Contemporary Issues in Evangelism & Missions

Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.
John 4:35

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“Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary is a school whose primary purpose is to provide graduate theological training for effective service in church-related and missions vocations through its main campus and designated branch campuses. Other levels of training are also offered.”
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“What are you doing to reach people?” That question is commonly heard by pastors and staff of growing churches.

With a large percentage of churches being plateaued or declining, ministers are constantly searching for something that works. However, a study of churches who consistently lead in baptisms reveals a diversity of methodology. Churches wanting to model their ministries after success stories will not find a “one size fits all” cookie-cutter mold.

The following is a study of randomly selected churches from various sizes, locations, backgrounds, and traditions. Each is in the top fifty churches in baptisms (either numerically or, in the case of smaller churches, in comparison to membership) in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Four Surprises

Interestingly, only two pastors mentioned a contemporary style of music or informal clothing as being connected to their success in reaching people. While both factors possibly are involved in many of the churches studied, when asked “what helps you reach people,” most leaders did not include either as a direct help in evangelism.

Another curious finding was that only three of the churches studied used a formal evangelistic program (such as Evangelism Explosion or Faith) to any significant degree. This fact does not mean that many successful churches do not use them. It merely highlights the emphasis
of these churches on methods other than formal training programs.

The third surprise from the study is the diversity of approaches. A few churches have regular weekly visitation. Others emphasize the constant “as you go” impact of believers on people in the community. Overall, every church had its own methodology for reaching people for Christ.

A fourth unexpected result was that while few of these churches use typical evangelistic revivals, all employ evangelistic events to varying degrees. This finding does not support the idea of discontinuing revivals. A recent study of the North American Mission Board of the SBC showed that churches which have evangelistic revivals using vocational evangelists tend to baptize more people annually than those churches who do not use revivals.

What works? This investigation reveals two commonalities and many unique approaches.

Two Commonalities

1. **Intentionality**—Every leader interviewed stressed that the church makes an intentional effort to reach the lost for Christ. Every program, ministry, activity, sermon, group has as its goal the touching of people’s lives with the gospel. Dr. Ed Young, pastor at Second Baptist Church of Houston (with 2,364 baptisms in 2009), wants every activity to have a “hook” to reach people for Jesus. In addition, the corporate culture encourages members to share Christ as a lifestyle and to bring friends to church.

2. **Pastor initiated**—Every pastor sets the tone for the staff and congregation. From sermons, to organizational plans, to staff agendas, to ministry activities, these leaders model and mold evangelism into the corporate DNA of the church. While staff ministers may administrate evangelistic efforts, none can replace the pastor in creating a commitment to evangelism. At First Baptist Church of Orlando, both current pastor, David Uth, and previous pastor, Jim Henry, helped focus the church on reaching people for Christ. Although each pastor has differing personal styles and organizational approaches, the common quality of a focus on reaching people started with the senior pastor.

Varying approaches

**Relationships**—Most of the congregations surveyed stress the importance of healthy relationships among members, but also focus on developing relationships with friends, family, and neighbors. Reaching a primarily Mormon community in Utah, Pastor Joe Johnston’s North Hills
Community Fellowship works to create a family atmosphere of people reaching out in love to their friends.

In the more traditional setting of Hendersonville, Tennessee, Long Hollow Baptist Church also emphasizes lifestyle evangelism. Leaders successfully encourage members to build relationships and to ask people to come to church with them.

Similarly, the leaders at Biltmore Baptist Church in North Carolina work constantly to instill a bridge-building culture into its congregation. A study by the Barna organization has revealed that most unchurched people will attend a church when invited by a friend who participates with them. Too many church members invite people to church but have no intention of developing a personal relationship with them. Successful evangelistic relationships are genuine—extending outside the church hours—and intentional—designed to bring people to faith in Christ.

Transformational Testimonies—The testimonies of people who have been dramatically transformed impact friends who observe believers’ changed lives. The Gathering in Mililani, Hawaii, has celebrated people rescued by Christ from backgrounds of alcohol, broken marriages, and other life tragedies. The pastor observes that as the people live out their Christianity and demonstrate their love for God, other people are attracted to the gospel.

Biblical Preaching—Another common focus for evangelistic pastors is the use of strong preaching to influence people for Christ. Ed Young, David Uth and other pastors are known for their effective biblical preaching. At Hillvue Heights church in Bowling Green, Kentucky, the most likely baptismal candidate is an adult man over the age of 40. Associate Pastor Jamie Ward suggests that the strong combination of the members’ witnessing and Pastor Steve Ayers’ preaching are responsible for this remarkable result. Hillvue Heights does not emphasize specific evangelism programs (although it has occasionally employed training with “Sharing Jesus Without Fear”). However, it has grown from 30 to over 3500 primarily through decisions at worship services.

Modeled after the Simple Church approach, Sagebrush Church in Albuquerque emphasizes the weekend, particularly Sunday, activities. Senior Pastor Todd Cook demonstrates his heart for evangelism through strongly evangelistic preaching.

The Gospel Invitation—Various pastors use a variety of approaches to drawing the evangelistic net at the conclu-
sion of the sermon. Most have a typical invitation in which seekers are invited to come forward to receive Christ at the end of a sermon. On the other hand, Pastor David Landrith does not offer a “come forward” invitation at every service, especially after sermons designed for believers. However, he regularly offers a strongly evangelistic message followed by an intense call for decisions, resulting in healthy responses.

Raising the Visibility of Baptism—Second Baptist Church, Houston, stresses immediate baptism. At many of its events, helpers are ready with baptismal clothes for people who receive Christ to be baptized immediately. First Baptist, Orlando, also elevates baptism as a celebration—both at its regular baptism services and at special services by the lake, at the beach, or at times in baptism troughs placed on the stage. Romar Beach Baptist in Orange Beach, Alabama, often baptizes on the beach, an activity which attracts onlookers who ask for baptism on the spot.

Event Evangelism—Many, though not all, of these churches employed attractional events to one degree or another. Romar Beach emphasizes jail and beach ministries, gospel concerts, and disaster relief benefits to reach people. Long Hollow Baptist uses strategic one day events coupled with multi-day events (such as Next Generation student camp) and traditional activities like Vacation Bible School.

Community Ministry—Several churches use community ministry to demonstrate Christ’s love and to provide opportunities to share the gospel. Lapine Baptist Church in Alabama has offered health fairs and parish nursing to minister to people and provide an opportunity for them to hear the gospel. Sagebrush often has up to 1000 volunteers for its “2nd Saturday” community ministry—partnering with various non-profit ministries to touch human needs.

Technology—One African-American church, New Memorial Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago, uses a tele-ministry system which places 10,000 phone calls a week. Teams trained in soul-winning techniques visit three days a week, following up on people who respond.

Other churches typically employ well-designed websites to share information about the church. Most websites include a gospel presentation, along with the opportunity for seekers to initiate contact with the church for follow-up. Technology also aids outreach, follow-up, and assimilation through church information software systems.

Small Groups—Some churches have traditional Sunday Schools or Connect Groups, but
also include numerous groups meeting on multiple days/ nights of the week. Each group is intentionally evangelistic, built around teaching God’s Word and reaching people with the gospel. The Connect Group leaders at Biltmore Baptist Church in North Carolina understand their purpose is to grow and multiply. The church constantly starts new classes, some at the church and others in homes.

Multi-site approaches—Several larger churches have satellite campuses in multiple locations. Each campus has a site-pastor and staff, but the Senior Pastor of the main campus is seen as the primary pastor of the entire church. Other “global” pastors help lead coordinated approaches to student ministries and other activities. By offering opportunities in areas that are experiencing population growth, these churches are able to reach more people in younger demographics, who typically are more open to the gospel. With six services at its main campus and additional services at its three satellite locations, Sagebrush Church added 2,000 members in 2010, reaching an average attendance of 9100.

Providing Follow-up/Assimilation—Second Baptist, Houston, uses a six-tier approach to assimilation:

- **Attract**—Employing various events to draw people to a place where they can hear the gospel.
- **Attach**—Immediately offering baptism, Bible study groups, and discipleship for people who respond.
- **Assimilate**—Making a priority of involving all members, especially new believers, in Bible classes.
- **Advance**—Helping believers grow through discipleship in small groups.
- **Activate**—Involving people in various ministries based on spiritual giftedness.
- **Affirmation**—Constantly encouraging believers at each stage of their spiritual journey.

Retention rates: With the various methods of evangelism and the strong emphases on baptism, a reasonable question may be asked about retention rates. A survey of these churches revealed retention rates from 50-80 percent. Those churches with the higher retention rate were more intentional in follow-up, discipleship, and assimilation.

Three Unusual Case Studies

The following case studies are not typical of Southern Baptist churches, but are relatively new congregations. Each has an unusual approach to ministry and evangelism. From Hawaii,
to Utah, to Florida, these con-
gregations give us a look at non-
traditional approaches church
plants have taken to reach their
communities for Christ.

North Hills Christian
Fellowship, Tremonton,
Utah, Joe Johnston, Pastor

When Pastor Joe Johnston
arrived at Tremonton, he found
familiar territory. His family was
multi-generational Mormon.
Joe had come to Christ after
trying to convert his wife to
Mormonism and discovering the
reality of Jesus Christ in the pro-
cess. After serving at North Hills
for six years, he has seen the
church grow primarily through
the conversion of people out of
Mormonism.

North Hills emphasizes the
creation of a loving atmosphere.
By focusing on genuine love,
authentically Christian life-style,
and willingness to provide a sup-
port system for those coming out
of the LDS, North Hills has suc-
ceded in an extraordinary way.
In one six week period in 2010,
34 persons were baptized. Most
people are saved in members’
homes after coming at discreet
hours to avoid pressure from the
Mormon community.

People hear about North
Hills primarily through word-
of-mouth testimonies, although
some people are reached
through block parties and other
events. Church members do
not approach neighbors with
a strong apologetic witness at
the beginning, but seek to build
friendships. Genuine love dis-
arms the typical Mormon who
expects to experience judgment
and rejection from evangelicals.
From the basis of relationships,
believers are taught not to argue
with their Mormon neighbor,
but to focus on the nature of
God, the nature of Jesus, and
the nature of salvation. Many
Mormons use the same terminol-
ogy as evangelical Christians, but
have vastly different meanings,
requiring witnesses to help with
definitions.

Pastor Johnston has observed
several stages that Mormons
typically experience when com-
ing to Christ.

Loving Relationships—As
believers encounter Mormon
neighbors and family, they offer
genuine loving relationships.

Doubt—Mormons typically
are not brought to doubt their
beliefs through argumentation,
but by Christians demonstrating
authentic love and a consistent
life-style. As their experience
with believers casts doubt on
what they have been taught
about non-Mormons, Mormons
will begin to question other
teachings of the LDS church.

Questioning—The LDS does
not permit questions. Typically,
a seeking Mormon may come
to discover that what he/she has
been taught is not accurate.
**Conversion**—At some point, usually in a personal conversation, the seeker will understand the true nature of Christ and come to Him in authentic salvation. Such conversions are usually very solid because the individual understands that he/she is choosing between Christ and everything else. People who leave the LDS for Jesus often lose family relationships, jobs, and even their homes. The members at North Hills try to provide a support system for these new believers—even to the point of offering shelter.

**Baptism/Membership**—Because of difficulties associated with baptism and membership in the LDS church, converted Mormons take time deciding to follow Christ in baptism. Church membership may take longer.

**Anger**—Some new believers may experience bitterness toward the LDS as they discover that what they had learned was not true.

**Discipleship**—As believers grow in the love of Christ and in understanding the true doctrine of Scripture, they gradually release their anger and begin to mature.

**Mature Love**—As they grow in Christ, they begin to express love for LDS family and friends and seek to become effective witnesses to them.

Pastor Johnston says his church seeks to get people to love Jesus and to love others. He attributes the church’s success to feeding the flock with biblical preaching and teaching, offering a family of believers who love each other, and providing a consistency in living out the Christ-like life.

**The Gathering, Mililani, Hawaii, James Shiroma, Pastor**

This congregation has grown from 0 to 260 in its brief four year experience. Founded on “falling in love with God” and “living out Christianity in life,” The Gathering is very relational in orientation. Many of its new believers have emerged from various broken backgrounds in response to the testimonies of Gathering members who share about how Jesus transformed them. Leaders emphasize that salvation is “more than a prayer,” but involves giving one’s life totally to Christ.

A Great Commission church, members are involved in their community, seeking to build relationships by ministering to neighbors in non-threatening community outreach activities and personal friendships. Occasional events in the fall and at Easter attract several hundred people. Ministry to the homeless, the elderly, and other needy
people also offer opportunities to share the gospel.

Training happens primarily on Sunday as the gospel is shared. The plan of salvation is in each week's printed bulletin. Small group leaders are trained to share their faith and to encourage members to share their testimonies with others.

Follow up begins with the church staff who discuss members' growth and needs. A retention rate of 60-70 percent is aided by the use of a “Life Journal” which leads new believers through a study of God's Word in a four-stage approach each week: Study, Observe, Apply, and Pray.

The church follows the Simple Church model with few activities during the week other than multiple worship services. The congregation uses only two or three attraction events during the year, choosing to focus on relational evangelism, Bible study, and worship services as means of reaching people. Youth services on Wednesday and Sundays, Young Adult services on Thursdays, join adult services on Saturday and three additional services on Sunday are held.

The Crossing has two primary approaches that combine relational evangelism and church proclamation are Invest and Invite. By “invest,” they mean to intentionally invest themselves in building relationships with non-believers (neighbors, business associates, etc.). They then encourage members to invite these friends to come with them to church activities where newcomers will encounter a gospel message. Pastor Dumas includes a strong invitation at every service.

Pastor Dumas’ philosophy is to insure what the church does is done well and remains biblical. New Christians are introduced to Life Journaling, placed into Life Groups, and encouraged to serve. Life Groups are located in homes during the week and at the church site on Sunday mornings.
The retention rate of the Crossing is lower than other churches studies—about 35%. However, the church is working on a tracking program to monitor members’ growth more closely.

**Conclusion**

Some people say that you can't argue with success, and each of the churches studied have succeeded in reaching people evangelistically in record numbers. Their baptismal records rank among the top fifty congregations in the nation. At the same time, one might legitimately ask whether pragmatic approaches are, at the same time, biblically consistent. Each of these churches insist on being biblical while, at the same time, being effective. Their methodologies are extremely varied—some using formal programs such as Evangelism Explosion, while others focus primarily on building evangelistic relationships. Events and other attractive programs are balanced with small group and individual discipleship emphases.

Another legitimate question relates to retention. Most churches studied showed a 50-80% retention rate. A few demonstrated a lower rate and acknowledged the need to help assimilate new members more effectively. This writer’s observation is that churches lacking an effective Sunday morning Bible study program—such as the Sunday School or Connect Groups—have a more difficult time assimilating new believers.

**What can churches take away from this study?**

- First, recognize that what works in one church does not necessarily work in another. Each congregation must seek to incarnate the gospel in its own culture.
- Second, successful churches are committed to biblical consistency. These congregations know their methods are only ways to support people’s encounter with God through His Word.
- Third, to reach people, the pastors must lead the way. The congregation will follow what the pastor models. If the pastor’s heart is to win people to Christ, the people will likely do the same.
- Fourth, whatever methods a church adopts, the congregation must be intentional in forming its strategy to focus on the result—people coming to faith in Christ in such a way that helps them live the Christ-life consistently in their daily setting.
Dr. Jere Phillips is Professor of Practical Theology and Director of Distance Education at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. He and Glenda have two married daughters and six grandchildren.
In 2004-2005, I visited and analyzed several dozen churches which were primarily growing with young people under the age of 35.

From this sample I chose twelve churches to profile in a book published by Abingdon Press. This book chronicled my impressions of these congregations and sought to identify recurring patterns among these churches as well as transferable lessons for similar congregations.

The sample contained churches of varying attendance sizes. For simplicity I primarily followed Gary McIntosh’s size differentiations (401+ large, 201-400 medium) (McIntosh, 1999, 17). To this I added Lyle Schaller’s delineations of 50-100 as a small church and 100-225 as a middle-sized/awkward congregation (Schaller, 1980, 27). While creating a small degree of overlap, the following church attendance demarcations were utilized for straightforwardness: 401+ large, 225-400 medium, 100-225 awkward, less than 100 small (Whitesel, 2006, 29).

In the sample two were large churches (10,000+ Mars Hill in Grandville, MI and 1,700+ St. Thomas/Philadelphia Church in Sheffield, UK), and the remainder were divided between medium congregations (355+, Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, CA; 350-400, Scum of the Earth in Denver, CO; 250+, Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis, MN), awkward-sized churches (155+, The Bridge in Phoenix, AZ; 125+, Bluðer in Minneapolis, MN) and smaller churches (30-55 the sole café in Edmonton, AB; 65+ Freeway in Baton Rouge, LA;
40-55, Church of the Apostles, Seattle, WA; 50-75, One Place, Phoenix, AZ; 25-55, The Tribe of LA, Los Angeles, CA).

**ORGANIC ORGANIZATIONS**

I chose to describe these congregations as organic in character. I used the organic terminology, not because of the trendiness with which some authors apply the term today, but because of the history in which organic describes a holistic, interconnected and symbiotic organization. A brief overview of the term’s etymology with regard to organizational, and especially ecclesial, application may be helpful.

James F. Engel was one of the first to offer a holistic definition, stating that the “organic church model” has five attributes: 1) one body with one leadership, 2) equipped by God with supernatural giftings, 3) led by God through disciplined planning, 4) ministering to one another in community, 5) and ministering to the world (Engel, 1979, 93). Howard Snyder emphasized the supernatural aspect stating that a healthy church was a “charismatic organism,” which he defined as a congregation that is empowered by God (charismatic) and where “all of its people are ministers” (organic) (Snyder, 1975, 157).

I have noted elsewhere that “the organic intellectual contextualizes grand truths in terminology that a modern culture can understand, so as to not obliterate the modern culture. This idea of an organic intellectual that does not emasculate a culture, but sojourns along with it to translate grand understandings to it, mirrors the missional attitude of the organic church” (Whitesel, 2006, 26).

Not surprisingly, organic also provides a fitting metaphor for churches because of Scriptural antecedents and validity, e.g. as 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, Romans 12, and in 1 Corinthians. Although a thorough discussion of the nature and validity of the organic appellation is beyond (and not necessarily germane to) this present discussion, I have offered the above overview to introduce the reader to my thinking and to explain the term when it does appear.

**MISSIONAL IMPRESSIONS AND MELODIES**

As a result of my research I found four broad attitudes that despite denominational affiliation and geographic location, persisted among the twelve youthful congregations I studied. I described these over-arching themes as “melodies,” using the musical metaphor because these melodies reoccurred with different cadences, in different keys.
and even with different personal interpretation. Still, these four melodies occurred in all twelve case studies.

For the first melody, I found that these case study churches embraced a theology that was consistent with their denominational theology. For example, I found Aaron Norwood’s theology in word and practice consistent with his Southern Baptist Convention affiliation (even though part of this church meets in the very un-Baptist location of a college bar). An induction, discussed at length in my earlier work, was that these emerging churches were more the product of new aesthetic expressions than divergent theological expressions (since they did not mirror denominational methodology, but they did so in theology). An investigative article in The New York Times concurred, stating, “Many emerging churches preach the same message as their sponsoring (evangelical) churches, but use different methods” (Leland, 2004).

The second melody I noted was that these congregations embraced a sense of honesty and openness, that they often referred to as “authenticity.” For example, their church worship expressions were more concerned about helping attendees encounter God, rather than attaining excellence and/or creating an attractional event. This authenticity was reflected in their congregational discussions in small groups (e.g. Sunday schools, etc.) and sermons where openness about faults and doubts were encouraged. One church held their weekly services in an Internet café, preferring to conduct their communal life in public. The churches seemed to value putting down their masks of perfection for the sake of honesty and growth.

A third melody I observed was these churches worked hard to minister to people across the spectrum of the evangelistic journey, i.e. before and after the conversion experience. Since evangelism is a process of unfolding good news whereby a person becomes reconnected with their Creator (the missio Dei), then meeting the physical needs of a needy individual can be good news to that individual. In a parallel fashion, helping a Christian discover his spiritual gifts can be good news to a growing Christian. Thus, both meeting physical needs pre-conversion as well as fostering spiritual formation post-conversion are both part of an unfolding good news to spiritual travelers. Subsequently, I found these churches rejecting a false dichotomy between social ministry and spiritual discipleship. Instead they see both of these actions as part of the good news process, and hence part of evangelism.
The final melody I observed was a linking of classic Church Growth Movement principles with the terminology and ideology of the missional church. I have described this as “missional church growth,” for these congregations often reframed Church Growth Movement principles in missional terminology. For example they emphasized classic church growth principles such as the importance of cultural groups/contexts, discipleship in small groups, people movements, presence-proclamation-persuasion, social-webs, planting internal-external churches-venues, and every Christian’s responsibility to participate in the *missio Dei*. (I was even surprised how often the pastors of these churches cited the classic Church Growth Movement writers such as Donald A. McGavran, George G. Hunter III, John Eddie Gibbs, etc.).

In addition to these overarching melodies, I observed sixteen reoccurring patterns that expanded lists by Craig Van Gelder and Eddie Gibbs (Van Gelder, 10) (Gibbs, 2000, 25). However, in this initial survey I did not specifically query the leaders nor track patterns of conversion. Therefore, one topic which might be germane for this present discussion would be to resurvey the leaders of these churches and ask about their views on conversion. Such an exercise can give the reader insight into the thinking of these leaders of youthful churches regarding salvation and conversion. However, this article is not written to be the last word (or even the definitive first word) on the topic of youth-orientated churches and their views on conversion. Rather, this is an initial exercise (one of many I hope) that will explore emerging leaders and their thoughts about evangelism and conversion.

**VARYING TYPES OF CONVERSION**

I asked each leader the same questions about conversion and evangelism. Because churches from varying denominational backgrounds were utilized, I tried to employ a holistic perspective of conversion, using general categories from the writings of Scot McKnight, Richard Peace, Charles Kraft and others. To compare these different kinds of conversion, the following chart is adapted from my earlier book *Spiritual Waypoints: Helping Others Navigate the Journey* and is used here with permission.
To take advantage of these categories, I asked the following questions of all church leaders from the previous study who were available and open to answer my queries. I will list their responses and then give my observations based upon my knowledge of the individual and their churches.

**QUESTIONS ON EVANGELISM AND CONVERSION**

Instructions: Thank you for letting me write about your congregation in *Inside the Organic Church: Learning from 12 Emerging Congregations*. I am writing an article for a scholarly
journal. For this next part of my research, it will be helpful if I can obtain from all previous interviewees their experiences and views on evangelism. Would you please answer the following questions in one paragraph or less per question (except where a number or circled item is required)?

Question 1: Please state your name and current occupation.

Question 2: How do you define evangelism and how does evangelism take place in your congregation?

Question 3: How do you define conversion and how does conversion take place in the congregation?

Question 4: Circle all of the statements below that described what you have experienced:

• My conversion was an experience that I can date exactly.
• I was converted from a sordid past.
• My conversion took place over a period of time and dating the exact date is difficult.
• I was connected to a Christian community before I was converted.
• My conversion occurred in conjunction with a liturgical or sacramental experience.

• I was a nominal Christian but a worship experience awakened my sleeping faith.
• I was raised in a non-church going home.
• I was raised in a Christian home.

Questions 5 - 8: On a Likert Scale with
1 = strongly negative
2 = negative
3 = no opinion
4 = positive
5 = strongly positive
what are your feelings about the following terms?

Question 5: Salvation
Question 6: Born-again
Question 7: Conversion
Question 8: Sudden conversion
Question 9: Progressive conversion

Question 10: What is your denominational affiliation? If none, please designate a denomination that might be similar.

RESPONSES:

STEVE WALLACE
FORMER PASTOR
OF FREEWAY,
BATON ROUGE, LA

Background: This church averaged 65+ attendees and met in the sanctuary of a Presbyterian Church in Prairieville, LA (a suburb of Baton Rouge). They employed many of the artifacts
of an emerging church culture, including interactive worship stations and multi-media sermons. The church has since ended, and Steve Wallace is the associate pastor at a nearby planted church affiliated with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

Question 1: Please state your name and current occupation.

Steve Wallace, Associate Pastor, River Church South (new church plant), Gonzales LA

Question 2: How do you define evangelism and how does evangelism take place in your congregation?

Defined by the terms used in the New Testament, ‘evangelism’ means ‘to share or announce the good news.’ In our young church plant, we encourage our members and regular attenders to evangelize (to share the story of Jesus) everywhere—at work, in their neighborhoods, at school and in their families. We structure our small group ministries and instructional classes, then, to assist our members to do that and do it purposefully and well. To that end, our worship services include evangelistic messages too.

Question 3: How do you define conversion and how does conversion take place in the congregation?

