

REACHING AND TEACHING

A CALL TO GREAT COMMISSION OBEDIENCE

M. DAVID SILLS

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*To
Abraham Michael Sills
My first grandchild
May the blessing promised to your namesake
in Genesis 12:1–3 be yours also.
And like him, may the families, clans, peoples,
and nations of the world
be blessed through you.
Papi*

A NOTE TO THE READER

Missionaries are my heroes, godly men and women working as hard as anyone at home, but doing so in other languages, suffering homesickness, culture shock, and unstable governments, leaving the comforts of home to live amidst persecution, tropical diseases, and violence, compelled by the love of Christ and His missionary call. Missionaries follow the Lord's calling on their lives, faithfully employing their unique gifts in the places where He calls them to serve. They increasingly must devise creative access to the countries closing their doors to missionaries every year, balancing ethical concerns with gospel need. I am thankful for mission agencies and missionaries who are aggressively engaging unreached, unengaged, and uncontacted people groups that are often in the most gospel-hostile parts of the world. I am equally thankful for mission agencies and missionaries continuing to disciple, teach, and minister in other fields. Almost everyone agrees that both reaching and teaching are biblical and essential aspects of Christian missions, and to some extent, that each is under way around the world in a host of diverse ministries. But there is much that is not being done and the result is tragic.

While I want to encourage those reaching the unreached to continue that vital work, I also want to exhort us all to do more than just reach—much more. Jesus commissioned us to teach everything He has commanded. A biblically balanced missiology includes searching, reaching, harvesting, church planting, discipling, and teaching. The Lord Jesus, the missionary Paul, and biblical commands exhort us to reach and win the lost, disciple them, and teach teachers among them.

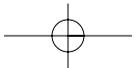
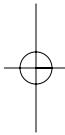
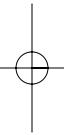
What is the biblical balance in the missionary task? Turn the page, and let's begin.

—M. David Sills



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FOREWORD

Is there mission beyond evangelism? Jesus certainly said so. Great Commission Line 3: “*Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” That’s how disciples are formed. And disciples (not converts) are what He told us to make. The apostle Paul certainly thought so. His first priority was to preach the gospel and plant churches. But then he worked tirelessly to make sure they grew in depth and maturity. He re-visited them. He wrote letters to them. He answered their questions and challenged their mistakes. He agonized in prayer for them. In fact he may well have spent more time in mission beyond evangelism than in evangelism itself. He spent nearly three years in Ephesus teaching that church the whole counsel of God from the Scriptures so that it became a source of evangelistic expansion to the whole region (Acts 19–20).

And alongside Paul there was a whole network of other church leaders whose *primary* missional vocation was in mission beyond evangelism. Think, for example, of:

- **Apollos** (Acts 18:24–28). His work was *teaching* the church. He was already converted and well-educated (in Africa), but he received even better biblical instruction from Priscilla and Aquila (in Asia) and then he went and used his gifts for strengthening the church through Christ-centred biblical teaching (in Europe—how’s that for a missionary career?).

- **Timothy** (1 Timothy 2:2). His work included **training** others to be able to preach the truth of the Scriptures, as he himself had learned from Paul. Mentoring and training multiplies those who can handle the Bible well and teach it to others.
- **Tertius** Who? He was the one whose job was **writing** down the great letter of Paul to the Romans (Romans 16:22). Writing was a special skill, and people with something to say needed the help of good writers. Peter needed Silas for that job too and commended him as a faithful brother for doing it (1 Peter 5:12).

Teaching, training, writing—all of it happening in the New Testament church. And all of it equally necessary for the growth and health of the church. And all of it a vital part of the *mission* of the church. Paul would not tolerate the idea that he or Apollos were any more important than each other. “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants . . . I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow” (1 Corinthians 3:5–6).

The importance of this “Apollos factor” in Christian mission was recognized by John Stott, in the ministries he founded, which I am privileged to serve, in the Langham Partnership International (known as John Stott Ministries in the USA), which trains pastors in biblical preaching, encourages evangelical writers for their own contexts, and supports theological education in the majority world. This is “church growth” mission—growth in depth, not just in numbers.

David Sills’ passionate plea in this book is addressed primarily to the missions community in the USA, but it is long overdue and needs to be heard by missionary-minded churches worldwide—including those who see the USA itself as among the “mission fields” of a world in which biblical mission is (as it always was) from everywhere to everywhere.

