



## *Competing and Conflicting Mission<sup>1</sup>*

M. David Sills

A.P. and Faye Stone Professor of Christian Missions and Cultural  
Anthropology  
Director of Global Strategic Initiatives and Intercultural Program  
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Louisville, KY  
dsills@sbts.edu

What place does the future have in informing the ways we do missions? Some cultures are crisis oriented while others are not. Those of a crisis orientation tend to look forward and anticipate the future in front of them. To encourage a friend who has suffered a setback or disappointment, someone might say, "Come on, keep moving forward, you have your whole life in front of you." Other cultures that are non-crisis in their orientation, consider what is in their past to be in front of them. After all, they would say, the only times of your life you can "see" are those which are past; the future is unknown and therefore, behind you. For peoples of such cultures, they are essentially walking backwards into the future, and seeing the past in front of them as they walk away from it. These people are non-crisis in orientation because they do not plan for future possibilities by purchasing life or health insurance policies, taking out warranties on automobiles, contributing to retirement plans, or saving for a rainy day. As they "walk backward" into the future, they do not consider such potential problems, and so do not plan for them.

What does this have to do with understanding the challenges and concerns of missions today? The majority of you reading this article likely belong to crisis-orientation cultures. You consider the weather forecast when making plans for a fishing trip or a picnic. When choosing a college major you will consider forecasts of job markets for employment possibilities. You anticipate and plan for your children's college education from their earliest years of life. Missionaries would be wise to consider the trends that lead multinational corporations and international governments to adjust, redirect, and refocus for the coming decades. Typically, hardworking and faithful missionaries are so engaged in their work that they often fail to look up to see what is going on around the world or what is coming down the road. Then, by the time that the challenges and changes are upon them their responses tend to be reactionary. It has often been said that the faithful pastor should conduct his ministry with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Imagine the pastor who continues to minister and preach as he did thirty years ago with no change in the music or leadership of his church, or any awareness of either world events or local changes in politics. While God's

<sup>1</sup>The content in this article is adapted from a chapter in my upcoming book, *The Challenges of Change* to be published by InterVarsity Press in 2015.

Word never changes, the world ever changes. To minister effectively, missionaries must engage the world that is, not the world that was. To know how missionaries should adjust for future trends and changes, it is wise to consider what our unchanging mission is.

### What is the Mission of the Church?

The world is shrinking. Globalization and urbanization are bringing more and more people into daily contact with one another and increasing a common awareness of the needs of the world—Gospel needs as well as social, educational, physical, and financial needs. In a world as advanced and developed as the one we know, the reality is still that more than 6,000 children die of starvation and hunger related diseases every day.<sup>2</sup> Ten thousand people die from the lack of clean drinking water daily.<sup>3</sup> Diarrhea kills more than 4,000 children every day,<sup>4</sup> and malaria continues to kill one child every thirty seconds.<sup>5</sup> Thirty-five percent of the world's people do not have access to adequate sanitation necessary for daily life.<sup>6</sup> The trends associated with these statistics are not changing for the better and thus do not indicate hope for the future. All indications are that the next 20-50 years will continue with the numbers going in the wrong direction. These trends have profound missiological implications. How should missionaries respond in light of these realities?

When looking to the future and considering the role of missions, it is helpful to pause and ask what churches, mission agencies, and missionaries should be doing everywhere all the time. The answer you get depends on whom you ask. Some stress the work of proclamation and sharing the Gospel as the only legitimate role for missions. Others will see that a priority for proclamation should be coupled with mercy ministries to meet human needs such as drilling water wells, water purification, feeding the hungry, improving agricultural techniques, rescuing those trapped in flesh trafficking, or providing health care. Still others would say that these all of these ministries are legitimate Christian mission efforts whether coupled with Gospel proclamation or not.

When considering the mission of the church, it is helpful to consider the difference between mission and missions. Many missiologists have used

<sup>2</sup>FMSC 2014 Brochure, "Feed My Starving Children," accessed August 25, 2014, <http://www.fmsc.org/document.doc?id=137>, 1.

<sup>3</sup>Water.org, "Water Crisis," accessed August 25, 2014, <http://water.org/water-crisis/water-facts/water/>.

<sup>4</sup>UNICEF and World Health Organization, *Diarrhoea: Why Children Are Still Dying and What Can Be Done* (New York: UNICEF, World Health Organization, 2009), 5, accessed August 25, 2014, [http://www.unicef.org/health/files/Final\\_Diarrhoea\\_Report\\_October\\_2009\\_final.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/health/files/Final_Diarrhoea_Report_October_2009_final.pdf).