As conversion is “the act of turning from sin and self toward God through Jesus Christ,” a certain sense of awareness of one’s spiritual condition is present. That level of understanding is obviously possible through preaching and teaching, but in our congregation has taken place more often in intimate settings like a small group, an Alpha class, or in conversations over coffee. In answering Questions 2 and 3, I found the New Dictionary of Theology—IVP, 1988—helpful in expressing my thoughts.

Question 4: Circle all of the statements below that described what you have experienced:

- My conversion was an experience that I can date exactly.
- I was connected to a Christian community before I was converted.
- My conversion occurred in conjunction with a liturgical or sacramental experience.
- I was raised in a Christian home.
My conversion took place during a Sunday evening worship service at the United Methodist church my family had attended since I was two. I was seven at the time.

Question 5: Salvation = 5  
Question 6: Born-again = 5  
Question 7: Conversion = 5  
Question 8: Sudden conversion = 5  
Question 9: Progressive conversion = 5

Note from Wallace: My conversion experience is just that—my experience, and yet I do not believe it to be an all-inclusive standard for all followers of Jesus Christ. That is why I have ‘strongly positive’ feelings about each of the five terms listed.

Question 10: What is your denominational affiliation? If none, please designate a denomination that might be similar.

Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)

Notes by Bob Whitesel: Steve Wallace notes that conversion processes at his church seem to be the most active in small group environments and interpersonal dialogue. As a church leader, he also expects what Lois Barrett calls the “missional vocation” pattern of counting on congregants to “evangelize (to share the story of Jesus) everywhere—at work, in their neighborhoods, at school and in their families.”

And, Wallace notes that church programs support congregants in this mission. He appears to have experienced a conversion experience that is datable. And, he holds in high regard the terms associated with evangelism, including sudden conversion which he has experienced but which appears to be somewhat foreign to the congregation’s experience.

AARON NORWOOD  
PASTOR OF THE BRIDGE  
AND RIO VISTA IN PHOENIX, AZ

Background: This is a church plant of 155+ with Southern Baptist affiliation that formerly met in two nightclubs/bars and also in a homeless shelter in downtown Phoenix. The church grew in the nightclubs/bars, but when it had enough money to purchase a building chose to purchase a homeless shelter (the Rio Vista Center) in downtown Phoenix. They chose this location to restore a formerly struggling ministry to the homeless. I observed Aaron stating to congregants at the nightclubs/bars that the Sunday morning brunch with service to the homeless in the Rio Vista Center was their “real” weekly service (and not the worship and preaching
services in the nightclubs/bars). Norwood’s strategy was to motivate young people who might come out to the familiar environment of a bar to get involved in “real service” at a Sunday brunch for hundreds of homeless people. It is refreshing to see youthful congregations eschewing a retreat to the suburbs, and instead purchasing facilities in the inner city to grow ministry to the urban poor.

Question 1: Please state your name and current occupation.

Aaron Norwood, Lead Pastor, the Bridge church and Commercial Real Estate Broker

Question 2: How do you define evangelism and how does evangelism take place in your congregation?

We define evangelism as sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed. This takes place as we serve our community’s needs: food, clothing, job resources, navigating government issues, pregnancy resources, biblical teaching, and worship.

Question 3: How do you define conversion and how does conversion take place in the congregation?

Conversion is the process of a person deciding that they want to change their life and follow Jesus. This happens slowly for some, and instantly for others.

Question 4: Circle all of the statements below that described what you have experienced:

- My conversion took place over a period of time and dating the exact date is difficult.
- I was raised in a Christian home.

Question 5: Salvation = 4
Question 6: Born-again = 2
Question 7: Conversion = 3
Question 8: Sudden conversion = 3
Question 9: Progressive conversion = 3
Question 10: What is your denominational affiliation? If none, please designate a denomination that might be similar.

Southern Baptist

Notes by Bob Whitesel: Outreach in “word and deed” is a phrase I often hear in these congregations. There is a network of parishioners and academicians that fosters this, led by a colleague, Al Tizon, and called “The Word and Deed Network.”
A part of the Evangelicals for Social Action, their goal is “…to see every Christian congregation to be engaged actively in holistic ministry—leading people to faith in Christ, restoring community, and working for social transformation.” This would be a good depiction of the ministry I observed at The Bridge and their Rio Vista Center. In addition, in his responses Norwood embraces both sudden and progressive conversion though he has experienced the latter, and finds ‘salvation’ a more attractive term than conversion (either sudden or progressive).

**DAN KIMBALL**  
**VINTAGE FAITH CHURCH, SANTA CRUZ, CA**

Background: I have visited this church three times, with my initial visit forming the basis for the description in an earlier book. At that time Vintage Faith Church had been planted by Santa Cruz Bible Church but was meeting in the mother church’s gymnasium. This venue better accommodated the many artistic stations, prayer grottos and mood walls than the location into which they have subsequently moved. The present location is a former Presbyterian church which seats approximately 250 and which barely accommodates the Vintage Faith congregation. With multiple worship encounters the church still runs about 375-400 in attendance. Though the venue limits their creativity and worship expressions, On my two recent visits I found the church still embracing an innovative and experimental style of worship. Of interest to me was if these changes in venues, partnerships, and their ongoing experimental competency have bearing upon Kimball’s views on evangelism. Though not addressed directly, the following responses from Kimball indicate that they might.

**Question 1:** Please state your name and current occupation.

Dan Kimball, staff member at Vintage Faith Church leading the teaching and mission of the church.

**Question 2:** How do you define evangelism and how does evangelism take place in your congregation?

Evangelism is the proclamation and explanation of the good news of Jesus—His teachings, His life, His death and resurrection and what was accomplished on the cross and how putting faith in Him is salvation. And then salvation needs definition. Bottom line, evangelism is about how Jesus has saved us and the good news of salvation that we can be
forgiven, saved, go to heaven, and join in His mission here on the earth, etc.

Evangelism takes place all the time. But it happens in both discreet and very bold ways. Primarily it is through the lives of the people of the church who are ambassadors for Jesus and represent Him in the world. Through trust gained in relationships, they share about their faith with people they know. They pray for people and it seems that through time some may be interested in knowing more. It may eventually lead to them coming to our church’s worship gatherings or small groups or events. And over time they learn more about Jesus and if the Spirit moves them they put faith in Jesus and make a decision to trust Him and follow Him.

Question 3: How do you define conversion and how does conversion take place in the congregation?

I think the process leading to conversion is so varied. But I do believe there is a distinct time when the Holy Spirit regenerates and becomes part of a person’s life upon their faith in Jesus. Conversions in our church happen more as a process of learning and trusting that happens. Eventually, whether it is in a worship gathering when we occasionally explain the gospel or when we ask directly if they have ever prayed to trust Jesus—and we lead them in a prayer. However, it seems that it often happens that someone learns enough and prays on their own. Then they make a decision of faith and believe. Then they tell us, or we have a baptism class they then tell us their story, and we learn about the decision they made.

Question 4: Circle all of the statements below that described what you have experienced:

- My conversion took place over a period of time and dating the exact date is difficult.
- I was raised in a non-church going home.

Question 5: Salvation = 5
Question 6: Born-again = 4
Question 7: Conversion = 4
Question 8: Sudden conversion = 4
Question 9: Progressive conversion = 4

Question 10: What is your denominational affiliation? If none, please des-
ignite a denomination that might be similar.

We started as an independent church which was pretty much Baptist in our theology with progressive forms of methodology as we are on mission. We have partnered with an aging PCUSA (Presbyterian Church USA) church, so learning all about that now.

Notes by Bob Whitesel: It is interesting that Kimball begins his definition of evangelism on a more soteriological tone, rather than a missio Dei one (note too his response to Question 5 in relationship to Questions 6-9). This may be because of Kimball’s salvation history in the Baptist stream. Regardless of genesis, his perspective demonstrates a strong commitment to evangelism. For example, I personally observed Kimball talking in an amicable yet straightforward manner about conversion with a college professor who attended Vintage Faith Church, but by her own admission, had not yet experienced conversion. Kimball, along with Norwood, may be the most forthright in discussing conversion with spiritual travelers approaching the point of conversion (and both have Baptist backgrounds). Still, it seems that Kimball’s experience with the populace of the somewhat libertine community of Santa Cruz, California, has expanded his appreciation for the progression that takes place before conversion. Thus, in Kimball we see a quest for equilibrium between sudden and progressive aspects of conversion.

WINSTON PEI
THE SOL CAFÉ,
EDMONTON, AB

Background: This congregation utilizes an Internet café as their site for a new church plant of the Christian and Missionary Alliance of Canada. With a motto, “Come for a coffee and let God feed your soul,” this congregation runs a full feature Internet café during the week while hosting worship encounters on Sunday evenings. The Internet café was leased from previous proprietors and provides a gathering place for people in the community. The church leaders are customarily the baristas and as such connect with community residents all week long and not just on Sundays. Located on Whyte Avenue, an urban neighborhood in Edmonton, Alberta, the congregation of the sol café attracts college students, metropolitan residents, urban artists, immigrant families and blue-collar families. The use of an Internet café for their plant also provides a degree of fiscal support to the planted church.
Question 1: Please state your name and current occupation.
Winston Pei, Graphic Design, Communications/Technology Consultant and a leader of the sol café.

Question 2: How do you define evangelism and how does evangelism take place in your congregation?
If I had to define it, and without giving it nearly the thought it needs, I would say evangelism is the act of communicating and nurturing an understanding of the Christian faith in people who do not consider themselves Christian. I think it has taken place within our group through personal relationships, through the writing and content of our website, and through the personal exploration and practice of our faith in public spaces and places.

Question 3: How do you define conversion and how does conversion take place in the congregation?
As above, if I had to define it, and with even less than the necessary amount of consideration required, I would say conversion is the act of choosing to pursue the Christian faith as one’s primary path for spiritual growth and development, of accepting the idea of God’s gift of redemption through the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ as a foundational premise, and taking that leap of faith as a basis for moving forward with your life.
The sol cafe is nominally part of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, but my personal “affiliation” to the Alliance is peripheral at best, and antagonistic in many instances. I was raised in the Baptist tradition, but I really liked the last Anglican service I attended.

SUMMATION

Conclusions for each case study along with questions for further study were included earlier in this article, and thus are superfluous here. However, a few final thoughts are in order.

First, this survey was conducted over a six-week period and perhaps because of time constraints some churches did not respond. The non-respondents tended to be the larger churches. Increasing response occurred as the churches were smaller in size. This may indicate a growing administrative focus, rather than a theological reflection among its leaders. Respondents are noted below in italics.

Secondly, it appears that congregations from my previous...
research continue to embrace conversion as a spiritual waypoint. Though many leaders had sudden conversion experiences, most found their churches experienced a more progressive conversion process. Another follow-up study in five years might throw light on whether conversion is trending downward in importance, if balance between progressive/sudden conversion is being maintained, and/or if conversion is increasingly important in these emerging congregations.

**SOURCES**


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Dr. Bob Whitesel holds DMIN and PhD degrees from Fuller Theological Seminary where he was awarded the Donald A. McGavran Award for outstanding scholarship in church growth. He is the author of ten books, including the award-winning *Preparing for Change Reaction: How to Introduce Change In Your Church* (2008), and the series on evangelism: *Spiritual Waypoints: Helping Others Navigate the Journey* (2010) and *Waypoint: Navigating Your Spiritual Journey* (2010). He serves as Professor of Missional Leadership at Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University and is a sought-after speaker and consultant.
SBC DECLINE IN BAPTISMS

The collective, reported baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention have plateaued and moved toward decline for several decades. This is taking place in the midst of growing numbers of mega churches and new church plants. This has and should cause reflection and evaluation with alarm.

The primary purpose of this paper is to explore possible reasons for the decline in baptisms reported to the SBC through the Annual Church Profile reports. This will involve exploring various contributing factors and proposing a few paths that could be considered to help remedy this problem.

No one book or even extended article can address the many tentacles which are contributing to the plateau and decline of the reported baptisms in the SBC. But, my hope is that you will see a clearer picture into the realities we as Southern Baptists are facing. A bonus would be that you may use whatever insights you gain to further expand God’s Kingdom in North America and around the world.

DELIMITATIONS

In writing formal papers for my PhD seminars at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, I became quite familiar with the term “delimitations” and its value in bringing some order to research and to making seemingly unlimited options a little more in focus. I need to delineate several items as you begin moving through this paper. First, I will not be intentionally addressing the value, the role, and/or the future of denominations generally or even the SBC as a whole. Second, I will not be extensively covering whether or not counting the reported baptisms in the SBC is the best measuring tool as to the effectiveness
of the SBC and in particular the evangelistic fruit of our collective ministry. Third, I will not seek to address the various ministries and ways the SBC is impacting the world through our denominational, church and individual ministries. Fourth, I recognize that while various factors are involved at various levels, I will not seek to determine exact cause and effect, or even attempt to provide statistical correlations on the factors. I am hopeful that you will not take one isolated factor or suggested factor out of the context of the collective picture of the whole.

Research Methods

I took several roads in exploring this significant matter with all of its various facets. However, I certainly would not claim that this particular research is exhaustive in nature. The statistics and demographic trends represent what is happening in the SBC and do so without much attention given to proposed solutions or future strategic implications. The surveys I conducted with individuals were wide enough in nature to get both a cross-section of responses that provided a broad range of reasons why the baptisms are declining in the SBC. Some previous research papers were particularly helpful.

- Strategic Planning Indicators” by Philip B. Jones, Summer 2000.

Current Status of Southern Baptist Baptisms in the US

The ways to look at baptisms in the SBC are not unlimited, but they are many. In the following sections I will seek to provide some statistical facts, a brief commentary on it for your consideration, and then allow you to determine which factors you believe are most significant.

- For the past 50 plus years, the numbers of reported baptisms on the ACP have basically been plateaued inside a 10% margin both up and down and overall trending down a little.
- For 4 of the last 5 years, baptisms have been declining.
- The ratio of baptisms per resident members has significantly declined in the last 60 years: from 1 baptism for every 14 resident member in 1950 to 1 baptism for every 29 resident members in 2004.
This means that it takes more resident members to baptize someone today than it did years ago.

**SELECTED FACTORS INFLUENCING BAPTISM TOTALS**

Many factors are influencing baptism numbers. Some are more readily observed through statistics, and others are more difficult to see under the layers of factors.

**Statistically Observable Factors**

The most obvious positive correlation is the connection of baptisms to the birth rate. The baptism totals of the SBC track in a positive correlation with the birth rate of white, non-hispanic children from seven years prior. God is certainly not limited by demographics or the birth rates, but for several decades, as birth rates have gone up and down among white people, so too, baptisms typically follow several years later.

Compared to other segments of the US population, white parents are having fewer children which is impacting the baptism totals. Other peoples are having more children per family. While Southern Baptists are growing more diverse, the denomination has historically been predominately white and non-Hispanic.

Compared to national averages, SB church members have an older average age which means that fewer SB church members are having babies to be reared in homes of SB families. Compiling the numbers of boys connected to a church, the trend goes significantly downward:

- Age 6 – 100 boys
- Age 12 – 50 boys
- Age 18 – 25 young men
- Age 22 – 7 young men
- Age 30 – 13 men

These figures demonstrate that out of every 100 boys connected with our churches at age 6, only 13 will be connected at age 30. While every single child’s soul matters, these numbers beg for some attention and focused efforts to reverse this very dramatic trend with boys. The ramifications of these shortcomings in discipling children are many.

**THEOLOGICAL FACTORS**

**Fewer Churches Requiring Rebaptisms by Immersion**

For several decades, research has indicated that between 40 and 60 percent of adult baptisms were not initial conversions, but rebaptisms. This means that the church’s ability to reach adults is more difficult than a surface level glance at the statistics
would reveal. Southern Baptist churches are having trouble communicating their message to adults, particularly toward first time conversion. This was not the case with Jesus and the early disciples.

Churches reaching out to adults who do not come from denominational backgrounds which require baptism by immersion have to wrestle with what they require for membership. Some churches have relaxed the traditional Landmark practice of requiring persons joining SBC churches from other denominations to be rebaptized by immersion. Historically this was a standard request and probably produced a few more baptisms each year.

A related factor is the decrease in the number of people migrating to the South from the Rust Belt and Snow Belt. Most of the migration to the South has already taken place, so there are fewer people to rebaptize should they seek to join a SBC church. While these factors may not be statistically significant, they are impacting the total baptisms reported.

Practical Universalism

Southern Baptists, as a collective people, say they believe in the Bible and follow the tenants of the Baptist Faith and Message in all of its major doctrinal positions. However, I believe Southern Baptists have lost their edge toward evangelism, because they operate as if there are many paths to God and that God will work it out in the end if a person is good or sincere. In his *Evangelism Handbook*, Alvin Reid addresses practical universalism and its potential dangers to evangelism which in turn impacts baptism rates.

Spread of Calvinism

Strongly held beliefs and passions often accompany any discussion of this topic. It would be neglectful not to list this matter of theology in the discussion of baptisms because of the growing amount of conversations about it across the SBC, even though Calvinism seems to be a negligible factor for now. In 2007, LifeWay Research completed a study and reported their findings in “Calvinism and SBC Leadership: Key Findings and Evangelistic Implications.” Four conclusions were drawn: (1) Calvinist led churches are a small minority of the total churches, (2) Calvinism is on the rise among SBC seminary graduates, (3) churches led by recent graduates and that hold to Calvinism are generally smaller in worship attendance and baptisms, and (4) in annual baptisms, there is little difference between Calvinist and non-Calvinist led churches.
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS

Spiritual Options

Some parts of the country used to be so saturated with Southern Baptists, that if a person belonged to another denomination, people would almost ask, “How did that happen?” Today the religious and spiritual options available to people are almost uncountable. Additionally, people are taking bits and pieces from various religious groups and almost making their own religion and beliefs.

Impact of Media

The number of noticeable and hidden impacts of the media on the minds and hearts of Christians as potential gospel carriers and those we are trying to reach for Christ cannot be overstated or even adequately addressed in a paper of this nature. The messages of the media are making it more difficult for pastors to motivate their congregations to share the message of Christ. The prevailing media messages are also making it more difficult for those without Christ to be receptive to Christians and their message.

Several impacts are worth noting:

1. The media has significantly contributed to how people process reality including matters of faith. There has been a major shift from primarily using logic, reason, and good judgment, to processing life through matters of emotions, feelings, and relationships. This applies both to Christians as they process sermons, Bible teachings, and other forms of hearing the Christian message, and also to lost people that Christians are trying to communicate the life-giving message of Christ.

2. The media and those who construct its messages have increasingly undermined Christian doctrine and teachings as a basis for thought and practice of life.

3. The media has often projected all religious groups as the same in spite of the significant differences. This impacts evangelism in several ways, but it also speeds up the process in which people choose to not hold to their denominational ties.

4. The media has propagated the idea that religious beliefs are a private matter, and that someone who has a belief that they share with others is acting with ignorance, arrogance, or aggression, not acting as a person of conviction and love for others.
Breakdown of Cultural Supports (Schools & Government)

In past decades, the church has been able to count on the support systems of the schools and of government to make many decisions that were fairly consistent with Judeo-Christian teachings. These entities were providing either support for decisions to follow Christ or laying a foundation for the gospel to be received when it was spoken to them.

Like the media, these institutions have been promoting that all religions are the same and promoting new forms and definitions of tolerance of both beliefs and practices of life. So, in many ways, these entities have eroded the foundation on which the gospel was laid in the minds and hearts of those who are significantly impacted by them.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Postmodernism

Christianity neither follows the thinking of Modernity or Postmodernity. However, the approaches to communicating the gospel with a person who is more influenced by Modernity is significantly different than communicating with a person who's culturalized and natural bent is toward processing reality through the lenses of Postmodernity.

People process a proposed truth/idea (including the gospel) through three filters: (1) reason, (2) pragmatism, and (3) feelings. For most of the history of the SBC, our evangelism tools have been designed to speak the clear truth of the gospel to the person processing reality through the filters in the order shown above of 1, then 2, and then 3. An example to illustrate this would be Bill Bright's 4 Spiritual Laws gospel tract. However, today, growing numbers of people are processing new proposed truths in a reverse order (3, then 2, and then 1). The implications for sermons and for personal witnessing are many. In my book on personal evangelism, I addressed this topic more extensively.

Starting Point Is Farther Away

While more people are considering themselves spiritual people, they are often spiritually confused about the true gospel as revealed in the Bible, even if they are using the same words. There is less common ground from which to start a conversation about Christ. People have widely different views on what it means to sin, who is God or god, the truthfulness of the Bible, what it means to be a Christian, and several other matters which are involved in a person surren-
dering their life to Christ. Most gospel tracts assume much more than meets the eye of those who also hold those beliefs. For a culture where people are often determining their own truth and almost making God into their image, the starting point for spiritual conversations and/or our gospel tracts are much more toward Genesis 1 than John 3. A factor in the decline in baptisms involves our inability or our limitations to connect people to the one true living God and Jesus in our communications with them when they have such diverse starting points. Even when churches are successfully reaching people who are postmodern in their thinking, baptism numbers may lag behind.

**Spiritual Factors**

Another factor in the decline of baptisms is the lack of recognition that we as Christians are in a spiritual battle with a living and active enemy who seeks to destroy. Satan and the demonic beings which follow him are seeking to thwart the work of God and those who follow Him in Jesus Christ. We are not in a spiritually neutral environment. With the world becoming smaller in many ways and as the religions of the world spread in the US, the lies and the author of those lies spread in their influence.

**OTHER POSSIBLE FACTORS**

Some Churches Have Disconnected from the SBC

For a variety of reasons, some churches are no longer tied to the SBC. There is less negative stigma in America toward churches that are independent or inter-denominational. Individualism was a mark of modernity, and has now grown additional roots into the systems of our churches. While Baptists have always practiced the local autonomy of the local church, it seems in recent years to have been taken to new heights as churches are less connected to their denomination.

Some Pastors Who Grew Up in SB Churches and/or the Children of SB Pastors Are No Longer Connected to the SBC

There are some churches (some more high profile and certainly those with lower profiles) that are no longer connected to the SBC and are being led by pastors who grew up in homes of SB families and pastors. This would reduce the numbers of baptisms reported by SBC churches.

Churches Not Submitting ACPs

For several different reasons, increasing numbers of churches are not completing their Annual
Church Profiles, which contain all types of information, including baptisms. This does not automatically mean that there are fewer actual baptisms, but fewer churches reporting baptisms. Currently about 10,000 churches are not turning in the ACP, but that does not mean that all of those 10,000 churches are not baptizing even one person.

**Heavy Emphasis on Individualism**

Many people believe they can determine absolute truth for themselves in an individual way. In some ways, postmodernity is just an extreme form of modernity, where the value of the individual is placed on steroids. As such, people are often creating what they think about God from a wide variety of sources and the collective whole may actually have no bases and similarities to God who reveals Himself through the Bible and ultimately through Christ.

Some of our evangelistic efforts and subsequent baptisms are being negatively impacted by sharing our message with more and more people who believe they can determine their own truth in their own minds and that they are not subject to the standards and revelation of God in the Bible. This is also in keeping with the growing and prevalent belief that all religion is now in the area of opinion, not truth, so the views they hold are equally valid as anyone else, which is why some can say with a straight face, “I am a Catholic Atheist.”

**Age of Congregation**

Not only does the age of the members of the church appear to correlate to baptisms, the actual length of time that a church is in existence impacts evangelism as well. As churches age, the membership to baptisms ratios grow wider. Newer churches baptize more based on their membership than older churches. However, based on research I did for the North American Mission Board in 2002, the best figures to use for a more representative comparison are either baptisms to average worship attendance ratios or baptisms to average Sunday School attendance.

**Single System & Evangelism Approaches in Isolation from Disciplemaking**

There is much to say for having a simple faith that moves a person through life in a Christ-honoring manner by living with consistent patterns of obedience in thousands of little ways. However, for too, too long we have isolated and segmented evangelism from helping people become the type of disciples that imitate the life, values and priorities of Christ and honor God.
with their relationships and little act of obedience that grow in depth over time.

Without going too deep in discussing modernity, Christians could, not should, say to a lost person, “It does not matter how I live or about your experiences with Christian churches; what matters is that the Gospel is true and you must believe it.” This context for proclaiming and evangelizing others no longer exists as the majority view. It is absolutely essential for churches, in the midst of the cultural collapse of Judeo-Christian teachings and values, to produce/assist people in looking more like Jesus than they do other people who do not say they follow Christ. Chuck Kelley, President of New Orleans Baptist Seminary, stated in a presentation to the NOBTS seminary family, “Aggressive evangelism without aggressive discipleship will eventually undo itself.”

