. Chapter 10 tells us of the amazing conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile and a

Roman military leader. The author of Acts, Luke, places Cornelius’s conversion in the book of Acts in a very strategic place. The Jews who came to visit with Peter were amazed that the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles (10:45).

7. In chapter 11 we read of Peter’s testimony before the brothers in Jerusalem, in which he tells them how even to the Gentiles “God has granted repentance that leads to life” (v. 18).
8. In 11:19–30 we come across the formation of the church in Antioch. The Lord used an unexpected and strange method to launch this church, namely, the persecution unleashed against believers in Jerusalem. The disciples were first called “Christians” in Antioch (v. 26).
9. Guess who appears in Antioch? Saul! The former persecutor of the church is now one of its primary preachers (Acts 11:25–26). Saul (Paul) stays with Barnabas for a whole year, teaching and building up the brothers of that new church.¹²
10. The apostle Peter makes his last appearance in the book of Acts in chapter 12, thus giving way to the leadership that Saul (Paul) will occupy in the rest of the book. And so, in chapter 13, we see the church of Antioch sending its first missionaries: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (13:2). Just as Peter serves as the apostle to the Jews, Paul becomes the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 2:8–9; cf. Acts 9:15; 13:46–47; 18:6; 22:21; 26:17–18).

The last word has not been written regarding strategies in missions. We need to pray for wisdom. We need to pray for ideas that will help us overcome the obstacles that we will encounter.

¹² For a helpful summary of Acts 8:1–12:25, see Robert J. Cara, “Acts,” in Michael J. Kruger, *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 150–52.

Where should we plant a new church? What country or countries will be the focus of our missionary efforts? How are we going to reach the unreached peoples in our own country? Instead of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task, however, it is essential for us to remember—we are not alone as we plan our strategies. God has given us a glorious, multifaceted, global network of churches to help us plan and mobilize laborers for his glory. Churches can come together and dream together regarding their evangelistic and missionary efforts.

What about unreached people groups? It is possible for us to see ourselves so far removed from ethnic groups where there is no Christian church, that we think we can't do anything about it. The task seems bewildering. It is often true that the less-reached an ethnic group is, the more difficult it is to reach them with the gospel, but that does not mean that the task is impossible. That is where the beauty of healthy interchurch relationships becomes evident.

Suppose for a moment that a church in South America has set out to reach an ethnic group in the Far East. The necessary logistics are complicated and difficult. We have several barriers that stand in the way: distance, language, and resources, among others. But what if this South American church can establish contact with another church that is already located in the same country of that ethnic group in the Far East? It is likely that the church in the destination country does not have the necessary resources to mobilize its members to reach the unreached ethnic group. However, it is possible that they do know the language of the ethnic group, and it is possible, too, that they will be aware of the material needs in the region. A joint effort between the South American church and the Far Eastern church not only makes the job attainable, but humanly speaking, it is also more likely to succeed.

CONCLUSION

Jesus has given his followers the monumental task of proclaiming the gospel and making

disciples of “all nations” (Matt 28:18–20). It is a task so massive that no single church can accomplish it by itself. However, the New Testament churches provide a helpful model for how the Great Commission can be fulfilled—through healthy interchurch partnerships. Churches can and should partner together in prayer, in the identification (and training) of missionary candidates, in financial support, and in strategizing. We must remember that taking the gospel to the ends of the earth is not just a one-local-church job. It is the work of the church universal. And that demands that we pursue and maintain intentional relationships with Christ-centered, gospel-affirming, like-minded churches both at home and abroad. In our pursuit of missions we can display, on a human scale, something of the glorious love and unity between the Father and Son (John 17:20–23)—the very love that fuels our mission to the world. •

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The Importance of Mercy Ministry in Missions

by Jeff Bys

INTRODUCTION

It was a hot day in early December 2016. My family and I had just moved from Texas to a small farming village in western Kenya, and we went to do some shopping in the nearest town, Bungoma. While in a market there, we saw several young boys with ill-fitting clothes, torn and dirty from weeks of continuous wear. They wore no shoes, and they carried clear plastic bottles with a yellow, gel-like substance inside that I later realized was glue. Protruding out of the bottles were sticks that they would occasionally use to stir the glue, and then they would put the opening of the bottle to their mouth and inhale. The boys were crowding around us, all holding out their hands. “I am hungry,” they said, using the little English that they knew. A security guard soon came rushing over with a large stick and chased them away. This was our first encounter with “street boys.”

There are many physical needs throughout the world. Countless image-bearers of God go to sleep at night hungry, millions are addicted to substances that are destroying their lives, human beings are trafficked every day, babies are murdered in their mothers’ wombs—the list feels endless. What is a Christian to do in such a world? What is the church to do in such a world? With a deep-seated love for our neighbors, our hearts as Christians are often broken as we survey the darkness around us. Multitudes are suffering because of their own bad choices and the bad

choices of others. We can become overwhelmed, even depressed, at the thought of trying to help fix so many burdens.

At the same time, other professing Christians will even question if mercy ministry is really biblical. After all, the Great Commission is about saving souls and making disciples, *right*?! The church should focus on proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, not getting distracted by feeding hungry kids, *right*?! Jesus said the poor will always be with us. Shouldn’t we just accept that reality and stop trying to alleviate the physical burdens of the poor and simply focus on addressing their spiritual problems? Yet Jesus tells us that the second greatest command is to “love” our neighbor. Is it possibly to love, truly, with only words? Surely part of loving others includes helping to alleviate our neighbors’ suffering in the world, doesn’t it? If we are Christians, shouldn’t we want to *do* something? I think the answer is an emphatic, “Yes!” But, *what*? And *how*? In a time when so many seem consumed by issues of justice and mercy, it seems prudent to take a step back and take stock of how God commands us in his Word to approach the issue of mercy ministry.

There really can be no question as to whether or not God expects Christians to help the poor. In Deuteronomy 15 we read the command, “[Y]ou shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but shall freely open your hand

to him ...”¹ Elsewhere in the Old Testament, God reveals to us his special concern for the poor, as in Proverbs 14:31, which states, “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.” Such a concern is further explicated in the New Testament. In his earthly ministry, Jesus was moved with compassion for the helpless (Matt 9:35–36). Jesus reveals that acts of mercy and charity for brothers in need are evidence of a godly life, and furthermore, such acts are done ultimately *for* him (Matt 25:31–46). We read accounts of the early church which reveal that the needs of the poor were a constant priority for believers (Acts 4:34–35; 11:30; Gal 2:10). And we are commanded to love one another, not only in words but in deeds (Jas 2:15–17; 1 John 3:16–18), giving special priority to the household of faith (Gal 6:10).²

There is no question that God cares about the poor, and he expects us to care about them also. In the words of Jonathan Edwards, “It is the most absolute and indispensable duty of the people of God to give bountifully and willingly for supplying the wants of the needy.”³ Not only is mercy ministry commended in the Bible—it is commanded by God. By his grace, we must strive to love others in word *and* deed, and we must do so in a way that pleases God and brings glory to his name. God has entrusted his church with fulfilling the Great Commission, and he has entrusted his church with performing works of mercy. The two are not the same, yet they are inseparably joined.

God’s church is made up of bodies of localized believers under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ, and every believer in God’s church should have a concern to help the poor. With this truth in view, this article will use some of my missionary experience in Kenya as a case study to give you, the

reader, ideas to consider as you seek to take part in biblical mercy ministry.