—Christopher J. H. Wright
International Director, Langham Partnership
International (John Stott Ministries, USA)
Author, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s
Grand Narrative*



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mission agencies and missionaries have increasingly shifted away from teaching and discipleship toward an emphasis on evangelism and church planting—some to the exclusion of any other field activity. While evangelism and church planting are essential components of a missions program, deep discipleship, pastoral preparation, and leadership training must be priorities as well. Jesus explicitly called the church to make disciples of the nations and to teach them to observe all He commanded us (Matthew 28:18–20). However, it seems that today many well-intentioned missionaries believe their task is merely to evangelize and then group willing participants into new “churches.”

As AD 2000 approached, mission agency administrators and field missionaries sought to reach the world by every means possible as quickly as possible. An awareness of unreached people groups (UPGs) grew out of this time period and dominated missions efforts

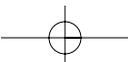
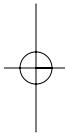
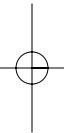
in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This awareness spurred agencies and missionaries on to identify and reach these groups. The accompanying sense of urgency shifted the missiological community away from time-proven strategies to more creative methods, hoping for rapid expansion of Christianity. These trendy, creative methods included new approaches to church planting, eschatologically driven missiology, and, all too often, a reductionistic interpretation of the Great Commission. The result of the application of these methodologies is such that once a targeted UPG hears the gospel, many missionaries move on and turn their attention to the next UPG. Unfortunately, these well-intentioned efforts to reach the unreached result in an inadequate approach to missions.

This understanding that the most pressing need is simply to reach UPGs and then continue to the next one results in a strategy to reach, preach to, and leave as many people groups as possible and as fast as possible. Discipleship, leadership training, and pastoral preparation are unfortunately relegated to a lower level of ministry that is not really considered missions. Some missionaries even consider any effort expended in such areas an impediment that slows down the “most important work” and is therefore an enemy of that which is essential.

This new understanding of the task of international missions is so common today that many consider it to be normative. Since the prevalence of this methodology has been growing for well over a decade, we are now seeing its consequences and ramifications. The most frequent consequence is that churches left in the wake of such efforts either fall apart rapidly and disappear or degenerate into dysfunctional gatherings with unbiblical doctrine and practice. As a result, the new believers are often victims of aberrant doctrine, heresy, cult outreach, or nominal Christianity for the rest of their lives. The church the missionaries leave behind is very often anemic at best and a syncretistic aberration at worst. The second unfortunate consequence is that proven, traditional missiological methods, strategies, and philosophies are now considered to be “old-school,” out of touch, and overly complex paradigms that hinder rapid, exponential

growth. However, rather than viewing theological education, pastoral preparation, leadership training, and in-depth discipleship as lesser forms of missionary activity, we must return to the biblical understanding of missions that incorporates them as primary and necessary ways of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Born out of my own research and burden to faithfully serve the call of Christ in the Great Commission, it is my prayer that this book will clarify the task of international missions. Of course, each of the subjects treated in the following chapters deserve more attention than I can devote in a single book. I am not attempting a thorough and exhaustive missiological treatment of each of these crucial issues; rather, my aim is to highlight modern trends that have arisen in recent decades and to suggest correctives that are based on such treatments provided elsewhere. Through an integration of the Scriptures, missiological research, and case studies, this book will help missionaries, pastors, and students wrestle with the biblical foundations and the holistic task of missions. The Great Commission is not just about evangelism or church planting. Jesus said to *make disciples* of all the ethnic groups of the world and to do that *by teaching them to observe all that He commanded* us (Matthew 28:19–20).



1



TEACHING THEM: THE GREAT OMISSION OF THE GREAT COMMISSION

Evangelical missionaries and mission agencies are eager to finish the task of world missions. Having recognized the need to reach all the people groups of the world, recent decades have found missionary efforts increasingly focused on the goal of completing that task as quickly as possible. However, in the midst of their focused and fervent efforts, many are now realizing the need to define the task or to reconsider the total task of international missions. Slogans such as “The world in this generation!” rally the faithful and call out the called, but to do what? The need for specific task definition must still be addressed. As missionaries have joined the race to reach the unreached people groups of the world as quickly as possible, they have strategized to increase speed. The need for speed has influenced missionary efforts so much that many traditional missions tasks have been jettisoned in order to enable it. Indeed, in recent years it seems that increasing the speed has itself become the task. Evangelical

missions organizations have been busy operating both traditional and creative ministries all around the world. Yet some missionaries have been looking over their shoulders at the wake of their efforts and are seeing a church that they barely recognize.