<sup>5</sup>UNICEF, "Malaria Fact Sheet," accessed August 25, 2014. <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/MALARIAFACTSHEETAFRICA.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup>Center for Disease Control, "Global Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene," accessed August 25, 2014, <http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/global>.

these words synonymously and there is little uniformity, though technically the distinction between them is that mission (singular) refers to all the church is to do in the world, and missions (plural) refer to the diverse and various methods of churches in evangelism, discipleship, and church planting to extend the kingdom. The general mission of the church is to worship God, glorify Christ, make disciples of all nations, baptize believers, and teach them to obey all that Christ has commanded. The many different ways that churches engage the world for this ministry and purpose are too numerous to mention, let alone describe in detail, but together compromise what is missions.

In recent years various scholars have addressed the biblical basis of mission and the relative value of the many different expressions of missions in the world. Indeed, this is a perennial concern that continues to resurface as new waves of philosophies, strategies, and methodologies splash onto the beach of missions. In the 1970s John Stott began to be so concerned about what he viewed as a shift away from biblical missions that he delivered a series of lectures; these were eventually shaped into the book, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*.

David Hesselgrave returned to this theme of ministry balance in missions in a book written to introduce students and missionaries to ten major paradigms that repeatedly create controversy and division among missionaries. His goal in *Paradigms in Conflict* was not to drive any one perspective on these paradigms, but rather to explain both sides of each position and encourage the missionary to make an informed, biblically-defensible opinion. One of the issues Hesselgrave discusses is the question of what is the mission of the church. Instead of presenting a binary system that forces a choice between either Gospel proclamation or social ministry, Hesselgrave presents four points on a continuum. He first presents the option of pure Gospel proclamation as a proper expression of missions, calling it prioritism theology and the traditional view. Next, he presents the restrained view of holism theology that utilizes social ministry to open doors or provide a platform for the end goal of Gospel proclamation. The next is the perspective in which Gospel proclamation and social ministry are equal partners and neither is more important than the other, or even truly distinguished from one another. Finally, he presents the radical perspective, which he calls liberation theology, which is social ministry that may not even involve Gospel proclamation since social justice and shalom on the earth are the essential aims of this perspective on missions.<sup>7</sup>

Another key work that addresses the mission of the church is from Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert. Their contribution to the debate is an exegetical treatment of pertinent biblical passages to argue that much of what churches and even missionaries are doing today is good to do, but not tech-

<sup>7</sup>David Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Kregel, 2005), 117-39.

nically the mission of the church. Some argue that including social ministry and community engagement is not only helpful, but actually essential if the church is faithfully to represent Christ in the world today. A Haitian proverb teaches that a hungry stomach has no ears, thus even for the evangelist, some aspect of social ministry is effective and beneficial.

### **Reaching the Unreached vs. Making Disciples**

The burden we feel for the lost is increased when we consider the growing awareness today of massive areas with entire people groups that are unreached with the Gospel, unengaged by any church planting effort, and have never even been contacted with the purpose of evangelization. Even after almost 2,000 years of missions to reach and teach the world, over half of the world's people groups are considered unreached. These unreached people groups represent over one-third of the world's population. This is an astounding reality when one considers how quickly Coca-Cola went from its invention in 1896 to being recognized by ninety-five of the world's population today. Our weak efforts are even more startling when we consider the speed with which the Internet has covered and changed virtually every aspect of our world in the few short decades of its existence. So many innovations have managed to advance globally for profit, yet Christian expansion has not grown at nearly the same rate. Even though we are fighting against the prince of this world and our sin natures, surely we must admit that our efforts hardly reflect the kind of commitment that should correspond to the significance of a person's soul and the glory of Christ. Todd Johnson of the World Christian Database has explored trends for the growth of Christianity in the coming years. One key trend that he has identified is that Christianity continues to move south and east. What was once considered a Western religion is increasingly less so. This shift results in three key implications for the church. Our understanding of Christianity has been defined by the Western church's theological contributions, but as the church in the south and east grows, so will their influence in shaping our understanding of theology and the world's understanding of what it means to be Christian. A second implication of the growth of Christianity in the south and east is a change in the dominant language of the faith. A third key implication of this geographic shift is that it results in large pockets of Christians living in like cultures and close proximity to Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Missionaries must prayerfully consider what this might mean for ministry endeavors.<sup>8</sup>

Someone has said that if Christianity is one-tenth as true as we claim, we should be ten times more excited about it as we are. Twenty centuries after Christ there are untold millions still untold. The grievous burden we feel when we think of the thousands of people groups sitting in darkness should