Too often Christians seek to do evangelism that results in baptisms, as if it were a single system matter, or at most a dual system: evangelism training and conducting harvesting events. Church evangelism is more like the systems of a body or a car. They are many, and it only takes one being down to keep the body or the car from running. So, in spite of efforts to do evangelism through personal evangelism training and through harvesting efforts, as vital as they are to the evangelism system, churches struggle many times because another part of the system is either unseen or neglected.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS — RESPONSES

I recognize that facing the many varied factors which are impacting our baptism totals and more importantly our fruitfulness in expanding God’s fame and glory around the US does not lead us to a simple solution. In the following section, I will seek to offer some items for your consideration. I know the list is not exhaustive, but maybe it will be a starter for future conversations, thinking, and hopefully promoting by the Holy Spirit who sustains life and gives us direction.

In no particular order and only with limited explanation, I offer some ideas for your consideration as we collectively address the decline in baptisms we are experiencing:

Give Attention to Follow-through

Whether it be a child or adult conversion, I would propose that churches pay significantly more attention to the new babes in Christ. They see the absolutely imperative role of doing God-pleasing follow-
through in helping new believers in Christ live in such a way that others would accuse them of being Christians. We seem to put the vast majority of our energies in getting to conversion and extraordinarily low thought and energy to helping those new believers grow in the faith as a part of the local expression of the bride of Christ, the church. With more and more Americans processing truth through whether or not it is working practically in someone’s life, our individual and corporate testimony will have significant ramifications on our ability to evangelize and baptize.

Plant Additional Churches, Particularly among Those Cultural Peoples Who Have Higher Birth Rates and Are Growing in Population in the US

Newer church plants and younger churches tend to, not automatically, be somewhat more effective in their baptism to attender ratios. Every single person is God created and as such, are precious in the sight of God, which means we should try to get them to Christ. However, planting new churches among segments of society who are having higher birth rates and/or lower church per person ratios seems to have the potential to help expand the gospel to future generations of Americans.

Give Attention to What It Takes for a Child, Particularly Boys, to Follow Christ into Adulthood

The statistics regarding the percentages of boys who drop out of the church and who follow Christ closely is alarming. It is not enough for churches to baptize children, we must assume greater responsibility to understand how children develop in their faith in today’s challenging culture. The answer is not to baptize them at younger and younger ages, because we cannot reach and/or keep them if we don’t get them while they are young and naive. We absolutely must build on our VBS and other evangelism efforts and expand our limited Sunday School type efforts to grow them. The future will demand that churches, through their human, financial, and spiritual resources, move toward assisting parents in discipling their children in the face of the contrary messages of the media and the challenges created by the forms of education they are receiving. Churches will have to care more about what is happening in the home, than what is happening in the one to two hours the children are involved in church activities.
Reposition Evangelism as a Loving Act

The media and other religions have convinced followers of Christ that to share their faith is to act with ignorance, arrogance, or aggression. The love of Christ compelled the early church. The love of Christ today demands that we love people in the highest possible ways, including sharing the Life-giver with them, Christ. Love is not complete without sharing Christ.

There are 6 expressions (maybe systems) of evangelism and love. Those 6 essential systems are (1) prayer for the lost, (2) enjoying and serving lost people, (3) evangelism training, (4) friendly-up the church both internally and externally, (5) bridging and harvesting efforts, and (6) celebrating, connecting, and deploying disciples. These six systems can be reduced by putting the above systems in pairs to get: (1) Engagement—God and People, (2) Preparation—Personal and Church, (3) Connecting—Christians, Church, Christ, and their Mission. More information can be found through the ministry of the Florida Baptist Convention and the website www.flbaptist.org/loveyourneighbor. Jesus said you will know My disciples by their love.

Adapt Our Methods of Communicating to Give People the Best Opportunity to Hear and Respond to Christ

The objective in communication at its simplest form is to accurately relay a message in the best possible form so that the person receiving it can understand what the sender is trying to communicate. Churches collectively and Christians individually are carriers of the message of Christ. We need to sharpen our skills in communicating and give attention to both the verbal and non-verbal messages we are sending. The peoples of the US, with their great, great diversity, are dependent upon us to be clear in our communications of the greatest story ever lived and told. How we communicate personally and publically really matters. They cannot respond if they do not understand our message in the midst of the all the confusing messages around them.

CONTINUE TO …

Place a Significant Value on Church Planting

Newer church plants and younger churches tend to, not automatically, be somewhat more effective in their baptism to attender ratios. Planting new churches must continue to be emphasized.
Diversify Our Congregations, Both Existing Churches and New Church Plants

The certainty is undeniable, America is becoming more and more diverse, with many different ethnic groups outpacing the growth of Anglo Americans. If the SBC is to be vital in the future, it will do so because those who exist today made sacrifices and preparations for people whom they would never see and for those who are radically different from them. Baptisms will be stronger as we plant healthy churches to minister to all people groups in our country.

Love by Serving One Another and Lost People to Both Validate Our Message and to Open the Hearts of Lost People to Us, and More Importantly, to Christ

It is painfully apparent that (1) increasing numbers of Americans are either choosing no religion or are becoming increasingly closed to the witness of Christians and our churches, and (2) increasing numbers of Christians and churches are leaning away from the mission of Christ to reach and disciple those who could care less that He exists. The most apparent way to open the heart of a lost person is to do acts of love in the name of Christ toward them.

The most apparent way to get the church to move toward lost people is to ask them to do acts of love toward the people around them. As the church moves in obedience in this way, hearts of the lost are opened and the capacity for compassion for the lost expands in the life of the follower of Christ.

See Church Evangelism and Personal Evangelism as a Process that Involves Several Key Parts and a System, not Just as a Finishing Touch of Facts

Isolated acts of love by individuals and churches will probably go more and more unheard by the peoples of the US. They will need a consistent and steady flow of Christians and churches, both living and telling the message of Christ to them as they wrestle with the increasing religious confusion all around them. It will take a church both to reach a lost person and raise a spiritual baby into maturity and spiritual reproduction. Evangelism cannot continue to be a segmented part of the life of the church. All aspects of the church have to support the message of Christ by how we relate to one another and how we relate to those who are spiritually searching.
CONCLUSION

The factors impacting the collective total baptisms are diverse and complicated. It is comforting to realize that, while God has used the Southern Baptist Convention to impact many parts of the U.S. and the world, He is not dependent upon the SBC as the sole carrier of His message. God is at work, both where we can see Him and where we cannot. He is working out His plan for His universe.

The question is how do we position ourselves in such a manner to both please God and be used by Him to expand His Kingdom.

May the SBC serve God collectively and His purposes above all. And, may God raise up others individuals, groups of followers, and denominations to serve Him and His purposes above all others.

SOURCES


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A New Paradigm

Three decades ago, seven men sat around an oblong table at the headquarters of a major evangelistic ministry. This ministry had been the most prominent mass-cooperative-evangelistic ministry in the world for thirty-five years.

They had conducted evangelistic crusades in virtually every part of the world, registering decisions for Christ in the millions. Five of the men sitting around the oblong table were key figures in this ministry. The two others seated at the table were a professor, whose writing on a particular subject had occasioned the meeting, and his colleague, a fellow professor there mostly for moral support. The two professors were from a well-respected and influential West Coast seminary. The meeting was held at the behest of the leader of the evangelistic ministry due to an article written by the seminary professor. In the article the professor had questioned the effectiveness of this evangelistic ministry, as well as others. The professor intended no disrespect. Contrariwise, he held this particular ministry in high regard, believing it had made a great impact on the world for the cause of Christ. He did not, however, defense, because they cared deeply about their ministry and their mission. This was profoundly important, for millions of people had given multi-millions of dollars because they believed in this ministry, and they cared passionately about what they believed this ministry accomplished. The professor made his case carefully and courteously. When he finished, one of the men representing the evangelistic ministry pushed his chair away.
from the table and stood up. “This is it,” he stated matter-of-factly. Everyone around the table searched his face for a clue as to what his declaration might signify. The professor felt a rush of anxiety. The standing man continued, “This is what we must do.” There was determination in his voice that changed to enthusiasm as he asked the professor and his colleague if they could help incorporate what had just been explained to them into their mass-cooperative-evangelistic ministry. The other four men representing the evangelistic ministry agreed and the professors accepted the request with excitement and, as one might expect, a certain amount of reserve. “This could be monumental,” the professor remembers thinking believe the ministry accomplished its stated purpose. And therein was the concern.

The audience of five intended to listen to what the professor had to say. They planned no to himself.

Mass-cooperative evangelism is a means and a method of accomplishing the purpose given to the church by Jesus Christ. Like any other method, it is not the purpose itself. This statement may seem trite; however, I propose the church spends most of its time and energy on means and methods, but few churches fulfill their purpose. Did mass-cooperative evangelism ever provide the means and the method of helping the church fulfill its purpose? Yes, for a limited time, in a few areas, and for a limited number of churches, mass-cooperative evangelism was a relatively effective tool. Many decisions have been made in response to a mass-cooperative-evangelistic effort. However, according to the standard of Scripture, if a decision maker fails to manifest the characteristics of a disciple, the means by which that decision was made cannot be deemed successful.

For several decades, crusade evangelism was considered the paramount method of evangelism in the United States. It was the gold standard. Crusade evangelism is the best known form of mass-cooperative evangelism. Its roots can be traced to John Wesley and George Whitefield in England. Whitefield transplanted it to America, where it soon became a natural part of the life of the church. Since 1950, the name most frequently associated with crusade evangelism has been Billy Graham. However, crusade evangelism is only one form of mass-corporative-evangelism. Mass-cooperative evangelism can be defined as an evangelistic effort which includes the participation of two or more Christian bodies involved in the united purpose of reaching a targeted
segment of society. Although some forms of mass-cooperative-evangelism exist today in the United States, crusade evangelism died a slow death beginning in the early 1980s. Churches tend to cling to what appears to be working long after it is no longer working.

Could it be the demise of mass-cooperative-evangelism if most of its forms came about because it never actually accomplished what it proposed to accomplish? Credible evangelism must incorporate both the correct means and the correct end. A simplistic misinterpretation of the Great Commission allows for the ideology that Christ commanded His followers to take the gospel message to the ends of the earth. In the 1970s, one evangelist stated that the Great Commission could be digested into two words: go; tell. This misinterpretation makes the proclamation of the message the goal in itself.

Careful exegetes have pointed out that the single imperative in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) is make disciples. This verb is poorly translated “teach” in the Authorized Version. Later translations have corrected this mistake. In the original language there are three participles in the Matthew passage that could easily be mistaken for verbs in the Authorized Version. The words are “going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching.” All of these contribute to the central task of disciple making; however, disciple making is the exact command. Therefore, making disciples is the expressed goal of evangelism.

In light of the clear directive of the Great Commission, it is important to understand the concept of disciple-making. Many believe evangelism is the effort to bring people into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Once this is accomplished, the process of discipling takes place. Scripture makes no such distinction. Rather, discipling is both the process of bringing a person into a relationship with Jesus Christ and, then, bringing the new disciple into the stature of the fullness of Christ. We disciple people to Christ—carefully and patiently teaching the individual what it means to be a disciple of Christ. This may demand more than one conversation, because it is very important that each potential disciple understands what is involved in the decision to be a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. Once this person has become a disciple, we disciple them in Christ: equipping them for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until they attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to
the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:12-13)

The goal of evangelism is constant: to make disciples. The means of evangelism should remain in constant flux. If the means of evangelism does not result in the goal of evangelism, it is time to check our bearings and, wherever necessary, make some needed mid-course corrections. The goal of evangelism must always trump the means of evangelism.

The New Testament concept of discipleship demands both the qualitative and the quantitative growth of the church. This is possible because quality and quantity are two aspects of the same reality. This means the number of disciples must be increased and, at the same time, the spiritual depth of the disciple must be increased. To neglect to do both is to fail.

Generally, with few exceptions, mass-evangelism has not been found to result in the numerical increase of the church. Many decisions are made through such efforts; however, few disciples are made. The New Testament judges the effectiveness of evangelism by the fact that the number of disciples increased. The twenty-first-century church should do no less.

An example of the effectiveness of mass-cooperative evangelism can be seen in an evangelistic crusade held by James Robison. For about two decades Robison’s primary ministry was crusade evangelism. He was considered one of the best. In August 1982 James Robison held an area-wide-evangelistic crusade in Gadsden, Alabama. In 1984, I did an extensive survey of this Robison crusade. Doing the survey two years after the actual event was partially in respect to a statement made by Peter Wagner, then Professor of Missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, in Pasadena, California. Professor Wagner had said to me, “The success of an evangelistic effort should not be judged immediately after the effort. Rather, the success of the effort should be judged by the number of genuine disciples serving in a local church two years after the effort.”

The emphasis of the evangelistic crusade in Gadsden, Alabama, was to bring lost men and women into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. One pastor challenged his fellow pastors to participate in this effort because they had “the opportunity to be involved in a great soul-winning revival.” Toward this end, sixty-one churches joined the effort.

The crusade was considered to be one of the most successful for the Robison evangelistic-team in years. Because of its impact, the scheduled one week crusade was extended for an additional
week. There were 343 recorded professions of faith plus multiple hundreds of additional decisions.

A questionnaire prepared and mailed to the participating pastors resulted in some disappointing information. Fifty-four of the sixty-one participating pastors replied to the questionnaire. Of the fifty-four churches represented by these pastors, eleven of the churches received members into their congregations as a direct result of the crusade, accounting for nineteen of the 343 professions of faith recorded. The two churches that received the highest number of new members from the crusade effort (three in one and four in the other) brought these people with them to the crusade. As a matter of fact, every church had a direct influence, prior to the crusade, upon those who eventually became a part of their particular congregation.

Further investigation revealed that eight of the eleven churches that received new members into their congregations were growing churches, displaying the outward signs of church health, prior to the crusade. However, an ominous revelation was that seven of these eleven churches decreased in baptisms from the year 1981 to the year 1982—the year of the crusade. Seventy-seven percent of the participating churches were Baptists. Because Baptists keep an active record of the number of baptisms occurring in each local congregation, it is easy to examine the overall effect the crusade had on the participating Baptist churches during 1982. In 1981, these Baptist churches baptized 697 converts. In 1982, they decreased in baptisms to 631.

What happened to the 324 people who walked to the platform during the evangelistic crusade, registered a profession-of-faith, and then disappeared? Most were simply decisions that never became disciples.

Was the 1982 James Robison evangelistic crusade an aberration in respect to what happens to individuals who make a spiritual decision at a mass-cooperative-evangelistic effort? Research of every significant mass-cooperative-evangelistic effort, in all its forms occurring in the twentieth-century, reveals the 1982 James Robison evangelistic crusade to be the norm. In a broad-based survey of ten-thousand participants, Win Arn found that mass-cooperative evangelism of all types accounted for only one-tenth of one-percent of those involved in local churches.

As early as 1970, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) considered that mass evangelism merely sets the stage for personal evangelism. The BGEA concluded that all evangelism must become personal if it
is to be effective. They discovered that many people who come forward at a crusade are not finders; rather, most of them are still seekers. This is an insightful assessment; however, it does not remedy an obvious problem in mass-evangelism. Most converts are not incorporated into a local church and, in the vast majority of cases, people do not display the characteristics of discipleship as a result of their decision. There are individual success stories to the contrary; yet, these do not contradict the overwhelming evidence. Most, by far, who make decisions for Christ on neutral ground do not afterward go into the church as responsible, productive members. Research reveals, few continue in the Christian life that are converted outside of the church unless they become members of the church and are active in it after they are converted.

In a day when few, if any, mass-cooperative-evangelism efforts are held in the United States, this information may seem archaic. However, the death of mass-cooperative evangelism in the United States came about for the very reasons much of our evangelism is ineffective today. Therefore, it is beneficial to learn from the past, lest we change the method, but fail to accomplish the goal. What is needed in our day is a new paradigm. Bill Gates is quoted as saying, “Beware lest your success becomes your failure.” As previously noted, churches tend to stick with what works after it no longer works.

A new paradigm should be based on the question: How do we, as the disciples of Christ in this generation, fulfill the Great Commission in this day? We must be radical in our determination to be both biblical and pragmatic in our response to this question. And it is vital that every generation revisits this question. In respect to this topic, there are a number of important considerations.

First, among the many good things God expects His church to do in the world, the primary task is to bring men and women into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and incorporate them into a local body of believers. When true disciples are made, there is success.

Second, ultimately, evangelistic effectiveness must be measured in terms of disciples made and not decisions made. For this reason, a very high dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit must be maintained. Men can manufacture decisions, but only the Holy Spirit can make a disciple. This does not excuse the responsibility of man. On the contrary, it greatly increases his responsibility to be available to the work of the Holy Spirit in the process of disciple-making.
Third, clear objectives are necessary if the church is to fulfill its mission in the world. These goals can be discerned from Scripture. The Great Commission summarizes the goal of the church. Simply stated, it is to make disciples. A decision made is not necessarily a disciple made. A biblical understanding of what constitutes being a disciple is essential.

Fourth, disciple-making is the clear objective of the New Testament. Objectives that deviate from or fall short of the ultimate objective of making disciples are, to the degree which they do so, inferior, and in need of correction. Is there room for absolute pragmatism in evangelism of all forms? Of course! There must be. The Christian community should insist on measuring the results of evangelistic efforts, not on degrees of enthusiasm, not on the pieces of literature distributed, not on the quality of the proclamation, not on the number of individuals who come forward in response to a given invitation, not on the number of people who attend a certain event, but on the measurable growth, both qualitatively and quantitatively, of fully devoted followers of Christ who serve Him and serve others in the church for which Christ died.

Fifth, evangelism must result in the discipling of the millions of people in the United States who do not have a clear understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. In this day, we have substituted the word Christian for the word disciple. In the Bible, the term Christian is used only three times; and it is never used by Jesus. Jesus called those who followed Him disciples and those who followed Him called themselves disciples. This is not a matter of semantics. Neither is it an effort to convince people to substitute the term disciple for the term Christian. Rather, it is an effort to make certain that we clearly understand who we are if we claim to be a Christian and that we clearly communicate to those who express an interest in becoming a Christian, what Jesus calls each of His disciples to be. Regardless of what term we may use, the question is: are we truly followers of Jesus Christ? A disciple is not a higher form of Christianity. Scripture reveals a disciple, simply stated, is a follower of Jesus Christ. Following implies leaving some things behind and, in the course of following, learning what it means to be a fully devoted follower. Any form of evangelism which does not result in genuine disciples is not evangelism at all.

I would argue that the number of fully devoted followers of Christ, or disciples, in a particular church, is the single most important factor, by far,
that will determine that church’s ability to be a disciple-making church. Disciples tend to make disciples. Many of our forms of outreach result in the increase of church attendees. Increasing the number of people who attend a particular church is an unworthy goal. The goal is to make disciples and only a church that consists primarily of disciples can effectively and consistently accomplish that goal. The body of Christ, rightly related, is God’s primary tool used to make disciples. Therefore, body evangelism should be viewed as the overall evangelistic strategy of the modern church. This form of evangelism recognizes the body of Christ, the local church, as God’s disciple-making unit. A healthy church, comprised primarily of genuine disciples, can develop an effective, natural form of evangelism. James McKinnell refers to this methodology as relational evangelism.

Relational evangelism takes into account that the average person in the United States lacks a basic understanding of the gospel message. Therefore, it is essential that we disciple these individuals to Christ. This approach demands more time and energy on the part of the disciple maker. The disciple maker must depend upon the Holy Spirit to reveal truths to the seeker. Therefore, days, weeks, months, or years, may be required to lead someone to Christ. The disciple maker cannot move faster than the potential disciple is capable of understanding the gravity of his decision to be a fully devoted follower of Christ. A wise disciple maker will move at the pace of the Holy Spirit.

Some assume that relational evangelism implies having a relationship with a non-believer in which the message of Jesus Christ is not shared verbally. This could not be further from the truth. The relational evangelist takes seriously his responsibility to share the message in a manner that can be understood and received by the potential disciple. The relational evangelist also recognizes that some people are initially resistant to the gospel and, therefore, through patience and kindness the relational evangelist moves the potential disciple through that resistance. This is consistent with Scripture. In Romans 2:4, Paul reminds his readers, “Don’t you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you?” The relational evangelist is aware that he has a message and a mission. His mission is to make disciples, and he is always on mission.

Body evangelism follows several tenets that result in its effectiveness. These tenets are the result of careful research and a rigid respect for biblical prin-
ciples. First, body evangelism recognizes the primary necessity of a healthy local congregation that consists primarily of fully devoted followers of Christ—disciples.

Second, body evangelism emphasizes the importance of new disciples being incorporated into a local body of believers—the church. It is essential that the church operate as the body of Christ according to what is clearly communicated in Scripture. This means we follow the biblical model, rather than a business-model. When the church is operating as the body of Christ, there is both accountability and responsibility among the members.

Third, body evangelism focuses on the audience of evangelism, rather than the method of evangelism. It is a strategy based on research. It involves discovering the resistance or receptivity of the targeted segment of society that needs to be reached with the gospel. It takes into account the importance of understanding the world-view of the targeted audience and, in some cases, the cultural distinctives. This should result in more realistic application of evangelistic methods. Fourth, body evangelism recognizes that no evangelistic method is applicable universally to all churches in all situations. For this reason, body evangelism is fiercely pragmatic.

Every evangelistic program or effort should, therefore, be placed under constant scrutiny. Proper results are vitally important. It is acceptable to adopt, adapt, or discard a particular method. The failure to increase the number of genuine disciples of Christ is not acceptable.

Fifth, body evangelism is not pulpit centered. The disciple of today must assume an evangelistic responsibility as did his first-century brother. In a culture where the average person lacks a rudimentary understanding of the gospel, does not respect preachers, and sees no need to attend a church, body evangelism is essential if the church is to succeed in its mandate to make disciples. Various methods of evangelism may be used, to the extent of their effectiveness; however, body evangelism is foundational. Therefore, whatever evangelistic method might be used, it should function from the basis of body evangelism.

The church is God’s primary agent in fulfilling the Great Commission. The goal of the Great Commission is to make disciples. Toward that end we must be biblical in our approach, bold in our efforts, gracious in our manner, faithful in our calling, pragmatic in our methods, and determined in our mission. And this brings us to the conclusion of the story that began this article. Several months after the
meeting at the headquarters of the evangelistic ministry, the professor received a phone call. In a brief telephone conversation, the evangelistic-ministry leader, who had spoken with great determination, told the professor why it was impossible to make the changes to the ministry they had previously discussed. In part, it was explained that the great majority of the ministry’s financial supporters would not understand the changes. The task of educating these supporters was monumental and it was agreed the ministry would most likely face a significant financial shortfall they could not weather. The evangelistic-ministry leader concluded the telephone conversation with an apology.

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The impact of the Church Growth Movement (CGM) and the mission theory of Donald A. McGavran (1897-1990) in the field of missiology since the middle of the 20th century is demonstrated by the volume of literature dedicated to its constituent elements.

**INTRODUCTION**

An on-line “Google” search conducted on March 24, 2011 for the phrase “church growth movement” turned up 3,512 “hits.” Much is being written about the CGM.

The missiological principles espoused by McGavran, especially beginning with the publication of *The Bridges of God* in 1955, gave rise to the CGM. At the core of McGavran’s mission theory is a commitment to the Bible as the Word of God, including an emphasis on obedience to Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations” in Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV), a passage known as the Great Commission. This article investigates two areas of McGavran’s understanding of this passage as it relates to evangelism: the priority of evangelism in the mission of the Church and the difference between what McGavran labeled, respectively, discipling and perfecting.

**MCGAVRAN AND THE PRIORITY OF EVANGELISM IN THE GREAT COMMISSION**

A foundational principle for the CGM is the priority of evangelism as the mission of the church in the world over other areas of church work such as service, social work, and other benevolent enterprises. McGavran argued that the Christian “mission” should
be understood as “an enterprise devoted to proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, and to persuading men and women to become disciples and responsible members of his church” (McGavran, 1990, 24). He further explained, “Even after establishing the priorities among social service, social action, and evangelism, the church still has many baffling alternatives, and this definition is necessary if we are to discover among them the path desired by the God who finds.” (Ibid.)

The reason for this priority of evangelism in the mission of the Church is found in God’s Word. In his 1988 book, Effective Evangelism, McGavran said that the growth of the Church is not only God’s will but His command. He specifically cited Matthew 28:18-20, along with other passages, as biblical proof. In this text Jesus claimed for Himself all authority in heaven and earth. McGavran wrote:

What is this ultimate Authority going to say? Is He going to say, “Love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself?” That certainly is an important command, but He doesn’t say it here. Is He going to say, “Go to church and worship God?” That also is important, but it is not what He says. What He does say is, “Therefore matheteusate panta ta ethne.” Matheteusate is a verb in the imperative. It means enroll in my school or enlist in my army or incorporate in my body. Panta means all, and ta ethne means the peoples, the tribes, the castes, the segments of society everywhere. All are to be discipled.

. . . [A]ll those who believe that the Bible is the inspired, authoritative, true, and utterly dependable Word of God still hear it as our Lord spoke it—disciple all the peoples of planet earth. This command sends them to multiply churches in the towns and cities where they live and among the unreached billions in the whole earth. It is important to realize that the Lord Jesus is not here giving a suggestion to His followers. He is not making a recommendation. He is not saying, “Do this if you find time or if it is financially feasible.” He is not saying to divinity schools, “Please squeeze this in as an elective.” He is issuing a command—disciple all the peoples of earth (Ibid., 17-8).

