

Philosophy of Missions

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The term “missions” is most often applied to speak of a church’s involvement in taking the gospel to the world. More specifically, it is usually addressing a church or denomination’s involvement in other countries. It is right that churches and denominations have a vision beyond themselves. A church that sees not the world has ceased to fulfill God’s intent. The world God created is the object of His affection, and He is not willing that any should perish. The mission of Christ was to seek and to save the lost. Therefore, the mission of the church, the body of Christ, must be to seek and to save the lost. There are many crucial Biblical perspectives that come into play when we look at missions.

Balancing the Tension of Biblical Truths

As with every area of Biblical philosophy, right practice in missions must be preceded by right philosophy. A correct view of missions requires that we first identify a balanced view of what the Scriptures teach about missions, and then use that view to define in practical terms the right and wrong approaches to missions.

BIBLICAL REALITY #1: MISSIONS IS ABOUT A TASK, NOT JUST A TRIP

There is a tendency to view missions as something that happens when we leave our country and travel to another. But the true focus of missions is on “what,” not “where.” It is a healthy church who recognizes that the mission field begins outside her walls instead of across the globe. In fact, I know a church that has posted over each exit door a sign which reads “You are now entering the Mission field.”

Jesus said that one of the consequences of being under the influence of the Holy Spirit is that we would be “witnesses.” God has called the church to proclaim Him. Mark 16:15 makes it clear that we have a responsibility to go to the world and take the gospel to “*all creation*.” But this task is not only concerned with evangelism. In Matthew 28 we see that we are called to “*make disciples*,” not merely to recruit converts. This call to make disciples of all the nations is not a suggestion, but a command. Because “*all authority in heaven and on earth*” has been given to Christ, He has absolute right to command us, and He has. Further, not only have we been commanded, but we have also been commissioned. The apostle Paul calls us “*ambassadors for Christ*,” assigned the ministry of reconciliation and equipped with its message (see 1 Corinthians 5). These dual tasks of evangelism and discipleship are like the pedals on a bicycle. Though one is sometimes pushed harder than the other, our feet never leave either one. These make up the mission of the church.

BIBLICAL REALITY #2: MISSIONS IS NOT SIMPLY SOMETHING THAT HAPPENS ELSEWHERE

Which would most people identify as a more worthy ministry to support with their efforts and finances—building an orphanage on the other side of the world or sharing the gospel on the other side of town? Looking at Acts 1:8, consider the geographical implications of what Christ says. To accomplish its mission, the early church did not start with a trip to the far reaches of the planet. They began in Jerusalem—their own hometown. As they made disciples there, their manpower was reproduced. This insured that they not only could continue the work in Jerusalem, but also expand it into Judea and Samaria. By succeeding there as well, they continued their expansion to the uttermost parts of the world. It is important to distinguish that the church was to add these locations to their focus, NOT switch their focus to the new places.

BIBLICAL REALITY #3: EVERY PERSON IS SINFUL AND DESERVING OF GOD’S WRATH

Scriptures clearly teach that every person is fallen, and apart from Christ, hopelessly lost and in need of redemption. Sin does not originate with a wrong choice. Sinful choices are the inevitable consequence of

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a fallen nature. The holiness of God requires separation from sin, so as a result of man's sinful nature and sinful choices he is separated from God. This reality is rooted in the holiness and purity of God Himself. Romans 3:23 makes it clear that all have sinned and fall short of God's standards—everyone from Billy Graham to Hugh Hefner. According to Romans 6:23, the wages of that sin is death—spiritual and physical separation from God both now and for eternity.

BIBLICAL REALITY #4: GOD LOVES EVERY PERSON

Another Biblical perspective we must maintain as we look at a philosophy of missions is that redemption is as consistent with the character of God as is judgment. While it is the holiness of God that requires sin to be judged, it is the love of God, equally His nature, which moves Him to provide man the way to be redeemed. These attributes of God are not at war with each other, but are both completely consistent with who God is. Remember, according to 2 Peter 3:9, God is not willing that any should perish. John 3:16 is almost so familiar as to make it difficult to really appreciate its message. The whole world is the object of God's love—so much so that He would pay the highest price imaginable to save each person from perishing and to purchase eternal life for them.

BIBLICAL REALITY #5: GOD DOES NOT NEED OUR HELP

An additional Biblical reality, and perhaps the easiest to lose sight of as we look at the church's role in missions, is that God is self-sufficient. He does not need our help. He is fully capable of reaching fallen man with the reality of sin, righteousness, and judgment and with the message of redemption, and He needs no help whatsoever. In addition, the completion of the task of world evangelization is not in doubt. God, in His providence and power, has guaranteed that every ear will hear and that the heathen who rejects Him will be without excuse. Before a word slips from the lips of the gospel-bearer, God has already spoken. Through creation around him and conscience inside him man has clearly seen God before a word is said (Romans 1-2) and he is already accountable for this knowledge. Further, because God is a just God, He will not withhold redemption and the redemption message from the humble and penitent if the assigned gospel-bearer fails to fulfill his task.