MERCY MINISTRY MUST BE PRAYERFUL

“Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

My wife and I made the commitment to move to Africa, along with our seven youngest children, to start a home for needy kids in Kenya called Mercy Children’s Home. After my first experience with street boys in Kenya, I went back to the home of our missionary hosts with lots of questions. Though we were moving there to work with children, we were not aware of the widespread plight of street boys. I learned several things about them that day and in the days that followed. There are thousands of boys living on the streets in Kenya, and several hundreds of them are in Bungoma Town, which is about a 30-minute drive from our village. Many of the locals refer to street boys by the derogatory term “*chokora*,” which is Swahili for “scavenger.” They are looked upon by most as dregs of society. There are street girls in Kenya, too, but the numbers are much fewer and the girls tend to be much less visible.

The homeless boys are in a predicament for a variety of reasons. Some are orphans whose extended families did not want the burden of raising them. Others come from various situations of abuse. Still others are on the streets because “the street life” appeals to them. Whatever the reason, these boys find themselves destitute, nearly all of them are addicted to sniffing glue, and many of them are dependent on other drugs and alcohol as well. When first turning to the streets, younger street boys are taught by more seasoned “mentors”

¹ Scriptural references in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

² Regarding the “hierarchy” for biblical mercy in Galatians 6:10, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 370.

³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 2:164. The English rendering of the quotation cited has been modernized slightly for contemporary readers.

that the glue diminishes the pain of hunger. What the boys initially view as a necessity soon becomes a brain-cell-destroying addiction. Without some kind of intervention, most street boys turn to a life of crime that only increases as they get older.

The more my family and I learned about these boys and their living conditions, the more we wanted to help. We started making trips to town to meet with many of the boys and to buy them lunch. We would gather large groups of boys and give them bread and milk. We would pass out laundry soap and other basic hygienic items. But as we got to know many of the street boys better, more problems ensued. We would make sandwiches, and I would go into town with a translator, and we would pass out the food and try to have conversations with them about God. This endeavor was difficult because so many of the young men were high and only interested in free food. We would buy several loaves of bread and try to get the boys to make an organized line to receive the bread and a Bible tract. However, the older boys would steal bread from the smaller ones. Shoving and fighting would follow, and on top of that, we realized many could not read the Swahili tracts we were giving out.

After a conversation with a local government official, I realized my efforts to try and help these boys were only making it more comfortable for them to continue engaging in destructive patterns. Many of the boys were on the streets by choice, a *bad* choice, and unintentionally, we were making it easier for them to stay there. Other boys who really needed help and did not want to be homeless were harder for the government and others to identify because they blended in with the boys who *wanted* to be there. All the boys were struggling, but for many, handouts were making it easier for them to live a sinful lifestyle cut off from God. Furthermore, I began to be convicted that I had been distracted by the physical needs before me and lost sight of these boys' eternal needs. The phrase first coined by Rogers Morton came to mind as I realized my unbalanced focus was like "rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic." The boys

we were trying to help were on the path that leads to destruction, and all we were managing to do through our efforts was making life a little more comfortable for them on their way to hell. I knew we had to do something different.

The first step for me was confessing that I had been trying to address the issues in my own power and in my own way without first seeking the Lord. My heart broke for these boys, and I wanted to help, so I just jumped in and started doing something. I later realized I had not considered that God is more concerned for the poor than I am and that I should seek his will instead of going at it alone. I went to God, asking for wisdom, believing that he gives it to all who ask generously without reproach (Jas 1:5). I recognized that "loving my neighbor" in this case had to mean more than just distributing physical bread; what I really desired for the street boys was for them to know the Bread of Life.

MERCY MINISTRY MUST BE CHRIST-CENTERED

"Only one life, it will soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last." (C. T. Studd)

After time spent with the Lord in prayer and in his Word, I became more and more convinced that if we were going to be a part of God's eternal impact on some of the street boys, we needed to be in a situation where we could keep Christ at the center, feeding them a steady diet of God's Word and raising them up in the way that they should go. It is the gospel that is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe (Rom 1:16). The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the only accomplishments which have the power to save lost sinners. The church is to be concerned with making disciples. This activity is accomplished through gospel proclamation. Preaching is the means God uses to save those who belong to him. Once God takes a heart of stone and gives someone a heart of flesh in the act of regeneration (or the new birth), that person repents and believes the gospel. That individual is adopted into the family of God, and at that point it is the responsibility of the church to teach him all that Christ has commanded (Matt 28:20).

I came to the realization that it would be more biblical for us to take some of these hardened street boys out of their environment and bring them into the children’s home. This step would be a way for us to help them get off drugs, proclaim to them the gospel of Jesus Christ in a regular and consistent fashion, and raise them up in the admonition of the Lord through a family and through the church that we had planted at our mission. Instead of making these boys more comfortable in their life of sin and rebellion against God, we would be welcoming them into a God-fearing, child-loving home and a Bible-teaching church.

MERCY MINISTRY AND GOOD WORKS

I pastor a church that affirms the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (2LBCF) of 1689. Therefore, as my desire grew for a more biblical approach to mercy ministry for the street boys, I turned to the Confession for guidance. The Confession refers to what I call “mercy ministry” as “good works,” and so I will use the two terms interchangeably throughout the remainder of this article. The Confession addresses the doctrine of good works in chapter 16, stating:

Good works are only such as God has commanded in His Holy Word, and not such as without the warrant thereof are devised by men out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intentions.⁴ (2LBCF 16.1)

The will of God determines and defines what a good work is, not the passion of men nor any trace of well-meaning or wishful thinking. One of the proof texts given for paragraph one in the Confession is Hebrews 13:21, “[God] equip you in every good thing to do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ,

to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” Calvin, in his commentary on this verse, says:

For we know that the spirit of regeneration and also all graces are bestowed on us through Christ; and then it is certain, that as nothing can proceed from us absolutely perfect, nothing can be acceptable to God without that pardon which we obtain through Christ.⁵

It is those who have received the pardon through Christ who seek to live lives obedient to the will of God. Believers’ works are acceptable to God only through Jesus’s perfect righteousness before the Father. I confessed to the Lord that in my desire to do something, *anything*, to help alleviate the suffering of the street boys, I jumped in headfirst with blind zeal and a pretense of good intentions. Yes, I was a Christian desiring to do good works, but I had not really sought the Lord’s will through prayer and his Word, and in reality, I acted as if I could provide help apart from God. Any unbeliever can feel sorry for kids living on the street and buy them some food. I realized that my attempts to do good works in the name of Jesus looked way too similar to what someone who does not follow Christ might do.

Of course, living in a society that viewed the “*chokora*” as deplorable, we knew there would be some pushback on our decision to bring street boys home with us. Some of the locals with whom we were working were very upset that we had brought these boys to live in our village, and some of the teachers and parents at the boys’ school treated them like trash. Because of our ministry to these boys, I was physically attacked, and my wife and I were imprisoned for a short time. But we thank God that he used those trials to help us gain trust with the community as well as with our boys,

⁴ *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith*, in *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version*, ed. R. C. Sproul (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2485–86.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews*, trans. and ed. John Owen, vol. 22 of *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 357.

which led us into opening a school at our mission, Mercy Christian Academy. As a result, we have an even greater opportunity for gospel proclamation throughout our community. Though we went through some great difficulties, God sustained us by his grace.