While McGavran found biblical justification for the priority of evangelism throughout Scripture, he found in the Great
Commission a clear and specific imperative for evangelism and church growth.

From the perspective of conservative Christianity, McGavran’s insistence on a literal understanding of the Great Commission has had a positive effect in the field of missiology. This put McGavran at odds with liberal Christianity and its mission focus on the “social gospel” of service and good deeds. (McGavran, Understanding, 18) Evangelism and church planting have been aided by this emphasis on the priority of evangelism as the chief task of God’s churches.

The primary aim of the CGM has been misunderstood by some. Church growth in some circles has become something like “how to have a bigger church,” removed from its missionary foundation. David Michel, Associate Executive Director of the Mission Strategy Division of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, observed that some Southern Baptists have missed the global, missiological applications which drove McGavran’s thoughts. In a 2006 interview by the author, he commented, “They read him-looking for techniques of enlarging their own congregations and they failed to appreciate his missiological and evangelistic intentions.”

Church planter and missiologist J. D. Payne noted the trend among many North American churches to apply CGM principles toward enlargement of individual local churches rather than the growth of the Church through church multiplication. Payne explained:

In light of this distorted understanding of church growth missiology, we must remember the movement originated in the mission field outside of North America with an emphasis on multiplying congregations in the various people groups throughout the world. Donald McGavran, the father of the movement once wrote, “Thus today’s paramount task, opportunity, and imperative in missions is to multiply churches in the increasing numbers of receptive peoples of the earth.” The Church needs to return to its roots and recapture the vision for church multiplication in North America and beyond (Payne, 2009, 63).

Payne’s citation of McGavran’s statement regarding the priority of evangelism and church planting demonstrates the missiological contribution of McGavran and the original principles of the CGM to God’s people as they engage in His mission.

McGavran clearly emphasized evangelism as the primary task in the mission of the
Church. It should be noted that he and the other early leaders of the CGM considered involvement in this mission to be an inherent element of biblical Christianity. In the process of defending and promoting the claims of the CGM, McGavran claimed that Church Growth leaders “are not pursuing the latest fad. They are emphasizing essential Christianity” (McGavran, 1988, 108). David Platt, in his 2010 bestseller Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream, seemed to make the same assertion, namely that normal, biblical Christianity involves “making disciples of all nations” as a fundamental element. He wrote, “He [God] has created each of us to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, and I propose that anything less than radical devotion to this purpose is unbiblical Christianity” (Platt, 2010, 64).

The priority of evangelism in the mission of the Church represents basic and biblical Christianity. In his emphasis on reaching the lost with the gospel as the principal task within the mission of the Church until the return of Christ, McGavran benefited and edified the Church by insisting on the normal and literal understanding of Jesus’ Great Commission to His Church: “make disciples of all nations.”

**MCGAVRAN AND DISCIPLING/PERFECTING IN THE GREAT COMMISSION**

In an effort to develop a Bible-based, reproducible strategy for Church Growth, McGavran identified a clear distinction between what he saw as two stages in the implementation of the Great Commission: discipling and perfecting. In The Bridges of God, he introduced this idea. He explained:

Two separate stages in the establishment of a Christian civilization must be defined. Although they are closely inter-related it will help to call each stage by a separate name. For our terms we go directly to the Bible, where, in Matthew xxviii 19, 20, we are commanded firstly to “make disciples of all nations,” and secondly to “teach them to observe all things.” The Greek word is really “disciple,” so throughout this book we shall use the verb “disciple” as a technical term.

As a first step, then, according to the Great Commission, the peoples are to be discipled.

The second stage in the establishment of a Christian civilization is “teaching
them all things.” For the sake of convenience we shall condense these words into another term and say that the second state is that of Perfecting the People (McGavran, 1955, 13).

McGavran argued that discipling and perfecting should be considered two inter-related but necessarily separate stages in the Christianization of a people. He described the distinction as “essential” for evangelistic mission work. (Ibid., 16) It is important to understand that McGavran considered the “discipling” of a people group to be the original and one-time occurrence of that group moving by multi-individual decision from false gods to loyalty to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (McGavran, 1990, 123). This was the original context for McGavran’s use of the verb “disciple.”

Though McGavran appears to have considered this understanding of the Great Commission to be based upon faithful exegesis of the text, not all responses to his proposals regarding discipling and perfecting were positive. The disagreement was sufficient that McGavran found it necessary to attempt to clarify and defend his thinking. In a May 1979 Church Growth Bulletin article, “How About That New Verb ‘To Disciple?” McGavran began by acknowledging, “Unnecessary confusion is arising among Christian leaders over the new verb ‘to disciple” (McGavran, 1979, 265).

The tone of the article seems to indicate that McGavran felt that criticism of his distinction of discipling and perfecting mostly arose due to misunderstandings concerning his views. He appealed to the fact that his views were developed within the context of groups of formerly pagan people coming to Christ in multi-individual decisions rather than the more common Western way of individuals coming to faith in Christ one by one (Ibid.).

Though McGavran felt that some of the confusion had arisen because of new uses of the verb “disciple,” the aim here is to focus on the criticism of his interpretation of Matthew 28:18-20 that McGavran used to buttress his teaching on discipling and perfecting (McGavran, 267 and 123). Most writers interacting with McGavran’s treatment of Matthew 28:18-20 have agreed that the passage includes a command issued by the Lord Jesus to “make disciples” (Bosch, 1983, 218). That there is a distinction between a lost person entering the community of faith by becoming a follower of Jesus and that same person growing in the faith is also not disputed. Theologians consider it virtually
axiomatic that there are different aspects of salvation such as regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. By definition there is a chronology involved in these different aspects. Justification before God occurs simultaneous with regeneration, but sanctification is a process that continues until the believer passes from this life into the presence of God. Glorification defines the ultimate condition for the believer in the eternal state. Virtually every systematic theology with an evangelical perspective includes this view of the aspects of salvation (Lewis & Demerest, 1996).

David J. Bosch explored McGavran’s approach to Matthew 28:18-20 in his 1983 contribution to Exploring Church Growth, edited by Wilbert R. Shenk. After stating McGavran’s view of the Great Commission to be that of two stages, namely, “make disciples” (discipling) followed by “baptizing” and “teaching” (perfecting), Bosch observed that McGavran held a bias toward discipling. Bosch noted that this emphasis was to counter an imbalance in which McGavran perceived that existing churches heavily favored perfecting over discipling (Bosch, 1983, 231).

Bosch exemplified the concern of many critics of McGavran’s discipling and perfecting paradigm by taking issue with McGavran’s claim that this approach is simply the result of faithful exegesis of Matthew 28:19-20. In other words, McGavran claimed that the Bible teaches that the Christianization of a people group is done in two stages, discipling and perfecting, and Bosch disagreed. He argued that McGavran’s “building of his case on Matthew 28:19 is untenable,” among other reasons because “it is impossible to read the text as describing discipling and perfecting as two successive activities (the participle “teaching” qualifies the main verb “to make disciples” and is not a separate enterprise).” (Ibid)

In his commentary on Matthew, Craig L. Blomberg described the relationship of the participles “baptizing” and “teaching” to “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19-20. He explained:

The verb “make disciples” also commands a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith. The truly subordinate participles in v. 19 explain what making disciples involves: “baptizing” them and “teaching” them obedience to all of Jesus’ commandments. The first of these will be a once-for-all, decisive initiation into Christian community. The second proves a peren-
nially incomplete, life-long task (Blomberg, 1992, 431).

Blomberg's explanation of the relationship of the participles “baptizing” and “teaching” to the main imperative verb in this passage, “make disciples,” demonstrates the problem with McGavran's interpretation of the text. McGavran has made a division where none exists. Blomberg and Bosch have shown that there is no grammatical basis within Jesus' Great Commission as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 for viewing the task of bringing people to Christ as a two stage-process.

Matthew 28:19-20 contains the imperative verb “make disciples” along with three participles which must be properly related to the main verb. The first participle is translated “go,” and according to Blomberg is “an introductory circumstantial participle that is rightly translated as coordinate to the main verb—here “Go and make.” (Wallace, 645) The relationship of the other two participles, “baptizing” and “teaching,” to the main verb is crucial in the analysis of McGavran's theory of discipling and perfecting. In consideration of these two participles, Daniel B. Wallace stated, “they obviously make good sense as participles of means; i.e., the means by which the disciples were to make disciples were to baptize and then to teach.”

Wallace's understanding allows the difference between the moment of becoming a disciple and the process of growing as a disciple. This is what McGavran attempted to emphasize in his theory regarding discipling and perfecting. What McGavran failed to include in his interpretation of Matthew 28:19-20 was the fact that what he labels “perfecting” is not a separate stage that comes after making disciples, but rather is part of the process of making disciples. This process is not complete until a person has both been baptized and is living a life of observing all that Jesus commanded. McGavran clearly desired to stress the importance of reaching the lost with the gospel. He also explained his understanding that growth in the faith was crucial for all believers. His effort to promote his conviction was hampered by a less than precise interpretation of Matthew 28:19-20.

John H. Yoder questioned the implications for this division of the Christian experience into two stages. After noting a lack of precision in the CGM literature over discipling and perfecting, he wrote:

But the significant issue related to the distinction between “discipling” and “perfecting” is not simply one of clear verbal usage
nor the tactical gumming-up of conversation by redefining terms, but rather its meaning for the theology of Christian experience and the practice of pastoral care. What implications do we predispose ourselves toward, or to what kind of presuppositions have we already committed ourselves, if we divide the experiences of becoming a Christian into two distinct segments, one of which is minimal while the other moves on toward perfection? (Yoder, 1973, 32).

While Yoder acknowledged that McGavran in some places recognized the continuity that exists between discipling and perfecting, he here questioned the theological soundness of maintaining a strict separation—a separation that McGavran seems to be calling for—within the experience of becoming and being a Christian. (Ibid., 31).

In his 1992 study of discipleship entitled, Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus, Michael J. Wilkins discussed discipleship from the context of Matthew 28:18-20. His understanding of discipleship and its relationship to evangelism could be helpful in resolving the problems with McGavran’s arguments concerning the Great Commission. Wilkins suggested:

Matthew intends for his readers to understand that the Christian life is equivalent to being with Jesus as his disciple. This means that conversion—not a later point of commitment or a process of spiritual growth—marks the beginning point of discipleship. Degrees of maturity will be realized as one traverses the discipleship path, but all true believers are disciples on that path. Therefore, evangelism is the starting point for making disciples (Wilkins, 1992, 191).

The view of discipleship presented here is not far from McGavran’s. However, the difference is that Wilkins’ view lacks the strict division into two stages of becoming a Christian and growing as a Christian.

**CONCLUSION**

McGavran’s insistence on the priority of evangelism within the mission of the Church in the world is faithful to biblical teaching, specifically the Great Commission as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20. In this emphasis, McGavran and the CGM have aided the Church in obeying the Lord’s command.
Though there is a wide range of service and benevolence ministries that should be done, evangelism must remain the top priority.

In the interaction with McGavran cited here, two areas of criticism regarding McGavran’s conclusion that Matthew 28:19-20 calls for discipling and perfecting as two distinct stages in Christianizing a people have been identified: that of the exegesis of the text and that of the theological implications. In the case of the exegesis of the text, McGavran has failed to properly relate the participles in the passage to the main verb. He thus wrongly cited Matthew 28:19-20 as support for his understanding of perfecting new believers as a separate stage in the Christianization of people groups. In the case of the theological implications, the definition of “disciple” can become less precise due to the questions raised by an understanding of discipling and perfecting as distinct stages in the task of bringing people groups to Christ.

While it is important to note the exegetical shortcomings of McGavran’s interpretation of Matthew 28:19-20, his basic emphasis should be noted. McGavran simply did not want churches to become so involved with perfecting new believers that reaching the lost was neglected.

The Great Commission, as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20, makes clear the priority of evangelism, i.e., making disciples, and the means for doing so. A believer has not fully obeyed the Great Commission by making a disciple until an unsaved person moves from spiritual darkness to faith in Christ, has entered the faith community through baptism, and is living a life of observing all the commands of the Lord Jesus, including the Great Commission. The proper understanding of the Great Commission will yield more disciples to obey the Great Commission. More disciples obeying the Great Commission is a result with which McGavran would have been pleased!

**SOURCES**


Michel, David, 2006. Associate Executive Director, Mission Strategy Division, Mississippi Baptist Convention Board. Interview by author. Jackson, MS.


One of the most significant movements to affect local churches has been the rise of the short-term volunteer mission trip.

Involvement in these trips has breathed new life into many local churches; indeed, some churches have embraced this movement with such passion that a significant portion of their budget now supports short term trips. Ralph Winter suggested that 2 million people engage in these trips annually. At an average cost of about $2000, the short-term volunteer trips become big business—about $4 billion dollars a year. As long as the US economy holds up, short-term trips will continue to consume significant financial resources and human involvement.

God holds local churches and pastors accountable for their physical and financial investment in this enterprise; therefore, pastors of local churches are well served to study ways to make such short-term trips effective for the kingdom. This article examines the local church’s role in the short-term volunteer trip, focusing specifically on the selection of candidates for the trip, selection of overseas partners, preparation and training of short-termers, accountability of short-termers, and long-term investment in the short-term process. As a pastor, a professor of missions, a former missionary, and a participant/leader of numerous short-term mission trips, I am personally involved in this subject.
SELECTION OF CANDIDATES FOR SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

Local churches send out volunteer teams for a variety of reasons. Some volunteers go because they like travel (I actually had one couple tell me that they were on their forty-eighth mission trip when they came to Zimbabwe). Some seem to go because they view the trip as a vacation, and some go with genuine hearts for God and a desire to win people to Jesus. The first step local churches should take is to ensure that every volunteer goes with the right motives and for the right reasons. Churches should ask the following questions of potential volunteers before they ever get to the first meeting as a team:

- Do these potential volunteers practice missional living at home? Are they involved in regular evangelism; are they faithful attendees in the church; do they give sacrificially to missions? Are they faithful in service to the church, or do they only come when they are required to come?

- Do these potential volunteers have the requisite gifts and skill set required for the upcoming trip? If they’ve never been pastors, can they really offer anything useful in pastoral training? Will they function well on a medical team without any medical knowledge or training?

- Can these potential volunteers teach or preach the Bible effectively in a cross-cultural setting? Are they skilled in training oral learners? Do they truly know the Word, live in it (John 15), and live it out before the watching world? Or are they hoping that crossing the ocean suddenly will make them spiritual?

- Are these potential volunteers persons of prayer? Will they be a benefit to the team or a spiritual liability?

- Are these potential volunteers physically prepared for the rigors of the trip before them? Can they handle extremes of climate and inconveniences? Are they flexible, or are they whiners?

When the couple who had made forty-eight trips arrived in Zimbabwe, I met with their team and explained the schedule for each day. I would pick up the team at 9:00 a.m., we would go out to the area where we would
be evangelizing, and we would work until about 1:30. We would then go home and rest until about 5:00, when we would head out for the showing of the “Jesus” film each evening. Her response was, “That’s a waste of time; we don’t need rest.” I explained to her that I would be involved in the morning before I picked them up, taking children to school and leading early studies. After I dropped them off, I would pack the trailer for the evening and walk several miles with my wife so that we could pray together. I also told her, “You are not accustomed to this climate. I’m used to it, so I can go for these hours; your team will need rest.” By the middle of the week, she told me after lunch, “I’m exhausted.” I replied, “That’s why I’ve planned this schedule; this country saps the life out of people, and you are not used to it.” Volunteers who are not physically fit and are not prepared for the rigors of a trip may end up hurting themselves or the effectiveness of the entire team.

These questions matter because volunteers are a true expression of the church’s commitment to good stewardship of resources. Churches ought to send out volunteers who will do the most good; this desire does not always find fulfillment in practice. While volunteers come with good motives, many of them could easily fit Duane Elmer’s illustration of the monkey and the fish; they come hoping to do good, but end up causing harm instead of the good that they hope to do. Here is Elmer’s story:

A typhoon had temporarily stranded a monkey on an island. In a secure, protected place on the shore, while waiting for the raging waters to recede, he spotted a fish swimming against the current. It seemed obvious to the monkey that the fish was struggling and in need of assistance. Being of kind heart, the monkey resolved to help the fish.

A tree precariously dangled over the spot where the fish seemed to be struggling. At considerable risk to himself, the monkey moved far out on a limb, reached down and snatched the fish from the threatening waters. Immediately scurrying back to the safety of his shelter, he carefully laid the fish on dry ground. For a few moments the fish showed excitement, but soon settled into a peaceful rest.

Joy and satisfaction swelled inside the monkey. He had successfully helped another creature.

Volunteers, like the monkey, generally mean well; their lack
of training, cross-cultural sensitivity, and understanding of the host worldview, however, subvert their good intentions. Sadly, some missionaries who work regularly with volunteers say that they seek to place them “where they will do the least damage” (Byrd, 2008).

Local churches should seek to send the most qualified and called people overseas because they will give an account to God for the stewardship of their volunteer resources. These resources include the people investment of the church as well as the financial investment of the church. Finances are no little concern, as Ralph Winter noted, “It costs at least five times more overall to send a short-timer than a long-term missionary–financial support that . . . would be better invested in a long-term missionary.”

These concerns do not mean that churches should not send teams; rather, they should strive to ensure that the right people go for the right reasons. Pastors and missions leaders who send out volunteers want to send godly people who are used by God to bless nationals, assist missionaries, and bring glory to God in their service.

**SELECTION OF OVERSEAS PARTNERS**

Churches that send out effective volunteer teams strive as well to send them to the right places. Missionaries and nationals around the world are looking for volunteer teams; the best churches determine their gifts, skills, abilities, and calling, and then partner with missionaries and nationals with whom they can fulfill that calling. Such partnerships require prayer, practical considerations, and commitment both on the part of the church and the hosts. Church leaders must pray seriously before entering into partnerships; if the church is evangelistic and the missionary is not, the project is open to conflict before the work even begins. If the church insists on using money and the missionary uses indigenous methods, the church can cripple the work before it ever gains a lasting foothold.

Churches with volunteer teams who have medical backgrounds may be used of God to open doors in many countries; those teams should find missionaries and partners who know how to utilize such teams, develop a long-term commitment to the work, and harness the team’s skills for God’s glory. Other teams ought to use business acumen to train locals so that their expertise opens doors
for the gospel. Some teams may know how to witness effectively in cross-cultural settings; these teams should partner with missionaries and nationals who seek to spread the gospel in areas of the world where gospel proclamation opens doors. All teams should witness, but some teams may enter security-conscious areas of the world where open evangelism is forbidden, and some platforms volunteers can offer open doors more effectively.

Effective partnering and planning by teams and missionaries can minimize false expectations on both sides of the water. One volunteer came to Zimbabwe years ago with the idea that he would preach to crowds of thousands, that thousands would be saved, and that he would return to his church a “hero.” While in country, he assisted in a church start, but was so disillusioned that he missed the joy of that experience because the new church was planted in a small village with less than 200 people. His frustration so permeated his time in the country that he refused to participate in several training sessions for national leaders, even though his training could have helped them as new pastors. He was the victim of unrealistic expectations. On the other hand, missionaries have often received teams at the last minute because the sending church and the mission organization communicated poorly with the missionary on the field.

Some teams may build buildings, but churches must be careful as they enter the construction arena; in most places of the world, the monies a team spends on the trip to build a building would pay the cost of building the building several times over. Further, constructing buildings for nationals may create unnecessary dependency on foreign funds and rob the nationals of learning the joy of giving and the power of God to answer prayers of faith.

**PREPARATION AND TRAINING OF SHORT-TERM TEAMS**

Once the church has assembled a team and matched that team to a place overseas, the church must prepare and train the team for the trip. Effective preparation and training fulfills four functions: cast vision, cover the trip in prayer, create unity, and cover the details of the trip.

Local church pastors and mission leaders cast vision for the trip by emphasizing the goals and purpose of the trip. Teams who know their assignments and what they hope to see happening when they finish go with expectation and faith in their hearts. They look forward to the trip not merely as a sightseeing venture,
but as fulfilling a definite agenda that enhances God's work in that field.

A second critical step in preparation is the prayer focus of the team. Effective teams pray together regularly with focused prayer. Good team leaders call the team to prayer on a schedule and give the team specific prayer requests that cover every aspect of the trip. My basic rule for praying about trips is this: anything you want the devil to handle, do not pray about; if you want God to take care of it, however, pray about it! This simple rule energizes mission teams as they pray for the finances before the trip, the flights and travel on the trip, the food and accommodations on the trip, the work each day during the trip, their health and safety on the trip, and fruit for their labors from the trip. The more informed the team, the more specific and effective the prayer. Paul called for prayer often on his trips (Col. 4:1-3; 2 Thess. 3:1-3; Eph. 6:19-20, etc.); if Paul needed prayer for his trips (and prayed while he went on his trips), how much more do teams today need prayer!

When we were taking a team to Zimbabwe one year, we met regularly and prayed in groups of two or three. Every person on the team eventually prayed with every other team member. During one prayer time, I was praying for the tires on the vehicle. My prayer partner, a dentist, laughed out loud and then caught himself. When we were actually in country, we were driving in a van with poor tires and no spare, and we were laying down barbed wire in order to go into a rock-strewn field where the new group was meeting. The dentist said out loud, “Now I understand why you were praying about the tires!”

Preparation done effectively fulfills the third goal; good preparation and prayer create unity in the team. The Bible testifies to the effectiveness of unified teams (Ps. 133; Eph. 4:3); Jesus Himself prayed that His followers “may be one in us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:21). (Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, NKJV.) Unity testifies to the world of Christ's reality, but unity also transforms the team from an aggregate of individuals to a band of believers who will serve one another, pray for one another, and love one another for the sake of the kingdom. Teams that develop unity experience greater effectiveness and joy in their trips (I’ve seen both kinds of teams!).

Finally, preparation and training ensure that the team knows all the details of the trip. The effective team leader organizes meetings, develops a timeline for the trip (from the
first interest meeting to the post-trip debriefing), and cares for the details of the trip, both mundane and sublime. Helpful leaders plan meetings on a schedule that increase the frequency of meetings as the trip grows closer and communicate the times of the meetings well in advance so that entire team participates.

Effective leaders develop a timeline to guarantee that team members order passports, purchase tickets, get immunizations (if necessary), fill out paperwork, change currency, pack luggage, and purchase all needed supplies well in advance. Far-seeing leaders plan in advance and try to leave nothing to chance. Efficient leaders plan with people in the host country to anticipate all needs, order all materials, buy tickets at the cheapest rate, and make certain that the team has all needed supplies before leaving. Caring team members think about their hosts (especially missionaries) and bring them “goodies” from the States that may not be available in the host country. Preparation turns good trips into memorable ones.

**Accountability of short-term teams**

Local churches need to send teams out with a sense of accountability. Accountability functions most effectively when members realize that they will give an account to the Lord on the Day, to the church on their return, and to the missionaries and nationals during their stay. Each of these areas of accountability drives effective teams.

Accountability before the Lord is a primary motivation in all ministry. Paul was motivated by the “terror of the Lord,” which he defined as the realization that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. v. 11). This motivation arose from his realization that all his work would be tested by “fire,” and that it could be “burned up” (1 Cor. 3:13-15). He himself felt this motivation in his life because he did not want to preach to others and end up “disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27). Team members who realize that their work will be evaluated on the only Day that matters by the only One who matters will seek to honor the Lord in all their doings.

Accountability to the church reminds members that they are part of the larger body and go out as representatives of that body. They are not “missionaries” in the strictest sense of the term, but rather they are ambassadors for Christ and their local church. They go with the blessing of the church, in the name of the church, and usually by the
help of funds from the church. They are not “lone rangers” but rather part of a larger body—members of a local body serving Christ together. They will give an account because of their stewardship and because of the church’s reputation.

Teams are accountable to missionaries because the missionaries have to follow in the footsteps of the team and build on their work. Good teams recognize that they work with the missionary or national partner to fulfill purposes most important to the work in that area of the world. Team members are not building a name for themselves but serving the kingdom of God and advancing the work in the host country. Pastors would not appreciate missionaries who called them from the field, told the pastor that they were coming, and then proceeded to take over all aspects of the host church without considering the pastor’s plan or vision. In the same way, teams that keep accountability come to make the missionary or national partner successful for the glory of God and the furtherance of the kingdom.

CONCLUSION

Churches are sending out teams to be on mission with God. Pastors and mission leaders have a responsibility before God, their church, and their teams to ensure that the teams they send are capable, are matched to the right places, are prepared, and are accountable. The best churches send the best teams to the best locations to harvest the best results so that God will be glorified, the team will be unashamed on the Day, and the nationals and missionaries will rejoice in the work the team leaves behind. This is the task of the local church as they select and send volunteer teams.