Consider what the Bible says about God's character. Jeremiah 32:17,27 teaches us that nothing is impossible for Him. Matthew 19:26 adds that this includes even those things impossible for man. He is able to raise up followers from the ground (Luke 3:8). Romans 1:18-20 makes it clear that God has already made Himself "clearly seen" through creation so that humanity is without excuse in rejecting Him. Romans 2:14-15 adds to this, and reveals that in addition to the external witness of creation, people also have the internal witness of conscience. As if all that were not enough, Revelation 14:6-7 shows that God is able to preach the gospel through angels. Although God invites us to join Him in His work, He can easily get the job done without us.

It is upon the foundation of these realities that any philosophy of missions must be founded. All deficiencies, deviations, and unbiblical excesses in world evangelization can be traced to an inadequate understanding of and submission to these realities. In a very real sense, these define the "what" of world evangelization. It should be noted that there are others which could be added to this list.

The Consequences of Misbelief on World Evangelization

A wrong presupposition will always lead to a wrong conclusion, no matter how sound the logic is. It is worthwhile to consider the consequences of misbelief in each of these areas on the task of world evangelization. This consideration will not, of course, be exhaustive, but will give us a place to start. First, let us consider some of the results of misbelief of Biblical reality #1. What practical consequence would you expect when Missions is defined as a trip instead of a task? It is important not only to see that you don't have to take a trip to involve yourself in missions, but it is also important to recognize that we can take a trip and perform a charitable service without embracing the mission of God. Digging a well

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for a villager in Africa accomplishes nothing of eternal consequence except that it is combined with the water which causes one to never thirst again. Since God has given to us the ministry of reconciliation, we have a responsibility to seek His face in a heart of surrender. We will never capture God's dream for our lives as individuals apart from also grasping His heart for His world. We must "*beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers,*" and we must be willing to be an answer to that prayer.

What are the potential consequences of wrongly defining Missions by geography? In the verses we considered previously both Mark and Matthew indicated that the whole world is the target of our mission. Holding this truth by itself however, has produced some erroneous values in the church. Most view missions as what happens in other countries, yet this is more a tradition than a truth. Our mission revolves around what we do, not where we do it. Since the whole world is the focus of the Great Commission, our target includes across the street as well as around the world. We cannot identify one as more important than the other. Though a church does well to become involved in reaching other countries, its members will never be as effective in reaching another culture as they will their own. Further, if a person is not effectively involved in reaching out in their own culture, a plane ride won't suddenly change things. As I mentioned before, if the early church ceased the work in Jerusalem because of prioritizing the world, their hometown would eventually cease to be a sender of missionaries and would instead become a mission field. This is not merely theory or hyperbole. It is a proven reality. At the turn of the 20th Century, Great Britain produced most of the planet's missionaries. At the beginning of the 21st Century, there are more practicing Muslims in Great Britain than there are practicing Christians. This is because they forgot about Jerusalem on their way to the uttermost parts. Missions may be a program, but our mission is the task of making disciples of all nations, identifying them with Christ and His family and teaching them to obey the commands of the Lord. Perhaps we ought to change the title of our budgets and programs from "missions" to "mission."

What do you think will result from not believing man is sinful and headed for judgment? If the church does not really believe in the sinfulness of man and the coming judgment of God, then the task of world evangelization will become redefined. No longer will the spiritual state of men's souls be the primary focus, but instead, the church's attention will shift to temporal concerns. The church will become simply one more in a long line of humanitarian organizations. While the church should respond to the temporal needs of the world with the compassion of God, meeting temporal needs only will never address the real problem of man. It will instead, enslave the church to the endless task of mopping up the symptoms of sin. A second danger of misbelief concerning the sinfulness of man is that of abandoning the task as altogether unnecessary.

What do you think will result from not believing in God's love and redemptive heart? Misbelief in this Biblical reality can lead to equally serious consequences. If the church loses sight of the redemptive heart of God, the sinner will be viewed through the eyes of the Pharisee. The church will begin to become self-righteous and prideful and will cease to become the agent of love God created it to be. Sinners will be castigated for their immorality instead of lovingly presented with the solution to it. Instead of embracing the world as needy of Christ, the church will retreat from sinners and arrogantly judge them worthy of wrath.