At the same time, results are not proof as to whether mercy ministry is biblical; it is the Word of God that should ground us in our thinking, alongside of prayer. Our works are good only in Christ, and God alone is sovereign in all things, including over the results and ramifications of our good works. We are simply to walk in the good works God prepared beforehand (Eph 2:10) and to leave the results up to him.

WHY IS MERCY MINISTRY IMPORTANT?

The Confession biblically defines what good works are, and it also helps us gain a biblical understanding of why mercy ministry is important. Paragraph 2 states:

These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith; and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that having their fruit unto holiness they may have the end eternal life.⁶

Wow! What an important statement describing what God's Word has to say about the importance of good works in the life of the Christian. Biblical mercy ministry is the fruit and evidence of a faith which is true and genuine. Good works flowing from faith are the reason why James says, "I will show you my faith by my works" (Jas 2:18). The good works of Christians also "stop the mouths of the adversaries." I love this! 1 Peter 2:15 says,

"For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men." As I mentioned earlier, my wife and I ran into some trouble because we had made certain people in the community angry simply by doing what we believed was right in the sight of God. At one point, our children living at Mercy Children's Home were removed from the residential house, and my wife and I were locked in prison. Thankfully, we quickly were vindicated, and the court ordered the children to be returned to us. In an area dominated by the prosperity gospel, our good works in Christ shut the mouths of our adversaries, and they continue to do so many years later.

I believe the most important aspect of mercy ministry is that it glorifies God. We are all God's creatures living in God's world, but so few give God the glory that he alone deserves. God's people are to be filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Christ Jesus, to the glory and praise of God (Phil 1:11). Biblical mercy ministry can only be done in Christ as we depend upon him. Anyone is capable of doing things the world calls "good," but only Christians can do genuine, God-glorifying *good works*. The end of paragraph 2 in the Confession states of Christians, "having their fruit unto holiness they may have the end eternal life." Mercy ministry is not the way to right standing before God (justification), but there is a connection between good works and eternal life (judgment). As I have heard Sam Waldron say, "Eternal life is not to be expected in the future where good works are not done in the present."

MERCY MINISTRY, THE LOCAL CHURCH, AND MISSIONS

The primary duty given to the church universal is to make disciples of Jesus Christ (through gospel proclamation) and to teach Christ's disciples all he has commanded. This is accomplished through local churches. Local churches are made up of believers, all of whom are to be concerned with

⁶ *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith*, in *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version*, ed. R. C. Sproul (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2486.

helping the poor. Churches are to meet not only spiritual needs but also physical needs. First and foremost, churches should provide for those in their spiritual family. The New Testament gives many examples of this principle (Acts 2:45; 4:32–37; 6:1–6; Jas 2:15–17; 1 John 3:16–17). We also see examples in the Bible of churches being commended for their generosity toward other churches with greater physical needs (Rom 15:25–27). Finally, Paul says that whenever we have the opportunity, we are to do good to all people, even to those outside the faith (Gal 6:10).

These biblical truths are what have shaped our ministry in western Kenya. We are focused primarily on meeting the spiritual needs of our growing church family and our community, but we also meet many physical needs in our church. We also strive to be a trustworthy vessel for partner churches in the west (who have greater financial means than we do) to make an impact on a congregation in which most members and attendees live below the poverty line (less than \$1.25 in earnings per day). Furthermore, we are thankful for opportunities to do good to unbelievers around us as we ask God to give us gospel opportunities, reaching out in word and deed, which he has been faithful to provide.

Since we began this ministry of bringing street boys into Mercy Children’s Home five years ago, we have brought in more than 50 homeless boys. Some of them are part of the group of boys we met on that hot December day right after our move to Kenya in 2016, while others were rescued over the following years. Some of the boys have remained with us, while others have left. It has not always been easy, but by God’s grace, he gives us strength to endure. We labor tirelessly to raise the boys as a loving family, training them up in the way they should go, and regularly sharing the gospel of our Lord with them.

The boys at Mercy Children’s Home attend our sister school, which starts each day with a chapel service where the boys learn the Baptist Catechism and hear the gospel. They are taught from a biblical worldview, and after receiving instruction in core subjects like math and reading, they finish each school day with a Bible study. On most evenings, we finish the day with a time of family worship. Every Sunday they attend the Lord’s Day service at Mercy Baptist Church, and every Wednesday they attend the church prayer meeting. Some of them have made professions of faith and have been baptized. We are asking God to save the others if it is his pleasure to do so. Some of the young men have expressed a desire to become pastors or missionaries; others desire to become teachers; and still others, farmers or construction workers. None who are still with us have touched glue or any other illegal drugs since coming to live at Mercy Children’s Home.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I want to provide a few more thoughts for you, the reader, to consider while seeking to be a part of biblical mercy ministry:

- *Prioritize the Gospel*: In chapter 7 of his book *Missions by the Book*, Chad Vegas talks about what he calls “gospel privilege.”⁷ In a time when more and more churches are concerning themselves with “wokeness,” “white privilege” and “social justice,” let us remember that every believer has the privilege of eternal salvation which God has given us through the power of his gospel.⁸ Christians have a gospel privilege and a gospel responsibility. It is good and right that disciples of Christ would desire to do good works, but by God’s grace, we must not lose sight of proclaiming the gospel as he gives us opportunities.

⁷ Chad Vegas and Alex Kocman, *Missions by the Book: How Theology and Missions Walk Together* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2021), 90, 102.

⁸ For an incisive critique of Critical Race Theory (CRT), intersectionality, and “wokeness,” see Owen Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness: How the Social Justice Movement Is Hijacking the Gospel—and the Way to Stop It* (Washington, DC: Salem Books, 2021).

- *Forge Partnerships:* Consider partnering through associations of churches. In 2 Corinthians 8:1–5, Paul commends the Macedonian churches for collecting money to send to the poor saints at Jerusalem. Local churches partnering together can usually accomplish more gospel ministry and mercy ministry by working together than alone.
- *Strategize Long-term:* Whatever you do regarding mercy ministry, plan to be in it for the long haul or to connect with people who are. Worthwhile mercy ministry is rarely completed in the short-term. On the mission field, I have seen many well-intentioned people who did not have a solid, biblically based, long-term plan; they contributed a lot of money to a cause only to pull out quickly, resulting in little fruit or even creating a negative effect.
- *Send or Support:* Choose to send out biblically qualified missionaries, or choose to support some already in the field, namely, men who are practicing biblical and ecclesiastical accountability. I have often seen people with blind zeal try to support mercy ministries overseas without being able to vet the workers on the ground. I have never seen a case where this sort of arrangement has worked out well.
- *Exercise Caution:* Be skeptical of missions programs that sound like sales pitches or ploys for instant success. We should practice at least the same level of discernment when it comes to spiritual endeavors, if not more so, as we do regarding financial “get rich quick” schemes. Great Commission work and gospel-based mercy ministry typically takes time. There are no shortcuts.
- *Practice Distinctly Christian Mercy Ministry:* Biblical mercy ministry provides the saints with opportunities to grow in Christlikeness. Do not fear that you are

“woke” if you are showing concern for others through mercy ministry. Rather fear that you are not Christian if you do not (Gal 2:10)!