Sources


HELPFUL BOOKS ON SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

(Books Marked With an Asterisk* Should Be Required for Teams)


Dr. Stan May serves as professor and chairman of the Missions Department at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife served in Zimbabwe with the International Mission Board, SBC. They have 3 grown children. He has served as pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Olive Branch, MS, since 2000.
Taking Risk in Dangerous Places—How Much is too Much?

by Gordon Fort

David and Carrie McDonnall spent several adventure-packed years as single workers in the Middle East, where they met in Bethlehem at the turn of the millennium.

They had returned to the region together as a young married couple, called by God to love Arabs, eager to help Iraqis rebuild their lives.

Larry and Jean Elliott had given a quarter century serving the poor of Honduras through relief and development ministries, church starting, and one-by-one love and compassion. They had come to Iraq only weeks before, excited to put their long experience to full use for needy Iraqis.

Karen Watson had come to Iraq among the first wave of relief workers, toiling long and hard to get Southern Baptist aid projects going in a dangerous, chaotic environment. After several months in a nearby country, she had just returned; ready to continue her courageous work.

Even with all their skill and experience, all their energetic willingness to serve came to an abrupt end March 15, 2004, on a road near Mosul, Iraq. They were tired but enthusiastic after a day of surveying potential water purification projects. Iraqis, thirsty for clean water, had welcomed them warmly and asked them to return soon. As they drove near the city, they were attacked by nameless killers who pulled alongside their truck and riddled it with gunfire. The Elliotts and Karen Watson died almost immediately. David McDonnall, wounded but still mobile, got help for his critically injured wife. He, too, later died (Bridges and Rankin, 2005 127-28).
“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”
- Jim Elliot

In the days following this incident, the IMB was bombarded with numerous requests for interviews and comment from various news outlets. It seemed that the general consensus of the secular public was that the IMB was foolish to take such risks and that this was a tragic waste of human life. Even in Christian circles, the debate raged as to whether this was an acceptable sacrifice and risk in response to the Great Commission. There was a call by some to bring all our missionaries home.

Somewhere between those who would actually say they would relish the opportunity for martyrdom and those who believe that known dangerous places should be avoided is what I would term ‘calculated risk.’ On what basis can a reasonable decision be made of the factors that constitute an acceptable risk for the sake of the gospel, and at what point do we cross over into foolish presumption upon God? One of the key issues for the current practice of Christian faith in ‘free’ America is a clear understanding of the biblical teaching on suffering.

“If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him.”
- C.T. Studd

In 2 Timothy 3:12, Paul wrote Timothy, and he warned him that every Christian who seeks to live a godly life will suffer persecution. He encouraged him to “Endure affliction” (2 Tim. 4:5). Paul states that “it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1:29). In 1 Peter 4:12, Peter wrote concerning the response a believer should have towards suffering. It was Peter’s expectation that Christians would face what he termed ‘fiery trials.’ In this suffering we should not be “ashamed, but him glorify God” (1 Pet. 4:16). James supports this expectation of suffering when he encourages followers of Christ to “count it all joy when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2).

I will never forget a conversation I had with Ms Bertha Smith, former missionary to China, and a woman greatly used by God in revival. She expressed her amazement at believers who thought they should never have to endure suffering as an expectation of walking with God, when God Himself allowed His only beloved Son to endure unspeakable pain and suffering at the hands of sinners. “Why,”
she asked “would we expect less?”

This is exactly what the writer of Hebrews expressed when he wrote “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, . . . so that you may not grow weary or faint hearted.” (Hebrews 12:3 KJV) Jesus gave us the power of His example. It was an expectation that those who follow Him would like-wise suffer.

In Christ, God demonstrated His willingness to go to great lengths for the salvation and reconciliation of His creation, but was it really His intention that followers of Christ also suffer and take risk for the sake of extending the gospel? I have often heard the statement “the safest place to be is in the center of God’s will.” By “safe” some who use this mantra are implying that nothing “bad” will happen to them. This is absolutely untrue. Read the litany of Paul’s experiences when he was absolutely in the center of God’s will:

In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep. In journeying often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by my own countrymen, in perils by the heathen in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness (2 Cor. 11:23-27).

Does this sound like it was safe! Nate Saint reflects: “And people who do not know the Lord ask why in the world we waste our lives as missionaries. They forget that they too are expending their lives . . . and when the bubble has burst they will have nothing of eternal significance to show for the years they have wasted.”

On one stateside assignment from our work in Botswana, we were being praised for the great sacrifice we were making in living overseas and facing what some thought were great dangers. I was driving home from Fort Worth back to the city of Grapevine, when just three blocks from our home, I encountered a road block. About fifty yards ahead, I could see a van with the words “Bomb Squad”
emblazoned across the side. A young man upset over his breakup with his girlfriend, had loaded his trunk with explosives, parked it next to a Piggly Wiggly grocery store, and was threatening to blow it up. I thought to myself, “Get me back to Africa where it’s safe!”

There is no “safe” place in the world. For a believer, there is only the question of where the place of obedience is. On one occasion when Paul knew his life was threatened, he was lowered in a basket from a window and escaped from the city. In another instance he was warned by the prophet Agabus of impending danger and imprisonment should he continue on his journey to Jerusalem, but he insisted on going anyway. I believe that in each of these situations, Paul took a calculated risk based on what he believed to be God’s will.

Christian missionary leaders have a responsibility to take the information available, the best training possible, and equip personnel to use the most current technology in order to take the gospel to the “panta ta ethne” of this generation. However, I believe it must be done in the context of calculated risk. The goal is the extension of the gospel to all who are lost so that all may hear and be given the opportunity to respond in faith to the claim of Christ on their life, and for those who are saved to be discipled in new testament churches that multiply.

“It will not do to say that you have no special call to go to China. With these facts before you and with the command of the Lord Jesus to go and preach the gospel to every creature, you need rather to ascertain whether you have a special call to stay at home.”

- J. Hudson Taylor

In recent days among Southern Baptists, much has been made of the Great Commission. Intense study and focus has been given to a “Great Commission Resurgence.” Great effort has been made to remind Southern Baptists that our denominational cooperative operations were founded on a vision for taking the gospel to a lost world. We point to a clarion call of Scripture to “go to the entire world and preach the gospel to every language, people, tribe and nation.” We trumpet the promise of Acts 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit is come on you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” (ESV) We hearken back to the picture of Isaiah, in Isaiah 6:8, where he heard the voice of the Lord calling out “whom shall I send, and who will go for us?.” We preach on the implications of Isaiah’s
response when he said, “here am I, send me.” Where in any of our rhetoric is an understanding that this is all predicated upon our safety and security? Consider the implications of the following story:

On the morning of December 30th, 2002, a Muslim man in Yemen, enraged by the influence of Christian ministry on his wife after a visit to Jibla Baptist Hospital, shot and killed Southern Baptist medical missionaries Bill Koehn, Martha Myers and Kathy Gariety and seriously wounded pharmacist Don Caswell. Abed Abdul Razak Kamel arrived early that morning. He held a “pink slip” pass for return patients which allowed him past hospital security guards into the outpatient waiting area. At 8:15, Martha Myers walked past him into Bill Koehn’s office where Kathy Gariety was already sitting. Kamel followed her, pulled out a pistol hidden under his coat and opened fire on the three workers at point-blank range. As hospital workers screamed and scattered, Kamel emerged from the office, walked to the pharmacy and shot Don Caswell three times. Two Yemeni soldiers at the front gate heard the shots and commotion, ran into the courtyard and confronted Kamel. He calmly laid his gun on the ground and raised his hands (Bridges and Rankin, 2005, 23).

I visited the hospital site and the graves of Bill and Dr. Martha on the back side of the hospital complex. Sometime later I was preaching in a chapel service at Mid-Western Baptist Theological Seminary and happened to be there during the dedication of new facilities in honor of these three missionaries. Dr. Martha’s dad, a prominent doctor from Alabama, was in attendance. I asked him why he chose to bury his daughter in Yemen. He replied, “When Martha went to Yemen, we knew it was a dangerous place. She told me that she just be another grave—but if I buried her in Yemen, her grave would be a witness.”

In subsequent months and years, many Yemenis have come to faith in Christ. They have faced persecution and imprisonment for their faith. Their testimony of why they have withstood the onslaught of these fiery trials is this statement: “We saw these missionaries live for Christ and now we have seen them die for Christ. How can we do anything less?” Dr. Martha went to Yemen on the basis of a calculated risk. That risk led to the opening of hearts to the gospel. The seed of the gospel has now taken root in the soil of Yemeni hearts.
The command has been to “go,” but we have stayed in—body, gifts, prayer and influence. He has asked us to be witnesses unto the uttermost parts of the earth… but 99% of Christians have kept puttering around in the homeland.”

- Robert Savage

On another occasion in early 2010, twenty-one-year-old Jeremiah Johnson left Phoenix, Arizona, to head to Quelimane, Mozambique, to serve a term in the IMB’s “Hands On” Program for college students. He was assigned the responsibility to begin researching the Moniga tribe that lived along the coastal region of the Indian Ocean Island.

As Jeremiah traveled out into the bush by motorcycle, he was accompanied by a local pastor named Sobrinho who helped him with translation and making connections with the tribal peoples. Out on the sandy beaches, Jeremiah would play soccer with the young people and begin sharing the gospel with them. In village after village, this young man became known as “The Sower of God’s Word.” One evening, as Jeremiah made his way back to Quelimane, he was struck by a truck and died instantly. Sobrinho, though knocked off the motorcycle, survived the accident (Portraits, 2010, 3-5).

I attended Jeremiah’s funeral service in the Royal Palms Baptist Church in Phoenix. There was a standing room only crowd. The news of Jeremiah’s tragic death had deeply touched the community. It was incredible to hear his Dad, David Johnson, share about his son's testimony. E-mails from Jeremiah were read that told of his growing love for the Mozambican people and the opportunity he had to share the good news of the gospel with the Moniga tribe. I made the statement during the service, “I pray that the Johnson family will never forget the high price you have invested for the sake of the gospel among the Moniga tribe of Mozambique.”

Some three months later David and Diana Johnson and their pastor and his wife made the trip to Quelimane. They wanted to see the villages and meet the people that their son had worked with. In the course of their journey, David had the privilege of helping in a Baptismal service of seventeen Monigan believers who had come to faith in Christ since the death of Jeremiah. Is this gospel tree that is growing among the Monigan worth the risk and the young life of Jeremiah Johnson? In thinking about the loss of his son, David Johnson said at his funeral, “I would not change one thing about what Jeremiah did—he was right where he was sup-
posed to be.” Jeremiah’s death was as a result of a tragic accident, but his life will bear fruit in the generations of believers to come from the Monigan.

When we deploy personnel around the world, all are faced with the possibility of such accidents. Many are placed in situations where there is inadequate health care, others where kidnapping by criminal elements for ransom is a possibility. Some may face kidnapping by rebel forces so that they can get exposure to their cause through the subsequent press their actions will garner. These are circumstances for which leadership must calculate the risks involved and must prepare for the eventuality of what to do should the danger be realized. However, we can never forget that the distance and the danger in taking the gospel to the lost is nothing when compared to the distance, and the risk, that Jesus took in going to the cross. NASA spent billions in getting a man to the moon, what should we be willing to risk for the sake of the gospel?

In my view, the key issue to consider is not whether there is risk and danger. If we were only to deploy personnel to the countries that the State Department considers “safe,” we would go few places in the world! The key question is whether the gospel can be extended to the lost. Mere presence is not the goal of the missionary call. The command of the master is to go and preach the gospel. The Greek word “Kerusso” is translated by the English word “preach.” When the Greek athletes would prepare to enter the arena to compete in the games, as they would enter the stadium through an archway, a group of trumpeters would begin to blow their trumpets. They were loudly announcing the arrival of the athletes. They were heralding the start of the games. They were “preaching.” The ambulance and the fire truck on their way to an accident loudly announce their progress. There is an emergency. Lives are at stake.

This modern example illustrates the meaning of the word “kerusso.” It is a loud word. The command is not to go into the world and be a “presence.” The command is to go and preach. The command is not “Go into all the world as long as you are safe and secure.” The command is to obedience. However, obedience can be exercised within the context of “Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16).

When missionaries cannot “herald” the gospel because of the local circumstances, then the risk is not acceptable. If we cannot encounter the lost and share the good news of the gospel with them, then we must find a dif-
different strategy for giving access to the gospel. In some situations, the presence of those who can be identified as Westerners makes the plight of local believers worse. We risk endangering our national Christian brethren by our presence. This is an unacceptable risk in my view. Such was the situation in Zimbabwe in the late 1970s.

Citizens of Britain in the colony of Rhodesia declared unilateral independence. They refused to follow the path of nationalization, believing that more time was needed to transition to independence. A war ensued. The Sanyati Baptist Mission had been in existence since the early 1950s extending medical care and education to the Shona people. During the war, missionary Archie Dunaway drove to the hospital one evening to pick up his wife Martha, a nurse. Later, Martha came outside to find the car running and their German shepherd dog inside—but no Archie. She immediately went to the other missionaries on the station to alert them. It was not until the next morning that they found his body behind the hospital. He had been bayonetted to death.

Most of the missionaries were evacuated and redeployed to other countries leaving a few essential medical personnel in Gatooma, the closest town. Until the end of the war, the medical personnel would travel to the hospital to attend to the urgent and critical needs of the patients. Sometimes they would go by road and sometimes by light aircraft. Nationals would inform missionaries when it was safe to come. Sometimes missionaries were told not to come because of threats to the local population if they did. At other times, their lives were spared by nationals who would warn them in advance where land mines were buried in the road. Missionary personnel followed this principle of not going when they knew that their presence would cause more suffering for the nationals. These decisions were based on taking calculated risk.

“We talk of the second coming, half the world has never heard of the first.”
- Oswald J. Smith

There is something worse than taking a calculated risk for the sake of the gospel and expending our lives in obedience to the command of Christ. When one missionary was told that the IMB would not pay the demand for ransom should they be kidnapped, he left the session feeling deeply concerned. He understood that if other criminal elements believed they could get funds for missionary captives it would endanger all missionary personnel. The words of an old
hymn came to his mind: “When with the ransomed in glory His face at last I shall see, I’ll sing His praise through the ages and sing of His love for me.” It occurred to him—his ransom had already been paid! Believers who keep an eternal view know that their future is secure. Jesus has promised that He is preparing a place for us. The Holy Spirit given as a gift to believers is evidence of God’s down payment for our eternity in paradise.

Those who are lost do not have this luxury. They are bound for a Christless eternity in a place called Hell. There is no other avenue of salvation and reconciliation with God other than through faith in Jesus Christ. This fact, if we truly believe it, should be an impetus for the believer to take an honest look at the world and consider where the gospel has never been proclaimed. Once those Peoples have been identified, we should do whatever it takes to ensure that each person has an opportunity at least once in their life to hear the good news of Jesus Christ and respond in faith to Him.

In Luke 14:27, 28 the Living New Testament says: “And you cannot be my disciple if you do not carry your own cross and follow me. But don’t begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first getting estimates and then checking to see if there is enough money to pay the bills?” There is a race to be run and a mission to be accomplished. Let’s consider the risk and let’s count the cost, but let’s expend our lives for the sake of the command to take the gospel to every language, every people, every tribe, and every nation.

**SOURCES**


Dr. Gordon Fort has spent his life in international missions—literally. He was born in Zimbabwe to missionary parents and grew up there with his four brothers. After receiving degrees from Texas A&M and SWBTS, he returned to Africa with his wife, LeighAnn to serve in Botswana as a church planter, and then in Zimbabwe in leadership positions for Southern Africa before moving back to Richmond in 2004 as the Vice President for Office of Overseas Operations (later changed to Office of Global Strategy).
“Finishing the Task” has become a frequent refrain in evangelical missions circles in recent years. What is the task to which this emphasis refers?

What is involved in completing that exercise? What are other related tasks, or aspects of the task, that may remain even after the initial task is completed? This article looks at questions such as these, in order to understand more fully the job before us.

The essence of the task to which this emphasis refers is that every ethnolinguistic people group in the world will have meaningful access to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This overall understanding of the task of the church is based on pervasive testimony throughout Scripture.

The first major allusion to the task is found in Genesis 12:2-3, when God says to Abraham, “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (All Scripture references are ESV.) This crucial promise is repeated to Abraham in Genesis 18:18 and again in Genesis 22:18. This promise, which lays the foundation for the task, is passed on to Isaac when God says to him in Genesis 26:4, “. . . in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” It continues with Jacob, when God says in Genesis 28:14, “. . . in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”

The promise of blessing given to the patriarchs carried with it the clear word that they were to be intermediaries
of blessing to all families, all nations, and all peoples of the earth. Like those who have come after them in the ensuing millennia, the patriarchs focused more on the blessing they received, rather than on the blessing they were to be to others. Yet God’s promise has always included His intention to bless every people, through those whom He has called to be in covenant relationship with Him.

Repeatedly we see that King David grasped the responsibility of God’s people to spread the truth of God to the nations. David also shows his understanding of the task in Psalm 67:1-2: “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.”

Isaiah remembers and emphasizes the task in passages like Isaiah 12:4-5, where he says, “... make known his deeds among the peoples ... let this be made known in all the earth.” God speaks through Isaiah reminding all that the task is His task alone, when He calls to the nations in passages such as Isaiah 45:22, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God and there is no other.”

In the New Testament, the task of carrying the gospel to all peoples is often reflected in the words and actions of the apostles. Before Peter begins to understand that Gentiles can be saved without first becoming Jews, he already grasps that the patriarchal promise and its inherent task is the responsibility of followers of Jesus. He says in Acts 3:25-26, “You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.’ God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness.”

The last time our Lord met with the disciples, He charged them (and therefore us) to take the news of His provision of salvation to every people. This declaration is found in Matthew 28:19-20, Where He proclaims “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...” Certainly there are varying understandings of elements of that charge, and some of those points of variation are mentioned later in this article. Nevertheless, the pointed reference to παντα τα εθνη, all peoples, is unavoidable.

We have seen that the task of Christ’s followers is to be a blessing to all people by sharing the gospel with them. In addition, it is essential that we understand that Scripture promises time after
time that the task will be accomplished. An early expression of that promise is Psalm 22:27, “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.” The certain success of the task of the suffering servant is reflected in Isaiah 49:6, “... I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

When Paul applies Isaiah 49:6 to himself and to all followers of Christ, we see that the task and the promise are clearly related together. He says in Acts 13:47, “For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

The words of our Lord in Matthew 24:14 convey a very clear promise that all peoples will hear, when He says, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.” The eschatological element of this verse has engendered some controversy, because we cannot be certain what “then” means, or what the causative relationship of the testimony and the coming of the end might be.

However, our focus must be on the very clear promise that the task will be accomplished, that the proclamation of the gospel will reach all peoples. That focus is clearly repeated in Mark 13:10, “And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.” Our Lord repeats the promise that the task will be accomplished, coupling it with the fact of His resurrection, when He says in Luke 24:45-47, “Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’”

It is important to acknowledge that this is not referring to the judgment day, when for a time all people shall bow, even non-believers on their way to eternity in Hell. Rather, this promise of the completion of the task refers to the picture seen in passages such as Revelation 5:9 and Revelation 7:9, when those from every nation, tribe, people and language gather around the throne, clearly as believers. Since there are believers from every people group worshipping around the throne, the gospel has been been proclaimed to every people group.

Carrying the gospel to every people group is a crucial task given to the church, and God promises that it will happen. Paul’s logical set of questions in Romans 10:14-15 expresses how...
this successful task is accomplished. He asks, “How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?”

The task is laid out: Saving faith grows from belief, which comes from hearing the truth, which comes from someone proclaiming the truth, which can happen when the proclaimer is sent. The promise that someone from every people group will hear can be fulfilled only when someone has proclaimed the truth to every people group, so that it is possible for someone from each people to believe.

Paul saw that Jesus’ commandment that all peoples should hear the gospel carried major implications for his ministry, as he states in Romans 15:20-21, “And thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.’” The consistent testimony of Scripture is clearly that not all will believe; but it is equally clear that every people must have opportunity to hear, for some from every people will believe.

The scope of the task is global in the greatest sense of the word, for it includes all peoples, all tribes, all languages, all nations. Determining the details of the task can be challenging, yet agreeing on the details is not a necessary prerequisite to obediently carrying out the task.

There are questions related to the task that often sideline the church from involvement in the task. One frequent question is related to the definition of a people group. What is a people, a nation, or a tribe? There are many definitions of a people group, and those varying definitions lead to differences in determining how many people groups there are and who must be reached. Nevertheless, the focus of the church must remain on the commandment that the gospel must be made available to every people, regardless of how a people group is defined.

There are also questions regarding how to determine sufficient proclamation of the gospel has been made among a people group. Is the provision of Christian television and/or radio broadcasts in the language of a people group sufficient? Is printed Scripture in the language of the people group necessary? Are accurate Bible stories in the language of the people group what is needed? Is individual personal witness required?
A more appropriate evaluation of whether there is meaningful access to the gospel among a people is whether there are any believers. If there are not any believers, clearly the task has not been completed among that people group. A good indicator regarding whether the task is being accomplished among a people group is whether there are churches within the culture of that people group. This indicates whether there is access that enables those within the people group not only to hear, but also to understand and to respond. Real access will eventually be demonstrated by churches, New Testament communities of believers covenanted together, and seeking to share the gospel with others.

There are also differences of understanding concerning what is meant by the command “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19, as well as “teaching them to obey all things which I have commanded you” in Matthew 28:20. Is the level of discipleship which Paul and others were able to provide in their often itinerant, short-term ministries a responsible obedience to Christ’s command? Did they misunderstand and rely too heavily on the converts’ dependence upon the Holy Spirit?

Certainly a part of the church’s task is the ministry of continued discipleship of all believers. Yet, the believers of Romans 10:14-15, must focus upon providing the good news of salvation, and helping converts begin the path of discipleship. There must be a clear focus upon enabling all to hear, in order to obediently be about the first task of giving access to the gospel.

The point is that there is a task to be accomplished. The definition issues may make it difficult for us to know when or if the task has been completed among a certain people group, or to agree that the overall, global task has been completed. We have seen that God has promised that this will be completed, and that means that in and through His power it is a doable task.

If we believe the gospel is clearly accessible to a certain people group, we will seek to make it available to the next people group. No matter what we think about the overall task, even if we think we have made the gospel accessible to all peoples, we will keep working. Regardless of what we think has or has not yet been accomplished we will continue evangelizing, discipling, teaching to obey, and planting new churches. We must not let disagreements about definitions or other matters keep us from moving forward.

Where do we seem to be at this point? The website www.peoplegroups.org, a ministry of the Global Research Department
of the International Mission Board, gathers information from and in cooperation with many evangelical organizations. This website provides probably the most up-to-date information available regarding the progress of the task. There are more than 11,500 people groups listed on the website. Of those 11,500 peoples, more than 700 are classified as having essentially no access to the gospel. For almost 5,000 additional groups, there is no evidence that the gospel is truly accessible to that people group, for there are few, if any believers, and there are not vibrant, reproducing churches.

Certainly we do not have complete information about every people group. Nevertheless, we can be confident that we do know enough to realize that the task in question—making the gospel accessible to every people in the earth—has not been completed. Also, the information that we do have helps us to prioritize the use of resources in order to take the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ to those people groups who would otherwise have no opportunity to hear. “How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Romans 10:14)

We must neither forget, nor neglect, that there are jobs other than the basic task of providing access to the gospel for every nation, tribe, people and language. We must remember and act upon the ultimate realization that people groups are made up of individuals. The gospel is made accessible to a people group in order that individuals within that people group might have opportunity to hear, to believe, and to call on the Lord that they might be saved.

Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:3-4, “This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Paul is speaking of God desiring individuals to be saved, as is Peter when he writes in 2 Peter 3:9, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

God’s emphasis on the individual is an emphasis that must characterize our ministry also. Yes, we have the task to make the gospel accessible to every people group on earth. If we come to the point that we are convinced we have accomplished that task, and if the Lord has not yet returned, there are still critical tasks that lie before us. As long as there is a single person who has not yet heard the good news of salvation made available in Jesus, our work will not
be finished. May we see that task as the next and continuing task, even when the gospel has become accessible to every nation, people, tribe and language.

Our focus must not be on the multitudes of people who have come to the Lord in recent years, or on the thousands of new churches started, or even on the hundreds of people groups who have received the gospel for the first time. Rather, like Paul, we must forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead.

Our focus must be on the task that remains—the untold millions of people and thousands of people groups to whom we have yet to take the words of life. They now live a hopeless life, lost in their sin on their way to an eternity in hell. They are desperately waiting for the truth that gives an opportunity to believe and to experience abundant life here and for eternity.

We are not there yet. In His strength, we must press forward, so that all may know.