<sup>8</sup>Todd M. Johnson, "Christianity in Global Contexts: Trends and Statistics," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, accessed August 25, 2014, [http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedfiles/Topics/Issues/Politics\\_and\\_Elections/051805-global-christianity.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedfiles/Topics/Issues/Politics_and_Elections/051805-global-christianity.pdf).

drive us to pray for them and for those who are trying to reach them. Even so, it is a terrible mistake with eternal consequences to reduce missions to a formula such as, “Missions equals reaching the unreached,” especially if we do not clearly define what it means to reach them. Given the clear instructions in the Great Commission, we should not consider undisciplined people to be reached, as if discipling them is a subsequent or optional step in Christian ministry. Those who have been disciplined and taught to observe all that Christ commanded are truly reached. The tragedy of the world is not that it is unreached but that it is undisciplined.

So, what is it that God calls missionaries to do no matter the challenges and changes we are facing? Are we to reach all the unreached? Can we do this by preaching the Good News in a one-week evangelistic crusade? Or, are we to teach the ones we reach through preaching? In the Great Commission Jesus called us to go and make disciples of all people groups (*panta ta ethnē*), to baptize them, and to teach them to obey all he has commanded us. The question of the Great Commission should never be reduced to a dichotomy of reaching *or* teaching, but as two sides of the same coin, we should see our role as reaching *and* teaching. It is clear from history that God calls and gifts some to dedicate themselves more to reaching and evangelism while he gifts and calls others to teaching and discipling. Perhaps this distinction results in some being called and Spirit-guided to serve in certain areas where their gift is best utilized. However, never assume that reachers do not have to teach or teachers do not have to reach. Some indeed have the gift of evangelism, but we are all to evangelize. Some have the gift of giving, but we all are to give. In light of the needs of the world reality today and the coming realities racing toward us, how should we respond?

The struggle for the balance of reaching all the unreached along with discipling and teaching them what Christianity is and how to understand God’s Word should always be just that—a struggle. When we capitulate to a predetermined decision independent of the specific and particular facts of a given context, we have lost the balance. Every missionary who is looking to the future and considering the needs of the hour feels the tension of knowing one’s role in the face of the surrounding realities. Certainly, God both leads his people and sovereignly determines every event they encounter (Eph 1:11). He also guides by an awareness of needs, personal gifts, opportunities, and by giving them the desires of their hearts when they are delighting themselves in him.

The need for speed that drives many missions efforts today causes them to streamline the missionary task to something humanly manageable and sometimes results in jettisoning the half of the Great Commission that would require missionaries to stay and pour their lives into the hearts of their people to teach them all Christ has commanded them. On the other hand, a desire always to be the teacher and micromanage the mission to the degree that nationals are never entrusted with the work keeps some missionaries from moving on to reach others. There is no formula, biblical or otherwise,

that would give clear direction regarding the whos and wheres and whens. The Holy Spirit guides Christians to the places and ministries God has prepared in advance for each one of us (Eph 2:10), and he alone should be the one to move them on.

### **Biblical Perspective**

The mission of God is found within his Word. The Bible is the unchanging Word of God. While there are many applications of the Word in thousands of specific situations among the many people groups of the world, there is only one meaning. In a world where everything is changing and change seems to be the only constant, God never changes. Whatever he has said to his people in the past is still applicable to us today in every culture and in every era of history. How to apply that in biblically faithful ways that are also culturally sensitive is the realm of cultural anthropology and applied missiology. However, the redemptive purposes of God do not change; every person must repent of their sin, submit to Christ as Lord, and be born again. As the trends of future changes bring anxiety and scrambling to keep up in the offices of many missions agencies and the plans of countless missionaries, we can all rest on the unchanging fact that everyone needs to hear the Gospel and be born again. God wants all people to come and worship him. As John Piper has said, “Missions exists because worship does not.”<sup>9</sup>

The mission of God is first discovered in knowing God. What would we know about God if he had never given us his self-revelation in the Bible? David tells us in Psalm 19:1-4 that we would know that there is a Creator but we would know little else. Paul picks up on this idea in Romans 1:18-20 and tell us that because God has revealed himself in the general revelation of nature, all are without excuse for not worshiping him as he demands. Paul continues in Romans 2:14-15 and tells us that we would also know that we have sinned against this God. God has given us a conscience that condemns us, a heart with his law written upon it that testifies against our willful rebellion, and a rational mind that can discern whether something is good or bad. Every one of us knows that there is a Creator and that we have sinned against him. We also know that we will live for eternity somewhere (Eccl 3:11), and this is reflected in every culture. There is simply no such thing as an honest atheist or a person who truly believes that they have never sinned. This is the heart of why we fear death. This is not going to change in the future, no matter how many sweeping changes blow through our world. The world’s people need to hear the Gospel message, repent, and be born again, and that is the only hope for its crippling guilt and brings the forgiveness and eternal life they desperately need.

