

Revisiting the  
Great Commission  
GEOFF THOMAS

John Calvin: Father of  
Reformed Missions  
STEVEN J. LAWSON

How Shall They  
Hear the Gospel?  
M. DAVID SILLS

# EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

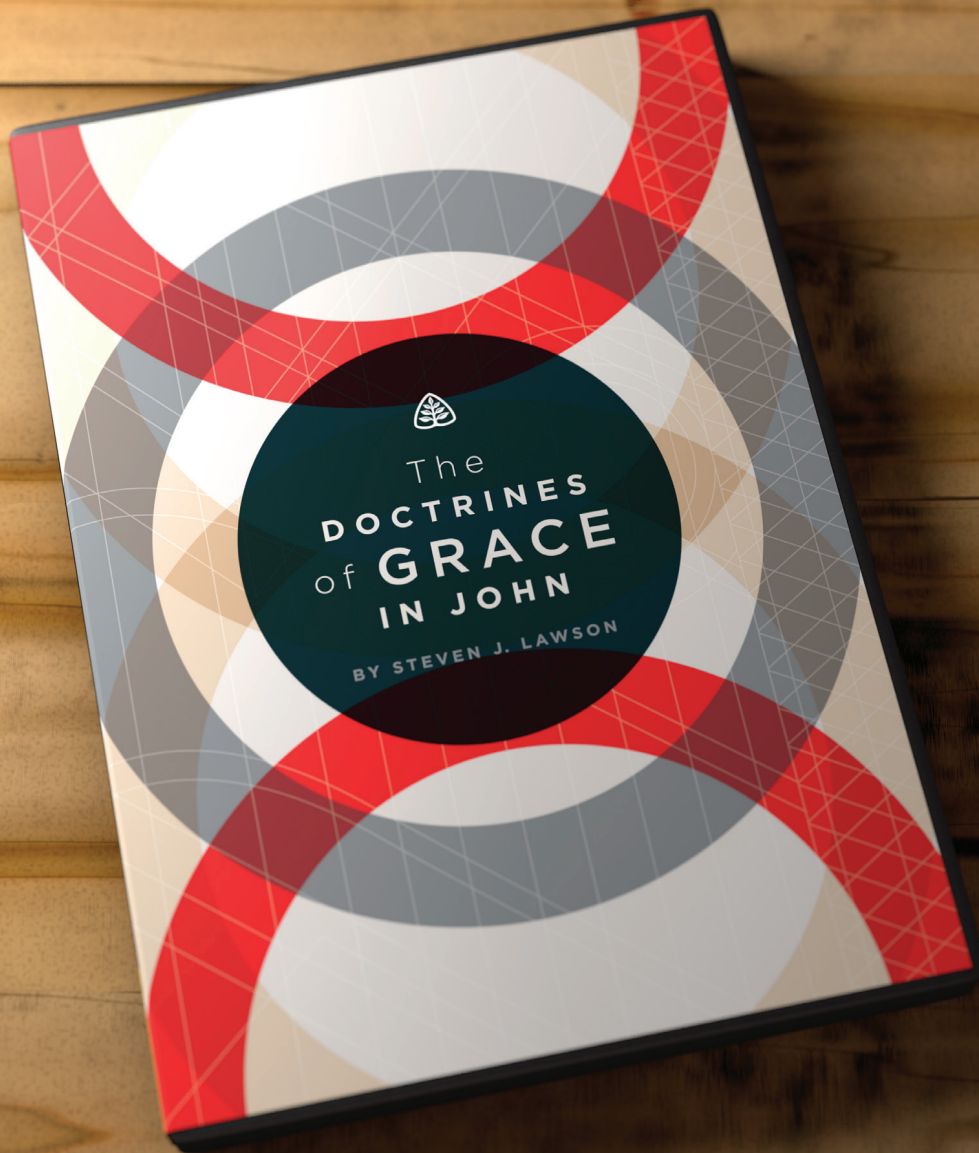
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ISSUE

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# PREACHING THE WORD, REACHING THE WORLD

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



In the Great Commission, Jesus Christ explicitly charged His disciples to preach the gospel to all the world and proclaim the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Their mission was to start where they were, in Jerusalem, and then expand outward to Judea and Samaria, and finally to reach the corners of the earth. As God gave them opportunity, the ministry of preaching the Word throughout the world was their primary duty.

Nothing has changed over the centuries. Every preacher has been entrusted with this same commission to preach the gospel to the entire world. As God-called heralds of truth, each one of us must do our part in proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. We must first preach locally where the Lord has placed us, and, then, we must be willing to preach globally as God providentially opens doors and orchestrates circumstances to do so. Fulfilling this call may involve short-term missions and other means, full-time missionary work as well as sending others.

In recent years, it has been my privilege to do my part in taking God's truths to the nations. As opportunities have been placed before me, I have been enabled to preach in countries such as Russia, Japan, Mexico, Scotland, England, Spain, Switzerland, Brazil, and many more places around the world. I am grateful for these open doors and encouraged to see the work of God being done all around the world by faithful pastors and churches. While some ministries will have more of a global focus than others, we are all called to make the most of our resources and ministries to impact this world for Christ.

This is the mission that Jesus Christ has entrusted to us. We must preach the gospel locally and extend its message to the nations as far and wide as the will of God will allow us. Every expositor is to fulfill this international commission, though it will be carried out differently as each man is uniquely gifted and positioned by God.

In this issue of *Expositor*, we will focus our attention upon preaching to fulfill the Great Commission. Every preacher must do his part in going into all the world to preach the Word. Likewise, every one of us must be discipling men who will spread the biblical message far and wide. We must be sending these men out from our churches to the four corners of the earth. Every expositor must be involved in preaching to the nations, whether directly or indirectly, whether himself or through others whom he equips and sends. This charge is not a mere option, but a divine obligation.

I pray that, through this issue, you are challenged and inspired to do your part in preaching to the nations. ♦



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PREACHING  
*to the*  
NATIONS  
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**EXPOSITOR**

**ONEPASSION**



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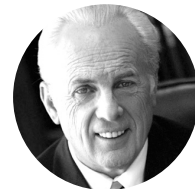
**Steven J. Lawson** is president of OnePassion Ministries, professor of preaching at The Master's Seminary, teaching fellow with Ligonier Ministries, and author of over twenty books, including *Pillars of Grace* and *Foundations of Grace*.

**M. David Sills** is professor of Christian Missions and Cultural Anthropology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. He is the author of *The Missionary Call* and *Reaching and Teaching*.



**Tom Ascol** is senior minister of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, FL, and executive director of Founders Ministries. He is editor of *Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry* and other books and articles.

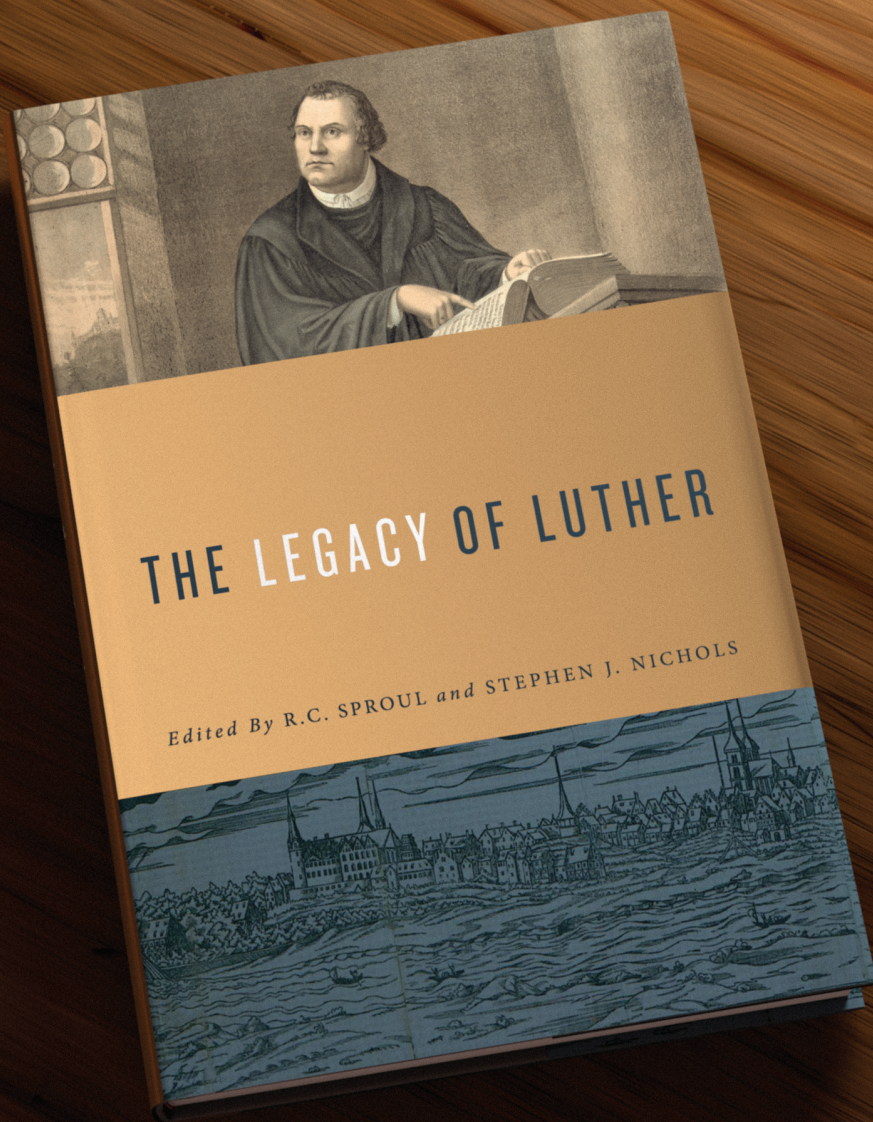
**John MacArthur** is pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA, and president of The Master's College and Seminary. He is the author of over one hundred books and author and editor of *The MacArthur Study Bible*.



**Geoff Thomas** is the minister of Alfred Place Baptist Church in Aberystwyth, Wales. He is a visiting professor of Historical Theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI.

**Donald S. Whitney** is professor of Biblical Spirituality and associate dean of the School of Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. He is the author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*.





## MEET MARTIN LUTHER

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JOHN CALVIN:  
FATHER OF  
REFORMED MISSIONS

STEVEN J. LAWSON



**N**o pulpit ever had a more gifted expositor with a greater commitment to expound the unsearchable riches of Scripture than did the one who stood in St. Pierre's Cathedral, Geneva during the sixteenth century. This gifted preacher opened up the Word of God in this newly Reformed city and became the chief theologian for the Protestant movement to this day. But more than that, he would become the first preacher to send out an army of missionaries to preach the gospel and plant churches in foreign lands. This indomitable preacher's name was John Calvin.