We received the Great Commission two thousand years ago. How are we doing? Over one-third of the world—more than two billion people—has never heard the gospel. Approximately one-half of the world's people groups remain unreached. Among those we reached in past decades, new generations are questioning the shallow and often syncretistic versions of Christianity that their parents believe. Still, some would say that we have finished our work among the “reached” because they have churches. Others would see that much work remains.

It matters what teachers teach and what believers believe. In an age where media and movies promote pluralism and many churches have embraced inclusivism, most evangelicals still believe in the exclusivity of the gospel. On the other hand, adherents of pluralism teach that every religion has value in and of itself. They hold that sincere followers of other religions will be saved through their respective religions. Missionaries with this perspective believe that the essential goal of their ministry is liberation, freedom, and basic morality for their hearers. Adherents of inclusivism teach that since Jesus knew that everyone would not have a chance to hear the gospel, He included all religions in His work. The goal of missionaries with this perspective is often simply to help people find Jesus in their own religious systems. However, if we adopt pluralism or inclusivism, we cut the root and nerve of missions.

Exclusivism teaches that there is no other Savior than Jesus Christ alone and that you must be born again. Moreover, we believe that, apart from being born again by grace through faith in Christ, people are separated from God and will spend eternity in hell. Missionaries with this perspective seek to proclaim the gospel message and fulfill the Great Commission in obedience to Christ, to rescue the perishing, and, above all, to bring glory to God. Sadly, not all Christians in the world are convinced of this truth.

THE SCOPE

In medical schools, there are some students preparing to be research scientists to find a cure for cancer and others who are planning to be family physicians. If we compare the work of missions to the medical field, we would say that the work of a missionary is more like that of a family physician than that of a research scientist. The research scientist may find the cure he seeks and declare his work to be done. However, a family physician will have many diverse duties, such as caring for patients during flu season, setting broken arms, and experiencing the joy of delivering babies. His work will continue changing to meet pressing needs all of his life. Mission work, also, is always ongoing, changing, and developing.

In the 1960s, some began to consider the work of the Great Commission to be complete. A brief study of any global missions map showed that there was a church in every geopolitical entity called a country—or nation. Since Jesus commissioned the church to make disciples of all nations, the work must surely have been completed. Yet in Matthew 28:19, Jesus actually said, “Go therefore and make disciples of *panta ta ethne*,” not every geopolitical country. The word *ethne* means “ethnic group” or “people group.” Based on this, Ralph Winter spoke at the 1974 Lausanne Conference for World Evangelization and highlighted the Great Commission challenge of reaching not only the countries of the world, but more specifically the ethnolinguistic groups that populate it.

Even though the task of reaching all these groups is not yet complete, a new challenge is emerging. Today’s challenge is to go beyond merely recognizing the legitimacy of people group thinking to understanding what our task should be among the people groups. Even as Dr. Winter clarified a part of the Great Commission so that we would not be merely thinking in terms of geopolitical nations, we would do well to remember *what* Jesus sent us to the ethnolinguistic groups to do. Jesus did not say, “Go therefore and get decisions from people, then gather them into groups called churches,” although both of these steps are essential parts of the Great Commission. He in fact

said, “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” (Matthew 28:19–20). It is the command to teach that I want us to consider as we begin to understand the task of international missions.

THE NEED

As God allows me to travel the world, preaching, teaching, and leading mission teams, I have seen a common thread. This thread is the biblical illiteracy of many national brothers and the de-emphasis of theological education and thorough preparation on the part of mission entities. The danger of this is compounded as it coincides with an alarming new reality in global Christianity.

In a new emphasis (or de-emphasis), some major agencies have so focused on church planting and evangelism that they have neglected the need for theological education, pastoral training, and leadership development. Some have reasoned that in order to fulfill the Great Commission, we must pour our efforts and resources into evangelism and church planting. Some even believe that Jesus cannot return until we reach every people group—and that He will return immediately after we do.