What would you expect to result from not believing God's ability to accomplish the task of world evangelization apart from us? This Biblical reality is especially prone to misbelief and the result to the church is an abandonment of the Christ life. Too many missionary appeals are based on a deficient view of God. Often we are guilty of presenting world evangelization as our task instead of God's. We forget that it is HIS harvest and His job to send out workers into that harvest. An effective speaker can easily excite pity in his hearers, not only for the helpless heathen but also for the God who has tried so hard and so long to save them and has failed for lack of help. It is time for the church to conclude with Job: "*I know that Thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted.*" Otherwise people

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will begin to respond to missionary appeal through the impotent efforts of the flesh. A. W. Tozer states, "I fear that thousands of younger persons enter Christian service from no higher motive than to help deliver God from the embarrassing situation His love has gotten Him into and His limited abilities seem unable to get Him out of. Add to this a certain degree of commendable idealism and a fair amount of compassion for the underprivileged and you have the true drive behind much Christian activity today." Instead of such erroneous thinking, we must recognize with Esther that if we remain silent, "*relief and deliverance will arise . . . from another place*," (Esther 4:14) and it is we, not the cause, who will be the loser. If God truly is self-sufficient, then I must assume that the need for world evangelization is ours, not His. It is through participating in what God is doing that the church begins to value the things of God. It is through giving to the work of the Lord that heaven begins to become our treasure and the place where our heart is. It is not God who needs us, but we who need to be involved in what God is doing.

Understanding the self-sufficiency of God does not paralyze Christian labor—it energizes it. This truth, while being a necessary rebuke to human self-dependence, will (when seen scripturally) lift from us the exhausting weight of trying to figure out how to win the world for God, and in its place we will find ourselves carrying the easy yoke of the Lord, being led by Him in Christ-initiated, Spirit-empowered labor to the honor and glory of God.

A Working Philosophy of Missions

The scope of world evangelization is defined by God in Acts 1:8, where Jesus proclaims to His disciples, "... *and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth*." This scope reflects the heart of God, in that He is "*not willing that any should perish but for all to come to repentance*." The church's ability to fulfill this call "*to the remotest part of the earth*" is, according to Jesus, contingent on two factors: receiving "*power*," and "*the Holy Spirit coming upon you*." Both of these prerequisites have God as their source and work to define who does what. It is the indwelling and filling of the Holy Spirit that defines the parameters of each believer's role in world evangelization. This is done through the work of God in the heart and life as He has gifted, called, and burdened each of us. This tells the "where" of world evangelization to each individual. We must be careful of unbiblical distinctions. The called person overseas is no more or less important to the work of God than here. We can trust that if we put the emphasis on the call of God, He will call where the need is, for it is His harvest.

The initiative of world evangelization is God's, not man's. This is an essential reality to understand. In Matthew 9:38 Jesus makes it clear that it is "*the Lord of the harvest*" who sends out "*workers into His harvest*." If our focus is the need of the world instead of the Lord of the harvest, our response will be wrong, however well intentioned. This makes the call of God the crucial imperative. It tells the "who" of world evangelization. God's call always comes with His provision of giftedness and resources.

The resourcing of world evangelization is the responsibility of God and the privilege of man. These two realities are not at odds with each other. The privilege of participation in missions reflects no need on the part of God, but rather, His gracious intent to let us participate in what He is doing. Whenever we look at ministry in any form we must remember: "Where God guides, God provides." This tells the "how" of world evangelization. If any ministry venture lacks resources, then either we are not looking to God for how he wants to provide those resources, or we are not where He has guided. This does not negate the element of faith, for God does not always provide when and how we expect or desire.

We see from these three considerations that the "where," the "who," and the "how" of missions are all in the hands of God, not man.

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How Does a Church know which Missionaries to support?

A final consideration is the question of how a church or denomination should decide whom to support and how much. At the risk of sounding simplistic, the bottom line is they must hear from God. Supporting a missionary is as important an involvement in the harvest as going, and requires as much a call. We must beseech the Lord of the harvest for wisdom. Logic would tell us that we cannot support everyone who asks, so what criteria do we use to make such a decision? First, we should only support those who have a clearly identifiable call and have been adequately equipped to fulfill it. Second, our criteria for the field should be no different than our criteria at home. If we would not hire a person to serve at our church, then we should not be supporting them to go somewhere else. The mission field deserves no less than our best. This means that a missionary candidate must meet the same Scriptural requirements as a pastor. Along with this, we should hold our supported missionaries to the same doctrinal standards as our pastors and teachers. We have no business supporting someone to teach on the mission field what we would not allow in our pulpit. These standards if dutifully followed would provide a more concrete basis for evaluation of support requests and would make it easier to be good stewards with our missions giving.