By an unforeseen turn of events, this Frenchman found himself in Geneva, preaching the Word during a pivotal time of history known as the Protestant Reformation. The population of the city doubled during the 1550s as thousands of refugees escaped the persecution of their homeland. By 1560, Geneva had suddenly grown from 10,000 citizens to more than 21,000 people. Among these new inhabitants were large numbers of French Huguenots, who fled for their lives under the intolerant tyranny of the staunchly Catholic regime of France. Others poured into Geneva from England, escaping the reign of terror initiated by Queen Mary I, infamously known as Bloody Mary. This malicious monarch was well named, as she burned 288 Protestants at the stake, including women and children.

Many other people took flight to this Swiss city of refuge to find protection and safe haven in these tumultuous times. This rapid influx included exiles from Spain, Italy, Germany, and various other countries. These beleaguered believers found themselves sitting at the feet of Calvin, the most noted expositor of the day, where they absorbed the profound truth of his powerful sermons.

As these displaced refugees sat under Calvin's preaching, they became even more deeply grounded in the sound doctrines of Scripture. But as they were being taught, something unexpected occurred. They soon became convinced they should return to their homeland to preach this gospel message to their countrymen and plant churches. The more they learned from Calvin, the more they felt convinced to go back and proclaim these same truths to their former fellow citizens. In their hearts and minds, a sacred stewardship was being entrusted to them, and they were accountable to God to declare this message in their native land. Under Calvin's pulpit, many of these exiles felt compelled to carry these biblical truths back from whence they had come.

### Calvin's School of Death

But before traveling back, these transplanted immigrants needed better training in the Scripture if they were to be effective missionaries. Across the street from Saint Pierre's Cathedral was the Auditorium, where Calvin would teach these aspiring men and prepare them for ministry. This lecture hall became the training center where he would equip them to preach to their fellow countrymen. In this classroom, Calvin taught sequentially, verse by verse, through books in the Bible so that they could serve successfully as missionaries. But this international outreach did not come without a cost. This class became known as "Calvin's School of Death" because enrolling in it often meant their martyrdom.

As these missionaries left Geneva and entered France, they were forced to travel by night under the cloak of darkness and journeyed on obscure roads to avoid being detected. Once they arrived at their destination, they hid in the attics of sympathizers of the Reformation. Many were even concealed in false rooms built behind chimneys. They met with other Protestants, forming an underground church, and these newly birthed congregations assembled secretly in barns, country fields, or secluded caves. Despite the ever-present dangers, these churches thrived and grew in France.

This mission was potentially so dangerous that the Venerable Company of Pastors, the council which oversaw this work, chose not to keep full records of the names of the men being sent to avoid putting them at risk. Despite the many dangers, missionaries trained by Calvin were commissioned and began leaving Geneva in order to preach the gospel and plant churches abroad. Ignited by Calvin's preaching and teaching, the far-reaching effects of this international enterprise was staggering.

### Calvin's Primary Target

These heroic missionary efforts were primarily directed towards Calvin's homeland, France. The Swiss reformer had been born north of Paris, in Noyon, and educated in the Universities of Paris, Orleans, and Bourges. It was in France that he had been converted to faith in Jesus Christ, and consequently, reaching his homeland with the gospel was strong upon Calvin's heart to reach his homeland. Because most of the refugees in Geneva were French Huguenots, who knew the language, culture, and customs, it made sense that these Frenchmen in Geneva would return to their native land. Therefore, sending these French-speaking men back to France, which lies in close proximity to Geneva, was the most prudent strategy.

Commissioned by Calvin and the other Genevan pastors, these brave men returning to France were highly capable. Some were from aristocratic French families, well educated in the best universities of the day. A large number of these missionaries were from upper-middle class backgrounds with the advantages of a proper education. A few were from the lower class of France with a high work ethic. They had come to Geneva from every province and social background in France. Thus, when they returned, virtually every region and social class in France was reached with the good news of Jesus Christ.

### Calvin's High Standards

These missionaries were carefully examined and required to meet high ministerial standards. They had to demonstrate ability in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek and show proficiency in exegeting the biblical text. The personal holiness of each man was carefully probed, and their theological astuteness was scrutinized. Each man was required to have a working knowledge of systematic theology and church history. They also had to pass an examination of their preaching ability. These men were even challenged to count the cost of possible martyrdom.

Only once these missionaries had been inspected for their moral purity, theological fidelity, and ministerial ability were they approved to be sent to France on this dangerous mission. However, any defect in their handling of money, personal honesty, or sexual purity meant a man's immediate discipline and dismissal.

The Genevan records show that 88 preachers were sent into France. Of these men, nine died a martyr's death. Many more preachers were commissioned by the Council of Genevan pastors. But due to the need to conceal their identity, their names were never recorded. Suffice it to say, many more men were sent out on this task. On one occasion, the French government contacted the Venerable Company of Pastors regarding their connection with two preachers who they had reason to believe had been authorized by the Swiss city. But the Genevan pastors were able to respond that they had no record of such men being sent from their midst, which was true. They, in fact, had no such record.

### Remarkable Expansion into France

In 1555, there were only five Protestant churches in all of France. These small congregations were having to meet illegally, underground, to protect their lives. But with the arrival of the missionaries from Geneva, the make-up of this movement began to change. Four years later, in 1559, the number of Reformed churches had grown significantly. The total suddenly exceeded over one hundred congrega-

tions that had emerged as a result of the missionaries from Geneva, who started Bible studies in homes that grew into healthy churches. In only three more years, by 1562, there were some 2,150 gospel-preaching churches in France.

Historians estimate that between two and three million people were active members in these Protestant congregations. The entire population of France was only twenty million people at this point in time. Given these figures, one-tenth of the entire population in France was involved in the Protestant movement.

### Rapidly Growing Churches

Some of these churches became quite large. One newly planted Protestant church in Bergerac, France, wrote to Calvin, revealing the success of their newly started efforts. This congregation had grown to a size of between four and five thousand worshippers:

There is, by the grace of God, such a movement in our district, that the devil is already for the most part driven out, so that we are able to provide ministers for ourselves. From day to day, we are growing, and God has caused his word to bear such fruit that at sermons on Sundays, there are about 4,000 to 5,000 people.

Another Reformed church in Montpellier addressed their correspondence to Calvin, providing further insight into the spread of their missionary work. This church in southern France had grown to an even larger size: "Our church, thanks to the Lord, has so grown and so continues to grow every day that we are obliged to preach three sermons on Sunday to a total of 5,000 to 6,000 people." Still other Genevan-trained missionaries planted a church in Toulouse that grew even larger. The pastors wrote to the Genevan Consistory: "Our church has grown to the astounding number of about 8,000 to 9,000 souls." God was honoring His Word with amazing results as it was being proclaimed by these faithful men.

### Throughout Europe and Beyond

Other missionaries trained by Calvin were sent to preach and plant churches in the surrounding European countries. The historical records reveal that men trained in Geneva were commissioned to other lands such as Italy, the Netherlands, Hungary, Poland, and the free Imperial city states of the Rhineland. After Bloody Mary I was removed from her throne in England in 1558, John Knox was free to leave Geneva and return to his native Scotland to preach the gospel. There he took the biblical truths he had learned

# WITH HIS EYE ON THE WORLD, CALVIN UNDERSTOOD THAT THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH MANDATED THAT IT BEAR WITNESS OF JESUS CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED TO EVERY LIVING CREATURE.

from Calvin and established the Church of Scotland in 1560. Others in Geneva returned to England to reform the church there.

One missionary team from Geneva even sailed across the Atlantic Ocean, reaching places as far away as South America. Two Calvin-trained missionaries—Pierre Richier and William Cartier—accompanied a Protestant expedition to Brazil in the dual capacity as chaplains to the French merchants and missionaries to the native Indians. Though the leader of the expedition betrayed the missionaries and the mission was forced to be abandoned, it nevertheless reveals the missionary vision and intense zeal of Calvin and his fellow pastors in Geneva to reach the world for Christ.

### **Preaching That Ignites Missions**

This kind of prolific missionary activity was ignited under the expository preaching of Calvin. Each sermon was stoking the flames within his listeners to carry the gospel to another land. The question needs to be asked: What was the nature of Calvin's preaching that it spurred such an

explosion of missionary activity? Granted, this Genevan reformer is well known for his strong teaching on the biblical doctrines of sovereign election and absolute predestination. But what other truths was he expounding in the pulpit that sparked such a heavy involvement in foreign missions? What did Calvin preach concerning the sacred duty of the church to reach the nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ? What was his pulpit emphasis in regard to human responsibility to go into all the world to proclaim Christ?

A survey of Calvin's sermons reveals that as he preached the full counsel of God, he maintained an unwavering commitment to the divine imperative to reach the nations with the gospel of Jesus Christ. While Calvin believed and openly taught the unconditional election of God of certain individuals for salvation, this did not negate the church's responsibility to preach the gospel to every creature. Calvin was firmly convinced that the saving message of Jesus Christ must be proclaimed to all peoples. This was a foundational truth that he announced regularly from the pulpit.

Any sampling of his expository sermons reveals that Calvin repeatedly urged his Genevan congregation regarding their duty to advance into the world with the saving message of Christ crucified. It was his relentless commitment to preach the Word that sparked this flurry of missionary activity in spite of the life-threatening dangers that awaited them in their homeland.

### **“To All the World”**

With his eye on the world, Calvin understood that the mission of the church mandated that it bear witness of Jesus Christ and Him crucified to every living creature. Before His ascension, as recorded in Matthew 28:19–20 and Acts 1:8, Christ commissioned His disciples to go to the nations and proclaim the good news of salvation to the ends of the earth. Calvin believed that this divine charge remained in effect to the end of the age and required that the church send out ambassadors to preach Jesus Christ to all nations. Preachers must be sent forth who would travel to all nations and call for repentance and faith in the Son of God.

For example, Calvin proclaimed in his sermon on 1 Timothy 2:5–6 that the message of the grace of God must be preached in every part of the earth:

God wants His grace to be known to all the world, and He has commanded that His gospel be preached to all creatures; we must (as much as we are able) seek the salvation of those who today are strangers to the faith, who seem to be completely deprived of God's goodness.

Here Calvin stressed that the message of saving grace must be preached indiscriminately to “all the world” and “to all creatures.” While the Scripture teaches that only some are chosen for salvation, it nevertheless commands that the church must preach the gospel to all people. Calvin affirmed both of these truths. The free offer of the gospel must be preached to everyone everywhere. Calvin maintained that this task of global evangelism is both God’s desire and His command. To this end, he devoted himself to do all within his power to facilitate the worldwide preaching of the gospel.