When Ralph Winter began to point out the long overdue need for people group orientation, his organization estimated the world’s people groups to number 24,000. They have since revised that number to 27,000 as some of the unreached groups have received more study and are now considered to be two or more distinct groups. Other missiologists consider the total number of the world’s people groups to be around 11,000. Virtually every person or agency calculates the number of people groups in the world differently.¹

Another point for consideration is what Jesus meant in Matthew 24:14 about preaching the gospel to all as a testimony. “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.” Many missionaries have preached the gospel through interpreters or

without understanding the cultural adjustments that are necessary to communicate the gospel clearly. Additionally, some people hear the gospel for years before they truly hear it! So what does it mean to have preached it to a people as a testimony? Is it merely pulling into a village, preaching John 3:16 through an interpreter, and driving away?

What if we reach all the people groups that we consider to be unreached and yet He delays His return for fifty years, or five hundred years, or five thousand years? What will happen to all of the people who have heard the gospel, raised their hand to pray a prayer, and then watched the dust of the missionary's vehicle as he sped away to the next people group? Who will teach new believers? Will the churches confused with syncretism, the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, or the Muslims be the ones who take them in and teach them?

Students who feel called to an international theological education ministry often express concern about the few opportunities they find to teach pastors on the mission field. Some agencies have greatly reduced the available openings for theological education in order to invest more human and financial resources in reaching unreached people groups. These agencies certainly care about those who need training, but the push has been to place their missionaries among the unreached. Subsequently, traditional mission fields are being left in the hands of the nationals regardless of whether they have the biblical training to sustain the furtherance of the gospel.

One problem with this approach is failure to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission instruction, "teaching them to obey." Some say that they will fulfill this by encouraging new believers to obey all that Jesus commanded. However, they will not be staying around to do the teaching. They further state that the new believers have a Bible and the same Holy Spirit we have; He will guide them into all truth. Yet syncretism, aberrant doctrine, and blatant heresy remain in many churches around the world.

THE NEED ILLUSTRATED

I recently met a number of Nigerian students pleading for help in their seminary. Many of them needed classes in order to finish their preparation, graduate, and serve in churches, but there was no one to teach the required courses. This plea for help is all the more concerning because the church in Nigeria is suffering much confusion. There are thousands of churches in Nigeria—Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Assemblies of God, and AIC churches (African Independent Churches or African Initiated Churches). Many Nigerian churches preach a “name it and claim it,” “power in your mouth,” “health and wealth,” and “seed money miracle” gospel message. Many are so far from the truth that the truth is very hard to find. In a country that is struggling with poverty and crime, many have turned the church into a miracle cult. Since I am Southern Baptist, I painfully noticed many Baptist churches in Nigeria that have adopted this philosophy of ministry.

Southern Baptists entered Nigeria in 1851. When the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) began in 1845, it formed the Foreign Mission Board (FMB) and the Domestic Mission Board to engage in missions. The FMB chose China and Nigeria as two of their earliest mission fields, and Nigeria is the oldest continuous mission field for Southern Baptists. It was once regarded as the “White Man’s Graveyard,” and the advance Baptists gained there was purchased at great cost. So why, after so many years of work, do many of the Nigerian churches have such aberrant theology and practice? I began to wonder what had gone wrong. Is there a lesson to learn in the history of the Southern Baptist work in Nigeria?

Today there are some 8,500 churches and 4,000 pastors in Nigeria.² Animism still reigns in the hearts of most believers. Some churches use juju to bring crowds to their meetings. One of the professors from the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary reported that some large churches sacrifice cows and bury them in juju ceremonies in order to bring forth power to attract and sway the crowds in their church services. Even many of my seminary students there were not

convinced that juju is demonic. They believed that it could be a neutral, ambivalent force to be manipulated for good or ill by the initiated. These were graduate-level students of the oldest theological seminary on the African continent, founded in 1898.



THE VOID THAT I continually see is an indigenously-led discipling process that is reproducing among Africans. I am speaking of the simple but profound process of knowing how to access Scripture and ask the right questions and model the process well enough so others can “catch” it and take it home. Possibly one of the greatest teaching needs is a discipling process that can be given away—one that really fits African lifestyle and learning styles—a process that will allow Africans to excel at making disciples. I am passionately committed to the pursuit of that discovery.

—STAN WAFLER

Missionary, Northwest Uganda

As they have for decades, many of the students still view Jesus primarily as the honored ancestor. The belief in ancestral spirits is saturated throughout all aspects of their traditional culture. This “honored ancestor” idea prevents them from seeing Jesus biblically as the reigning, interceding, and soon-coming King. Nigerian Baptists have had SBC missionaries among them for more than 150 years—not counting all the other denominations and their efforts. Yet they still struggle with these concepts. Having a Bible and the Holy Spirit is not adequate without someone teaching them. It is obvious that they still need to be trained to interpret the Word of God accurately.