Though my underlying desire is to make Christ known, I have made many mistakes in my career as a missionary. Nevertheless, I hope to encourage other believers, in part through my blunders, to get involved with biblical mercy ministry. Prayerfully, reader, ask God for wisdom to know what to do and how to do it (Jas 1:5). Hear God answer through his instruction in the Scriptures (2 Tim 3:16–17). Trust that God directs the steps of those who belong to him and desire to make his glory their chief end (Prov 16:9). Finally, in dependence upon God, step out in faith—in order to be *a doer who acts*—rather than a hearer who forgets (Jas 1:25). •

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Cultural Contextualization in Missions That Accords with Sound Doctrine

by Scott Aniol

INTRODUCTION

One great challenge missionaries face is how to communicate the gospel clearly in non-native languages and how to plant churches within cultures that are foreign to their own. Various perspectives have characterized missions methodologies throughout the history of the church, ranging from what Paul Hiebert characterizes as the “rise of colonialism” to the more recent rise of “emphasis on contextualization, not only of the church in local social structures, but also of the gospel and theology in local cultural forms.”¹

This new posture of contextualization has created challenges, however, specifically for theologically conservative missionaries who fear the dominant perspectives behind this movement are leading to a weakening of biblical sufficiency and the gospel itself. In extreme cases, a push for contextualization has even led to religious pluralism. For example, Phil Parshall warns that in some missional situations in countries dominated by Islam, Christian missionaries are encouraging new converts to continue reciting the *shahada* (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet”) in the

traditional *shalat* (a row of men bowing down) during Friday worship at a local mosque.² These missionaries believe that such practices are part of the neutral culture, and the locals should not be forced to change their customs.

My goal in this article is to assess the modern philosophy of cultural contextualization through the lens of the sufficiency of Scripture. Whereas modern methodologies of contextualization prioritize the purity of indigenous cultures, I will argue that Scripture, not culture, must be the authoritative starting point for any cross-cultural gospel communication and ministry. I will argue this thesis by: (1) defining the terms, “culture” and “contextualization,” with care and precision; (2) examining two key New Testament texts often used in defense of modern theories of contextualization (Acts 17:16–34 and 1 Cor 9:19–23); and (3) highlighting two important theological concepts at stake in such discussions, namely, human depravity and biblical authority.

DEFINING TERMS

Culture

We must first consider the nature of culture.³ The term itself, of course, is not found in Scripture.

¹ Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” *Missiology* 12, no. 3 (1984): 104, 108.

² Phil Parshall, “Danger! New Directions in Contextualization,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34 (1998): 406.

³ I do not intend to explore this point fully here, but I will briefly summarize what I believe to be the most biblical way to understand culture, which I develop more fully in my book, *By the Waters of Babylon: Worship in a Post-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2015).

The idea of culture finds its Latin roots in discussions of agriculture, but it was first employed metaphorically to describe differences between groups of people, similarly to how we use it today, no earlier than 1776.⁴ The idea progressed through several different uses over time. It first denoted what Matthew Arnold would call “the best which has been thought and said in the world,” or what we today might call “high culture.”⁵ This usage was employed in J. Gresham Machen’s *Christianity and Culture* and T. S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. But as early as the mid-nineteenth century, anthropologists began to use the idea to designate all forms of human behavior, not limited to high culture, including what today we might call “folk culture” or “pop culture.” British anthropologist Edward Tylor is credited for articulating the first influential use of the term in this way when in 1871 he defined “culture” as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”⁶ It is this understanding of culture as the totality of human practices in a society that I would suggest has come to dominate the discussion and that evangelicals today accept uncritically.

To give an example of the missiological trend toward viewing “culture” as the entire complex of customs in any particular human society,

Lesslie Newbigin defined culture as “the sum total of ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another.”⁷ Likewise, Andy Crouch succinctly defines culture as “What we make of the world.”⁸ Many conservative evangelicals writing on culture, including D. A. Carson, prefer the definition of anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “[A]n historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.”⁹

Adopting the anthropologist’s definition of culture is not necessarily problematic, but if we, as evangelicals, are going to use this idea of culture, then we must ask what principles in Scripture inform it.¹⁰ Many evangelicals seem to equate the idea of culture with the biblical concept of ethnic identity. For example, in commenting on Matthew 28:16–20, Christian cultural anthropologists Janell Paris and Brian Howell explain that “the word translated ‘nations’ here (*ethnos*) refers to the culture of a people, an ethnic group.”¹¹ They equate *ethnos* with culture and insist that “cultural anthropology helps us fulfill the Great Commission by preparing Christians to go to all *ethnē* and speak and live effectively.”¹² Likewise, more popular authors like Mark Driscoll equate “race” and

⁴ This survey is necessarily simplistic and notes only the three most significant stages in the development of the contemporary idea of culture. Historians usually note at least four developmental stages and as many as seven. For a more thorough discussion, see Ernest Lester Schusky, *The Study of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975); Merwyn S. Garbarino, *Sociocultural Theory in Anthropology: A Short History* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1983); Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Roger M. Keesing and Andrew Strathern, *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998); Jerry D. Moore, *Visions of Culture: An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira, 2009); Jenell Williams Paris and Brian M. Howell, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

⁵ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1869), viii.

⁶ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: Murray, 1871), 1.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 5.

⁸ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 22.

⁹ D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 2; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 89.

¹⁰ Some of the implications secular anthropologists draw from their definition of culture are certainly problematic for Christians, such as cultural relativism and the idea that religion is just one aspect of culture. See *By the Waters of Babylon* for a thorough treatment of and response to these erroneous implications.

¹¹ Paris and Howell, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 23.

¹² Paris and Howell, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 23.

“culture,” and Ed Stetzer defines *ethnos* as “cultural environment(s).”¹³ Equating “culture” with “race” or “ethnicity” logically could lead to a belief in cultural relativism, though, for any critique of a culture would be tantamount to racism. The problem with this notion is that in Scripture, the term *ethnos* denotes a group of people (cf. other terms related to ethnic identity, such as *genos* or *laos*), while “culture” refers to the common *practices* and *behaviors* of a group of people.¹⁴ A particular ethnic group often shares a set of behaviors because of common heritage and values, but “ethnicity” and “culture” are not equivalent ideas.¹⁵

For this reason, I suggest that when looking for concepts in Scripture that parallel anthropological notions of culture, we should consider ideas related to *behavior* rather than *ethnicity*. New Testament authors use terms like *anastrophē* (“way of life,” “conduct”) and *ergon* (“work,” “deed[s]”) to describe human behavior.¹⁶ If culture, as defined by anthropologists and accepted by evangelicals, refers to the “ways of living built up by a human community and transmitted from one generation to another” (Newbiggin), then it makes the most sense to apply whatever Scripture says about a Christian’s way of life to our discussions of culture. The New Testament authors use *anastrophē* to describe all kinds of behaviors that we commonly associate with our notion of culture, and they admonish Christians to “be holy in all your conduct” [*anastrophē*], in contrast to the

“futile ways” [*anastrophēs*] inherited from your forefathers” (1 Pet 1:15, 18). The New Testament authors also use *ergon*, a word specifically denoting human labor (both the act and what it produces), as the object of God’s judgment (Rom 2:6) and as an honorable endeavor that can lead unbelievers to “glorify God” (1 Pet 2:12). Human behavior is never neutral—it must always be judged as either conforming to God’s will or pushing against it. According to Scripture, there are certain kinds of behavior that “accord with sound doctrine,” and others that do not (Titus 2:1).