### “Over All the World”

In this same sermon on 1 Timothy 2:5–6, Calvin proclaimed that Jesus Christ entered this world to save many souls throughout the nations. He stated: “Jesus came, not simply to save a few, but to extend his grace over all the world.” Calvin firmly believed and boldly preached that the saving grace of Christ must be declared in every place to every person around the world. Hearing this sermon from Calvin, and other messages like it, must have instilled a

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compelling motivation in many refugees sitting under his preaching. This was so much the case that they would be transformed from refugees into missionaries within a very short time.

### “To the Entire World”

Preaching further on 1 Timothy 2:6, Calvin stressed that the gospel must be proclaimed not merely locally, but globally. He instructed his Genevan flock that Jesus sent out His disciples to the entire world to preach the good news of salvation. In like manner, so must the church continue to do the same. Calvin maintained that salvation must be offered to the entire world:

Jesus Christ has not only proclaimed glad tidings but has also sent forth His apostles and ministers to preach and publish peace to the entire world.... This salvation belongs to the entire world without exception.

By this assertion, Calvin relayed the divine mandate that preachers advance into the entire world to make Christ known. This truth was reinforced in the ears of exiled French Huguenots as they heard Calvin preach. This, undoubtedly, must have made a strong impression upon his congregation as they sat under his expositions. With every emphasis upon their responsibility to fulfill this mandate, a heightened sense of their gospel duty was growing within them to evangelize back in their homeland.

### “All the World”

In his exposition of 2 Timothy 1:8–9, Calvin boldly asserted that if Christ is not preached to the whole world, it is as though Jesus Christ is still buried and removed from the sight of the people. That is to say, if Jesus is not proclaimed abroad by His people, the Lord cannot be seen or heard by those who are without Him. Here is what Calvin preached:

If the gospel be not preached, Jesus Christ is, as it were, buried. Therefore, let us stand as witness, and do Him this honor, when we see all the world so far out of the way...Let us here observe that St. Paul condemns our unthankfulness, if we be so unfaithful to God, as not to bear witness of His gospel; seeing He has called us to it.

In this moving sermon, Calvin charged that if Christians do not preach Christ to the entire world, it is nothing less than ingratitude toward God. If the church fails to declare the gospel, he reasoned, the thankfulness due to God

is withheld from Him. It is out of a heart of gratitude that believers must proclaim to others what has been preached to them.

#### **“That He Be Known by All”**

On another occasion, Calvin challenged his Genevan congregation that a failure to make known the saving gospel to all people is a sure indication that the glory of God is lightly regarded by them. When preaching on Deuteronomy 33:18–19, Calvin asserted that if God and His greatness mean anything to the church, it will do all within its ability to make His majesty known to all. He stated:

When we know God to be our Father, should we not desire that He be known as such by all? And if we do not have this passion, that all creatures do Him homage, is it not a sign that His glory means little to us?

Here Calvin argued that the knowledge of God brings with it a strong desire to make Him known to all creatures. All who truly know God want to make Him known to all. This saving knowledge of God is so dynamic that it generates a “passion” for “all creatures” to know Him. Otherwise, the glory of God means little to a believer.

#### **“Rescue Poor Souls from Hell”**

In this same sermon on Deuteronomy 33, Calvin stated what should be the genuine compassion of all believers for those who are “going to perdition.” The fact that others are going to hell should motivate believers to preach the gospel to those who are perishing. He stated:

If we have any humanity in us, seeing men going to perdition, ought we not be moved by pity, to rescue the poor souls from hell, and teach them the way of salvation?

With this statement, Calvin reasoned that the reality of people perishing in hell forever should move the church to reach them with the gospel. Believers must do all within their power to “teach them the way of salvation” and rescue lost sinners from the eternal flames below. How could these refugees sit safely in Geneva when their fellow countrymen are in great danger of eternal damnation?

#### **“Spread the Doctrines of Religion”**

Calvin explained that the godly will be possessed with an evangelistic zeal to make the truth of the gospel known to others. In commenting on Isaiah 2:3, he taught there will

## **CALVIN REASONED THAT THE REALITY OF PEOPLE PERISHING IN HELL FOREVER SHOULD MOVE THE CHURCH TO REACH THEM WITH THE GOSPEL.**

be a high level of motivation in believers to spread the saving message of Jesus Christ. The ones who know God and are growing to become like Him want to make Him known. Calvin explained:

The godly will be filled with such an ardent desire to spread the doctrines of religion, that everyone...will desire to draw others along with him.

Here, Calvin reasons that the godly will be filled with an “ardent desire to spread the doctrines” of salvation far and wide. This will be more than an obligation, but a burning passion to be engaged in missions. Calvin stressed that “everyone” who believes in Christ should have this “desire” so that no one should be unreached with the gospel truth.

#### **“To Every Nation”**

Calvin stressed that the responsibility to make the truth about God known to every nation belongs to every believer. If the church fails to proclaim God to all people, Calvin stated, it is because its members are “lazy and slothful.” In commenting on Isaiah 12:5, Calvin affirmed:

It is our duty to proclaim the goodness of God to every nation. While we exhort and encourage others, we must not at the same time sit down in indolence, but it is proper that we set an example before others;

for nothing can be more absurd than to see lazy and slothful men who are exciting other men to praise God.

Spreading the gospel, Calvin emphasized, requires that the church not whisper it, but openly “proclaim” it. This powerful message is not to be mumbled in a stoic manner. Rather, Calvin stressed that believers must fervently “exhort” and strongly “encourage” others. The church must not “sit down” idly in a “tame” fashion while sinners are perishing. Instead, believers must be actively, even aggressively, engaged in missions.

## SPREADING THE GOSPEL, CALVIN EMPHASIZED, REQUIRES THAT THE CHURCH NOT WHISPER IT, BUT OPENLY "PROCLAIM" IT.

### “Everywhere in the Whole World”

Moreover, Calvin asserted that no nation or people group should be excluded from hearing the truth of the gospel. In his comments on Genesis 17:23, he maintained: “[God] requires His gospel to be preached everywhere in the whole world, for the purpose of restoring it from death to life.” To this end, he maintained that God expects the truth of His gospel be proclaimed in every place to every person. The purpose of this global undertaking is that under the preaching of the gospel, those who are spiritually “dead” may be resurrected to eternal “life.”

### “Throughout the Whole World”

After preaching, Calvin regularly closed his sermon in prayer by expressing to God that it is not enough for a Christian to know the truth and possess salvation. The knowledge of the gospel and the salvation it imparts brings a great responsibility with it. Once this saving message is received, Calvin proclaimed, it must be declared to “the whole world.” After his sermon on 1 Timothy 2:3, he noted:

Seeing that God has given us such a treasure and so inestimable a thing as His Word, we must employ ourselves as much as we can.... It is not enough to have an eye to [one’s] own salvation, but the knowledge of God must shine generally throughout the whole world.

In this pulpit prayer, Calvin stressed that the gospel is a treasure that cannot be hoarded and kept to one’s self. Instead, he prayed, the message of salvation is so valuable that it must be shared with all people who stand in great need of it. Further, the light of gospel truth must shine from the church to all peoples everywhere. This light of truth must not be hidden from any person, anywhere, but be made known to all.

### “We Pray...for All Men”

Calvin concluded each Sunday morning sermon with a second prayer after his initial brief, extemporaneous prayer at the end of his exposition. This second closing prayer—a prayer of intercession—was written by Calvin and recorded in the Genevan Liturgy of 1542. These words were prayed by him at the end of each Sunday morning exposition:

We pray, most gracious God and merciful Father, for all men generally. Since You desire all men to acknowledge You as Saviour of the world, through the redemption won by our Lord Jesus Christ, may those who do not know Him, being in darkness and captive to ignorance and error—may they by the light of Your Holy Spirit and the preaching of Your gospel be led into the way of salvation, which is to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

The worldwide extent of this prayer that was offered by Calvin every Sunday morning cannot be overlooked. The Swiss reformer prayed weekly for “all men” to believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. In this pastoral prayer, he interceded that all in “darkness” may come to “the light” of the truth. He pleaded with God that “those who do not know

Him” may hear “the preaching of Your gospel” and “be led into the way of salvation.” This evangelistic prayer for the lost world was offered before the throne of grace every Sunday. As the congregation heard him give such a prayer with a heart for the world, their own souls, undoubtedly, were enlarged for the lost as well.

### A Towering Example

The missionary zeal of Calvin to preach the Word and send out gospel preachers stands as a towering example to all generations of a gifted expositor who desired to reach the nations for Jesus Christ. As this Genevan pastor stood in the pulpit, week after week, even day after day, expounding the Scripture, he constantly kept his focus upon evangelizing the world. His passion was that all peoples would come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. God

blessed his pulpit labors by giving them a strategic role in fulfilling the Great Commission in his day. Under Calvin’s expository sermons, God raised up an army of missionaries who marched to the nations with the gospel truths they had learned. Through these biblical messages transcribed and subsequently distributed far and wide, the preaching of Calvin continues around the globe even into our generation.

As a preacher of the Word, will you follow in the pattern set by John Calvin five hundred years ago? Will you personally commit to a ministry focused on expositing the Scriptures with a desire to see those under your ministry carry the gospel to the ends of the earth? Let us emulate the preaching of Calvin and point our listeners to the God-honoring cause of international missions around the world. ♦



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HOW SHALL THEY  
HEAR THE GOSPEL?

M. DAVID SILLS



**V**oices all around me are shouting in several languages. Some are explaining why the current U.S. president is a great leader; others are telling me that he has failed the American people. Some are telling me what the weather will be like, others want me to know which roads have traffic snarls, and yet others are trying to convince me to buy my groceries at their store. Music of every style is blaring all around the room: hard rock, rap, hip-hop, jazz, classical, easy listening, country, and bluegrass.

Fortunately, I cannot hear the cacophony; it is in the form of radio frequencies that my ears cannot detect. I would have to turn on a radio receiver and tune it to a desired station to hear any of the intended messages. The greatest programming from the most creative minds is lost on me.

Such is also the case with much preaching of the gospel: it goes out in culturally inappropriate ways that make sense only to the preacher.

This miscommunication, however, is of crucial significance, because there is no salvation apart from the gospel message. The glory of God and the eternal destinies of billions of souls are in the balance. In Romans 1:16–17, Paul states, “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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” This passage, a favorite of many people, speaks of the great blessing of our salvation, but with such great privilege comes great responsibility. The Bible also charges us to fulfill the Great Commission to reach and teach all people groups.

Jesus taught us through his encounter with Nicodemus that we must be born again (John 3:1–16). Paul implored the church in Corinth to be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:17–6:2). He stressed that we must respond with a positive profession of faith in Christ upon hearing the gospel message. Yet, in Romans 10:14, Paul raises questions that should haunt every Christian: “But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” It is essential that the gospel message go out to the ends of the earth.