How Does a Church Prioritize its Missions Spending?

A final area a church must consider is how to take the resources allocated to the area of missions and use them in a way that reflects their values and has the greatest impact. Research into the evolution of missions giving of churches where missions was a great priority reveals some interesting patterns. There is a tendency toward some common strengths as well as some common mistakes. Churches with a strong missions heart reflect this value in their overall budget. Missions spending is significant, and sometimes is extreme. But the priorities of that spending tend to change as the ministry matures. To fully appreciate the decision-making dilemmas a church must face in this area, consider the questions below. What percentage of an individual missionary's support do you believe a local church should commit to? How should the decision to support or the amount of support be affected by...

- ◆ Whether the missionary was raised up from that church, joined that church after already being in ministry, or simply came to the church for support?
- ◆ The missionary being an "expatriate" (foreign to their field) versus "indigenous" (national worker)?
- ◆ What the missionary does versus where it is done?
- ◆ Whether it is evangelistic ministry, edifying ministry, equipping ministry or benevolent?
- ◆ Whether the ministry is stateside or overseas?
- ◆ What country or region of the world the missionary is to serve in?
- ◆ Under what circumstances should a missionary's support be increased?
- ◆ Under what circumstances should a missionary's support be decreased or discontinued?

These are questions which require much thought, and there are no easy answers.

Most new churches or churches with a new emphasis in missions determine to give larger amounts to each missionary. The rationale is that by making a significant, rather than token commitment, they can make a bigger difference in those ministries they support. They can lessen the time a missionary spends on initial support raising, as well as on reporting during a furlough. Churches can and should give larger amounts than individuals. There is however one significant problem with this approach. It doesn't acknowledge the fundamental reality that whether their gifts are large or small, sooner or later the budget will be used up. Unless the church has first defined its parameters and priorities, this approach rewards those who enter the system early and punishes those who arrive when the funds are gone, with little regard for strategic giving. What most churches learn later in the process is that they should have defined their priorities and standards up front, and should have allocated conservatively. It is always easier to increase later than decrease. In the process of wrestling with too many opportunities (and as

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soon as word gets out in the missions community there will be plenty), values emerge and are defined. Priorities become established. Standards are inevitably raised. But really, all of that should have been tackled up front. The investment opportunities are too great to give to everyone who comes to your door.

What values should guide who a church supports and how much? While a church should be open to supporting strangers, its first priority is to those raised up from within. If a home church does not get behind its own missionary, it sends a negative message. Many missions ministries have also learned the value of supporting national workers. In many countries, whether because there are few Christians or because of economic conditions, it is only through foreign support that a Christian worker is able to devote themselves full-time to the ministry. Often the cost of such support is only a fraction of what it would be to send a missionary there from the states—especially when factoring in learning the language and culture. The down side of such giving though is that such issues as communication and accountability often are difficult. Another consideration that few missions committees think about up front is the distinction between those who offer direct ministry in evangelism and discipleship verses indirect ministry such as construction or medical care. Though both are valid, they shouldn't be approached as being the same priority. Support decisions should be driven by a rational approach rather than an emotional one. Raising money for orphanages is easier than for pastoral training because a picture of a homeless child tugs harder at the heart than one of a studying pastor. Results reported from an evangelistic crusade sound more impressive that results from a discipleship emphasis because they are more immediate. But without discipleship, those results will disappear as fast as they appeared. A life-changing discipleship process is harder to write about in a newsletter than a conversion. This is why giving must be guided by the mind as well as the heart.

Ask any missionary who has done both and they will tell you that it is far easier to raise money to go overseas than to minister in the States. I have a friend who lost over 50% of his support when his Mission Board called him home from Africa to serve in a more strategic leadership role at their headquarters in the US. This is because most of us wrongly value geography over strategy and calling. Many churches want to have different standards for missionaries to “unreached” peoples. There is nothing wrong with valuing those areas with fewer Christians. We must remember though that the harvest belongs to God, and it is He who determines which fields are ready to harvest. We need to keep our eyes on God, for need does not equal call. A church that commits to mission support should count the cost. Taking on their first missionary at 50% of their support will likely bring challenges down the road in either the ability to support others or to maintain that commitment or both. While churches who have overcommitted sometimes have to drop to a lower level of support, this is always painful for everyone involved and can negatively affect ministry. Better to have counted the cost up front than to have to do this for not having done so. A church needs a sense of calling to a particular ministry, but that calling may not be permanent. If changes need to occur, they should be communicated as far in advance as possible, with a view to when the missionary will be able to replace the lost support. What is the bottom line? A church needs to define its mission philosophy, standards and priorities before committing to support.