From this understanding of culture as the behavior of a people, we may draw a few implications. First, just as behavior is not neutral, so culture is not neutral. Second, culture is produced by beliefs and values. Culture is, as Eliot argued, inexorably tied to religion.¹⁷ Some contemporary definitions of culture acknowledge this reality, such as Geertz’s definition mentioned above where he at least recognizes that culture embodies meaning, but most discussions of culture either imply or state outright that culture itself is neutral. Yet, as Mark Snoeberger argues, “[T]here is nothing in culture that may be detached from one’s ontological presuppositions about divinity.... All theories of knowledge that are not connected to the presupposition of the existence and sovereign exclusiveness of the God of the Bible are wrong, and right behavior not connected to epistemology and ontology native to the regenerate is sin.”¹⁸

¹³ Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformission: Reaching Out without Selling Out* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 100; Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 37–38.

¹⁴ Georg Bertram, “*ethnos*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [TDNT] 2:364–72; Friedrich Büchsel, “*genos*,” TDNT 1:684–85; H. Strathmann, “*laos*,” TDNT 4:29–39.

¹⁵ Some conservative Christians tend to go to the opposite extreme, defining “culture” as “the world” in the New Testament (*kosmos* or *aion*; see John 17:14–16, Romans 12:2, 1 John 2:15–17), leading to the conclusion that all culture is hostile to God. This approach, too, is problematic since these New Testament terms, in various contexts, often describe a set of values that are against God, while “culture” refers primary to a set of human behaviors that may or may not be opposed to God.

¹⁶ Ethelbert William Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament: Together with an Index of Greek Words, and Several Appendices* (London: Longmans, Green, 1908), “*anastrophē*” (186); Georg Bertram, “*ergon*,” TDNT 2:635.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot notes: “No culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion: according to the point of view of the observer the culture will appear to be the product of the religion, or the religion the product of the culture.” T. S. Eliot, “Notes Towards the Definition of Culture,” in *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 87.

¹⁸ Snoeberger makes this claim on the basis of detailed exegesis of Proverbs 1:7; Colossians 2:3, 8; Ephesians 4:17–21; Romans 1:18–21, 25; Isaiah 64:5–6; Matthew 23, and Proverbs 21:4. Mark A. Snoeberger, “Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization: How Culture Receives the Gospel,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004): 363, 365.

Third, all culture, just as with all kinds of behavior, must be evaluated as to whether it reflects values consistent with biblical teaching or values that contradict it.

Contextualization

As in the case of culture, the term “contextualization” is not a biblical term, and it was a term that was developed more recently than even the term “culture.” David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen’s *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* helpfully defines and traces the development of what the authors acknowledge to be “a new word—a technical neologism.”¹⁹ They define contextualization as:

[T]he attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teachings of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts. Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing; Bible translation, interpretation, and application; incarnational lifestyle; evangelism; Christian instruction; church planting and growth; church organization; worship style—indeed with all of those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission.²⁰

As Hesselgrave and Rommen explain, this new concept finds its roots in the missions debates of the 1970s by the Division on World Missions and Evangelism (DWME) of the World Council of Churches (WCC). The DWME, whose members

were influenced by the secular anthropological understanding of cultural neutrality, was concerned about what it deemed to be the “theological imperialism” of the church in the West. In reaction, the DWME argued that each civilization should develop its own perspectives “in a theology, a liturgy, a praxis, a form of community, rooted in their own culture.”²¹ This idea that each individual civilization should develop its own theology and method of church ministry became known as “contextualization.” The concept went beyond historic understandings of translation or even indigenization. Hesselgrave and Rommen point out that “to its originators it involved a new point of departure and a new approach to theologizing and to theological education: namely, praxis or involvement in the struggle for justice within the existential situation in which men and women find themselves today.”²²

Conservative evangelical theologians and missiologists rejected, of course, the theological and even moral relativism embedded in this original formulation of the concept of contextualization, but they very quickly became “enamored with the word.”²³ Part of the reason is that they had already been heavily influenced by the anthropological view of culture, including its assumption of cultural neutrality: “A new word was needed to denote the ways in which we adjust the messages to cultural contexts and go about doing the work of theology itself.”²⁴ Consequently, conservatives decided to adopt the word “and redefine it where they rejected the meaning prescribed” by the original formulators. “They agreed,” note Hesselgrave and Rommen, “that the new definition should reveal a sensitivity to context and a fidelity to Scripture.”²⁵

¹⁹ David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2003), 32.

²⁰ Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 200.

²¹ Division on World Missions and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, “Your Kingdom Come” (a pamphlet published by the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, n.d.).

²² Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 32.

²³ Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 33.

²⁴ Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 28.

²⁵ Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 33.

The roots and inherent assumptions behind a concept matter, however, and as conservative evangelicals began to adapt and redefine the term, they could not help but be influenced by its relativistic and pluralistic underpinnings. Part of the purpose of Hesselgrave and Rommen's book was to battle against this trend and offer more conservative clarity; they distinguish, for example, between cultural contextualization and theological contextualization, insisting that biblical contextualization must be "true to both indigenous culture and the authority of Scripture."²⁶

Yet the Darwinian assumptions embedded in secular anthropology inevitably shaped the development of cultural thought in evangelical missiology. Evangelicals began to prioritize anthropological ideology over scriptural authority in their goals of contextualization. Charles H. Kraft acknowledges this priority when he states, "When it comes to the analysis of such cultural contexts, however, it is likely that contemporary disciplines such as anthropology and linguistics, dedicated as they are to a primary focus on these issues, may be able to provide us with sharper tools for analysis than the disciplines of history and philology have provided."²⁷ As noted above, influential missiological definitions of culture like Newbigin's took their cues from secular anthropology, influencing evangelicals to view culture as neutral. Significantly, many evangelicals even consider religion itself to be part of neutral culture. For example, missiologists Alan and Debra Hirsch consider "religious views" merely a subset of culture, and Lesslie Newbigin asserts, "Religion—including the Christian religion—is thus part of culture."²⁸ If in prominent missiological thought religion is but a part of culture, and culture is

neutral, it is not difficult to see why religious pluralism has grown among even professing evangelical missionaries. Mark Snoeberger helpfully summarizes the common evangelical view of culture and contextualization:

There is a general assumption that culture is neutral, and either independent of or essentially in harmony with God: just as man retains the image of God in microcosm, so culture retains the image of God in macrocosm. As such, culture possesses aspects and attributes that escape, to a large extent, the effects of depravity. The Christian response to culture is merely to bridle various aspects of culture and employ them for their divinely intended end—glory of God.²⁹

"CONTEXTUALIZATION" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Having assessed the concept of culture biblically and having traced the development of the contextualization movement, we must now turn to a biblical assessment of the latter. Two primary passages of Scripture typically undergird most evangelical discussions of contextualization: Acts 17:16–34 (Mars Hill) and 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 ("all things to all men").

Mars Hill

First, evangelicals often cite Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Acts 17:16–34 as the supreme example of missions contextualization. Paul's evangelistic engagement of the culture in Athens, Greece, serves as a model for many missiologists. Stetzer and Putman comment, "The culture of the hearer impacted [Paul's] missional methods," and Craig Van Gelder notes that "Paul argued philosophy with *secular* philosophy on *secular* terms."³⁰ The

²⁶ Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 55.