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In addition to the Isaiah passages that prophesy Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection, many believers instantly recognize the quotation from Isaiah 55:11:

**INTRODUCTION**

“So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.” (All biblical quotations are from the NASB.) As a result of the verse’s popularity, believers often apply it to any number of situations. Examples of the verse’s implementation include the proclamation that an unbeliever will come to Christ after hearing the gospel, or that a situation’s outcome will be the one that the believer desires merely because he quoted Isaiah 55:11. In reality, the prophet intended neither of these meanings, and perhaps the only verse that believers and unbelievers alike take out of context more frequently than Isaiah 55:11 is Philippians 4:13.

In order to understand the intended meaning of Isaiah 55:11, one must observe the verse in its proper context. For this reason, we will consider a couple of examples of the verse’s misinterpretation before examining the content of Isaiah 52:12-55:10. Next, we will focus on the true meaning of Isaiah 55:11. Finally, we will move on to proper biblical applications of the verse.
EXAMPLES OF MISINTERPRETATIONS OF ISAIAH 55:11

Decades ago before the rise of computer generated graphics, Lon Chaney, Sr. held the title “the man of a thousand faces.” Chaney was a talented actor who also became an expert at makeup application. For his roles in the classic movies *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, he created the now famous appearances of the leading characters Quasimodo and Erik. Unfortunately, believers often treat Isaiah 55:11 as the verse with a thousand faces, forcing the text to mean whatever they wish it to say. These misinterpretations may be summarized into two general categories.

A Guarantee of Prosperity and Health

In many circles, those who quote Isaiah 55:11 do so in order to assure their hearers that they will obtain whatever their hearts desire. As proof of this interpretation of the verse, adherents often utter the oft-misquoted Philippians 4:13 in the next breath. For this reason, Isaiah 55:11 tends to be popular with the “health and wealth” movement.

An internet search of Isaiah 55:11 displays over 700,000 references to the verse. More often than not, these websites provide no background for the contents of Isaiah 55. A significant percentage of the sites consist of sermon notes and videos of teachers and preachers who promise wealth or who hold healing services in order to remove people’s illnesses. As one might expect, many of the individuals who champion this interpretation of Isaiah 55:11 also line their pockets with the money of their faithful followers.

A Guarantee of a Positive Response to the Gospel

Football enthusiasts who watched sports on television during the 1980s may never have heard the name Rollen Stewart, but they most likely observed him in the stadiums’ crowds. For years, Stewart scouted out strategic locations near the end zone so that he could flash a specific message to the cameras with the intention that it be broadcast across the United States. Usually, the message that he promoted on his T-shirts and signs, while wearing a rainbow colored wig, read “John 3:16.” Stewart’s premise was that the Scripture reference would prompt people to open their Bibles, read about God’s free gift of salvation, and subsequently become His followers.

Stewart appears to have been driven by the premise that verses
such as Isaiah 55:11 guaranteed the observers’ *en masse* conversion because God’s Word does not return void. Ultimately, he became so disillusioned by a lack of results that he lit several stink bombs near prominent churches and took three people hostage in a hotel room. Presently, Stewart is serving three life sentences for his criminal antics.

**AN OVERVIEW OF ISAIAH 52:1-56:8**

With all of the competing interpretations of Isaiah 55:11 in circulation, how are we to determine the true significance of the verse? In order to retrieve its proper meaning, we must consider the context of Isaiah 55:11.

**Isaiah 52:1-54:17**

The focus of Isaiah 52:1-54:17 is the nation of Israel. In the past, God’s covenant people had been humiliated for centuries as slaves in Egypt. In more recent history, the Assyrians had oppressed them without cause. God promised to deliver His people from those who invaded Jerusalem, and as a result, these foreigners would know His name (52:1-6).

As a result of the messenger’s announcement that the people were freed from servitude, they rejoiced. God bared His holy arm in the sight of all the nations, demonstrating His victory over all kingdoms and all false gods. The people had nothing to fear, because God would go before them and serve as their rear guard as well. This act of deliverance would result in all nations seeing His salvation (52:7-12).

The highlight of this portion of the book of Isaiah is the fourth Servant Song (52:13-53:12). This powerful passage describes both the source of forgiveness from sin as well as the means by which spiritual salvation is possible. The Servant of Isaiah is Jesus, and the song foretells the suffering and ultimate vindication of the Son of God that would occur over seven centuries after Isaiah prophesied these events.

Just as God promised to Noah that He never again would flood the entire earth, one day He never again would punish the Israelites for their wickedness because of the Messiah’s sacrifice. When Israel’s enemies assailed the nation, God would ensure that neither weapon nor false accusation would be effective. The Lord would be the source of His peoples’ vindication (54:1-17).

In summary, the focus of Isaiah 52:1-54:17 is God’s dealings with the nation of Israel. Even though the nation had forsaken Him in the past, because of His love and faithfulness He would bring about both their
physical and spiritual deliverance through His Messiah. God's mighty, matchless arm prevented the enemies of the sons of Israel from triumphing over them, because they were His covenant people.

**Isaiah 55:1-56:8**

Whereas the focus of Isaiah 52:1-54:17 primarily is Israel, the emphasis of 55:1-56:8 broadens out to include the Gentiles. Jesus did not die only for the sins of the Israelites, but also for the sins of the entire world (John 1:29). The dual emphasis on the spiritual deliverance of both Jews and Gentiles in Isaiah 52-56 provides the foundation for discovering the true context of Isaiah 55:11.

The offer of salvation is available not only to Israel, but to the entire human race: **Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost (55:1)**. The invitation is threefold in nature: “come (Isa. 55:1–5), seek (vv. 6–13), and worship (56:1–8)” (Wiersbe, 1996, 144). The result of receiving the Lord's salvation is joy, peace, and an everlasting covenant with Him (56:9-16). God assured faithful non-Israelites that they would receive the same treatment as Abraham’s descendants. They could look forward to an everlasting name that never would be cut off, as well as access to God's holy mountain. In fact, their sacrifices would be just as acceptable on His holy altar as those of Israel. Ultimately, the Lord would gather dispersed Israel to Himself as well as the Gentiles who placed their faith in Him (56:1-8).

**THE CONTEXT OF ISAIAH 55:11**

**An Invitation to the LORD’s Banquet (55:1-2)**

God used food imagery to depict His mercy. Although the people figuratively spent their money on things that did not nourish or satisfy, there was another option. God offered them water, wine, milk, and food that would cost them nothing. These important items were staples in the ancient Near East, so God made reference to them in order to help His hearers understand that He desired to give them free mercy in place of the misery that was the result of their rebellion against the Him. The Lord declared that His gift of spiritual nourishment was available to all who desired to have their thirst quenched.

**Listen to the LORD (55:3-5)**

In order to enjoy the Lord's mercy, the Israelites were directed to obey Him. This obedience
would result in the preservation of their lives as well as participation in an everlasting covenant “according to the faithful mercies shown to David” (55:3b). As a result of their faithfulness, the covenant nation would become a witness to all of the peoples of the earth. Paul Hanson wisely noted that “The connection with the Servant Song is evident here, for the covenant people ‘shall call nations that you do not know’” (55:5a) (Hanson 179). In other words, Israel’s submission to God would be a testimony to all other people groups. Gentiles who sought out the Lord would participate in His offer of mercy in the same capacity as Abraham’s flesh and blood descendants.

**Seek the Lord** (55:6-7)

Isaiah calls His listeners to seek the Lord while He may be found, because His offer of forgiveness will not last forever. They must acknowledge the shamefulness of their sin, and this recognition will prompt them to forsake not only their evil ways, but also the unclean thoughts of which no one else is aware. Once this rejection of wickedness occurs and the people return to the Lord, He promises to show compassion and abundantly pardon those who are truly repentant of their rebellious ways.

**The Loftiness of God’s Thoughts** (55:8-9)

God reminds His hearers that He does not think as humans think, nor are His ways like those of mortals. Rather, His ways are so much higher than ours that the only comparison between the two is the loftiness of the heavens in relation to the earth. Just as the sky towers over the land, God’s ways are higher than those of mankind (Motyer, 457).

**An Illustration of Rain and Snow** (55:10)

In order to demonstrate the highness of His ways, God developed an extended illustration that focuses on the usefulness of rain and snow. Both forms of precipitation descend from the heavens and are essential to the continuance of life. John N. Oswalt explained the significance of this illustration to Isaiah’s original hearers:

In the ancient Near East rain spelled the difference between life and death. If the rains came at the appropriate times one could hope for good crops, which means enough food (bread) for the coming year, and, of at least equal importance, seed for the following year’s crop. If the rains did not come, not only was the crop
lost but also the seed, and famine stared one in the face. In a powerful comparison, Isaiah says that God’s word is just like the rain. In particular, he compares the effectiveness of the two. Each one achieves the purposes of blessing and life-giving for which it was intended (Oswalt, 1998, 446).

In other words, the Lord sends His rain and snow to provide sustenance, and this liquid nourishment perfectly accomplishes its purpose.

An important observation must be made about the effectiveness of rain and snow. Heavenly precipitation does not cause every single seed in the ground to sprout or every blade of grass to stretch skyward. The addition of water does not guarantee the growth of any individual plant, but this fact does not diminish or negate the effectiveness of the life-giving properties of water. One of the main purposes of rain and snow is to irrigate the ground and cause crops to grow, and this objective is accomplished every time that God causes the clouds to pour their contents on the earth.

A New Testament analogue of this principle appears in Jesus’ parable of the sower. In Mark 4:3-8, the sower’s seed fell upon four types of ground: the hard ground beside the road, the rocky soil, the ground among the thorns, and fertile soil. Although every seed was identical, only the seeds that fell on the good ground sprouted. For this reason, the sown seed accomplishes the sower’s purpose even though not every individual seed develops and produces a crop. Interestingly, the seed in this parable is an illustration of God’s Word (cf. Mark 4:14) like the rain and the snow of Isaiah 55:10.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament, therefore, demonstrate that the distribution of God’s Word is not a guarantee that every person who hears it will respond favorably. Those who share the gospel should not expect every hearer to forsake sin and trust in the resurrected Lord. Furthermore, Isaiah 55:11 is not the biblical equivalent of a blank check from God that guarantees the claimant anything that his or her heart desires. What, then, is the biblical meaning of Isaiah 55:11?

**THE MEANING OF ISAIAH 55:11**

**God’s Word: The Means by Which He Works**

Because God is omnipotent, He possesses the power to communicate with us in any way that He desires. In Exodus 3,
for example, God got Moses’ attention by means of speaking through a burning bush. God opened the mouth of a donkey in Numbers 22:28 in order to express His will to Balaam. Isaiah 6 records Isaiah’s heavenly vision and subsequent call to serve as a prophet of the Lord.

These events and others like them are spectacular manifestations of God’s power, but they do not represent the most important way that God has communicated with mankind. Hebrew 1:1-2 explains that “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.” As magnificent and as miraculous as the above Old Testament interactions with the Lord were, they do not compare with the revelation of His Son, who is known as the Word (John 1:1).

Additionally, God has provided mankind with a written Word that we know as the Bible. The written Word is the means by which God communicates with believers today, and the New Testament speaks of the Bible’s importance numerous times. In Isaiah 55:11, the word that will not return void is none other than that which the human biblical authors have recorded in Scripture.

Another important point is that the word that will not return void is God’s word and not the word of humans. In other words, people cannot make their desires a reality merely by applying Isaiah 55:11 to whatever situation they desire. The only word that God guarantees is the word that proceeds from His mouth. Any other word from any other source does not carry this type of authority.

The LORD also indicated that His word will not return “empty.” The reader must understand the meaning of this term to understand exactly what God’s promise entails. As an adverb, “empty” often carries the idea of “not fulfilled” or “unsuccessful” (Harris, Archer & Waltke, 1980. 846). A helpful example of this usage appears in 2 Samuel 1:22 in the song that David composed to lament the deaths of Jonathan and Saul. The new king depicts his predecessor to the throne as a mighty warrior whose sword did not return empty. The purpose of Saul’s sword was to make war against his enemies, and his weapon fulfilled this purpose.

To say, then, that God’s word does not return to Him empty is a strong declaration of His sovereignty. So certain is this assertion that the Lord employs parallelism in Isaiah 55:11 to make the point that His word is effective:
It (the word) will not return to Me empty, (declaration)
Without accomplishing what I desire, (first parallel statement)
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it (second parallel statement).

Therefore no one, not even Satan himself, can frustrate the purposes of God's Word, which is the means by which He has determined to work. Isaiah 55:11, then, contains a general principle that affirms that God is all-powerful.

**God's Word: The Means by Which He Announces Salvation**

Contextually, the declaration of God's omnipotence in Isaiah 55:11 relates to the concept of salvation. Typically, the word *salvation* carries two primary definitions in the Old Testament: physical deliverance and spiritual salvation. We must consider both of these meanings in order to determine which one fits the context of Isaiah 55:11.

Throughout Israel's history, the Lord was responsible for rescuing the nation during troubling times. The deliverance of the sons of Israel from Egypt is the foundation for this concept. In later times, when the Israelites faced seemingly invincible enemies, they would recall God's miraculous intervention for His people in Egypt and call for Him to work in such a way once more (e.g., Pss. 44, 77, 98).

The concept of physical deliverance from hostile opponents became a powerful illustration by which to refer to spiritual salvation. Just as the sons of Israel were slaves in Egypt, humans are slaves to sin. The Israelites could not escape from their bondage, nor can sinners set themselves free from the sin that entangles them. Only God could deliver the people from Egypt and lead them to Canaan, and only Jesus can deliver us from sin and provide us with a heavenly home.

Since both physical and spiritual deliverance figure so heavily in the Old Testament, which is in mind in Isaiah 55:11? Historically speaking, God's chosen people faced perilous times during Isaiah's lifetime. They needed assurance that God would not forsake them during their time of trouble, so physical salvation certainly is a factor in Isaiah 55:11 (cf. Isa. 56:1). However, the verse also anticipates the spiritual deliverance not only of Abraham's descendants, but also all Gentiles who seek the Lord's mercy (cf. Isa. 56:6, 8). In short, both types of deliverance are present in Isaiah 55:11.

The significance of Isaiah 55:11, therefore, is twofold.
First, by means of His unfail-
ing word, God announced that He would deliver Israel from its overbearing oppressors, and this purpose could not be thwarted. Second, He determined to make forgiveness for sin, transgression, and iniquity (cf. Exod. 34:7) available to any person who trusts in Jesus, and no person or force could frustrate or impede His desire to make redemption possible through His Son’s sacrifice.

**IMPLICATIONS**

When one considers all of these factors, a vivid, powerful image appears in Isaiah 55:11. The almighty God has no equal, so His plans never fail. His purposes always find fruition, so He never is forced to resort to a “Plan B.” Because of His omnipotence, believers can find assurance in the fact that the Lord’s will always will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

**CONCLUSION**

This examination of Isaiah 55:11 reveals to us several interesting ideas. First, it is God’s purpose that will not return empty, not ours. We cannot legitimately use the verse to proclaim that God will cause our desires to become a reality. For this reason, we must learn to pray as Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion: “yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matt. 26:39b). We will find that when our will aligns with His will instead of our own yearnings that God will give us the desires of our heart (Ps. 37:4).

Second, God is all-powerful and unconquerable. It is easy for us to despair when we see that many nations and people are hostile toward Christ and His gospel. We must remember, though, that nothing happens in the universe without God’s permission, and He is triumphant over Satan, sin, and death. He graciously has provided us with a glimpse of the consummation of Christ’s kingdom in the book of Revelation, so we have nothing to fear. When we look at things from this perspective, we can echo David’s often quoted words of confidence: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the defense of my life; Whom shall I dread?” (Ps. 27:1).

Third, Isaiah 55:11 is tied inextricably to the concepts of evangelism and missions. God the Father purposed to send His Son to pay the price for sin, and this sacrifice makes salvation possible not only to Jews, but also to the rest of the earth’s population: “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him” (Rom. 10:12).
When we share the gospel with others, some will reject this word just as some of the seed in Jesus’ parable fell on unproductive ground and failed to sprout. Isaiah 55:11 does not guarantee us that any one individual, with whom we share the gospel, will become a Christian. We may, however, state with certainty that many who hear the gospel will respond to it favorably and become followers of Christ, because God’s Word is powerful. The Lord has purposed to save all who confess their sins and follow the risen Lord Jesus, and His Word will succeed in bringing them to Himself!

**SOURCES**


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My family and I arrived in Paris on August 13, 2003, during the worst heat wave to hit France in decades.

We had come to plant our lives in that city, because we agreed with C. Peter Wagner when he wrote, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches (Wagner, 1990, 11). My training had prepared me well, I believed, for the task of planting churches in the secular and postmodern society of the Ile-de-France. During our six-week orientation, I studied the rationale and methodology of Church Planting Movements and house churches. We devoured Wolfgang Simson’s *Houses That Change the World* and its sometimes caustic critique of traditional churches. I recognized the necessity of contextualizing methodologies on the mission field, but believed wholeheartedly in my sending agency’s strategy.

As I began to engage my new neighbors and friends, however, I discovered that I had not asked the most important question of all: What is a church? I visited established churches and successful (at least by French standards) church plants, but none of them looked like the models I had studied. I began to search for a model that was both biblically faithful and culturally appropriate, a search that continually led me back to that key question.

During this same period, many Southern Baptists confronted the task of defining “church” in the face of emerg-
ing church paradigms at home and missions questions abroad. Controversies related to North American church planting methodology and disagreement over appropriate partnerships and church expression overseas forced trustees of the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board to issue official “definitions” of the church in 2004 and 2005 respectively. The purpose of this article is to consider these efforts at outlining key elements of a Baptist ecclesiology for missions. While I will conclude with reflection on such an ecclesiology, it is outside the scope of this paper to develop an in-depth statement on the nature and purpose of the Christian Church.

The “Irreducible Ecclesiological Minimum” and Church Planting

Without using the exact phrase, Southern Baptists have been searching for what J. D. Payne calls the “irreducible ecclesiological minimum.” Payne argues that “the most critical issue in church planting today is an ecclesiological issue” (Payne, 2008, 2). He adds, “the way we respond to the question, ‘What is a church?’ affects the entire missionary strategy” (Payne 18). This foundational question is often ignored in the early planning stages of church planting, resulting in great difficulty for the church, its sponsors, and the planter. Within a denomination like the Southern Baptist Convention, the problem occasionally becomes one of accountability as the church or agency supporting a new work is surprised by its structure or leadership. Because of problems arising from ecclesiological issues, Southern Baptists have made efforts to define “church” in a way that allows for doctrinal accountability and adequate church planting strategy.

Payne defines church planting as evangelism that results in congregations. This emphasis on evangelism as the starting point of church planting cannot be understated; new churches are formed with new believers. The process of biblical church planting is “to translate the gospel and the irreducible ecclesiological minimum into any given social context.” That process makes two important assumptions. First, it assumes an irreducible minimum, a “basic essence of the church” found in Scripture and suitable as a guideline for church planting. Second, Payne’s definition assumes that such an essence is, in fact, translatable to other cultures. Missiological principles teach that a planter’s cultural traditions should not be imposed on the target culture. The IEM provides leaders with a framework for discerning
cultural trappings and planting the church appropriately (Payne 115-16).

The Southern Baptist Convention is not alone in this quest. Some missionaries have long recognized the need for an adequate description of “church.” The search for the IEM arose from a growing desire for contextualization. Although that term itself is a relatively new creation, the missionary effort to develop theologies appropriate for diverse cultures has developed over the last century. John Nevius, writing before the turn of the twentieth century, addressed ecclesiological issues related to mission strategy and church planting. Nevius believed that the early church exhibited a simple form that developed over time and that modern missionaries must consider the impact of their own culture on their view of ecclesiology. Charles Brock, a strong advocate of contextualized reproducible churches, wrote, “I believe a perverted and tarnished view of a church constitutes one of the greatest hurdles faced by church planters” (Brock, 1994, 49). He pointed out that missionary church planters, no matter their context, must often re-orient their own views of the church and its trappings before effectively starting a new work.

European church planter Stuart Murray argues for the necessity of a New Testament ecclesiology while cautioning planters of the potential dangers of inflexibility and uniformity (Murray 81). Murray reminds readers that the IEM is just that—a minimum. Just as the early churches were planted in particular contexts and reflected those cultures, modern church plants must be founded on biblical standards, but their structures and practices should also reflect the believers that make up the body. Just because churches are “New Testament” does not mean that they will all look exactly alike. Such is the motivation behind the search for the IEM.

Recent works by Southern Baptist authors have emphasized the importance of ecclesiology in general and for church planting. Daniel Akin pleads for “a vision for a faithful and authentic biblical ecclesiology” as one of ten mandates for Baptist churches (Akin, 2007, 15). Reacting to controversies over church planting on mission fields, John Hammett says, “if planting churches is at the heart of the task of missions, then issues of ecclesiology deserve more careful consideration than is often given.” Contextualization is important, he contends, but the doctrinal foundations of the church must remain constant.

In Planting Missional Churches, Ed Stetzer argues that ecclesiology comes from Scripture rather than from a target culture, an important dis-
tinction within the discussion on contextualization. “Ecclesiology is not a blank slate to draw out of the cultural situation,” he contends, but rather “the Bible tells us that certain things need to exist for a biblical church to exist” (159). Stetzer provides another helpful distinction between “contending” and “contextualizing.” Scripture defines certain elements of theology on which Christians must stand strong. Other aspects of ecclesiology might change with culture and time. There exists, however, an irreducible minimum by which all contextualization and innovation is measured (Towns, 2007, 18).

Most missionaries and church planters today recognize the importance of contextualization. Unfortunately, many of the same people neglect the careful and discerning search for a biblical ecclesiology. The result is a need for statements of an irreducible ecclesiological minimum as an affirmation of theological conviction useful for accountability and guidance. For the last century, Southern Baptists have developed such a statement, beginning with broad doctrinal confessions and ending with organizational guidelines for church planting. In the Southern Baptist movement to start churches, these guidelines become the “checklists” for identifying valid congregations.

The Southern Baptist Search for the IEM

Theologian R. Stanton Norman has argued that Baptist distinctives are essentially (though not exclusively) related to ecclesiology. Whether it be the Baptist understanding of the ordinance of believer’s baptism or local church autonomy and government, “the distinctive doctrines of Baptists are actually the theological traits that define and shape our churches” (Norman, 2005, 6-7). From the Southern Baptist Convention’s basic confession of faith, the Baptist Faith and Message, to more detailed studies and, finally, church planting guidelines in Southern Baptist missions agencies, one finds a steady development of the Baptist understanding of “church.”

The Baptist Faith and Message

The guiding doctrinal statement for Southern Baptist missions agencies is the Baptist Faith and Message. Initially adopted in 1925 as a response to modernism and theological liberalism, the Baptist Faith and Message has been revised twice, reflecting a continuing desire to outline basic Baptist beliefs. Two sections of the doctrinal statement that have undergone significant revision are the articles on the church and, to a lesser degree, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s
Supper. The 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* provided a concise outline of a Baptist ecclesiology. Essentially, the church was described as a body of baptized believers, covenanted together for ministry and led by “bishops” or “elders.” Article XII of the original *Baptist Faith and Message* (1925), titled, “The Gospel Church,” emphasized five basic elements of Baptist ecclesiology. First, a church is defined as a “congregation of baptized believers.” Second, those believers are associated together by covenant. The act that joins believers into a church is their recognition that they are accountable to one another by a covenant of common belief. The third basic element of a local church is that those believers observe the “ordinances of Christ.” Though this article does not name those ordinances, Article XIII identifies them as baptism and the Lord’s Supper. A fourth mark of the church is the ministry of believers. The article states clearly that church members are “governed” by the law of Christ and exercise “the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word.” The mission of the church, the article continues, is “to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.” Finally, the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* identifies the biblical offices of the church as “bishops, or elders, and deacons.” In 1963, the Convention adopted a revised statement that expanded the older document. The new guideline emphasized that the church is a *local body* and completely autonomous. It also added a statement that churches should operate by “democratic processes.” Another interesting change in the 1963 version is the replacement of the office of “bishop” or “elder” with “pastor.”

An understanding of the *Baptist Faith and Message* is vital to a study of later doctrinal guidelines on church planting because they are firmly based on that confession of faith. The statement is intended to provide a “witness to the world” by declaring that which Southern Baptists believe to be the fundamentals of the Christian faith. In addition, the *Baptist Faith and Message* is a document of doctrinal accountability. While Southern Baptist churches are completely autonomous, including new churches, there is a standard to which all are held for the sake of cooperation. The *Baptist Faith and Message* provides a foundation for churches to build upon.