The gospel message is indeed going out around the world. Faithful missionaries and dedicated preachers are heralding the good news across the seas and across the street. This communication of the Word has been going on in greater or lesser degrees since the first century. Yet, two

thousand years later, one third of the planet has still not heard the gospel. *Missions Frontiers* magazine reports that there are 27,000 people groups in the world today. Of that number, 13,000 are still unreached people groups. One third of the world’s population, over two billion people, has never heard the gospel. There remains much to do, and the task requires every effort of faithful Christians.

Joshua was one of the more faithful leaders in Israel’s history. Toward the end of his earthly years, the Lord spoke to him: “Now Joshua was old and advanced in years, and the Lord said to him, ‘You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to possess’” (Josh 13:1). We have had much more time than Joshua had and many more resources besides, but there remains “yet very much land to possess.” Some would counter that it is virtually impossible to take the gospel to every continent, every country, every language, and every culture. The languages alone make the task seem insurmountable.

Certainly, men and women have been busy at the task. We are broadcasting the gospel message all around the globe, but often we are transmitting in a frequency that the people of the world cannot hear. How can we ensure that the proclamation of the gospel will be heard and understood? We must make every effort to be good communicators of the gospel in every culture.

There is a vast difference between commentators and communicators of the biblical message. One may read the commentaries of Matthew Henry or John Calvin and find nuggets of truth that were mined hundreds of years ago, but neither writer attempted to apply the truth of God’s Word in the culture of the United States in the twenty-first century. They left us to make our own application. Indeed, a commentator must do this, as he does not live in all of the cultural contexts of each of his readers—even in his own time—much less those in the future. He simply unpacks the truths that are in the text, which then become so many ingredients for the meals that the pastors prepare and feed their flocks.

Commentators write about the basic truths of God’s Word and do not concern themselves with applying them in all the diverse cultures and worldviews. Communicators of God’s Word, however, are not allowed this luxury.

Communicators must concern themselves with both biblical truth and the sending of it in culturally understandable ways. They do this by transmitting the message in a mutually accepted coded system that the hearers will understand; in fact, this is the *sine qua non* of their discipline. The essence of effective communication is speaking the truth in a way that thoughts in the speaker’s mind are encoded, sent, decoded, and accepted into the respon-

# UNDERSTANDING AND INCORPORATING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL.

dent's mind with roughly the same message. In recent decades, research, reflection, analysis, and God's blessing have resulted in approaches to the task that are more effective. However, such techniques are certainly not completely new. Numbers 13 records the command of the Lord for Israel to send spies into the land of Canaan to see what kind of people lived there, what kind of cities they lived in, and what kind of food they ate. A similar event occurs in Joshua 2. This ethnographic research was reconnaissance for the purpose of conquest. Ethnographic research today employs similar tactics for studying people groups for the purpose of kingdom growth. The general field of missions has developed into specialized fields of study in areas such as ethnographic research and communication in intercultural contexts.

Intercultural studies is a discipline employed by seminaries and universities to train those who will live and work among various cultures—in the United States or in other countries. While cultural anthropology and intercultural studies are terms that may conjure up images of pith helmets and field notebooks or social scientists hugging trees, they are simply proven tools for understanding, living among, and communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. In fact, many seminaries have renamed their missions departments as schools of intercultural studies or have major programs of intercultural studies in their missions programs. An appreciation of the

value of cultural anthropology as a useful tool in communicating with others has been growing among evangelicals for decades. One of Christianity's greatest gospel communicators, Dr. Billy Graham, majored in anthropology while at Wheaton College.

One of the divisions of intercultural studies is intercultural communication. The purpose of this article is to address the value of the discipline of intercultural communication for proclaiming the gospel. This will be accomplished by considering its biblical basis, historical implications, benefits for linguistics, value for understanding worldviews and cultures, recognition of the unique needs of oral cultures, and the missiological strategies and methodologies that flow out of these. In such a short article, I can only introduce these areas along with a few examples to demonstrate some of the benefits of intercultural communication. Understanding and incorporating intercultural communication tools are essential for effectively communicating the gospel, whether as missionaries in international contexts or as pastors of churches in the United States.

## Biblical Basis

Those of us who love the Scriptures should be the first to notice the tools of intercultural communication at work. The fact that we have a Bible that we can read and understand proves that this process has occurred in our past, since the essence of intercultural communication is putting a message in terms that someone in another culture can understand. We speak freely about the incarnation of Christ as an essential for our redemption but often overlook the fact that his written Word also came to us in a system that we could understand. John Calvin says that the Bible is God speaking to us as a parent speaking to a young child in baby talk. Since God's thoughts are above our own and infinitely wise, he spoke to us in ways that we could hear and understand.

For example, Jesus used parables and illustrations from everyday life as windows into the truths he was teaching. He also understood that the vast majority of his hearers were common people and were illiterate. Oral-culture people learn, communicate, and remember truth best in narrative form. Therefore, Jesus did not lecture them with steps, outlines, bullet points, or even expository sermons; he taught them in stories.

In Luke 15, Jesus presents three stories that teach one primary truth to his oral-culture hearers rather than a three-point sermon that required deductive reasoning skills. The stories of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son all teach that the thing that was lost was precious to

the one who lost it and that there was great rejoicing when it was found. His hearers could not avoid the truth he was driving home: they were precious to God, and he would rejoice when they came home. In our churches, Jesus would probably deliver a three-point, expository sermon, illustrate it well, and draw it to a wonderful conclusion. However, Jesus knew that they could not process information in that format, so he spoke to them in the way that was most effective.

Paul and Barnabas also found that preaching the gospel is more complicated the farther you get away from your home culture. He and Barnabas preached in Lystra and saw God work in their ministry by healing a man (Acts 14:6–18). It should encourage other intercultural communicators of Christ's message that even the super-apostle struggled to make himself understood. When their hearers began to attempt sacrifices in their honor and began shouting praise in the Lycaonian language, they knew that something had gone terribly awry. The message sometimes gets confused in the minds of the hearers—especially when there is a language barrier to start with.

Rather than dissuading Paul from going to unreached and unfamiliar peoples, this experience convinced him to learn to make the necessary cultural adjustments for effective missionary service and Christian ministry. His clearly stated goal was to preach Christ where he had not been named (Rom 15:20, 21). How would he accomplish this? Would he go as a rabbi and argue from the Hebrew Scriptures with fellow monotheists who knew God's Word, as in the case of his synagogue work, or would he go as a preacher of the gospel among polytheistic pagans? He would have to do both. How could he avoid the confusion of Lystra in the future? Paul understood the only answer.

Paul stated his intended strategy in 1 Corinthians 9:22; he would be all things to all men so as to save some. Of course, Paul is not saying that he would become drunk to be an effective witness to drunks. He was simply saying that in every way that was not sin for him, he would adapt to the culture so that he might communicate the gospel effectively among them.

In the context of Paul's teaching on the use of tongues, he speaks of the necessity to sound the gospel message clearly. He reminds us that in battle, the bugler must sound a clear alarm, or no one will get ready for battle (1 Cor 14:8). This speaks of the need for clear communication. Later in that passage, Paul says that he would rather speak five words that people can understand than ten thousand that only he can understand (1 Cor 14:19). I believe that we can apply this principle to the need for clear communi-

cation of the gospel interculturally. We must proclaim this great gospel message to every person in the world, as there is no other way for men and women to be saved. Therefore, since this message is both unique and essential, it is of utmost importance that we communicate in ways that people can "hear."

This dynamic redounds in blessings to our own understanding of the Scriptures. As we disciple new believers and the Holy Spirit illumines their minds to truths in God's Word, hitherto unseen teachings often become known. Since cultures understand the gospel message in their own cultural context and within their own worldview, this means that they will see and understand certain truths or nuances that other cultures do not. I want to be very clear; there is only one meaning of the Scriptures. However, one culture may see the story in black and white, another in hues of blue, another in hues of green, and another in hues of red. Together we can see the beauty of previously hidden or unnoticed colors. Last year I visited the Guggenheim Museum in New York. One of the exhibits consisted of four sheets of clear glass, about one-meter square, leaning against a wall. The title of the piece was, "Clear, square, glass, leaning."<sup>7</sup> At the time, it struck me as odd that an artist could make a living like this. However, as I reflected on it, the message became obvious: Each of the words describes one truth of the exhibit, but none was exhaustive. When we consider the four descriptors together, their several perspectives yield a fuller understanding of the piece. So it is when the global hermeneutical community studies God's Word; each community adds a part overlooked by another.

Let me hasten to add that we do not wish to change the gospel message. Yet, that is precisely what others are in danger of doing. When they fail to contextualize the gospel message, they run the danger of making it the foreigners' religion. Many who communicate Christ in culturally inappropriate ways are changing the gospel message they so desire to protect. What the people actually hear is something that the preacher never intended to say. Although they mean well, they are presenting the gospel in foreign garments and trappings.

This takes place in many forms. For instance, some churches in Africa have buildings made of red brick, with pews and pianos inside, that meet for Sunday School at 9:30 AM and worship at 11:00 AM simply because that was the kind of "church" that the missionary had at home. Every other structure in the community is made of mud with thatched roofs. Another missionary in Peru requires that Quechua Indians, whose culture only knows music with a five-tone minor scale, learn to worship God singing

Scottish metrical psalms. Red brick buildings and metrical psalms may be fine in certain contexts, but when one imports them as virtual essentials of biblical Christianity, one has added to the gospel and made it to be something else.

The failure to contextualize Christianity in culturally appropriate ways results in an importation of something foreign to the gospel message. It becomes the religion of another culture and it teaches that to be a Christian, one must leave one's own culture behind and adopt the missionary's culture. It is indeed correct to say that there is only one meaning of Scripture, but there are many applications. Scripture only has one meaning, but no culture has exhausted its fullness. There is one meaning of Scripture, but we must communicate it in culturally appropriate ways. Few worshipers in evangelical churches today come dressed in first century garb and carrying Hebrew Old Testaments and Greek New Testaments. Nor should we preach in English to a crowded market where no one understands it and then proclaim that we have evangelized the city. We are not simply to preach the truth as we would at home; we must communicate it in the culture of our hearers.

Pastors in the United States practice this to a degree in their churches every week. In every church, there are many different levels of understanding and spiritual maturity. When the children come forward and sit on the platform for the children's sermon, the pastor will speak in a voice that is fatherly and kind and use short sentences with small words. Then, when he stands to deliver the message to the congregation, he may become very animated and shout. He may emphasize points with wide sweeping gestures and walk around the pulpit. All of this could have seemed threatening to the children. When this same pastor speaks to a luncheon of senior adults, he will adopt yet another delivery style that is appropriate for that group. He may be speaking to each group about the same theme or passage, but he seeks to communicate it to them in a way that will be most effective.