²⁷ Charles H. Kraft, "Interpreting in Cultural Context," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21, no. 4 (December 1978): 358.

²⁸ Alan Hirsch and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 25; Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, 5.

²⁹ Snoeberger, "Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization," 357.

³⁰ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 183; Craig Van Gelder, *The Missional Church and Leadership Formation: Helping Congregations Develop Leadership Capacity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 118. Emphasis added.

implication for many missiologists is that a missionary should immerse himself in his target culture so that he can understand and engage the culture on its own terms.

The question is whether Paul contextualized the message depending on the culture he was in, and if so, to what degree. It is true, in a sense, that Paul presented the same gospel message in different ways depending on his audience. With the Jews in Thessalonica and Berea, Paul was able to build on the foundation of their current knowledge of Scripture and explain new revelation concerning Jesus. He could not do that with pagans in Athens since they did not know the Scriptures and had a different understanding of the nature of the world, and so Paul had to consider their current religious presuppositions and then explain what was necessary to correct their faulty thinking. He does this in Acts 17:22–23:

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”³¹

Paul evidently had spent time studying the religion of Athens, and he used that knowledge to present the gospel in the most effective way possible, but what Paul thought about the Athenian religious culture is enlightening. Verse 16 reveals that Paul was “provoked” (*parōksuneto*) by the culture he saw in Athens.³² Paul did not adopt their culture.

He did not approve of their culture. He *despised* it. Furthermore, Paul did not try to garner respect by speaking positively about their beliefs. In verse 22 when he says that they are “religious,” the apostle is not complimenting them. The word here is *deisidaimonesterous*, or “superstitious,” which would have been considered a negative charge.³³ This reality is reflected further in verse 23 where Paul references their “unknown” god.

Some missiologists suggest that Paul was seeking to gain common ground with his audience.³⁴ However, Paul’s use of the term *agnoeō* here again connotes a negative charge of ignorance. The NASB presents, perhaps, the clearest translation of verse 23: “What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”³⁵ Even the word for “worship” used in the phrase “objects of your worship” (*sebasma*) is used elsewhere in Scripture only negatively (2 Thess 2:4; cf. also *sebazomai* in Rom 1:25).³⁶ Thus, Paul was accusing his audience of being ignorant in their religious beliefs. In fact, he implies their ignorance again in verse 30 and says that God commands them to repent of it.

In verse 28, Paul continues by quoting the Athenians’ own philosophers: “For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’” Some might insist that this is an example of Paul immersing himself in the culture of Athens and quoting Greek philosophers as a way to gain respect from his audience. However, careful consideration of Paul’s argument here clarifies the issue. His primary argument begins in verse 24:

³¹ Scriptural references in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

³² Cf. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, repr. ed., Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 278.

³³ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 494; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Evangelical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 564. Cf. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 371.

³⁴ Lynn Allan Losie, “Paul’s Speech on the Areopagus: A Model of Cross-Cultural Evangelism,” in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 229–30.

³⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 372; R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996), 233.

³⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilber Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker [BDAG], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “*sebasma*” and “*sebazomai*.”

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

Paul's argument begins with an assertion that God is the Creator and Ruler of all and that he is not served by human hands. Then he quotes the Athenians' own philosophers who admit that they come from a god, which reveals their inconsistency. They say that they came from a god, and yet they still try to bring that god under their control by making idols. Paul is attempting to discredit them by pointing out this glaring inconsistency in their thinking. The apostle reveals that purpose in verse 29:

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

Paul was not using cultural references in a positive light; again, he was showing how futile pagan thinking truly was. Paul was discrediting the popular religious philosophy of his day; he exposed the ignorance and superstition of Greek religion in order to confront the men of Athens with the truths of the gospel. Rather than highlighting similarities between his worldview and that of the Athenians and seeking to express the gospel in their cultural categories, as some

authors suggest, Paul was pressing the antithesis between their worldviews and ways of life in order to reveal the inconsistencies in their own thinking and to highlight the truth of the Christian worldview. His method of gospel proclamation was what Snoeberger characterizes as "Christ Discrediting Culture."³⁷

"All Things to All Men"

Evangelical missiologists also often appeal to 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. Stetzer and Putman say of this passage, "Paul is the model for us in that he made himself a slave to the preference and cultures of others, rather than a slave to his own preferences."³⁸ Parris comments, "Paul held deep personal convictions, yet he searched for customs and traditions with which he could sympathize in order to place himself in the position to win them to Christ."³⁹ Many missiologists use this passage to support the position that churches must be willing to change any aspect of their ministry for the sake of the gospel, and it provides the basis for Ed Stetzer's assertion that church plants must not be "constrained by the values and vision of supporters who are already Christ followers."⁴⁰

In order to discern the central message of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, it must be understood in its larger context of a discussion about meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8–10. Paul argues in chapter 8 that the meat itself is good, but for several reasons expounded in the subsequent chapters, in some circumstances Christians may be wisest to refrain from eating. If the meat is so strongly identified with the idol worship that it causes weaker Christians to stumble into sin, then the stronger Christian should not eat the meat (1 Cor 8:13). In chapter 9, Paul reinforces his point by listing other rights that he would be willing to forego for the sake of the gospel (e.g., marriage;

³⁷ Snoeberger, "Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization," 374. Snoeberger is playing off of H. Richard Niebuhr's influential taxonomy of Christian approaches to culture as found in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

³⁸ Stetzer and Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code*, 52.

³⁹ Stanley Glenn Parris, "Instituting a Missional Worship Style in a Local Church Developed from an Analysis of the Culture" (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2008), 28.

⁴⁰ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 267.

monetary compensation). For Paul, unhindered communication of the gospel motivates him to forsake rights that are legitimately his (9:18).

In this context, Paul makes his famous “all things to all men” statement. Some missiologists understand this statement to be a positive one of adopting the culture of a target audience in order to reach them for the gospel. However, the context of the argument proves otherwise. Paul is not suggesting that the missionary adopt cultural practices to engage his audience; rather, he is insisting that the missionary be willing to eliminate practices that may be within his rights if such practices will hinder the advancement of the gospel. This is John Makujina’s argument. “Contextualization,” in this sense, according to Makujina, should be “preventative and defensive” rather than “offensive.” Paul is not attempting to create a “persuasive advantage with his hearers when the gospel is presented”; rather, he removes barriers to the gospel in order to create a “zero, neutral ground from which he may preach Christ crucified.”⁴¹ In this model, Snoeberger suggests, “contextualization should be a passive bid for non-offense rather than an active attempt to give the gospel an advantage” by indiscriminately adopting culture.⁴² Terry Wilder summarizes such an approach:

Paul willingly gave up the exercise of his rights “on account of the gospel” and by doing so saw himself as participating in it (9:23)... For the sake of Christian love and the propagation of the gospel of Christ, we need to be willing to refrain from the exercise of any rights that we may have as believers or individuals.⁴³

Even if the common evangelical philosophy of contextualization is based upon an anthropological

understanding of culture, such an idea of contextualization cannot be proven from the two passages discussed above. Avoiding otherwise legitimate practices or behaviors because they might hinder gospel clarity in a particular culture is not the same as the contemporary evangelical notion of “contextualization” that involves immersing oneself in the cultural practices of a target audience in order to make the message more palatable to hearers.

THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS AT STAKE

The central problem with common evangelical approaches to contextualization is one of authority. The notion of contextualization itself, as demonstrated historically, begins with human culture as the primary source of authority. In other words, missionaries are called to begin with culture and only *then* to determine how biblical truth can fit into the “authentic” cultural milieu of the target culture. Such an approach, however, is problematic for two reasons: (a) human depravity; and (b) biblical authority.

Human Depravity

Because many evangelicals have adopted the anthropological definition of culture as well as its underlying assumptions, they assume that whatever cultural expressions are most natural to a group of people are, by virtue of their very existence, good. Yet, when “culture” is understood correctly as “behavior,” problems with this way of thinking become clear. Scripture teaches that all human beings are corrupt by nature in their desires and actions (1 Cor 2:14; Rom 3:10–18). Even redeemed Christians do not always behave in ways that are good. Although believers are free from the penalty and power of sin (Rom 6:17–18), although they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9–11),

⁴¹ John Makujina, *Measuring the Music: Another Look at the Contemporary Christian Music Debate* (Willow Street, PA: Old Paths Publications, 2002), 20–23.

⁴² Snoeberger, “Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization,” 375.

⁴³ Terry L. Wilder, “A Biblical Theology of Mission and Contextualization,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 16–17.

and although they possess a new desire to please God (2 Cor 5:17), Christians nevertheless continue to battle indwelling sin (Gal 5:17). The process of sanctification is one in which Christians progressively learn and grow in their understanding of what kinds of behavior are biblically acceptable. The biblical tension of an ongoing battle between the flesh and the Spirit in the Christian's experience at least raises the possibility that even some of the most cherished cultural expressions among believers may not necessarily be good and right for Christian life and ministry. Culture that reflects truly *biblical* values, like all behavior, is something that must be taught and learned (1 Tim 3:15).

The preceding insight raises problems for even the conservative evangelical understanding and application of contextualization. As Mark Snoeberger rightly observes, “[I]n calling for a gospel presentation that is ‘*meaningful* to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts,’ Hesselgrave makes some substantial assumptions concerning the mammoth topic of epistemology in a culture beset by the effects of noetic sin.”⁴⁴ In other words, by making contextualization to a target culture the starting point for missions and cross-cultural ministry, evangelicals fail to recognize the strict anthesis that exists between the worldview of believers and unbelievers. Since culture is religion externalized, we can never assume a neutral or even positive starting point with unbelieving culture. As Henry Van Til noted,

The radical, totalitarian character of religion is such, then, that it determines both man's cultus and his culture. That is to say, the conscious or unconscious relationship to God in a man's heart determines all of his activities, whether theoretical or practical. This is true of philosophy,

which is based upon non-theoretical, religious presuppositions. Thus man's morality and economics, his jurisprudence and his aesthetics, are all religiously oriented and determined.⁴⁵

Biblical Authority

The second problem is related to the first, but it is even more fundamental, and that is the foundational importance of biblical authority over every aspect of theology and church practice. Contextualizing to one's culture ought not be the starting point of any methods of evangelism, church planting, worship, or ministry, regardless of the cultural context; rather, Scripture must be the foundational authority for everything. As the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) helpfully states (1.6):

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture.

As Fred Malone notes, Baptists even altered the wording of their confession from “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (Westminster Confession of Faith) to “expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scriptures” (Second London Baptist Confession of Faith) to “make sure that the containment of Scripture (i.e., the analogy of faith) limits what may be called ‘good and necessary consequence.’”⁴⁶

Matters of culture would certainly fall under what the Confession calls “circumstances,” but even these details “are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed” (1.6). In other words, even cultural matters—while not governed as strictly by Scripture, and changeable, to some degree, from

⁴⁴ Snoeberger, “Noetic Sin, Neutrality, and Contextualization,” 346.

⁴⁵ Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1959), 42.

⁴⁶ Fred A. Malone, “The Subjects of Baptism,” *Reformed Baptist Theological Review* 2, no. 1 (2005): 57.

one context to another—must still be ordered by biblical precepts and principles. Historically, Reformed Baptists in particular have insisted that not simply the content and elements of our churches, but also the forms of our worship and ministry, must be regulated by the authoritative and sufficient Word of God.⁴⁷ This is most evident, of course, in the Baptist form of baptism, but it also influenced how Baptists observe the Lord's Supper, practice singing, and execute church polity. Unlike other traditions that considered the form of those issues flexible, Baptists insisted that they must be governed by biblical authority.⁴⁸

The reality is that the modern understanding of contextualization has created an artificial division between content and form in most evangelicals' thinking concerning the relationship between theology and culture.⁴⁹ But divorcing the content of truth from the cultural way that it is expressed is not as simple as many evangelicals assume. The fact is that Scripture itself is not simply theological content devoid of cultural expression. The Holy Spirit inspired more than merely the concepts of Scripture; while the very word choices, grammar, syntax, poetic language, and literary forms were products of the human author's writing style, culture, and experiences, the doctrine of verbal-plenary inspiration affirms that these aspects of the form of Scripture are *exactly* how God desired his truth to be communicated.⁵⁰ The truths of Scripture are not simply Scripture's propositional content that just happens to be contextualized in certain aesthetic forms. Truth in Scripture is *content plus form*, considered as an indivisible whole. As Leland Ryken argues,

We can rest assured that the Bible as it was written is in the form that God wants us to have.... If the writers of the Bible were at some level guided and even 'carried along' by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), it is a logical conclusion that the Holy Spirit moved some biblical authors to write poetry, others to imagine prophetic visions, and so forth. The very forms of biblical writing are inspired.⁵¹

Recognizing the importance of the inspired forms of Scripture, however, does not imply Scripture cannot be translated. Unlike Islam, which teaches that the Koran must not be translated into other languages, Christianity encourages translation of the Bible. However, as Rodney Decker argues, "If we accept the Bible as inspired and inerrant in the original autographs, then we will be very concerned to represent it accurately in translation."⁵² If verbal-plenary inspiration requires attention to the very words, grammatical structures, and historical context of the original text in translation, then it follows that faithful translation also requires equal attention to the cultural forms and devices biblical authors used in their writings as well. And just as the original grammar and context provides regulation for translating the text into a new language, so the original cultural forms of Scripture likewise regulate how the Bible's content is translated into new cultural forms. The important factor is that the *meaning* of the original text is accurately rendered in the new translation, and meaning is found in words, grammar, syntax, history, and cultural expression.

The methodologies of contextualization place culture as the dominant starting point, but the

⁴⁷ See Scott Aniol, "Form and Substance: Baptist Ecclesiology and the Regulative Principle," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2018).

⁴⁸ See Matthew Ward, *Pure Worship: The Early English Baptist Distinctive* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 141.

⁴⁹ For example, see Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 200.

⁵⁰ Rodney J. Decker, "Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 11 (2006): 25–61.

⁵¹ Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 129–30. Emphasis in original.

⁵² Decker, "Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation," 41.

doctrines of biblical authority, sufficiency, and inspiration ought to lead us to make *Scripture* the starting point for any cross-cultural missions and ministry. Scripture must govern and regulate all Christian behavior, especially how we proclaim the gospel and “behave in the household of God” (1 Tim 3:15), which includes what we consider the “cultural” aspects of gospel proclamation and church ministry. The meaning of the cultural expressions we use to communicate the gospel and to conduct Christian ministry must accurately correspond to the meaning that Scripture’s cultural forms embody.