The North American Mission Board’s “Ecclesiological Guidelines”

Southern Baptists have long treasured the principle of the autonomy of the local church.
Congregations are free to determine their own covenants, structures, leadership, and polity. In order to be a “cooperating” Southern Baptist church, however, autonomous congregations should subscribe to the Baptist Faith and Message. In addition, agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention are expected to adhere to the doctrinal framework outlined in the confession. In recent years, the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board have stressed the necessity of planting new churches as a key to fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). As missionaries planted new churches, concerns arose over the ecclesiology and doctrinal fidelity of those congregations. The result was two statements adopted by the mission boards and intended to guide church planters as they start Southern Baptist Churches. The goal of these guidelines is to provide an IEM on which church planters can build. A brief analysis will determine whether or not that goal was achieved.

The first agency to adopt ecclesiological guidelines for church planters was the North American Mission Board (NAMB), which is responsible for evangelism and church planting efforts in the United States and Canada. In October 2004, trustees adopted a set of ecclesiological guidelines developed by Stan Norman and the Council of Seminary Deans (Norman 34). Referring to this board action, then-President Robert Reccord said, “It is important that the North American Mission Board have a very clear statement of what we see to be a Baptist Church. We are not planting ‘baptistic’ churches . . . we are planting Southern Baptist churches that reflect what a biblical New Testament church is” (King, Baptist Press). Richard Harris, who once led the board’s church planting efforts, agreed, adding that the guidelines were intended “to ensure that churches we help start throughout North America are Southern Baptist” (Norman, 2005, 34).

The NAMB guidelines outline ten points that identify a Baptist church and are, therefore, necessary for a church planted through that agency. In essence, these points are, the IEM for Southern Baptist churches planted in North America. Norman writes,

A Baptist church is defined by the following traits:

- Committed to the authority of Scripture for faith and practice while recognizing that all Scripture is God-breathed
- Submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ

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A Baptist church is defined by the following traits:

- Committed to the authority of Scripture for faith and practice while recognizing that all Scripture is God-breathed
- Submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ
• Visible, local body that is independent and autonomous
• Composed of members who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit
• Members covenanted together voluntarily for worship of and service to God
• Observes the two ordinances of Christ
  ° Baptism of believers by immersion as profession of faith in Christ as initiatory rite for membership
  ° Lord's Supper regularly observed by members in good standing as commemoration of the sacrifice of Christ
• Practices congregational polity
• Practices church discipline
• Scriptural officers are men who serve as pastors and deacons
• Invisible, universal body that includes all the redeemed of all the ages (Norman, 2005, 33).

One can see clearly that the minimum “essence” of a church under this definition is in actuality quite extensive. While this summary outline aligns closely with the Baptist Faith and Message, the explanations within the remainder of the document, also part of the guidelines, suggest the imposition of some American cultural forms. When compared with the International Mission Board definition of a biblical church, these elements become more clear.

**The International Mission Board Definition of Church**

Reacting to many of the same issues as the North American Mission Board, the trustees of Southern Baptists' international missions sending agency, the International Mission Board (IMB) adopted their own ecclesiological guidelines on January 25, 2005. In a letter the following year, board Chairman Tom Hatley explained the reasoning behind the new policy.

A growing concern about doctrinal integrity on the field had arisen following the adoption of “Strategic Directions for the Twenty-first Century,” a plan for evangelism and church starting developed in 1997. “The concerns were varied,” wrote Hatley, “but the three greatest doctrinal concerns were the need for a consistent definition of a local church, a poor understanding of the importance of scriptural baptism, and charismatic problems that would intrude into some of our mission work” (Hatley, imb.org). While there is some question whether doctrinal problems were real or perceived, the trustees decided that a clear definition of “church” was necessary.
to guide missionaries supported by Southern Baptists.

The IMB definition of church is much simpler than that of the North American Mission Board. It also identifies ten elements of a biblical church, but without the extensive explanation and expansion seen in the NAMB document. The framers of this definition explain clearly the rationale behind its creation, saying, “in our church planting and teaching ministries, we will seek to lay a foundation of beliefs and practices that are consistent with the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, although local churches overseas may express those beliefs and practices in different ways according to the needs of their cultural settings” (imb.org). This recognition of the diversity of cultural forms is unique to the IMB definition and emphasizes the search for the IEM. The International Mission Board definition emphasizes,

1. A church is intentional about being a church. Members think of themselves as a church. They are committed to one another and to God (associated by covenant) in pursuing all that Scripture requires of a church.

2. A church has an identifiable membership of baptized believers in Jesus Christ.

3. A church practices the baptism of believers only by immersing them in water.

4. A church observes the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis.

5. Under the authority of the local church and its leadership, members may be assigned to carry out the ordinances.

6. A church submits to the inerrant word of God as the ultimate authority for all that it believes and does.

7. A church meets regularly for worship, prayer, the study of God’s Word, and fellowship. Members of the church minister to one another’s needs, hold each other accountable, and exercise church discipline as needed. Members encourage one another and build each other up in holiness, maturity in Christ, and love.

8. A church embraces its responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission, both locally and globally, from the beginning of its existence as a church.

9. A church is autonomous and self-governing under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of His Word.

10 A church has identifiable leaders, who are scrutinized and set apart according to the qualifications set forth in Scripture. A church recognizes two biblical offices of
church leadership: pastors/elders/overseers and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture (imb.org).

Other Contemporary Southern Baptist Voices

Writing at the same time as the development of these ecclesiological guidelines, theologians and church planters have addressed the same issues, seeking in one form or another the irreducible minimum. Although it is an oversimplification of his excellent book on the topic, John Hammett’s description of the “essence” of the church is one valuable contribution. He first argues that the church is “God’s organized, purposeful assembly.” The essence of the church is that it is an assembly of believers gathered under the authority of God and the Scriptures and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Hammett adds that this assembly is organized under biblical forms of leadership for specific biblical purposes. These ministries include teaching, fellowship, worship, service and evangelism. Closely related to this last purpose is the truth that the church must be gospel-centered; a church must consider doctrinal orthodoxy important. While he does not discount the reality of

the universal church, Hammett emphasizes the local congregation as the visible expression of the church.

Ed Stetzer lists six “essentials” that must be present in a church but may be applied in different ways. Beginning on the foundation of biblical authority, churches are identified by biblical leadership (overseers and deacons), the presence of preaching and teaching ministries, the practice of the two biblical ordinances, the existence of a covenant community, and the call to mission. “These are at least the minimalist essentials,” he writes, “and they must be applied in the church’s context” (Towns, 2007, 20, 267-68). For Stetzer, the church matters and “the biblical idea and model of church does matter,” as well (Stetzer, 2006, 2).

Surprisingly, J. D. Payne, though he argues for the necessity of finding the IEM, does not delineate that minimum in any straightforward fashion in his writings. In Missional House Churches, he does define the local church along the lines of the Baptist Faith and Message, saying that,

a local church is comprised of regenerate and baptized membership. In its covenant identity, essence, and practice, these believers are an autonomous local body
of Christ. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and God’s Word, they are self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. They are kingdom citizens living according to a kingdom ethic in covenant community with one another (Payne, 2008, 8).

Payne describes the biblical nature of the church as a new community formed by Christ and identified by its “love for the King,” “love for kingdom citizens,” and “love for non-kingdom citizens” (Payne, 2008, 26–28). He adds that “the church is primarily to be understood in simple relational terms” and the definition, function, and vitality of the church does not come from money, sophisticated organization and bureaucracy, numbers, or even a great preacher, but rather from the citizens of the kingdom, indwelled and empowered by God Himself, living according to a kingdom ethic that clearly establishes their relationship with God, each other, and the world (Payne, 2008, 37).

It is important to note that Payne, within the context of “love for the King,” affirms the importance of obedience to Christ’s commands to observe the ordinances and share the gospel. This definition serves to identify Payne’s understanding of the IEM and will be important as one considers the various versions of that minimum in Southern Baptist church planting.

A Comparison of the Various Southern Baptist Expressions of the Irreducible Ecclesiological Minimum

The first thing one notices in a comparison of these various expressions of the IEM is their similarities. The guidelines from NAMB and the IMB are based on the Baptist Faith and Message, so their basic outline is similar. Hammett, Stetzer, and Payne are all Southern Baptists and teach (or, in Stetzer’s case, have taught) in Southern Baptist institutions. It is no surprise that all five affirm the authority of Scripture, the autonomy of the local church, regenerate church membership, the necessity of the two biblical ordinances of the Lord’s Supper and believer’s baptism by immersion, and the importance of local church involvement in Great Commission mission.

More telling than the similarities, are the differences, however subtle, between the five statements, especially the missions agencies’ definitions. It is impossible to determine motiva-
tion behind the differences, but a careful analysis of both statements shows that, in terms of an irreducible minimum, one definition surpasses the other.

**Intentionality**

The International Mission Board definition of church declares in its first article that “a church is intentional about being a church” and that “members think of themselves as a church,” a notion unique among the Baptist ecclesiological statements (IMB, “Definition of Church”).

The trustees believe that unless a group understands and identifies itself as a church (as opposed to a Bible study, a mission point, or the like), it is not a church. While the NAMB statement affirms the covenant relationship between members, it does not focus on this self-identification. It is possible that the two are closely related, but the IMB definition recognizes that a church is not a church just because a missionary calls it a church. This element precludes a group of Christians gathered, for example, at a Promise Keepers conference from calling themselves a church.

Closely related to the intentionality and self-identification of a church is the IMB statement declaring that a church has an “identifiable” membership. The NAMB statement sets no such criteria. Baptism appears to be the mark of this identification in the former statement. Stan Norman, in his book expanding on the NAMB guidelines, confirms that “Baptists regard baptism as the initiatory rite into membership of the church,” while Hammett calls the ordinance the “rite of commitment” to Christ and the church (Norman, 2005, 131). This public identification with the Body of Christ is an important mark of the church.

**Lay Administration of the Ordinances**

All Baptist statements of faith affirm the celebration of the two ordinances of believer’s baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The IMB definition of church adds an interesting criterion by freeing the laity to administer those ordinances under the authority of the local church. The NAMB guidelines do not address the administration of the ordinances, though Norman does write elsewhere that the ordinances are local church practices as opposed to individual Christian responsibilities (Norman, 2005, 153-55). Both statements agree on this local church authority over the administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

One possible reason for the explicit statement on this issue in the IMB definition is the role of missionaries on the inter-
national field. Many men and women serve in places where there is not yet any church in existence, so when the need for baptism arises, there is no pastor or local church available to administer the baptism. Missionaries may, under the authority of their local church, perform baptisms until a local church exists on the field. This situation may be less than ideal, but it is necessary to address. Hammett affirms that the ideal of proper church order prescribes that church officers administer the ordinances, “the church can designate whomever it chooses . . ., whether that person is ordained or not” (Hammett 261).

In his recent treatment of ecclesiology, Mark Dever emphasizes the proper recipient of the ordinances, but not the administrator (Dever, 2007, 783-91).

“Self-Governing” versus “Congregational Polity”

On the issue of polity, the IMB statement is more broad than the NAMB guidelines. In the guidelines, Norman clarifies that the polity of a church “must embody democratic processes,” a statement that lines up more closely with the Baptist Faith and Message than the IMB definition (Norman, 2005, 17). The difference may be subtle, in that the IMB definition does not deny the possibility of such a church structure, but it is significant nonetheless. Norman insists on democratic processes as the purest form of congregationalism, while Hammett is slightly less stringent. The key to understanding both statements, however, is that they equally support congregational self-government, however that may look in each particular context. The NAMB guideline on “democratic processes” is probably the most culturally specific of any of the statements studied in this paper.

Other Differences

Other differences in the IMB and NAMB statements are generally semantic or differences in emphasis. For example, the NAMB guideline refers to “pastors,” while the IMB definition speaks of “pastors/elders/oversers.” One would be reading too much into the statements to see a significant distinction here. Also, the NAMB “summary” of its guidelines, which serves as something of a “checklist” for the characteristics of a biblical church excludes a mention of the purposes or mission of the church, though Norman refers to both in the body of the document. Finally, the NAMB summary does include a statement on the universal church while the IMB definition does not. Such a statement does seem somewhat out of place consid-
ering that both documents are essentially addressing the marks of the local church.

**Conclusions: The Continuing Search for the IEM**

This comparison of the North American Mission Board and International Mission Board guidelines for defining “church” shows one thing: the Southern Baptist search for the irreducible ecclesiological minimum is engaged but not yet complete. If, as Payne seems to argue, simplicity is an important characteristic of the IEM, then the IMB definition is the best attempt thus far, as it allows the most room for contextualization. Even then it seems that much of the IMB definition is a reaction to particular situations rather than a statement of a true minimum.

Still, this study raises as many questions as it potentially answers. What is the true minimum? Are the elements unique to Baptist doctrine truly necessary for a church to be a church? At what point does a church become a church, or the converse, at what point does a church cease being a church? Must all elements of the definition be present at all times, or can some, such as the presence of biblical officers, be missing and the church remain a church?

These are not simple questions, and adequate answers will require much theological and missiological reflection. Current debates in Southern Baptist circles related to the structure of biblical leadership are one example. The question is what is essential and what is application.

Perhaps Stetzer’s six essentials outlined above are the best available outline of the IEM. I might also suggest that the IEM is embodied in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20. There, Jesus commanded the Apostles (and the church), to make disciples, teach, baptize, and obey all that He taught, ultimately under His authority and power. The remainder of the New Testament teaching on the marks of the church reflects the historical application and development of those principles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The only significant aspect of biblical ecclesiology not explicitly mentioned in the Great Commission is leadership. But Jesus’ example in His call and preparation of the apostles, when coupled with the Acts account of the earliest days of the church, makes Jesus’ call to “teach all that I have commanded you” an adequate and flexible delineation of leadership.

If the greatest challenge to church planting today is a problem of ecclesiology, then the
attempts at finding the irreducible ecclesiological minimum described in this paper are an encouraging start. As God-called church planters and strategists contextualize the gospel in all cultures and among all peoples, faithfulness to the gospel and the inspired Scriptures will demand that they start congregations that reflect God’s plan for Christ’s body. Only then will Southern Baptists and believers of all backgrounds truly fulfill the call to make disciples.

**SOURCES**

**Books**


**Articles**


Jeff Walters is a PhD candidate and Instructor of Missions at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he also works with the Center for Urban Ministry Training. Prior to serving at Southern, Walters was a church planting strategist in Western Europe with the International Mission Board.
Spiritual warfare has leapt to the forefront as an area of religious interest in this millennium; this revival of interest matters because spiritual warfare is both a biblical truth and an ongoing struggle for Christians.

I was teaching on spiritual warfare and temptation during a Lordship Revival Conference (a term I use in my preaching ministry), and I commented that Satan will establish a sinful stronghold in one’s life little by little—one step at a time. Afterwards, a father approached me and shared his story. He said that his son became involved in Internet pornography, which later led to child molestation, and eventually to prison. The father said that when his son gets out of prison, he will no longer be able to visit his home, because he still has younger children. In addition, he will be forced to live in a certain area of the city. The consequences of his sin demonstrate that the wages of sin is truly death.

The Christian life is a battle. Paul describes it as a war for which believers need to be prepared, “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Eph. 6:11—All Scripture is taken from the NIV). This battle takes place in the mind—in our thought life.

First Thessalonians 5:23-24 teaches that man is composed of spirit, soul, and body. Each of these pertains to spiritual warfare.

1. The Body
   The body houses our soul and spirit. Upon salvation, the body becomes a temple of God. We have the following five senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch,
and taste. Satan often attacks us through these five senses: It smells good, so let's over-eat; she looks good, so let's lust, etc.

2. The Soul
   The soul is comprised of our mind, will, and emotions. All temptation happens in our mind. Whoever controls our mind controls us. We are in a spiritual war. The battle takes place in the mind, and is all about our thought life.

3. The Spirit
   The Spirit is that part that communicates with God. It will live for eternity. Of course, a demon cannot be in the spirit of a Christian when Jesus resides. Some debate whether a demon can be in another part—the body or the soul—of a Christian. Merrill Unger argued that a demon could reside in a Christian. The jury is still out on this issue. We do know that Satan is powerful even in a believer’s life. The first two chapters of Job show what the devil might do in a Christian’s life, but they also reveal that the devil can only do what he does with God's permission.

   **TEMPTATION**

   What is temptation? Pastor Peter Lord of Titusville, Florida, gave the following definition—while speaking to missionaries in Brazil: temptation is seeking to fulfill a God given desire in a God forbidden way. For example, sex is a God given desire, but adultery is fulfilling this desire in a God-forbidden way. God has given us all a will. Thus, we have the ability to choose right from wrong.

   In 1 Corinthians 10:13, God promises that we will not face any temptation that we are not able to bear, and He will provide a way out so that we can stand up under it. James says, "When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.” (James 1:13-14).

   Once I was doing some church planting training in Mexico. In Mexico, they have genuine bullfights. Bullfights have four key components: the Matador, the bull, the red cape, and the sword. These components can easily portray man's battle against Satan and temptation. Within this context, the bull represents mankind, the matador stands for Satan, and the red cape represents temptation. When the matador waves the red cape, he is tempting the bull to charge. This is what happens when Satan tempts us to sin. We can choose to turn away by an act of our own free will or charge the red cape.
Satan may wave it several times. Then if we, on our own volition, decide to charge the red cape, we commit a sin. However, behind the red cape is a sword. The Bible says, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23a). All sin (unless repented of) leads to the death of something. It may be the death of one’s joy, peace, assurance of eternal security, or eternal death for an unbeliever.

**STRONGHOLDS**

A stronghold starts with a thought that leads to a choice. A choice leads to an act. An act repeated leads to a habit. A sinful habit leads to a stronghold which Satan establishes as a foothold in some area of a person’s life. It is that area of his life in which a believer will not have victory!

**THE SOURCE OF STRONGHOLDS**

General Albert Wedemeyer was a top military strategist during World War II. He once told of attending the German War College in the late 1930s. While there, he learned from the very same men he would later fight against. He said, “The Germans stressed the campaigns of Fredrick the Great, Napoleon, Caesar, Alexander, and Philip of Macedon.”

He said that when they studied a campaign of Frederick the Great or Napoleon, they generally went to the area where the battle was actually fought. General Wedemeyer wrote, “The military history instructor reviewed the situation, analyzed dispositions and tactical decisions, and injected interesting anecdotes.”

If we are to understand the warfare we are in, we must know the area where battles are being fought. There are three basic battlefields.

1. **The World**
   First John 2:15 says, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.” That is the world system. Satan has invaded our culture with anti-Christian ideas and thoughts. He has done this through the media, the arts, books, and education.

2. **The Flesh**
   The term “flesh” comes from the Greek word, “sarx.” It can mean the skin that covers our bones. Sometimes it is used to speak of the entire body, as in Acts 2:26, “Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body (flesh) also will rest in hope.” In the area of spiritual warfare, however, the word “flesh” refers to our old sinful nature. No one had to
teach us “how to” sin. We just grew up and did it. We are sinners by nature, and we are sinners by choice. This sin nature is in rebellion against God. It is self-centered and desires to be in control (Romans 7:14-24 and 8:5-9).

3. The Devil
Satan’s main focus is to exert his power against believers and unbelievers. The Apostle John says, “The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” (1 John 3:8). The Bible gives many names for him: Angel of light, Accuser, Prince, Ruler of this world, and Satan. Satan is the prince of this world. Ephesians 2:2a says that before we were saved we “in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air.”

**TYPES OF STRONGHOLDS**

Satan’s strongholds occur in many different ways:

Bitterness—Bitterness is harboring anger toward someone. Heb. 12:15 identifies bitterness as a root sin.

Lust—This is an out of control thought life.

Immorality—From the word “porneia,” it means all sexual intercourse outside of marriage.

Fear—It’s the what if’s of life.

Fear of death.

Fear of rejection—This is always feeling you are being judged.

Fear of failure.

Jealousy, lying, gossip, addictions, insecurity, idolatry, sorcery, drunkenness, envying, doubts, worry, laziness, greed, are tools of Satan.

Guilt—not being able to forgive yourself of past sins is evidence of guilt.

Unforgiveness—not being able to let go and forgive someone of what he said or did to you, even when you want to do so.

Pride—Pride can lock a man or woman up as though he were in a straightjacket; no one can touch him, and he can touch no one else. It can erect a barrier between people who live together under the same roof. Husbands will not speak to their wives; wives shut their husbands out of their lives. They will not communicate because of an impassable gulf, or chasm, created by pride. Pride remains in control of that individual, and all efforts to break it down are resisted. You cannot destroy it that way. Parents are isolated from their children, and children from
parents, by gulfs of non-communication.

**DECEIT**

One of the major manifestations of the flesh is deceit. Deceit is a major weapon Satan uses in spiritual warfare. Jeremiah 17: 9a says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”

The Hebrew word “’aqob” is deceitful and is translated in other passages as “stained” (Hos. 6:8) and “rough ground” (Isa. 40:4). The root word occurs in Gen. 3:15 in the word for “heel” where Satan would attack Eve’s messianic offspring (Ps. 41:9; 89:51). Deceitfulness is said to be characteristic of Satan and his followers (John 8:44). The name Jacob, the great deceiver, is also from this same root word (Gen. 25:26, 27:36).

The human heart has an unlimited capacity for wickedness and deceit (Mark 7:21-23). The only remedy is a radical change, the new birth in Christ (John 3:7 and 2 Cor. 5:17).

Satan uses religion to bind and deceive mankind in spiritual strongholds, because God created us with a desire to worship someone greater than ourselves. Every religion he has created depends on one’s own good works to gain access to heaven. He uses these lies to bind people in the darkness of strongholds.

There are several key “lies” which Satan uses to deceive and trap people today:

**Lie #1: Hinduism**

Recently, my wife, Barbara, and I were in West Bengal, India. Hinduism acknowledges over 300 million gods. In the state of West Bengal, the main god is Cali. Cali is called the destroyer. She is out to destroy evil to make space for good. The people live in fear of Cali and her demons. They give gifts in order to appease her so she won’t destroy them. In Calcutta, they sacrifice goats every day, not for sin, but to appease the god Cali.

Barbara and I conduct training in evangelism, making disciples, and church planting. Recently during our training in West Bengal, a mother and her two daughters were in attendance. One daughter was sixteen and the other was about eight years of age.

The mother was of the Brahmin caste, the highest caste in India. She was full of joy as she shared her Christian testimony. Just in the last few months, she was invited to an evangelistic Bible study. As she studied the Word of God, the Holy Spirit was able to reveal to her that Cali was not a god, and that Jesus had died to set her free from bondage to sin. She shared her a powerful testimony, “For nineteen years I worshipped Cali.”
For nineteen years she walked in darkness. How then did she come to see the truth? Only through the work of the Holy Spirit was the truth revealed to her.

How do we access the Holy Spirit to ask for Him to do His work? We must go to the Father in prayer to ask for our eyes to be fully opened to the truth.

Lie #2: Islam

Recently I was preaching a Lordship Revival Conference in Virginia. While there my wife and I met a beautiful young lady named Susan (not her real name). She was raised in a very strong and committed Muslim family. Her father and mother said their prayers five times a day. She was not allowed much of a social life outside her home. She was well protected. She was taught that she could eat with the Jews but not sleep at their house, for they might kill her. She could sleep at the Christians’ home but not eat with them for fear they would give her pork. Even though she had heard about Muhammad and Islam her entire life, she had her doubts.

When she went to the university, she had a Catholic roommate. With this roommate, she attended a Christian worship service for the first time. Although she attended, she did not understand anything going on in that service, so it had no meaning to her. She said, “They all drank from the same cup, and that was weird to me.” She continued searching for God in many ways and studied various religions. She was a seeker.

She met a young man who was a Christian, and he took her to a Bible-believing Baptist church. The pastor gave her a Bible. One day she was reading Ephesians 4:31-32 which says, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

When she read this, these were her thoughts, “God forgave me! That was a foreign concept. My concept was that God has a scale, and He weighs my sin on it. So, I did good things, because I had to, not because I wanted to. I would get points in my favor by doing good.” She began attending church and was baptized six months after God illuminated that verse in her life.

She said, “When I was baptized it felt like a light shining everywhere. I was excited. I had a pure passion about Christ and a complete joy that has never left me.”

What was the key to her conversion? It was the Word of God. “The Holy Spirit took the Word of God and applied it to my life,” she said.

How did she come to see the truth? The Holy Spirit revealed
truth to her. How do we access the Holy Spirit to ask for Him to do His work? Prayer.

Lie #3: Animism

I often do ministry in East Africa where the principle religion is Animism. People in Animism pray to their ancestors hoping that they will intervene in their lives and bless them. They also seek out witch doctors for healing and advice, and as a result, witch doctors possess great power among the people.

During the summer of 2010, we had some volunteers there doing leadership training and open air meetings. On the first day of the first week, forty-one people came forward interested in seeking Christ. After praying to give their lives to Jesus, they all took off their fetishes and handed them over to the pastors. The second week, several demon-possessed people gave their lives to Jesus. As a result, they were freed from the rule of the demons in their lives.

The third week, a demon-possessed witch doctor came to the open air meeting. By the grace of God, the Holy Spirit revealed truth to her, and she gave her life to Jesus. The next day she came to the open air meeting and brought all of her fetishes and burned them before the entire crowd. She then began studying the evangelistic Bible study, Good News, by Charles Brock with the members of the local church.