The mission of God finds root and deepening expression as those who follow him walk with him, remaining sensitive and obedient to his leader-

<sup>9</sup>John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 15.

ship. When a person is born again that is just the beginning of their Christian experience. Believers must begin the process of progressive sanctification whereby they learn to walk in the Spirit saying no to the wrong and yes to the right. This process is complete in God's eyes at the moment of salvation due to the vicarious suffering of our substitute and the transfer of his holiness to our account in the Great Exchange. Yet, we learn to pursue actual righteousness and a life of holiness as we walk with him. This process is not automatic in a fallen world. The Bible teaches us what pleases God and also what grieves his heart. We understand and follow the mission of God as we begin to know him more deeply. What we can know about God is most fully revealed in his Word. For this reason, studying God's Word is essential to grow in Christ and be faithful to his mission. The Bible is filled with commands instructing those who know to teach those who come behind by discipling, mentoring, and modeling what God requires. When believers begin to grow in grace and thankfulness for the salvation they have freely received, they long to see others find the peace and hope they have. A desire to share the Gospel with others, reaching and teaching those who are lost and undisciplined, are natural developments in the life of a growing disciple. This is amplified by the awareness of daily life, the crises of natural and man-made disasters, and the darkness of false religions that floods our computers, televisions, and newspapers in our interconnected, globalized world. A heart that breaks with the things that break the heart of God is shattered by the lostness and religious confusion that has a stranglehold on this world. Such broken hearts long for those trapped in darkness and hopelessness to hear the Gospel, learn to know, love, and obey Christ, and be able to teach others who can teach others in culturally appropriate, biblically faithful ways. This is the mission of God.

### **Anticipating the Future**

The future of missions will have to adjust to countless new trends, technologies, crises, and epidemics. New strategies and methodologies will have to be devised to meet the challenges faced. However, no matter what comes down the road or what adjustments will have to be made for the church and missionaries to be relevant and effective in the future, we must continue to reach the unreached and then teach them to obey all that Christ has commanded. Disciple-making strategies and methodologies must always be adjusted to the cultural realities of diverse cultures. This is especially challenging when people groups are primary oral learners. Even teaching them to read does not change the reality that they do not learn in highly literate fashion, using syllogisms, or thinking in linear sequential logic patterns. Missionaries have traditionally sought to evangelize and disciple using highly literate methods; indeed the International Orality Network reports that over 90% of all resources for evangelism, discipleship, and leadership training



were devised for the highly literate.<sup>10</sup> The burgeoning awareness of just how oral our world is demands that we develop missionary methodologies that are effective and culturally appropriate while remaining biblically faithful in the process.

How will missionaries plant churches in countries where evangelical organizations are not legal, or are not permitted to own property? Missionaries have rediscovered that churches may meet in houses or office buildings, remembering that some of the first churches met in prisons and catacombs. Shrinking missions budgets require more creativity. The house church-planting model has taken flight in many places around the world. Yet, only after such methodology was utilized in some contemporary contexts did missionaries learn that some cultures consider any religious group that meets in a home or business instead of its own building to be a cult. What are they to do now? With the mass movements of people to the cities in our increasingly urbanized world, how will urban missionaries meet the need for planting sufficient numbers of churches where buildings are prohibited by law, cost prohibitive, or dangerous? The trends facing missionaries today demand new and more effective church planting models that are both culturally appropriate and biblically faithful.

### **Key Principles and Application**

As we have noted, some things never change. God never changes, his Word never changes, the meaning of his Word never changes. But, the ways we deliver his Word, the buildings in which we meet, the languages we speak, the music we use for worship, and the literacy levels among the people change from context to context. Something else that never changes may be tugging your heart as you think about the needs of the world, and you find yourself in the throes of finding out what it all means. That something else is a call to missions and the fact that God guides us to fulfill it in ways and places that please him. Answering the call of God means you have already answered the call to salvation and are answering the call to discipleship and sanctification, and always listening for the still small voice to call again. A genuinely-changed, born-again believer will grow in grace and sanctification, and persevere to the end if someone disciples him, teaching him to know and obey the Word of God.