Additionally, their cultural worldview is that the ancestors hold and have an impact upon time. In the timeline perspective of this view, people living today stand still, and the only time with which

we interact is the immediate past, the present, and the immediate future. The bubble of time included in the immediate past, present, and future is considered “the present.” The events of our lives flow past us into an ever-increasing past; the future is not normally considered. This overemphasis on the importance of the past and minimization of the importance of the future greatly complicates a basic understanding of eschatology and a hope for the world to come.

The Yoruba tribe of West Africa use a well-known curse, “Go die in the bush.” This is one of the worst Yoruba curses because historically they were buried under the floor of their houses. To die away from home was the greatest shame and tragedy. According to the Yoruba worldview, people die and are buried, but they live on as living dead. Their presence and preferences are always acknowledged. Although this is certainly not taught in Bible classes, this cultural influence over the people has colored their worldview. One pastor said that the people are nominal Christians; they may be in church on Sunday but just as easily in the witch doctor’s hut on Tuesday. These people live in a land that has historically embraced 401 Yoruba gods and goddesses. This worldview does not evaporate upon praying a prayer; deep discipleship and biblical teaching are needed to develop a Christian worldview and godly living.

In *Listen to the Drums*, C. F. Eaglesfield said, “The greatest need is that of providing leadership for the churches. . . . The leader in many churches is often the one who can read. His instruction is often questionable.”³ It is indeed questionable . . . to say the least! Imagine if the leaders in our churches were simply the ones who could read. Would that guarantee sound biblical instruction? Nigeria has lost funding and missionary personnel for theological education that the sending churches supplied for years. After all, Nigeria is considered reached. Some mission agencies defend this position, saying that the Nigerians already have many pastors who were trained in Nigeria as well as some who were sent to the USA and the UK to earn advanced degrees. However, these men are full-time or bi-vocational pastors and cannot serve as professors. They live all around the country (with a population of 140 million) and are nowhere near the

seminary. Most of these pastors do not feel called to teach in seminary. Of course, this challenge is not found in Nigeria alone.

Missionaries in Ecuador know that the church there shares many ecclesiastical challenges with Nigeria. Many of the Ecuadorian challenges also arise from syncretism and worldview issues. Baptists have been in Ecuador since 1951. There was once a thriving Ecuadorian Baptist Theological Seminary that was training many men and women to serve the church. It was blessed with personnel, funds, material resources, and a well-appointed facility. However, the need for speed to reach the unreached people groups caused some to prefer abandoning theological education there, noting that Ecuadorian churches had received training for twenty years. They argued that twenty years should be sufficient, and the nationals should be able to train the new generations of pastors, professors, and practitioners. However, this is simply not a fair assessment. As in Nigeria, the nationals who were trained are full-time pastors, are bi-vocational, or live too far away to work at the seminary. Tragically, today over half of the Baptist churches in Ecuador have no trained pastor, and only 17 percent of the pastors in the country have received theological education and pastoral training.

I noticed the great need for such training when my family and I served as missionaries among the Highland Quichuas of the Ecuadorian Andes. The few indigenous pastors implored us to not start more churches. I wondered why, since there was an obvious need for more to be planted. They reported that there were pastors in some areas of the country who served eight, ten, or more churches, and what they really needed was more trained leaders. While conducting field research interviews among these poorest of the poor, my last question was always, “What is the greatest need among your people?” Of all the many possible answers that could have surfaced—church buildings, money, medicine, government representation, literacy, etc.—in every case the answer was pastoral and leadership training.

Peru, Ecuador’s southern neighbor, also shares the need for trained pastors and leaders. I often travel to Peru to help train national pastors and church planters. On my first such trip, as I

taught on basic doctrines, I reminded them of the need to share this information with others. A younger class member asked how to share these truths with preliterate people who lack the ability to read or write. As I explained basic ideas of teaching primary oral learners, an older lady in the class seemed very concerned. She asked, “What about me? Can I go to heaven when I die, too?” When she realized I was taken back by her question, she explained. “We have always been told that we could not enter into the kingdom of heaven if we could not read.” Although it broke my heart to hear this, in great detail I joyfully explained that the gospel has nothing to do with one’s literacy level. However, another sad reality in this encounter was when I noticed that the pastors in the room were straining to hear the “correct” answer to that question.