How did she come to see the truth? The Holy Spirit revealed truth to her. How do we access the Holy Spirit to ask for Him to do His work? Prayer.

Lie #4: Buddhism

Millions are blinded by the teachings of Buddha, a man who lived and died. Buddha taught that misery in life comes from unmet desires, so the way to have peace is simply to remove all desires. A good Buddhist tries to live by the teachings of Buddha, so that one day he or she will go to Nirvana. Nirvana is a place absent of desire, a place of nothingness. Buddhists live caught in a web of rituals, constantly praying to idols who cannot hear, cannot see, cannot touch, cannot feel, and cannot heal.

Bhutan is a Buddhist country where it is absolutely illegal to share Jesus. If one is caught, he can be put in jail, and he will lose his job. One young man shared his conversion story. He was arrested for being a Christian and put in a “hot box” till he died. He asked to go to the toilet. And the guard had mercy. Once inside, he crawled through a large pipe through filth and sewage for miles until he fell into the river. He walked across the mountains until he reached the nation of Nepal.
and was taken in by Christians. Today, he is a strong leader training Bhutanese house church leaders.

In our *Pioneer Evangelism* Church Planting training, we teach people that the Holy Spirit is always working in the hearts of lost people to draw them to Christ. In Luke 10:7, Jesus told His disciples to stay in those homes where they found people of peace.

So our job is to find those in whom the Holy Spirit is working and present truth, rather than pushing ourselves on people and forcing them into a decision. So how do we find those people seeking peace? We use questions to find them. These are questions that you can use:

- May I ask you a spiritual question?
- What is your understanding of Creator God?
- Would you like to know Creator God personally?
- May I share a story with you about Creator God?

If they say yes you have an open door to teach the Bible to them. In Cambodia, we sent out students to ask the questions and share the story of Jesus. When everyone came back, they shared the responses given to the above questions. The overwhelming response was that they were tired of praying to a statue that could not hear and could not answer their prayers. We visited a man in his home, and after we shared with him he thanked us for coming. He said, “Thank you for coming all this way to tell me about Jesus. No one has ever told me this before.”

How did he come to see the truth? The Holy Spirit revealed truth to him. How do we access the Holy Spirit to ask for Him to do His work? Prayer.

**Lie #5: Materialism/Atheism**

Another lie that Satan uses to deceive people is to convince them that money and successes are the ways to happiness. In a world where there is so much wealth, many become agnostic. Man believes that he can make it on his own, so he does not need God. I am afraid that Satan lulls the church into complacency. When we become complacent we live as though there is no spiritual war. We live oblivious to the fact that Satan and his demons are out to kill and destroy. His greatest weapon against us is complacency.

If we live as if there is no war, we sit on the sidelines, and we are not in the battle. Worse yet, Satan strips us of using the one weapon we have that can overcome him: prayer.

When we do not pray, and we do not live under the control of the Holy Spirit, we are living by our own flesh. Our flesh is no match for Satan and his demons.
CHRIST IS A GOOD STRONGHOLD

The Bible teaches there is a good stronghold as well: 2 Samuel 22:2-3, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer, my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, He is my Stronghold, my refuge and my savior.” The psalmist tells us in Psalm 18:2, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer, my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” In Psalm 27:1 he says, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is my stronghold of my life.” Again in Psalm 62:2 he says, “Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.”

JESUS

God is an all powerful God. He is sovereign and reigns over the entire universe. He has not lost control of His world. Through Jesus Christ’s death on the cross, He defeated the enemy-Satan, the powers of darkness, sin, and death. In 1 Peter 3:22 the Bible says that Jesus “who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand, with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” Jesus rules and reigns!

There is no power, or demon on earth or in hell that has power over Jesus Christ, so we are not to fear Satan or his demons. Ephesians 1:22 says that “And God placed all things under his feet.” His death on the cross and His resurrection disarmed all the demons of hell. Colossians 2:15 says that Christ has “disarmed principalities and powers. He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.”

In the case of people who are demon-possessed, casting out demons is one means of accomplishing His purpose to demonstrate that Christ truly reigns in the Kingdom of God. Matthew 12:28 says, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

Hebrews 2:14 says that through His (Christ’s) death He “so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.” This is what Christ will do when one’s sinful stronghold is replaced by the Stronghold of Christ. Satan is a defeated enemy.

There are GOOD strongholds and there are BAD strongholds. Christ is the Good Stronghold! Christ can and will deliver you from the bad strongholds of life. That is great news!
OVERCOMING STRONGHOLDS

If the person in bondage is not a Christian, the first step is to surrender one’s life to Christ as Lord. Here are six key steps one can take to overcome a stronghold, if one has already accepted Christ as Lord and Savior.

1. Recognize the strongholds within your life. The first step is to be honest with yourself and God. Ask God to reveal every stronghold in your life. Then confess to God that you have allowed one or more strongholds into your life. They have you captive. Be very specific, not general.

2. Repent—This means “to change your mind about these strongholds.” We are to ask God for forgiveness, and we should ask him to change us. You no longer want to live under them and with them in your life. Turn to Christ. He is your deliverer. If not, you will be rendered totally useless before God (Jeremiah 6:9-30). We see a perfect picture of how a people of God refused to admit their strongholds and repent.

3. Realize your position in Christ—you are to submit to the control of the Holy Spirit. Colossians 2:9-10 says, “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.” He lives in you by means of the Holy Spirit. So, you place yourself and this stronghold under the authority of the Holy Spirit. Paul says in Romans 8:9 that you are not controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit (Holy Spirit) if the Spirit of God lives in you. The key is to be filled or controlled by the Holy Spirit of God. Satan is continually allowed to keep men and women in bondage by his lies and deceit. So, how do we fight the war and counter the deceit that Satan has spread in so many ways?

What can we do to make an eternal difference in the lives of the lost? PRAY! Pray that the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of the lost to draw them to Christ. Pray specifically that the Holy Spirit will bring someone into their lives that will share God’s word. Pray that by His Word the Holy Spirit will convict them of sin and convince them of truth. Pray the same for family, friends, and colleagues at work and be willing to be used by the Holy Spirit to share the truth with them. Pray for your missionaries that you send out and get information from them about praying for their work.
For some we may be the only one to stand in the gap for the lost to escape hell and live with Jesus eternally.

4. Reject sinful thoughts. When Satan pursues you with a sinful thought say, “In the name of Jesus, I reject that thought.”

5. Replace sinful thoughts with God’s Word. This is what Jesus did when He was tempted. He quoted the Word of God. Find a verse of Scripture that deals with your issue. When you are tempted, repeat it back to Satan (Matt. 4). Genuine believers who continue to doubt their salvation should replace those doubts with truth. First John 5:12a says, “Whoever has the Son has life.” Thus, if you have Jesus in your life you are saved. The Word of God is a powerful weapon against Satan and his fiery darts.

6. Resist Satan continually. If you resist Satan, the stronghold will weaken, until finally someday, it will be just gone out of your life. James 4:7 says, “Submit yourself, then to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” He says two things in this verse: (1) Submit yourself to God. Submit means to be under the authority of Christ, the Lordship of Christ. That means the Holy Spirit who lives in you will be your Guide, your Strength, your Leader. Ephesians 5:18 says to be filled or controlled by the Holy Spirit. (2) Resist the devil. Keep repeating that verse God gave you about your issue. The stronghold will eventually break, and you WILL have victory!

CONCLUSION

Satan is a formidable foe! He is at work in our lives and in our churches in the West just like he is in the Third World. We must become more aware of him and of his tactics. He is also a defeated foe! We have the victory over Satan if we will learn how to claim this sure victory.

Dr. Wade Akins is currently serving with Pioneer Missions based in Jackson, TN, teaching Pioneer Evangelism Training world wide. He is also an Adjunct Missions Professor at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Cordova, TN, and Union University in Jackson, TN.
**MissionShift** brings multiple perspectives to bear on three of the most crucial missiological issues of our day. Whereas most texts, even edited volumes, typically advocate a single position or strategic view, **MissionShift** differs most notably in its roundtable discussion approach to the topics addressed: global missions issues in the third millennium. The book, edited by one of the most respected missiological authorities of our generation, David Hesselgrave, and one of our most prominent contemporary missiologists, Ed Stetzer, tackles the core topics of defining mission, contextualization, and the future of evangelicals in mission. The key elements of the text are the three anchor essays that cover the book’s core topics addressing missions’ past, present, and future. These essays are written by well-known missiologists within each of these disciplines, and serve as the springboard for subsequent responses by other missiologists and theologians comprising the remainder of the book.

The first essay, written by Charles Van Engen, tackles the topic of defining and describing “mission” in the context of the church. Taking a largely historical perspective, Van Engen’s essay most notably affirms the value in the missional church movement, which provides much of the fodder for the respondents. Establishing a format maintained throughout the text, five missiologists and theologians respond to Van Engen’s essay with varying degrees of support. This examination of the definition and description of mission and the missional church movement results in a multifaceted examination of the topic with healthy debate and differing opinions. The second essay follows in like manner, this time by the late and great Paul Hiebert in one of his final written works, submitted just before his death. Hiebert tackles a contemporary controversial topic in his examination of contextualization. Hiebert’s concluding call to critical contextualization is coupled with an articulation of the call for a contextualized hermeneutic. As with each of the other two articles, multiple respondents follow Hiebert’s contribution, engaging his essay with their own perspectives. With responses from scholars as varied as Darrell
Whiteman and Norman Geisler, and issues ranging from insider movements to orality to apologetics all interact with Hiebert’s essay, resulting in a robust and complex discussion. Finally, the third topic covered is the future of evangelical missions. Written by Ralph Winter not long before his death, the essay captures a historical perspective on missions while offering a strong call to return to a holistic approach to social ministries. In Winter’s essay, the responses find distinction from those to the previous essays. The respondents did not feel Winter addressed the core topic of the future of missions and in response tackled the topic themselves. This section includes frank discussion of Winter’s approach as well as the informed opinion of several missiologists revealing their varied perspectives on the future of evangelicals in missions. The book concludes with an essay by David Hesselgrave providing historical insights into the history and development of evangelical missions, as we know it, providing key insights for seeing down the missions road we are traveling.

MissionShift is a helpful text that provides a fascinating glimpse into differing perspectives on some of the most complex issues of our day. While the discussions centered on defining missions and the future of missions are helpful, the examination of approaches to contextualization is especially significant and provocative. Ed Stetzer’s responses to each section are especially helpful for providing a sense of resolution and cohesion, preventing the sort of chaos that could result with this multi-perspective format. One minor criticism of the text, however, is that the liberties Dr. Winter took with his topic skewed the content of the final section, resulting in multiple offerings of perspectives on the future of evangelicals in missions, rather than multiple contributors engaging with the essayists single perspective. Even so, the contributions on the future were helpful and insightful.

Ultimately, MissionShift’s key contributions to the discipline of missiology are two-fold: First, the multi-perspective format allows a helpful overview to informed opinions on crucial issues rather than an agenda driven approach that sets up and destroys all differing views. Second, the section on contextualization provides a thoroughly diverse examination of one of the most vigorously debated subjects of our day. The insights offered into the reasoning of diverse perspectives are beneficial for a thorough understanding of the origin, legitimacy, and limits of contextualization. Hesselgrave and Stetzer should be commended for assembling this lineup of essayists and respondents, who together with the framework the editors created, bring experience and wisdom to bear on issues of great significance. You will want to read this volume for its multifaceted presentation of missions’ past, present, and future found in the arguments and reflections of some of today’s leading missiologists.

Reviewed by Rusty Keltner, MDIV and PhD Student

Through the preaching and teaching of David Platt, the Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, AL has done some extraordinary work. *Radical* contains many of the ideas Platt taught this congregation to move them to a new level of action. Will the ideas presented in this book work in other churches, especially the smaller church? What about the rural congregation that I lead which averages less than one hundred people in attendance? Brook Hills gave away over $500,000; my congregation’s ten-year budget would barely be this much. What would the ideas presented in this book look like on a much smaller level? Thoughts like these filled my head as I read *Radical*.

Platt confronted the American Church as he examined the negative influence of culture on church. He attempted to prove that “satisfaction in our lives and success in the church are not found in what our culture deems most important but in radical abandonment to Jesus.” For eight chapters, the pastor compared and contrasted self-centered American Christianity to the self-denying Christianity found in the teachings of Jesus and throughout the New Testament. In almost every chapter, Platt used at least one story of Christians in another part of the world and examples from his own faith family to show how believers were fulfilling Jesus’ command to take up their cross and follow Him.

In order to show what self-abandoning Christianity looks like, the author began with an examination of the gospel. Platt challenged readers with the biblical concepts of God, man, and salvation. If this foundation is not correct, then one’s entire premise of Christianity will be off. One of the greatest challenges to self-denying Christianity is trusting in God’s power. Chapter three dealt with this issue as Platt urged believers to be radically dependent on God. He continued his argument by examining God’s purpose for creation and asserting God’s desire to be glorified. Throughout this book, the concept of having a missional mindset was advocated. The idea of making disciples became an essential part of Platt’s argument, and the last half of the book continually came back to this theme. He used disciple making as a platform to address one of the biggest roadblocks to American Christianity; our wealth. After urging Christians to use their possessions to spread the gospel, Platt examined the other costs of Great Commission living. He concluded the book with a one-year challenge called the radical experiment.

The radical experiment contained five major components. The first two were to pray for the entire world and read the entire Bible. The last three aspects involved sacrificing money for a specific purpose, spending time in another context, and committing oneself to a multiplying community for life. Each of these commitments builds on the other, and the result is a transformed life lived out through the community of faith.

One of the strengths of this book is Platt’s easy-to-read style. He wrote so the average person in the average church could read and comprehend what
was being said. The use of Scripture was adequate to back his points, and the stories that he shared were on point and added to the overall value of the book.

Christianity by its very nature is radical. In America, it is hard to find believers who have made the complete transformation that Jesus called for in the New Testament. Platt never suggested that the radical experiment was about some new way to live out Christianity; however, to the average American Christian, the ideas in this book may seem extreme or radical. *Radical* is an attempt at a wake up call. The challenge of being believers that mirror the ideas found throughout Scripture is not just for the people at Brook Hills but also for all who bear the name Christian. Platt is not just another mega church pastor selling mega church ideas; he is a pastor teaching ideas that all pastors should teach. The idea of self-abandoned Christianity is for a smaller church with limited resources like the one I pastor, it is for the mega church with abundant resources, and it is for every church in between.


Reviewed by Jim Collier, MDIV and PhD Student

Affiliated with both the Journey Church in St. Louis as lead pastor and the Acts 29 Church Planting Network as vice president, Darrin Patrick employed his knowledge of church planting in his first published offering entitled *Church Planter*. The mention of both Journey Church and Acts 29 may repel some, but Patrick's practice of allowing Scripture to develop his arguments should keep the most conservative observer engaged.

Not only did the author prove to be a capable student of Scripture, but he also demonstrated his ability to exegete his culture. Recognizing that the American culture produces Ban (his hybrid word between boy and man for the twenty- or thirty-something who refuses to grow up) instead of men, Patrick challenged the men of his audience to become “God’s man who is being transformed by God’s gospel message and is wholeheartedly pursuing God’s mission.” This challenge shaped his work as Patrick explored the biblical standard for the man, the message, and the mission.

Patrick opened with a study of the man God calls to plant a church. He ensured his readers first understood that the church planter had to be regenerate—a “rescued man” in his words. He then discussed the call and the confirmations necessary to discern God’s calling. The bulk of his exploration of the man flowed from his chapter on, “A Qualified Man,” as Patrick dissected 1 Timothy 3 regarding the qualifications of an overseer. This examination was steady and rooted in a capable handling of the passage. The only questionable exposition rested in his neglect of the topic of divorce and his allowance for the possibility of alcohol consumption for God’s man. Even with these two problematic readings present, the entirety of the section presented a strong case for the biblical qualifications of the overseer.
The author continued by investigating the message of the church planter. This section emerged as the strongest of the book. He explained each facet of the message of the gospel, remaining biblical while exposing its relevance to the postmodern culture. He demonstrated Christ’s centrality to the Bible and by extension, to the message of the preacher. Patrick spent two chapters on sin and the power of the gospel message to expose it. His chapter on idolatry reminded the reader to allow the Bible to attack the root of sin and not just the fruit of sin. Patrick saturated each of these facets of the message with grace, demonstrating that only Christ saves sinners and produces any lasting changes in them.

Patrick finished his challenge by surveying the mission of the church in culture. This overview of the mission served to remind the reader of God’s plan for the church. While not stating anything new or revolutionary, Patrick joined several concepts together to sharpen the focus on the planter’s purpose. Driven by compassion, he argued that Jesus’ goal was to seek and to save the lost, and that the church planter should join Him in that goal. For those who are suspicious of Patrick’s zeal for the lost in light of his reformed theology, he added, “We are desperate in our desire to share the gospel with all peoples so that they may be saved.” This section also contained a defense of contextualization, which seeks to deliver the gospel message to the target culture in a way that communicates without losing the truth of the message.

In Church Planter, Darrin Patrick accomplished his goal of challenging the next generation of young men to be diligent about God’s call and purpose. Neither arrogant nor flippant, his approach proved to be both sobering and encouraging. The only disappointment encountered by the reviewer was the specific lack of emphasis on church planting. The book worked well for pastor and missionary alike, but it did not add to the church planting discussion. Overall, however, Patrick’s overview of the man of God proved to be worth the effort, and the student of pastoral ministries will find it serves him well.


Reviewed by Ray Meadows, MDIV and PhD Student

Across denominations, Christian churches are in a state of decline. Missiologists, church planters, and erstwhile ministry professionals constantly debate the cause and cure for the current predicament. Alan Hirsch presented his take on the issues in the text under review. He argued for the urgent need of a paradigm shift to a missional ecclesiology. The author used his own personal experiences as a pastor, church planter, and denominational leader, along with an examination of the early New Testament church and the modern Jesus movement found in the underground churches of China to develop his position. It is the author’s premise that churches embrace what he termed, “missional DNA” (mDNA) and “Apostolic Genius” for the purpose of reengaging and arousing the innate power of the Holy Spirit in the church to reach a new generation for Christ.
Hirsch wrote his text for the general reader interested in church planting, missional strategy, and thinking from an emerging church perspective. The aim of Forgotten Ways is to provoke and challenge the reader to consider a more radical expression of church in the postmodern, twenty-first century. It is not an overtly scholarly work, but it includes a number of footnotes and sources, an addendum with an additional chapter, and a glossary. Though written for a general audience, the author explored several fields of research such as organizational theory, biological systems, and chaos theory. This caused the text to become overly technical at times. More use of footnotes and sources would have aided the text in this regard.

What exactly is “Apostolic Genius?” It is the author's term to describe the built-in life-force and guiding mechanism of God’s people. It is what drives movements of Jesus throughout the ages. It includes five components: missional-incarnational impulse, apostolic environment, disciple making, organic systems, and **communitas** (a term used to describe the dynamics of a Christian community which leads to a call to action in common mission) which make up what he termed “missional DNA” (mDNA). Missional DNA functions just like DNA in a living organism. It is found in all living organisms (Hirsch meant Christian communities or churches), it codes genetic information for transmission to offspring (passed on to the planted churches), is self-replicating (not dependent on organizational structure), and it carries vital information for healthy reproduction. The entire text is focused on explaining and justifying these propositions. The limits of space constrain a proper analysis at this time, but the following positives and problems are taken from the text.

There are a number of positions taken by the author in this text in which a conservative evangelical, missions focused, Bible student can agree. For instance, he sought a missiology for today's context; one that could spark a genuine Jesus movement. The author presented valid arguments against western churches. They have lost the art of discipleship, have become “consumer oriented,” and are unable to quickly and consistently reproduce the mega church model. Many writers, including conservative, liberal, as well as postmodernist/emergent have identified the inward focus of many churches as problematic. He argued for the centrality of Jesus, especially Jesus as Lord. Additionally, he noted the problem of consumerism. He stated his belief emphatically that consumerist lifestyles lead to idolatry. He emphasized the need for an incarnational lifestyle for all believers. This meant to live Christ before the lost. Finally, he acknowledged the susceptibility of emergent/postmodern communities to universalism and relativism.

Conversely, there were several problematic positions taken in the text. Only a few will be discussed here. First, the author took the position of many emergent writers in presenting a classic “straw man” argument. His primary complaint was against “Christendom,” the hierarchal state church which formed during the time of Constantine. This ecclesiology is indicative of an Episcopal form of church government, and most conservative evangelicals, especially Baptists, agree this is bad theology and practice. Yet Hirsch based most of his criticism against this paradigm and grouped all non-emerging churches into this same category. Additionally, Hirsch and other emergent writers often claim the underlying ecclesiological issues of the church come from the influence of Greek philosophy. However, the author does not supply
the reader any source material for his claim. Baptists and other conservative evangelicals have always claimed the Bible and what it says in its grammatical and historical context as a guide and filter for belief and practice. This is why any change in paradigm is viewed skeptically, unless it is clearly in line with a biblical ecclesiology. A third issue Bible believing Baptists and other evangelicals will have with the text included the author’s dependence on evolutionary theory and language. The idea presented: chaos brings change or adaption to situations, thus the Christian should accept the paradigm shift from modern thinking to postmodern. From chaos, a new, more relevant Christian community will emerge. Is it natural selection for ecclesiology?

Hirsch, like many postmodern, emergent writers should be commended for his desire to reach the lost, especially those who reject traditional methodologies. However, like most emergent writers, Hirsch’s new ecclesiology barely resembled a biblical, New Testament expression of the church. He sought models from biology and science, organizational theory, and leadership methods, with little emphasis on a true biblical model. Those who read this text should do so with great discernment.


Reviewed by Jackson Spungen PhD student and Missionary to East Asia

David M. Sills is Professor of Christian Missions and Cultural Anthropology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Sills joined the faculty of Southern Seminary after serving as a missionary in Ecuador. In addition to *Reaching and Teaching*, Dr. Sills wrote *The Missionary Call* and two books about the Quichua Indians. He holds a PhD and a DMIN in Missions degrees. Dr. Sills and his wife Mary, have two grown children.

*Reaching and Teaching* represents both sound scholarship and practical experience. It is written from the perspective of one who has served cross culturally. The greatest strength of the book is Sills writes from the viewpoint of a practitioner. The insights within this book are relevant to modern missions.

Sills devoted ten chapters addressing contemporary issues related to evangelism and discipleship. Following each chapter is a suggested reading list for the topic discussed. Extensive footnotes and bibliographic citations give the reader further resources for study. The International Mission Board statement on ecclesiology is located in the appendix.

The premise of *Reaching and Teaching* is taken from Matthew 28:19-20 where Jesus said to go and make disciples. Disciples are not made until they are taught “to observe all that He commanded.” Sills wrote, “Discipleship, leadership training, and pastoral preparation are unfortunately relegated to a lower level of ministry that is not really considered missions” (12). The work of missions is incomplete without taking the time to teach new converts the Bible and train leaders who train leaders. Sills explained that missionaries must take time to develop leaders not just organize churches. For a missionary to discount this responsibility is to neglect the Great Commission.
Although Sills saw value in theological seminaries he did not believe that every area must have a seminary. He explained:

There are numerous models of theological education, leadership training, and pastoral preparation. Some are adaptations of generations-old training models found in the cultures of the world such as watch and do learning, the master apprentice model, and on-the-job training. Missionaries should avoid the trap of thinking that they must train the nationals the same way in which they received training (168).

He also believed that classroom training was simply not enough. Ultimately, if pastoral leaders are to be developed they must be involved in evangelism, discipleship, and planting churches. Classroom instruction alone is not sufficient. A missionary-professor must be an example to his students by “modeling, and challenging his students to plant, assist and pastor mission-impacting churches” (51).

In a day of pragmatism, Reaching and Teaching encourages the reader to examine missionary practices in light of the Word, particularly, the practice of evangelizing without adequate discipleship after a person believes. Sills wrote, “The greater good mentality in evangelism means taking the path of least resistance and using whatever methods result in the most measurable decisions as quickly as possible” (138). Sills exhorts the reader to not take a pragmatic approach but rather embrace the scriptural model.

Reaching and Teaching includes insights from Scripture, missiological research, and individual missionaries. It is comprehensive in its treatment of training national workers. Sills has sufficiently delineated the issues related to evangelism and discipleship. While he provides a baseline for discipleship, Sills expects the practitioner to build on this foundation.

Reaching and Teaching encourages the reader to embrace a biblical approach to making disciples that expands beyond evangelism and church planting. The missionary must take the time to establish theological education, pastoral preparation, and leadership training among the people they are called to reach. If these crucial elements are eliminated, then Jesus’ command to “teach them all things I have commanded” has not been obeyed. This reader highly recommends Reaching and Teaching to anyone seriously seeking to establish a maturing and multiplying church.
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