It has been said that when a child says thank you for the first time without prompting, he or she is well on the way to social maturity. In like fashion, when a new believer for the first time asks God whether he wants him to go and serve as a missionary, he is well on his way to spiritual maturity. It is a good sign and demonstrates selflessness and a desire for many to fall at Jesus' feet and worship him as Lord.

The corporate effort to reach and teach the world for Christ's sake is

<sup>10</sup>Durk Meijer, "How Shall They Hear," presentation at International Orality Network Meeting, February 2008.

the majority of missions work around the world throughout Christian history. Missionaries have had to adjust to new world realities that changed the way they would have done missions. Moravian missionaries wanted to reach the African slaves working the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, but were forced to find access to the slaves when the owners would not permit mission work among them. Believers I know in Cuba have received permission to leave the island nation and join their families in the USA, but they genuinely believe that God has called them to stay and serve the Cuban people, so they remain. Countries are regularly closing their doors to traditional missionaries, forcing missionaries to find creative access platforms to obtain visas in order to minister in the countries where God has called them.

As we step into the future, we must find creative ways to minister in new situations that often challenge and impede traditional missions efforts. However, we must remain faithful to God's Word in every respect. When the kinds of churches that we have known all our lives are too expensive, inadvisable, or inappropriate, then we are forced to find new manifestations of the local body of Christ but to assure that they meet biblical qualifications. These are not open to debate as negotiable scenarios that can be set aside when we find it expedient to do so. This includes the biblical officers of a church, the qualifications they must meet, and the ways that the Christian life is to be conducted until Jesus comes for the church.

With the Holy Spirit calling people from other countries to join in missions, such as the Back-to-Jerusalem movement in China, or the Latinos who are called to the Muslim world, missionary training programs must be developed that will help these believers to fulfill their missionary call effectively. Many have zeal without knowledge. Returning to China after a failed mission effort brings greater consequences of shame than is known in the USA and similar cultures. Sometimes couples nearing retirement or are empty-nesters with kids married or in college want to finish well and serve in missions. Perhaps a businessman has made his mark and the money he needs to make to be successful and he begins to wonder how he could participate in missions other than "pay, pray, and get out of the way." Mission agencies must prepare to meet the future as it comes by providing opportunities for these men and women to be engaged in missions in areas of creative access and creative sending models.

The ease of air travel and availability of discretionary income of many Christians facilitate the phenomenon of Short Term Missions (STM). Some missionaries have been reticent to use STMs in their strategy. They fear the damage that could be done by "vacationaries" who teach incorrect doctrine, or risk hurting the testimonies of the nationals or missionaries with whom they associate, or simply would rather avoid the ugly American-types who require babysitting and pampering. And yet I would argue that STMs have come a long way from this caricature. Proper orientation, field oversight, experienced missionary involvement, and faithful follow-up can result in excellent experiences for everyone involved. One of the most common benefits

of STMs is not for the nationals with whom the team goes to work, but for the team itself. Many have felt called to missions on such trips. Others return to the USA more determined to pray for missions, missionaries, and the world's lost peoples. Others are more committed to give to missions and lead missions efforts in the local church. The future needs more missionaries and the places in need of missionaries need different kinds of strategies and methodologies if we are going to find success in the twenty-first century.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus told his church that we are to go and make disciples of all people groups, baptize them, and teach them everything he has commanded. Each of the four Gospels and the book of Acts have some version of the Great Commission. The last command of Christ should be the first priority of his followers. To make disciples, we must engage the world as it is and preach the Gospel. Engaging the world as it is means adjusting as it changes and not allowing our methods to become fossilized. When we are fossilized in ways of the past, trying to reach and teach people as we imagine them to be, wish them to be, or as they once were, we miss the opportunities God gives.

Business and financial analysts along with government foreign policy experts are constantly watching the world with their finger on its pulse to monitor developments and trends—actual and potential. Some businesses and governments hire consultants to advise them in adjustments so that they may meet the challenges and continue the success they knew in the past. Becoming so enamored with the way we used to “do it” or wishing the world was still as it once was in some “golden era” inevitably results in being left behind. While I am sure that it is important for car companies to be advised and aware to meet the coming changes and challenges, or for a government to be aware of immigration realities, it is eternally and infinitely more important for missionaries and the church of Jesus Christ to be prepared for the future, meet it head on, and engage it with effective strategies and methodologies. Only by studying the future trends and considering the missiological implications will we be able to find success for the advance of the kingdom and glory to Christ.