

INTRODUCTION

TRUTH matters for eternity. Words have meaning, and ideas have consequences. I care deeply about the eternal state of souls, both the lost and the redeemed. I ache over the plight of the unreached perishing apart from any knowledge of Christ, but I am also saddened for those big-hearted Christians who lack discernment and go from one waterless cloud to another, seeking refreshment and fruitfulness, but in the end feeling weary and unsure that their lives and ministries are actually producing fruit at all. This book is for you.

Hopefully you will see this book not as a strident criticism of the state of missions and the thankless work of missionaries, but rather as a brotherly and friendly plea that we rest in Christ's work and abide in His Word. For the sake of the least reached and for the sake of God's global glory, my prayer is that together we seek to be found faithful to the Pioneer of our faith and to His final commission.

Addressing common observations

As I have traveled the world and worked alongside numerous mission agencies and have seen varying styles of church leadership and missions philosophy, I have come to realize that most people, whether senders or goers, make emotional, experience-based, and reactionary decisions about missions. They care deeply and are whole-heartedly invested; often they just lack the cultural, historical, and theological perspective needed to make wise, discerning, long-range decisions that are biblically faithful, theologically consistent, and culturally wise. Furthermore, many are not theologically trained and not competent to teach the whole counsel of God.

In this age, fewer and fewer missionaries ground their missionary conviction and call in the Scriptures, and increasingly they cite compelling experiences, dreams, leading signs, open doors, and actual words from the Lord. I have also seen a handful of missionaries who, after going through dark seasons on the field, return to their sending country and sometimes leave the faith altogether. Often one of the main reasons given is because they cannot hear the voice of God telling them what to do, and they are paralyzed in fear that they will miss God's perfect will. I realize this is evidence of a larger problem they already had that was just squeezed out by the meat grinder of missionary living, but a common denominator in each of their lives that I have witnessed is that they inadequately handle the Bible, they do not hide it in their hearts and store it up like gold, they do not trust it to do its work in their ministries, and they find their strength from popular books about hearing God's voice and from conferences and prayer times where people share 'words from the Lord' with them. They are far more fascinated with the mystical than the biblical, with the pragmatic than the propositional.

Considering current trends

The twentieth century saw an explosion of missions involvement, but in contrast to those who went before, this last generation has been woefully untrained theologically. Most missionaries in church history have, in preparation for the field, committed themselves to rigorous study and extraordinary theological training that, compared to our educational standards today, seem draconian and excessive. However, increasingly the sentiment is that the less you are theologically trained, the closer you are to Jesus; the logic goes that knowledge quenches the Spirit and puts God in a theological box, which is blamed as the fruit of European rationalism and American fundamentalism.

How did we get to this place? Many factors have contributed, probably even some undetected ones, but to name a few dominant factors that missiologists and historians have shared with me over the last twenty years: the short-term missions boom and the subsequent reduction of interest in long-term commitment, the rise of egalitarianism and the consequent flattening of roles and duties, the

death of expertise, anti-authoritarian movements, the gutting of inerrancy from flagship seminaries for global mission, the ease of jet travel, unprecedented affluence, the globalization of pop culture, the information age explosion, the syncretizing of soft evangelicalism with the latest cultural fads, the mainstreaming of anti-dogmatic liberal theology, and the overall juvenilization of evangelicalism that has abandoned the doctrinal and textual for the experiential and emotional.

No coordinated conspiracy to dumb down missions exists; there can sometimes be just a lack of thoughtfulness, discernment, care, and wise long-term planning. The principles of this book could be applied to most ministry leaders anywhere in the global church, but I have written most directly and naturally to those from historically missionary-sending nations. I believe there are innumerable unknown courageous acts of Christian sacrifice accomplished around the world for the gospel; I look forward to hearing those marvelous stories upon arriving at our heavenly country. I hope this book helps those at the beginning and in the middle of their missionary story to think biblically, discern theologically, and work faithfully for the rest of their earthly chapters.