### Historical Implications

Missionaries have taken the gospel message around the world with varying degrees of success for hundreds of years. Could the failure to communicate the gospel in culturally appropriate ways account for so many years with little or no fruit in the ministries of many missionaries? The pages of mission history are replete with accounts of missionaries who have gone to historically "hard" cultures. Missionaries have often suffered there for years without fruit. Names such as William Carey, who labored for seven years before his first convert, or Adoniram Judson, who likewise preached and suffered long years in apparent bar-

renness, spring to mind. A lesser known missionary was Julia Woodward Anderson, who began living and working among the Highland Quichuas of Ecuador in 1902. When she retired in 1955, over fifty years later, the first three Highland Quichua believers were baptized.

Could it be that these missionaries were operating in their own cultural paradigms and patterns without awareness of the need for cultural understanding? Could it be that since they were lacking in cultural anthropological or intercultural communication understanding, they were preaching the gospel as they would in their home contexts? We certainly do not want to denigrate or belittle their ministries, and we recognize them as heroes of mission history. They were, after all, children of their times, and most of the Christians in those times were not aware of the tools we commonly make available to missionary candidates today. Nevertheless, is it possible that their efforts might

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have found fruit more readily if they had been able to utilize these skills?

It seems logical that over a period of years, their language skills would have improved, their cultural understanding would have deepened, and initial stereotypes and prejudices would have given way as counter intuitive data yielded to a fuller cultural understanding. As this process continued, their ability to communicate the gospel so that it could be "heard" would have been honed and refined. Almost imperceptibly, they would have adopted and adapted communication patterns of the target cultures so that

they eventually became effective communicators. Moreover, while this certainly does not mitigate the hard, stony ground that some cultures prove to be, it could be that the farther removed the target culture was from the missionary's home culture, the more difficult it was in reality. Julia Woodward Anderson's fellow missionaries who served in the Mestizo cultures of Guayaquil and Quito certainly found more receptive hearers than she found in the Highland Quichua work—a dynamic that continues today.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, how many times one hears the gospel before one “hears” the gospel is a question that can be answered only in the work of the Holy Spirit. The same crowd at a Billy Graham crusade hears the same message in the same stadium on the same night in the same temperature and humidity. Yet, of the lost people present, many will go home still lost. Only the Holy Spirit can make the preaching of the Word effectual in the hearts of men and women.

In the annals of mission history, we must acknowledge that some have hardened hearts and live in hard, dark cultures. In some cases, the lack of fruit must certainly be due to hard soil, in others though, it is due to culturally inappropriate presentations of the gospel. Although this touches a revered part of mission history, a harder question remains. Could this failure to communicate clearly be a part of the reason for much martyrdom in mission history?

This begins to tread on hallowed ground, and so we tread lightly and with great respect. Perhaps we need more than one category of martyr. In recent examinations of the tens of thousands of Christian martyrs reported each year, research shows that many victims in these great numbers are ethnic Christians. There is ethnic violence in parts of the world such as Africa where the inhabitants of Muslim villages and regions are attacking and killing those in Christian villages and regions—and sometimes vice versa. Often these victims are considered Christian martyrs because of their ethnic identity, not their Christian convictions.

Sadly, there are also Christian workers who die in tragic ways around the world every year. Some of these lose their lives in robberies, traffic accidents, or plane crashes. Others die from tropical diseases or the lack of proper medical attention for more common diseases. Are these missionaries martyrs? The question is not whether they are great examples of Christians who selflessly give themselves in Christ's service, but rather, are they martyrs?

Certainly, some missionaries are killed because they refuse an order to cease and desist preaching the gospel message. They lay down their lives because they regard the glory of God and the souls of their hearers as more precious than their own earthly lives. Yet, other missionaries

sometimes die in foreign lands because their murderers do not understand their intentions—that is, they are killed because they are not clearly communicating the gospel message. Their gospel message was sometimes not even presented, or if preached, “unheard.” Some missionaries innocently blundered into taboo situations and lost their lives because of simple cultural ignorance. Their murderers killed them for being foreigners or because they were considered a threat. Could the knowledge and application of intercultural communication skills have avoided some of the loss of life that has occurred among missionaries in the past? Again, the intention here is not to take away from the memories or testimonies of those who have suffered on the mission fields of the past; it is to avoid accidental suffering in the future.

### Linguistic Considerations

Language is usually what comes to mind when considering the process of making the gospel known among another people group. We know that missionary candidates must attend language school. Yet, language is only one color of the intercultural communication prism. We use many other systems for communication. In fact, studies have shown that verbal language accounts for only a small percentage of what we communicate.<sup>12</sup> Language is a code system to facilitate communication, both in written form and orally. Nevertheless, language does not exist in isolation from other aspects of culture. Thousands of languages exist in the world today. The globalization and urbanization processes at work in the world today have yielded a juxtaposition of these tongues that results in a virtual tower of Babel in our cities. Every day, the people living in Manhattan speak 250 languages. Instead of the miracle of Pentecost where visitors to Jerusalem could hear the gospel proclaimed in their own languages, we have the reverse: A myriad of people who do not understand the gospel—each in their own language.

Languages create problems for communication in everyday life and for Christian ministry. In some Asian languages, the word used for “sin” is also the word for crime, and “sinner” becomes “criminal.” This renders great confusion when the Christian witness wants the hearer to admit to being a sinner. It is even worse when the missionary does not know the etymology of the word. Many times the missionary is unaware that a word has many meanings, and this creates confusion. Many missionaries go to language school in Costa Rica to prepare for service elsewhere in Latin America. Words that are innocuous in Costa Rica are crude slang words in their target countries, and missionaries must often learn that the hard way. Cultures

define behaviors with categories that the missionary may not recognize. The missionary could unwittingly preach against some behavior using one specific word that gives tacit approval to virtually identical behavior that goes by other names.<sup>13</sup> Dialects are another challenge, as a country may list the language group with one generic name that has many dialects—oftentimes not mutually intelligible.

The great linguist Eugene Nida set forth a model for communicating biblical truth in other cultures. In his tri-cultural translation model, he said that it is imperative to keep in mind three cultures, beginning with the biblical cultures. When interpreting a passage of the Bible, knowing the original cultural context is essential for grammatico-historical exegesis. Nida also reminds us of the fact that there is no biblical culture on earth, nor a culture-less manifestation of Christianity. Each culture has expressed Christianity in unique ways that usually become identified with the Scriptures themselves in that culture. Nida warns the missionary of the danger of transplanting cultural forms of Christianity into the target culture. For this reason, he stresses that the missionary not only must know the Bible and its cultural contexts, but also must know his own culture in order to discern what is biblical and what is a cultural form or packaging. He goes on to say that the missionary must also study the culture and language of the target people in order to avoid syncretism and to communicate the gospel in as clear a manner as possible.

Missionaries must also address the linguistic challenge of idioms when translating or interpreting in other cultures. The translator must be aware of biblical idioms and their English counterparts for proper understanding in translation. Certainly, these exist in modern languages today also. Missionaries often tell short-term mission team members not to use humor in sermons because it will not translate. The same is true for idioms.

Not only do problems occur between languages, but even among various cultures that use the same language. So many examples have been given of the linguistic differences between the English and Americans that it has often been said that we are two countries divided by a common language. This dynamic is true among Spanish-speaking countries as well. For example, the word for “bus” in Cuba means “baby” in the Andes. There are many other cultural differences between them as well.

Therefore, learning the grammar and vocabulary of another language is just the beginning of communicating effectively in another culture. Non-verbal communication is crucial in culturally appropriate ministry. An example is the “yeah, right” sarcastic response so often heard in our culture, where the paralanguage tone of voice contradicts

the meaning of the words.

Other aspects of the linguistic consideration are form and meaning. The dynamic equivalent is what communicates in another culture, not a form that they cannot understand. Yet, there are limits to this freedom. It is obvious that there is no one-to-one correlation between languages in many cases. Some cultures have divided the color spectrum into seven, others into four, and some cultures have no real words for color, only the ideas of dull and shiny. In such a culture, the following passage presents the translator with a difficult challenge: “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa 1:18). They have no word for scarlet, white, or red, and they have never seen snow. It is obvious that they can recognize colors, but they do not think of them that way. Symbols are not always sufficient to communicate reality.

Words have meaning in context. Concepts are encoded into the words of the speaker and then decoded by the respondent based on his understanding of those words. The worldview in which this coding takes place determines the meaning of the message received. For instance, when ministering in a Hindu context, the Christian witness must use caution in asking whether a hearer has been born again or would like eternal life. The Hindu sees eternal life as a negative reality that he will eventually overcome. The Hindu also believes that he has already been born again many times and will be again.

While the most obvious first step to proclaiming the gospel in various cultures is learning languages, learning another language is extremely frustrating and difficult. There are almost 7,000 languages in the world today; many of these are main languages that constitute many subdivisions of dialects. Many missionaries attend language school for one year and then believe that they know the language and should be able to communicate. This may be true at the objective level of shopping or asking directions; it is not yet true regarding deeper matters of worldview, belief systems, and values.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to move a thought that is in one mind directly into another’s mind. A mutually held communication system must encode the thought and send it out as a message. The respondent then receives the message and decodes it, thereby giving it meaning. Sometimes the result is remarkably close to the intended message, and this is successful communication. Other times, there is a disconnect due to noise or interference, and the result is miscommunication. A message was indeed sent and received, but the thought was not successfully transferred

# TO BE EFFECTIVE WITNESSES, WE MUST LEARN HOW OTHERS THINK, INTERACT, AND COMMUNICATE.

from one mind into another. The process requires the encoding according to the rules of the communication system and then the system of another's understanding must decode the message to receive the meaning.

## Culturality

Just as we recognize that there are personalities of various types, there are also cultural types that have their own peculiarities. Some cultural anthropologists and missiologists have devised scales consisting of core cultural values plotted on continua to measure strengths or values. I refer to these cultural types and dynamics as *culturalities*. Each culture has its own way of viewing reality, or its own worldview, and has many characteristics that anthropologists can study and categorize that have become fields of study in their own right. For instance, ethnocognition refers to the study of the way a people view reality and process information, that is, how they think.

Some cultures traffic well in abstract thought and linear, sequential logic and can argue ideas. Others tend to be more concrete in their approach to life. The communicator will find acceptance for presented ideas when he delivers them in culturally appropriate formats. Relational cultures measure truth primarily by the trustworthiness of the person who presents it. Additionally, the ability to receive information in one format and then transform it into another before giving it to someone else is a learned skill. In other words, people give what they receive in the format in which they received it. When we present truth in logical syllogisms or deductive reasoning as is common in the United States, our hearers can only follow along and embrace the conclusion if they are from cultures that process information this way.