A BIBLICAL APPROACH TO CONTEXTUALIZATION

What are the implications, then, of an approach to culture that is firmly rooted in biblical authority? First, Scripture—not culture—should govern, regulate, and shape the methodologies of missions. This is true both of the content of the gospel and the cultural ways in which we express that content. Since the Bible comes to us from God as inspired content *and* form, Scripture should govern both aspects in missions. Both will certainly require translation and/or explanation from the original to the contemporary context, but in both cases, Scripture must be the starting point. Typical “contextualization” approaches, in contrast, usually begin by allowing constructs to be governed first by the culture.

Second, while there is certainly flexibility from time to time and people group to people group concerning what cultural forms are used to communicate God’s truth and to worship him, understanding the nature of cultural form and the need to submit culture to Scripture’s authority leads to the conclusion that some forms are more suitable to expressing biblical truth than others. Some cultural forms even may do injustice to the truth when compared to the forms God chose to

use in Scripture. Cultural forms certainly may vary between ages and civilizations, but they should nevertheless be *equivalent* in their faithfulness to the content and forms of Scripture. As David de Bruyn notes, “[T]he expressions of every place and era must be tested for their harmony with transcendent reality and with God’s created order.”⁵³ Therefore, all expressions of human culture must be evaluated to determine their faithfulness to Scripture.

Third, because culture is behavior that flows from religious presuppositions, it ought not to surprise missionaries that people groups with more long-term gospel exposure will likely have cultural expressions that are more faithful to Scripture than people groups with little gospel light. Nor should missionaries be concerned if they discover few indigenous cultural forms fitting for gospel proclamation and worship—and, as a result, find themselves resorting to practices less familiar to the unevangelized. The gospel itself will be unfamiliar to them, and it should not be surprising that fitting cultural forms will also be unfamiliar. Missionaries must translate biblical truth—both its content and form—for the unevangelized. The highest goal in missions ought not to be preserving the indigenous culture of every people group; the highest goal ought to be preserving, or in some cases *introducing*, cultural forms that best embody biblical values. However, because all people still possess the image of God, and because God shows grace even to unbelievers (Matt 5:45), every civilization will likely possess some cultural expressions the missionary may find useful in communicating the gospel faithfully.⁵⁴

The truth is that evangelicals tend to think about Scripture and culture entirely backwards, assuming the inherent goodness of all cultures and attempting

⁵³ David de Bruyn, “On Harmony and Variety in Ordinate Expression,” in *A Conservative Christian Declaration* (Fort Worth: Religious Affections Ministries, 2014), 57.

⁵⁴ John Murray defines common grace as “every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.” John Murray, “Common Grace,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1991), 96.

to fit biblical truth into those cultures in the name of “contextualization.” Yet as Dean Kurtz helpfully explains, we should begin instead with Scripture as the ultimate criterion—not culture—in determining what cultural expressions best fit God’s truth:

As politically incorrect as it may sound, I believe an examination of various human cultures reveals that some cultures may be closer than others in reflecting the fixed norm of Kingdom culture (how things will be when Jesus is King). That is why it is dangerous to reason from culture back to the Scriptures. Instead we should endeavor to build the best biblical model for [ministry] that we can and then go to the culture in which we find ourselves and look to stimulate progress toward that model.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

Missionaries must look to the Word of God to determine the kinds of values and expressions that are appropriate for the communication of God’s truth, and then they must seek to discover (or, in some cases, to create) the kinds of cultural forms that best convey those values. The best way to accomplish this objective is to rely on the authority of Scripture, not only in articulating doctrine in propositional constructs, but also in the way that doctrine is expressed culturally. Missional practices should seek to communicate God’s truth using societally appropriate modes that are regulated by Scripture. •

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⁵⁵ Dean Kurtz, *God’s Word the Final Word on Worship and Music* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 287.

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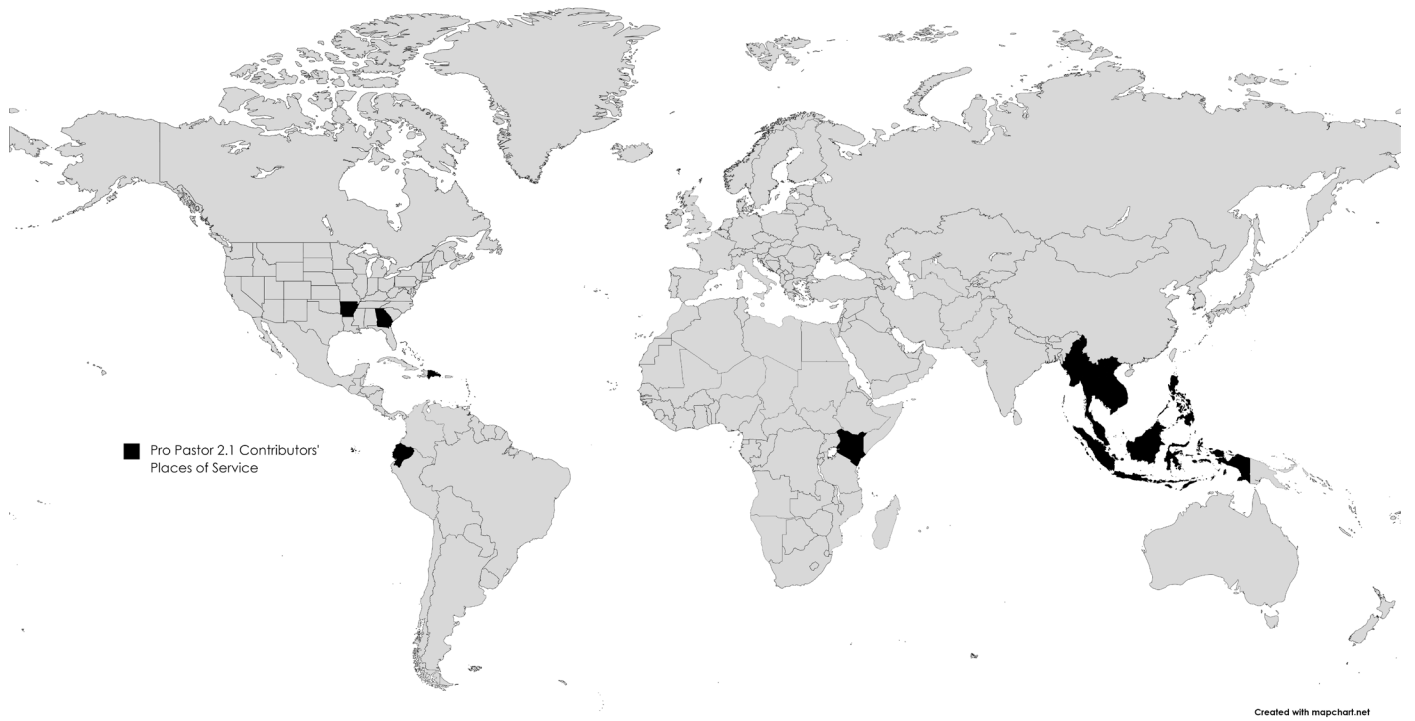
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