Seeing the scope of the book

The main point of this book is this: Because of our righteous standing and union with Christ and because of His reign over the nations, when the Holy Spirit propels Bible-centrality that mobilizes the heart, instructs the mind, and consecrates the life of the missionary to Christ, fruit-bearing in mission will result. Out of a trusting gratitude to Christ for His substitutionary, redeeming grace alone, received by faith alone, *to the degree that missionaries lead with the Christ-centered Word, are directed by the Christ-centered Word, experience God through the Christ-centered Word, and impress upon people the sufficiency of the Christ-centered Word, to that degree are they faithfully following Christ as He establishes His church among all the nations. Jesus is the true Missionary; proclaiming His Word is the method, through the means of His Spirit.*

The first chapter contends that gospel doctrine is the lifeblood of a missionary-theologian; the second chapter grounds the missionary

mandate and subjective/objective missionary call in the Word of God; the third chapter outlines the centrality of prayer and the pursuit of Word-centered godliness for the missionary; the fourth chapter argues that the missionary should devoutly immerse himself in the biblical text so that his ministry philosophy and methods are theologically sound; the fifth chapter highlights how to theologically consider the challenges and opportunities of partnering with sending churches; the sixth chapter makes a case for leading, serving, and partnering with the global church in a way that is biblically faithful, theologically helpful, and relationally sensitive; the seventh chapter discusses how a missionary-theologian should consider modeling the role of a humble Bible-centered shepherd and not overstepping his delegated authority; the eighth chapter demonstrates how the missionary should and can be a courageous apologist that neither compromises the gospel nor unnecessarily accommodates the worldviews of the target culture; and the ninth chapter is a historical and academic synthesis of the Word-centered strategies of the first American missionaries to Burma—Adoniram Jr. (1788–1850) and Ann Judson (1789–1826).

Hearing the heart of the book

I have consciously written this book with varied styles—polemical, devotional, popular, exegetical, theological, and academic—seeking to model various perspectives a missionary-theologian might want to consider. Moreover, my general writing style aims at those in the middle of their missionary career and the generations following them, since they are the future of global missions and will most likely be the ones reading this. With the culture of that audience in mind, without apology, my argumentation style is punchy and to the point. This persuasive style of writing is intentional, especially since so much best-selling evangelical publications and popular Christian radio exhibit levity more than gravity, plastic more than granite. At times these chapters might seem like a round-table debate with like-minded colleagues, and in other places it might seem like auditing a seminary classroom lecture. Though I could have written strictly for the academic guild as I have done with other publications, I chose, rather, to write for the practitioner who is passionate for God's name to be

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worshiped around the world, who likes to ponder deep consequential matters, and yet maybe who has rarely been stirred up to think of these subjects much before. I have prioritized and consciously included some themes to the exclusion of others. And none of my chapters purport to exhaustively cover their topics. Hopefully they will at least jumpstart dialogue, debate, and deep thinking. I have aimed to sensitively examine some issues that are allegedly politically incorrect or incongruent with our twenty-first-century cultural sensibilities. I realize it would be ideal to communicate the contents of this book along with non-verbal language, voice intonation, and in a class setting with question-and-answer and group discussion. This book grew out of numerous class lectures and discussions that my students found helpful for encouraging fresh thinking.

I have heard from booksellers that Millennials tend to be cause-driven and in need of constant praise, and consequently books not substantially incorporating those elements do not popularly sell. This assertion precisely proves my point: we need less cause-driven missionaries and more truth-driven missionaries. Indeed, it is true that mobilizing missionaries today based upon a noble cause is most motivationally effective, but what happens when they discover what feels like a greater cause? A more exciting and well-admired initiative? What happens when the emotions run dry and when all optimism for kingdom impact, as genuine and noble as it might be, seems shattered? What then when the heart is sick with dashed hopes and when feelings of triumph languish like a fading dream? If there is no one standing on Scripture alone now, then no one will remain standing.

This book will have its limitations and faults, which are entirely my own. I am aware that my experience and education limit my perspective, and I frequently feel humbled and even embarrassed by my own myopic perspectives and what I have yet to learn. Moreover, I realize that I do not see, explain, and prioritize the same issues as brothers and sisters would in other parts of the world, such as in Myanmar, Chile, South Africa, Palestine, Romania, or Australia. I am always growing and in need of improvement. No two missionaries are equal; everyone has their own experiences, personalities, temperaments, gifts, vocations, and influences. My way of saying these things and the particular issues

I have highlighted to the exclusion of other worthy topics will greatly differ from other godlier, sharper, and wiser missionaries. And to be sure, the missionary I am today in the middle of my missionary 'career' is not the same person I will be in thirty more years, and if I were to write this book then, hopefully I would be markedly humbler, wiser, and more biblical.