Ethnocentrism leads us to judge the cultures of the world that are unlike our own as inferior.

Many times this is done simply out of ignorance. A

Kikuyu proverb says, "The man who has never traveled thinks his mother is the best cook." If we have nothing with which to compare our culture, we not only assume others are the same, but when we find out that they are not, they appear to us as backward, undeveloped, and, usually, morally wrong. This often happens when American Christians go to cultures that are very different from their own for the first time. The tendency is simply to teach and preach just as we did at home. When these methods are ineffective and even our best sermons are not bearing fruit, we return from the short-term trip proclaiming that they are a cold, closed, and hard-hearted people. Conversely, if the trip happens to be among people whose culture is similar to our own and results in more fruit, we report that they are very open to the gospel and a harvest-field.

As a missionary, I have witnessed many frustrated attempts of short-term team members in missions ministry. When the missionary indicates some needed cultural adjustments, many respond, "I don't care about the culture; I just want to teach the Bible." The cultural adjustments seem to be overwhelming, and sometimes workers feel inadequate to the task. A common defense mechanism comes into play that minimizes the cultural importance and argues that there is only one gospel. After all, it is the gospel once for all handed down to the saints, and there is only one meaning of Scripture. However, rather than dismissing the need for culturally appropriate ministry, this argument supports it. Since there is only one saving gospel, and this one way must be heard and understood, it is essential that we present it in a way that can be "heard." The Western, highly literate cultures are the minority in the world. To be effective witnesses, we must learn how others think, interact, and communicate.

## Orality Issues

Oral cultures constitute over fifty percent of the world's people, and over seventy percent of the unreached people groups of the world. Among these people, relationships are the key to successful communication. Oral cultures are those that learn best and most easily through stories, anecdotes, proverbs, songs, and practical experience. People in oral cultures are preliterate and often speak a language that has not yet been reduced to writing. In fact, the International Orality Network that grew out of Lausanne's Executive Task Force regarding issues in orality reports, "At least 1.5 billion people in the world have never been introduced to reading and writing."

Of the almost 7,000 languages in the world, only 414 have a Bible translation, 1,068 have a New Testament, and others have some portions. Yet, over 3,000 languages do not

have a single verse. It is obvious that much work remains in the task of Bible translation. A translator who feels called to enter a culture with an unwritten language to provide them the Scriptures must first learn the language without any teacher, book, or school. Then comes the long process of translation, teaching the people to read their own language, and revising the manuscript along the way. Wycliffe reports that the time needed for this process is twenty to thirty years, depending upon the language. No one suggests that the work among the 13,000 unreached people groups wait until they have a Bible finished for their language. We must utilize oral methodologies in order to communicate the gospel in culturally appropriate ways among such cultures.

However, oral methodologies are to work in concert with translation efforts and are meant to serve until a Bible

## THE KEY FOR SUCCESSFUL MINISTRY IN ANOTHER CULTURE IS TO UNDERSTAND THE CULTURE AT THE WORLDVIEW LEVEL.

is available and the target culture is trained to read, write, and value literacy. Oral methodologies are not to be permanent alternatives to Bible translation, but rather to work in conjunction with the written word when completed. Some Bible translators have said that their happiest day of ministry was when they finished the translation and gave the Bible to their people group; the saddest day was when they returned years later to find the Bibles on a shelf unread. The day when a Bibleless language has God's Word and loves to read it is decades away in most of these languages, if it happens at all. Some oral cultures never seem to embrace literacy or place a high value on it.

Herbert Klem has written an insightful book on orality in Africa<sup>29</sup> in which he presents the results of many literacy efforts that were less than desired. Most literacy efforts spring from our ethnocentric perspective that everyone wants to

read and write because we value these skills in our culture. We often seek to address the felt needs that we would experience if we were in the target culture context. He found that for various reasons many cultures would not embrace literacy. Sometimes this was because their orality bound the culture together, and in other cases, it was due to the shame that the elders felt when the children could read and they could not, so they denigrated the skill. In addition to the oral cultures and their relational societies, countries such as the United States are experiencing a burgeoning secondary orality among their own populations. Secondary orality refers to those who can read when necessary but whose preferences and thought patterns follow an oral pattern.

### Missiological Strategy and Methodology

The key for successful ministry in another culture is to understand the culture at the worldview level. Only then will we avoid the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and the monocultural methodologies of the ugly American. We must be sensitive to cultural differences for receiving and processing information. For instance, in an oral, relational culture, a narrative format is the most effective communication method.

In highly literate cultures, a professor may assign chapters to read and reflect upon for class discussion, but in relational-type cultures, a narrative approach finds more success. Oral societies utilize a narrative approach for sharing information and training such as mentoring, master-apprentice, and watch-then-do models. Even in highly literate societies, it is common to ask someone "how to" do rather than reading a manual explaining "how to," even though every bookstore has a "how to" shelf in its inventory. The practice of a young man apprenticing himself to an established pastor or physician was the training school of former generations. Our own culture has largely forgotten these models, but they still reign as the gold standard in others. We should remember and employ these effective models when training believers from oral cultures.

Understanding that cultures are as unique as the peoples that embrace them has led the discipline of intercultural communication to re-examine how we evangelize and disciple. A methodology that Jesus regularly used was telling stories. Stories capture the heart and engage our minds. When Nathan wanted to confront David with his sin, he couched it in the context of a story. The story had its desired effect. Others have written on the biblical basis of storying as a methodology by citing the many biblical examples. In fact, even in highly literate cultures, the part of a sermon we remember most vividly, and often for years, is the story or illustration rather than the outline or main points. Many pastors cannot even remember their own outline from a previous week.



The ability to recall is what renders storytelling so powerful. Worldview, beliefs, values, and behavior patterns are at work in every person. Beliefs, values, and behavior patterns grow out of the worldview.

Worldview is the lens through which we see the world regarding what is real, where we came from, where we are going, and more. This worldview grew out of the stories we heard all of our lives. If we believe that humans came from the union of two jungle animals, we will have great reverence for those animals and little regard for some cosmic god. When we replace these stories with biblical stories, a biblical worldview begins to take shape.

Missionaries have found that preaching John 3:16 on the first day in a village when the people had no background or worldview for understanding all of the implications of the verse was ineffective. However, when sharing the stories of the Bible from creation, the fall, the flood, and so forth to the cross, the people were broken-hearted for sin and repentant. They embraced Christ as the Savior that he is.

This lack of a biblical worldview influences the acceptance of the gospel message in cultures like the United States as well. George Barna reported in 2004 that only seven percent of the U.S. population, nine percent of U.S. Protestants, and fifty-one percent of U.S. Protestant pastors had a biblical worldview. One of my students had been witnessing to his mother unsuccessfully for thirteen years. He accepted the challenge of using this model for sharing the gospel with her on a weekly basis over lunch. Through the process of using the Chronological Bible Storying model, his mother has accepted Christ and been baptized. Strategically, storying is an effective missiological method for several reasons. With storying, people are able to understand, remember, and repeat the stories that they have heard. Oral culture peoples do not easily understand highly literate methods like steps and outlines, and even if they understand somewhat, they cannot remember and repeat them to others. Missionaries use storying effectively to disciple as well as evangelize. In one pastoral training model in Northern Africa, teachers taught local pastors in three levels fifty stories each and several songs or choruses that went with each story. At the end of three years, the pastors could evangelize, disciple, and train leaders armed with a corpus of 150 Bible stories and 450 songs and choruses. In oral cultures, this method is much more effective than reading and reflecting—especially when the language has not yet been reduced to writing!

Someone has said that a definition of insanity is continuing to do what you have always done while expecting different results. If we desire to see missions advance and the extension of the kingdom, we must learn to reach and teach cultures that are unlike our own. Learning the language of

others is an essential first step, yet that in itself does not ensure effective communication. Each culture has its own nuances that render its culturality unique.

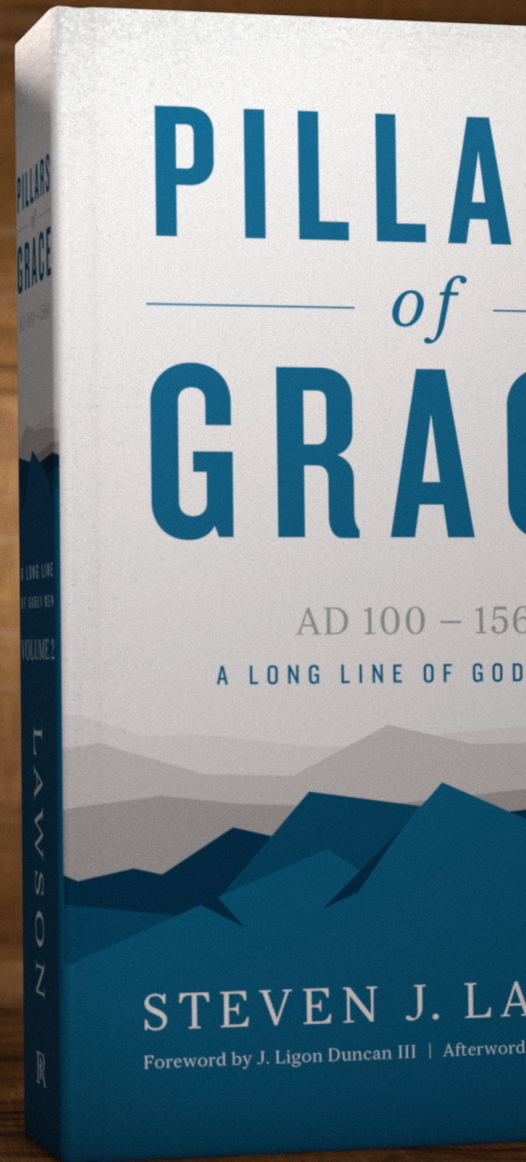
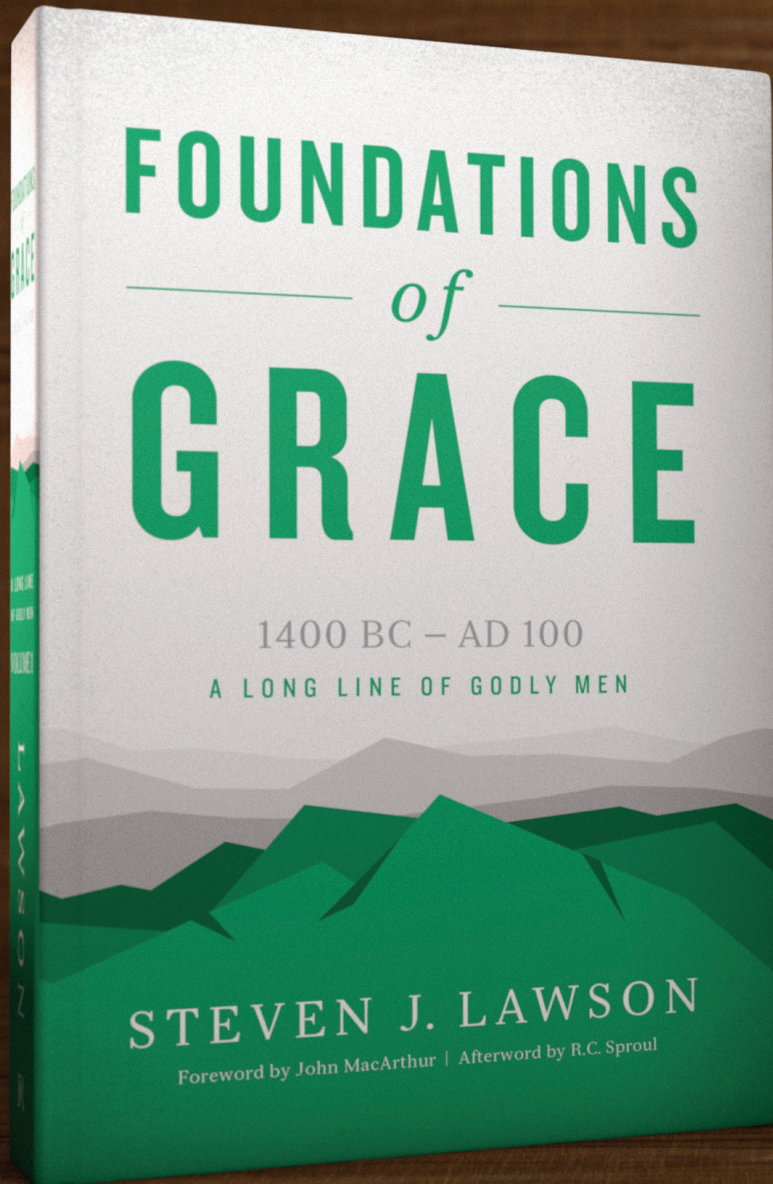
For example, churches in the United States that desire to have an outreach to Hispanics would do well to keep this dynamic in mind. While their efforts may be well intentioned, cultures from the twenty-one countries that speak Spanish are as different as the cultures in the countries that speak English. A successful outreach should include opportunities to study the Bible in the “heart” or natal culture and language. The church with a vision for reaching Hispanics should consider steps like Sunday School classes for various culture groups such as Mexicans, Cubans, and Ecuadorians along with a combined worship service to celebrate the unity that we have in Christ. In this way, the individual is evangelized or disciplined in a way that is culturally appropriate but is also challenged to take the next step of unity.