The lady mentioned above is a sincere believer who opened her humble home for a new house church in her community. She serves and worships the Lord Jesus but lacks anyone to teach her His Word. A pastor from one of the most prolific denominations in Peru told me that his denomination lacks trained pastors for 90 percent of their churches. The other brothers told me that over half of the evangelical churches in the country lack trained pastors. These are dear brothers and sisters who love the Lord and each other, but they need trained leadership among them.

Meanwhile, some mission agencies are promoting the idea that pastors do not need theological education. It slows down the work of church planting if you must provide a trained pastor for each church. At first, this sounds logical and seems to make perfect sense. However, many missionaries today are relearning a hard lesson from missions history: When your church growth outstrips your trained leadership, you are in trouble; weak and dysfunctional churches abound.

Those who serve in theological education, as well as those who aspire to do so, have heard many reasons why we should reduce training to the nationals. Some have said, “Places like Nigeria, Ecuador, and Peru do not need any help; they have the Bible and the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth. They already have the people that we have trained who ought to do the training for the others in

their countries, and besides, they might become dependent upon us if we continue to provide their training. They must learn to do this for themselves.” Consider some responses to this argument, offered by missionaries who have seen the problems that result from neglecting Paul’s instruction in 2 Timothy 2:2, “And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”



“Places like Nigeria, Ecuador, and Peru do not need any help; they have the Bible and the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth.”

It is neither responsible nor accurate to say that a Bible and the Holy Spirit is all someone needs. Many dogmatic preachers are genuinely saved and have a Bible, but they see in the Bible only what they want to see. Many well-meaning but untaught brothers are wrongly interpreting the Bible and leading people astray. All of us appreciate the training that we have received and realize that we have been taught truths that we may never have seen for ourselves—or at least not for many years.

“Places like Nigeria, Ecuador, and Peru already have the pastors whom we have trained, and they ought to do the training now for the others in their countries.”

The ones who have been trained through the years are those who were called into the ministry. Seminaries did not consciously, intentionally, or proactively train professors; they trained pastors. No one should fault these pastors for remaining true to their calling. It is true that some of them would be glad to help if they could, but they are overwhelmed with their pastorates and family responsibilities—especially those who are serving as bi-vocational pastors, as

denominational workers, or in other ministries. Many do not live near their country's seminary locations and could not logistically manage such a responsibility.

“Places like Nigeria, Ecuador, and Peru might become dependent upon us if we continue to provide their training. They must learn to do this for themselves.”

Dependency is a complicated problem that should be avoided with all due diligence. Yet, generally, dependency refers to financial matters. Some have extrapolated this concept to apply to training as well. While we do not want the national church to depend on our training forever, it is never right to stop training without first training the trainers who will replace us.

For instance, when an agency decides to no longer direct a bookstore ministry and hands the keys to the nationals with no training to prepare them, missionaries should not be surprised when the bookstore suffers. I have had the uncomfortable experience of translating a collection agency letter from a United States-based Christian publisher to a Christian bookstore in Latin America. The nationals did not know how to manage the store, buy books, pay bills, or read collection agency letters. They had simply received the keys from well-meaning missionaries who never trained them to do the work. This same approach has been applied to handing off seminaries and Bible colleges. Of course, nationals will be dependent on those already instructed and trained for their instruction and training. Discipleship and mentoring by very definition depend on knowledgeable guides who have more wisdom, life experience, and training than those whom they are guiding.

The only way to ensure that the national churches are not dependent on outside missionaries forever is not for them to step out of the picture, but rather to be obedient to 2 Timothy 2:2. We must train trainers, teach teachers, and disciple

disciplers. It is clear that national churches should not become dependent on our money, but Jesus commands us to teach. Yes, we have taught them for years, but before we leave, we must teach others to teach so that they can continue the task.

The national church must have a seat at the table in the hermeneutical community. They alone have the emic perspective that is essential for a proper contextualization of the gospel. However, until nationals are biblically and theologically trained, missionaries must provide the proper parameters in the grammatico-historical interpretation process as well as critical contextualization. The reality is that many mission agencies have left the table.

GLOBAL NEEDS

An alarming reality in global Christianity today coincides with the abandonment of thorough theological preparation of the churches we have reached. Without understanding this sobering new reality, some may be tempted to simply shake their heads and feel pity for these benighted brothers teaching heresy in other lands. The reality is that there are now many more Christians in what is called the Southern Church than in the traditional sending countries.