A missionary-theologian is not necessarily someone who has a doctorate, who publishes, and who operates at an academic level; very few will endeavor to attain that threshold. Not many will have opportunity or ability to train theologically at an advanced level. Some missionaries can thrive by mere self-study, whereas some would benefit more from formal, face-to-face interaction with professors and colleagues. Most are doers more than they are thinkers. There is nothing wrong with that, but with the immense amount of popular literature that focuses on methods and techniques, slowing down to contemplate the theology and implications of fundamental ideas is always a beneficial exercise. Most of us missions-minded folk are productivity-driven activists and legalists at heart. And it takes a work of the Holy Spirit to drive our roots down deep into the Word, where we meditate and take refuge in Christ's work and wait on Him to accomplish His purposes in His way and in His time.

Paul the missionary

It is my conviction that the Apostle Paul was the exemplary missionary-theologian. Many pastors like to describe Paul as the exemplary pastor, but when comparing the two, he functioned much more like a missionary than a pastor. True, pastors can and should learn from Paul's pastoral theology, but if anyone should be looking to Paul for cues and instruction, it should be missionaries.

This book is a clarion call to stir up a new breed of Pauline missionary-theologians, who rest in Christ's work alone, standing on *sola scriptura* in the face of any new missions methods that supposedly 'really work this time' and of any new spiritual experience that promises real power, inner-healing, and freedom from brokenness, and of any Christian leaders who claim to speak on behalf of God and know God's secret will. My prayer is that this book will awaken

missionaries and missionary-senders to cling for their lives to Christ and His sacred text with this steadfast resolve: ‘To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn. They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry’ (Isa. 8:20-21).

The Great Commission is inevitably theological work; to make disciples of Christ is to make students of Christ, which means the teacher must first be a student of Christ Himself. Being a student requires studying, which is textual and theological work. It is hard, slow, and often feels inglorious and not as flashy as ministries that produce immediate ‘results’ that so many people love to support. But if the awards ceremony decided by the Judge at the end of our marathon is our goal, then why preoccupy ourselves with the latest passing fads? Why not fix our eyes on the long-distance prize, training and competing according to the rules?

The Church’s mission

The famous social justice maxim, ‘go into the world and preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words,’¹ reveals our woeful ignorance of the biblically prescribed act of preaching Christ, which is indispensable to both evangelism and discipleship. Missiologist and professor, David Hesselgrave’s (1924–2018) definition of the mission of the church helpfully combines evangelism and discipleship with the chief action being the proclamation of Christ: ‘The primary mission of the church, and, therefore, of the churches is to proclaim the gospel of Christ and gather believers into local churches where they can be built up in the faith and made effective in service.’² Additionally, the definition of

1. Though Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) is commonly credited with saying this, it is just a legend. Francis was actually a powerful street preacher. The closest statement comes from his Rule of 1221, Chapter XII on how the Franciscans should practice their preaching: ‘No brother should preach contrary to the form and regulations of the holy Church nor unless he has been permitted by his minister ... All the Friars ... should preach by their deeds.’ See: Joe Carter, ‘Factchecker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi’, The Gospel Coalition Blog, entry posted 11 July 2012, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/07/11/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/> (accessed 17 May 2013).

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

the church's mission from pastors Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert brings some clarity:

Essentially, the mission of the church is summarized in the Great Commission passages—the climactic marching orders Jesus issues at the ends of the Gospels and at the beginning of Acts. We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling.³

Similarly, DeYoung and Gilbert wisely make a pastoral and theological case for not conflating social work and evangelism:

Though we do not believe that the mission of the church is to build the kingdom or to partner with God in remaking the world, this does not mean we are against cultural engagement. Our point is simply that we must understand these endeavors in the right theological categories and embrace them without sacrificing more explicit priorities. We should not cheapen good deeds by making them only a means to some other end (evangelism), but neither do we want to exaggerate our responsibility by thinking it is our duty to build the kingdom through our good deeds. Similarly, we should not overspiritualize social action by making it equivalent to God's shalom. As the church loves the world so loved by God, we will work to relieve suffering wherever we can, but especially eternal suffering.⁴

Majority-world theologian, Ajith Fernando, likewise asserts: 'The tendency among some evangelicals to downplay verbal proclamation—including persuading people to receive Christ's salvation—demands a fresh call for evangelicals to emphasize the urgency of proactive evangelism. And if talk of priority will help the church to a fresh commitment, then so be it.'⁵

3. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), p. 63.

4. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, p. 27.

5. Ajith Fernando, 'Getting Back on Course', *Christianity Today* (November 2007), 51:44.

The Apostolic Model

The apostolic *philosophy* of missions is that sinners are saved and believers are sanctified through the Word of Christ, and the apostolic *method* is proclamation; the *message* is the Christ-centered Word; the *center of the message* is the crucifixion, resurrection, and kingship of Christ; the *effect* is aroused religious affections for obeying Christ the King. Or to say it in a different way: the apostolic philosophy of missions combines reaching the unevangelized with the Word of Christ and teaching the undisciplined to keep the Word of Christ; and, the apostolic methodology of missions employs proclaiming the Christ-centered Word in such a way that arouses religious affections for submission to Christ the King among the church and the unreached.

Numerous missions-oriented strategies use the biblical phrase, ‘preach the gospel’, and it seems that there is no universal definition of ‘preaching’ assumed by all. Historian Stephen Neill (1900–1984) aptly said, ‘if everything is mission, nothing is mission.’⁶ Similarly, if in missions everything is preaching the gospel, then nothing is preaching the gospel. Just as there is a danger of not biblically defining mission, which leads to viewing every Christian activity as mission, there is a similar danger of not biblically defining proclamation. Missions debates and discussions rarely deal with the apostolic understanding of preaching, and we defer that discussion to professional pulpитеers or homileticians. Eckhard Schnabel, theologian and professor of New Testament, helpfully explains:

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

6. Quoted in DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, p. 15.

from others whose ministry is deemed successful. Preachers of the gospel... are authentically flexible because they are motivated not by the pressure of demonstrating the ‘effectiveness’ of their methods or the ‘success’ of their ministry but by their commitment to God and by their commitment to the people they seek to reach with the news of Jesus.⁷

The Gospel for the reached and unreached

Proclaiming Christ is fundamental for both evangelism *and* discipleship, reaching *and* teaching, and this is made clear by the bookends of the epistle to the Romans. Paul stated his ministry philosophy in Romans, which is essentially a missionary support letter that must be read both theologically and missiologically. In the first bookend of Romans, Paul says:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, *called to be an apostle*, set apart for the *gospel* of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and *apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ*. ... For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift *to strengthen you*—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. *I am under obligation* both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. *So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also* who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, *for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes*, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:1-6, 11-16, emphasis added).

Paul is under obligation to preach Christ, period. So he preaches it *evangelistically* to unbelieving Greeks, barbarians, wise, and foolish;

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

likewise, he is under obligation to preach Christ *evangelically* as a means of sanctifying and building the faith of the Christians. He employs both of these modes of preaching—to convert unbelievers and to disciple believers—as a well-studied, text-driven, *evangel*-motivated theologian.

At the end of Romans, in the second bookend, Paul restates the same idea as Romans 1:11-16 to form a missiological-theological *inclusio*. In his doxology he says:

Now to him who is able to *strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ*, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been *made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith*—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Rom. 16:25-27, emphasis added).

From the bookends of this letter written by the missionary-theologian extraordinaire, clearly Paul's philosophy and methodology of missions includes proclaiming the Word of Christ as a theologian for the evangelism of the nations *and* the discipleship of the church. 'Paul's description of his missionary task focuses on the preaching of the gospel as the primary goal. ... Paul understood his primary task as an apostle who has been called and sent by God to preach the gospel.'⁸

Preaching Christ is our Pauline legacy; we must not forfeit our apostolic vocation. Often, discussions of missions strategies deal with degrees of contextualization, cultural relevance, sociological research, intercultural communication, and dynamic equivalence, which are all very valuable issues, yet if such discussions *assume* the place of gospel proclamation, the core method of our missionary calling is in danger of being eclipsed altogether. Therefore, for the sake of clarifying this Pauline missionary-theologian *ethos*, we must reconsider what we are doing in the name of missions today and how we can reclaim the apostolic craft of proclaiming the Word of Christ as missionary-theologians, as pioneer-apologists.

8. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, p. 210.