### Conclusion

Intercultural communication is just one tool from the multifaceted field of intercultural studies. With the use of these tools from the cultural anthropology toolbox, Christian communicators discover more effective ways to share the gospel.

Studying the various cultures of the world to know how best to communicate the gospel is wise stewardship. Night is coming, when no man can work, and there remains very much land to possess. Preaching to people in a language that they do not understand, or using any other culturally inappropriate method, is obviously an ineffective strategy. As those who have been entrusted with the gospel once for all delivered to the saints, without which no one can be saved, we should use every resource available to us for effective sharing of this saving message.

The indigenous people that killed Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Pete Fleming, Roger Youderian, and Ed McCulley in the Ecuadorian jungle in 1956 were once known as Aucas. This word comes from the neighboring Quichua Indians and means “naked savages.” No one had gotten close enough to learn their real tribal name and survive the encounter. After the tragic deaths of these men, Nate Saint’s sister, Rachel, and Jim Elliot’s widow, Elisabeth, were able to reach and teach this ruthless tribe by using many of the skills described above. We now know that the tribe calls itself Wadani. Their idiomatic way of referring to something that they like very much is to say that they “see” it well, or of hearing great news as something that they “hear” very well. When we think of other cultures around God’s world, how will they hear the gospel? ♦





# AND THEY BELIEVED

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The doctrines of grace are not a sixteenth-century invention. The Scriptures and the greatest men of church history have all celebrated God's free grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Moses, the prophets and the apostles, the early church fathers, and the Reformers together form a long line of godly men who have upheld these truths. In *Foundations of Grace* and *Pillars of Grace*, Dr. Steven J. Lawson walks readers through history showing that, far from being a new innovation, the doctrines of grace are the clear teaching of Scripture and Christians through the ages. They are a tremendous gift to Christians today. **Now available in print and digital editions wherever books are sold.**



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# REFORMATION & MISSIONS

TOM ASCOL

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, an English Baptist pastor wrote a pamphlet in which he surveyed the state of Christianity in various countries. Although Europe was the obvious stronghold of the Christian faith at that time, this pastor said it was a “melancholy fact that the vices of Europeans have been communicated wherever they themselves have been; so that the religious state of even heathens has been rendered worse by intercourse with them.” He went on to observe in his pamphlet:

Of those who bear the Christian name, a very great degree of ignorance and immorality abounds amongst them. There are Christians, so called, of the Greek and Armenian churches in all the Mahometan [i.e., Muslim] countries; but they are, if possible, more ignorant and vicious than the Mahometans themselves. The Georgian Christians, who are near the Caspian Sea, maintain themselves by selling their neighbors, relations, and children, for slaves to the Turks and Persians. It is well known that most of the members of the Greek church are very ignorant. Papists also are in general ignorance of divine things and very vicious. Nor do the bulk of the church of England much exceed them, either in knowledge or holiness; and many errors, and much looseness of conduct, are to be found among dissenters of all denominations. The Lutherans of Denmark, are much on par with the ecclesiastics in England; and the face of most Christian countries presents a dreadful scene of ignorance, hypocrisy, and profligacy. Various baneful, and pernicious errors appear to gain ground, in almost every part of Christendom; the truths of the gospel, and even the gospel itself, are attacked, and every method that the enemy can invent is employed to undermine the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This writer viewed the Christianity of his day as weak and ineffective. In fact, it was worse than ineffective, because it worked at counter-purposes with the cause of Christ. In countries that were known as Christian, the gospel had been forgotten and even attacked in the name of Christianity itself. Ignorance and immorality were rampant among those who called themselves followers of Christ. In their efforts to evangelize, Christians often left the unconverted people in a worse condition than they knew.

Who was this voice crying in the wilderness? Why was he so pessimistic? On what grounds was he compelled to put his thoughts in print?

The words belong to William Carey, and they come from the third chapter of his epic-making book published in 1792, entitled, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. That book has been called the “charter of the Protestant missionary movement,” and Carey wrote it to motivate the Christians of his day to preach the gospel to all nations.

What Carey observed was a bleak spiritual picture—not only among the unevangelized nations of the world, but also in those lands with a long and significant Christian witness. Churches were weak. Christians were untaught and unholy. The truths of the gospel were being undermined by the very churches that professed to know and preach the gospel. Listen to the conclusion that Carey drew after assessing this distressing condition in his day:

All these things are loud calls to Christians, and especially to ministers, to exert themselves to the utmost in their several spheres of action, and to try to enlarge them as much as possible.

Superficiality, ignorance, and immorality among the people of God, Carey says, are loud calls to Christians, especially to pastors, to exert themselves to the utmost in their churches and beyond. But for what purpose? To what end were they to give exertion? Carey knew the answer: for the reclamation of the gospel and the expansion of its work.

What William Carey recognized is something we need to see clearly in our day. The recovery of the gospel is reformation! The expansion of its work is missions! There is no incompatibility between the work of reformation at home and the work of missions abroad. In fact, there is a vital connection between the two. *Passion for missions demands a commitment to reformation.*

How much the gospel makes an impact abroad depends significantly upon the health of churches at home. Churches need to exemplify that which they would commend to others. This principle is established both positively and negatively throughout the Bible, especially in the New Testament.

In the positive sense, Jesus taught us that, as his followers, we are the light of the world. Collectively, we are to regard ourselves as a city set upon a hill, one that cannot be hidden. Our light is to give light to the nations.

That certainly happened in the first century. A church was planted in Ephesus. We read in the book of Acts how Ephesus became a strategic foothold for the gospel through the work of that church. Through its members, the message rapidly spread throughout all Asia (Acts 19).

Also, the church planted in Thessalonica was commended by Paul because of its spiritual health and vitality, which spilled over into other regions of that land. He wrote in 1 Thessalonians 1:8–10:

For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. This church, which Paul earlier had characterized as being filled with faith, hope and love, sounded forth the gospel by their reputation of how they lived and by their actions. Their living of the Word became the foundation of their proclamation of the Word throughout the world. The Thessalonian church was a healthy church, and it had a broad impact. Its members followed a key principle: when spiritual vitality characterizes the home base, the gospel witness which goes out is strengthened.

But this principle also works in the other direction. Where there is a lack of spiritual health at home there will be a hindrance to the work of the gospel abroad. It is this negative aspect of the principle that I want to call to our attention by specifically looking to Paul's letter to the church at Rome.

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written (Rom 2:17–24).

Verses 17 through 20 could be constructed as rhetorical

questions, or, as the New King James Version seems to suggest, they could be statements—not completely accusatory ones, but somewhat critical in tone. Either way, the point is the same. Paul writes these words in the midst of building an argument for the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He is showing both Jews and Gentiles that they are all sinners before God, condemned by God's law, and in need of a salvation that comes only through grace and that will bring them into a right relationship with Jesus Christ, God's Son. Paul's argument in verses 17 to 24 demonstrates in a negative way the relationship between the advance of God's kingdom abroad and the spiritual health of God's people at home. Paul takes the Jews to task for failing to live up to the responsibilities and privileges which had been afforded them.

## WHERE THERE IS A LACK OF SPIRITUAL HEALTH AT HOME THERE WILL BE HINDERANCE OF THE WORK OF THE GOSPEL ABROAD.

In verses 17–20 we see the great privileges of divine blessing that are set forth by the Apostle (albeit in an edgy way), but they are genuine privileges of God's blessing. We see first of all, in the first part of verse 17, that they are the people who bear the name of God. They have the distinction of being known as God's people, the Jews. This was a self-designation which, in the Jewish mind, encapsulated all of the prerogatives and all of the privileges which went with being God's chosen people.

Paul went on to speak of them "resting on the law." They took comfort in having God's law. They derived a sense of security from the fact that they were the ones to whom the law had been given. After all, doesn't Psalm 147 say that God "declares His Word to Jacob, His statutes and His

judgments to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation.”

Paul then reminded them that they regarded their relationship with God as so wonderful that it was something to “boast about” at the very end of verse 17. I like the way the New International Version renders it: “you brag about your relationship with God,” as if they thought they themselves were responsible for it.