The Southern Church refers to Africa, Asia, and the nations south of the Rio Grande in the Americas. The church is growing exponentially in these countries. They not only outnumber those from the United States of America in numbers of Christians and churches, they send more missionaries than the United States and Western Europe combined. Sadly, their lack of theological education, pastoral preparation, and leadership training is reflected in the aberrant forms of Christianity found in their lands.

Philip Jenkins has noted this phenomenon of growth in the Southern Church in his book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. He writes, "Over the past century . . . the center of gravity has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia, and Latin

America. Already today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa and Latin America. If we want to visualize a ‘typical’ contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela.”⁴ Christopher Wright also writes about this reality in his book *The Mission of God*, “From a situation at the beginning of the twentieth century when approximately 90 percent of all the world’s Christians lived in the West or North (i.e., predominantly Europe and North America), the beginning of the twenty-first century finds at least 75 percent of the world’s Christians in the continents of the South and East—Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia and the Pacific.”⁵

This trend is a new phenomenon because for the first time in centuries there are more Christians in other parts of the world than there are in Europe and North America. The Western church now sits in the shadow of the Southern Church, the massive younger big brother in global Christianity. Of course, this fantastic growth rate is not the alarming reality. We give praise for this answer to our prayers and missionary efforts. The alarming aspect is that there has been a concomitant growth of aberrant doctrine and bizarre practice in the Southern Church.

In an article in *The Economist* magazine, Harvard professor Harvey Cox points out the reasons why syncretistic Pentecostalism has grown so quickly around the world. He says, “One is the fact that it reconnects people with primitive religion: it taps into a deep substratum of primal spirituality, filling the ‘ecstasy deficit’ left by cooler religions. The movement’s emphasis on experience rather than doctrine gives it a remarkable ability to absorb other faiths, from spirit possession in the Caribbean to ancestor worship in Africa, from folk healing in Brazil to shamanism in Korea. As the Pentecostals say, ‘the man with an experience is never at the mercy of the man with a doctrine.’ The other is that Pentecostalism offers a ‘third way’ between scientific rationalism and traditional religion.”⁶ Failure to understand existing folk religions and the cultural nuances of world religions in their various contexts has resulted in startling degrees of syncretism in many places.⁷

Nature abhors a vacuum, and human beings do not like the tension of questions with no answers. When a people embrace Christianity and begin to explore its implications, they must have biblical answers. In the absence of biblical answers, the answers to questions such as, “Why did my daughter die?” or, “How can I ensure crop success?” will be answered with the former traditional religions.

If we are not training national believers to believe biblically sound Christian doctrine and to interpret the Word of God correctly, the day will soon come when those who represent Christ in this world will be preaching a gospel that Jesus never gave. When people wonder what Christianity is about, they will look to a “typical” Christian. The person they look to will not be a Christian in a Western evangelical church preaching a gospel that orthodox, biblical Christianity will recognize. Doctrinally sound New Testament Christianity is shrinking in size and influence.

Mission agencies have withheld human and financial resources for theological education in order to speed the work of exponential church growth among the nationals and to avoid all forms of dependency. Those who sense the fallacy in such a methodology sometimes shrug and turn back to their books while confidently reminding themselves that at least Western Christians have the truth. The day is rapidly approaching when few beyond our theologically sound Western seminaries and churches will care. Global Christianity is growing in such a way that truth is considered to be that which works; pragmatism rules in the absence of propositional truth. We will have to say in that day that we did not lose our voice; we willingly yielded it. If trends continue, we will one day shout truth in order to rebuke, reprove, exhort, instruct, and correct, only to be considered irrelevant and not be heard.

CONCLUSION

The Great Commission is not just about witnessing or church planting. Jesus said to make disciples of the ethnic groups of the world, and to do so by teaching them to observe all that He commanded us.

We must not relegate pastoral training, theological education, and biblical teaching to a level of less important missions activity when they are a primary and necessary means for the fulfilling of the Great Commission. Right now, people all over the world are begging for help. They want teaching, Bible training, theological education, and pastoral preparation in Nigeria, Ecuador, Peru, and, of course, in many other countries. Right now, we still have a voice. May it ring out for the glory of God and the advance of the gospel.

SUGGESTED READING

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