In verse 18, he showed how they claimed to have divine insight and knowledge which others did not have, thus making them rather self-assured regarding their calling in the world to be guides to the spiritually blind; light to those in spiritual darkness; teachers of the spiritually foolish and immature.

In other words, Paul described the Jews of his day in language which they themselves would have used, but there is what one writer calls a “latent irony” in the way that Paul addressed them. The Jews were indeed called to be God’s people. As such, they were certainly blessed with many spiritual blessings. They enjoyed a special relationship with God. They had God’s law. They possessed the covenant. To them the promises had been entrusted. They had a mission to the rest of the world. It was to the Jews that God gave the commandment to “proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day, to declare His glory among the nations, His wonders among all people.” They were the ones that were to “say to the nations, ‘The Lord reigns’” (Psalm 96).

The Jews acknowledged all this, at least to some degree. In fact, the way that Paul addressed them in verses 17–20 suggests that they had a measure of pride and self-importance about this responsibility. They knew the true God. They possessed the only law of God. They were able to discern God’s will, so naturally it rested upon them to be the teachers, the instructors, of others.

But what Paul said to the Jews in verses 17–20 was designed to set them up for the scathing indictment that followed. Beginning in verse 21, he laid out the devastating consequences of their spiritual hypocrisy. In verses 21–23, he exposed that hypocrisy by turning to a more accusatory tone and quizzing the Jews about their spiritual and moral conduct. It is as if he was saying to them in these verses, “You who have been so favored of God and who are so self-consciously in the position of being the stewards of his Word, declaring his Word to the world, how do you measure up to the things that you teach? Do you practice what you preach to others?”

In verses 21 and 22, he said, “You therefore, who teach another, do you teach yourself? You who preach the demands about stealing, do you steal? You who say you do

not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?”

The Apostle Paul used these four rhetorical questions to expose the specific hypocrisy among the Jews of his day. There is clear evidence that each one of these sins was being committed. He shows the inconsistency between that which they understood about themselves and proclaimed to others, and the reality of how they conducted themselves.

Then, in verse 23, he turned to a sweeping accusation that categorically condemned the hypocrisy he had exposed in the immediately prior verses—that the Jews boasted of their possession and commitment to the law of God. They prided themselves in their unhesitating affirmation of the law being the very Word of God. They didn’t wince at affirming the full authority of the Word of God. No doubt they would have affirmed its inerrancy and infallibility. They conscientiously embraced their own responsibility to make this Word known to the nations. Yet Paul castigated them in verse 23, “You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?” The very God whose law they extolled with their lips was dishonored by their lives.

They were scrupulous in their devotion to his Word, zealous in their efforts to spread the Word of God to others, but grievously neglectful of applying that Word to themselves. In this instance, Paul is following in the footsteps of the Old Testament prophet Nathan who stood before a slumbering, spiritually sick King David and said, “You are the man.” That which you would do to others and have others do to you, you yourself are unwilling to do. The Jews, entrusted with God’s Word, called to spread that Word, were living in ongoing disobedience to the Word.

Finally, in verse 24, Paul came to the conclusion of the point and described the consequences of their hypocrisy as devastating. “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you. You who boast of God, who take pride in your favored position as the people of God, who affirm the Word of God entrusted to you, do you not see that the *ethnesin*—the nations—blaspheme the name of your God because of the way you conduct yourselves!” In this verse, Paul alludes to Isaiah 52:5, and also several passages in Ezekiel where God accused his Old Testament people of conducting themselves in a way that brought reproach upon his name that he had placed upon his people. The Jews were responsible for leading the nations to blaspheme God. The nations of the world were judging God on the basis of what they saw in the Jews. You can’t blame them. The Jews claimed to be God’s own people, the very children of God, the representatives of God, on the earth. They were

his messengers and his family. The Gentiles judged God by their conduct and no doubt must have reasoned that if the family members, the children, are like this, the head of the family must also be like this. They tell us not to steal. They say we must not commit adultery. Yet they rob our temples and steal themselves and commit adultery. The God they worship must not be much of a God. They tell us that we must look to this law that they profess to honor, yet look at the consequences of this law in their own lives. There must not be much in this law that God has given to them.

John Murray comments on this verse: “The tragic irony is apparent. The Jews who claimed to be the leaders of the nation for the worship of the true God had become the instruments of provoking the nations to blasphemy.” That wasn’t their intention. Indeed, I think it’s not too much to conclude that their intention was the exact opposite. They wanted, worked for, and desired to have the nations come to know their God. They even went to some effort to convert the Gentiles. They accepted the responsibility to be the stewards of God’s Word, the instructors of it, even missionaries, to go out and make it known. Yet the work of spreading God’s Word abroad was seriously hindered. Paul even suggests that it was overturned by the neglecting of spiritual lives at home. Instead of the nations being soundly converted, they were provoked into blasphemous thoughts of God.

Paul doesn’t speak against their zeal. In later chapters he commends their zeal, but zeal to declare God’s Word is never enough. Zeal must be based upon knowledge, truth, and a proper understanding of that Word. It must be matched with an ongoing application of that Word to our own lives.

Doesn’t Jesus make the same point when he castigates the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23? He says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” It is an immeasurable tragedy when our evangelistic and missionary efforts leave the very people that we go to in a spiritually worse condition than we found them! That’s precisely what happened in Jesus’ day. It’s what happened in Paul’s day. It happened in William Carey’s day. Brothers and sisters, it’s happening in our day! The name of God is being blasphemed today among the nations because of the Christian church in America. Our great God of wonders, our Lord Jesus Christ, who bled for us, who came and revealed God’s incredible love and grace for rebels, is being blasphemed among the nations.

A few years ago, a missionary who works with Muslims told me about a conversation he had with an Afghani

Mullah. When the Mullah discovered that the missionary was a Christian pastor, he asked him this question: “Is it true that you can have as many women as you want—like other Christians?” This Muslim leader’s vision of moral decadence in “Christian America” and his awareness of immorality by American ministers (who expressed sorrow only after they were caught) led him to believe that this Christian pastor must be able to be as immoral as he would want and with as many women as he would want.

If Christians are like a city set upon a hill, could it be that we who are part of the church of Jesus Christ in America should see ourselves as the highest peak in the range of modern nations? Whether we like it or not, we are highly visible to the world. A large percentage of the rest of the world, for good and for evil, judges Christianity and the Christian God by what it sees in America. Who is responsible for the moral degradation in America? We can all say “Amen” to criticism of the education system and how rotten it has become. We can all decry the politics of our land and how degenerate it is. But at least a very large, significant portion of the responsibility must be laid at the feet of the churches in America. We decry the immorality in our society, yet we wink at the same immorality within our churches. We declaim the loss of truth in our world, yet we do not guard the truth that has been entrusted to us in our churches.

If this is true, that the church in America bears incredible responsibility to the rest of the world because in God’s providence we have a high profile before that world, then our concern for the work of the gospel among the nations must make us concerned for the reformation of the gospel here in America.

In a book entitled *The Call of the South*, written in 1920 on the work of the gospel in the southern portion of the United States, the author, Victor Masters, records an incident that I find chilling. He says that in the year 1900 the Mikado, emperor of Japan, publicly stated his willingness to issue a decree that would make Christianity the state religion of his kingdom. He observed the work of Christian missionaries, and he told his council that in observing the missionaries he had seen that their religion had been more helpful than any of the other religions that were being propagated in Japan. Some of his councilors suggested that before the decree was issued, a deputation should be sent to the United States and Great Britain to measure how Christianity worked itself out within the borders of these sending countries. So, the deputation traveled to Canada, the United States, and Great Britain. They made notes of observations in the courts of law, where they found justice often defeated. They noted that in the markets of trade



and industry, often reputed Christians were destroying each other in competitive business. They said they noticed something of a stench in American municipal government. They returned to Japan and wrote this report: "That while it may be true that the lives of the Christian missionaries among us is the purest of any of the advocates of religion in Japan, and the principles of Christianity taught by them are right and most helpful to our citizens, the people of the United States and Great Britain do not believe and practice the doctrines taught us by their Christian missionaries." Victor Masters, who recorded this incident, says, "Their deliberate refusal to adopt Christianity, after inspecting American and English life, is a severe arraignment on the effectiveness of our Christian teachings in our own land."

What if there had been more vital godliness in America and Great Britain at the turn of the century? While the Mikado's decree would not have made Japan a Christian nation, it would have opened up doors of opportunity for thousands of Christian teachers and missionaries to go in and to influence millions of Japanese.

John Stott has said, "No church can spread the gospel with any degree of integrity, let alone credibility, unless it has been visibly changed by the gospel it preaches. We need to look like what we are talking about. It is not enough to receive the gospel and pass it on; we must embody it in our common life of faith, love, joy, peace, righteousness and hope."

Brothers and sisters, do our churches look like what we are preaching about? Does the state of our own congregations commend the message of God's grace and love? Can we honestly stand before the world and declare the holiness of our God in light of the character in our own lives?

How can we expect the world to believe that our trinitarian God is himself love when we can't even get along with one another? How can we call upon people to believe that God is holy if we are not holy? What makes us think that we can convince people that the God we know in Jesus Christ is blessed forever if our lives are not marked by genuine joy? Why should anyone believe that our Lord spiritually and morally transforms people if we who make that claim are no different from the world?

What must we do? Should we cool our hearts for the work of missions around the world and turn all of our efforts to the work of reformation at home? No! Never! What we must do is increase our passion to see the gospel carried to all peoples of the earth, and out of that passion—as an integral part of that passion—we must fully embrace the call of reformation here at home! Passion for missions demands a commitment to reformation.

There are many areas of reformation that are desper-

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ately needed among American evangelicals in general and Southern Baptist churches in particular. Much could be said about the sufficiency of Scripture; worship; or the doctrine of the church, its polity, its practices, its order and discipline. All of these and many others are worthy subjects for us to zero in on to refine our thoughts about the need of reformation, but in the interest of time and order of priority, let me limit myself to simply one area.

Where do we desperately need a reformation as evangelicals in America and as Southern Baptists? We need it

in our understanding of conversion; what it means to be a Christian; how one becomes a Christian. We can no longer assume that all evangelicals agree on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ or how a person becomes one. The Scripture is not ambiguous on this point. The Scripture says, “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old is passed away, all things become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). John says, “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4). Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

We might have various nuances and differences of opinion in precisely what conversion means, but can we not all agree that being a Christian means something? Is there a difference between one who is a child of God and one who is simply of the world? It is a significant event when a person becomes a disciple of Christ. There is a difference between a converted man or woman and an unconverted

## THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CONVERTED MAN OR WOMAN AND AN UNCONVERTED PERSON.

person. They have different loves. They have different orientations of life. They have different objects of devotion. The notion that a person can be genuinely converted and yet have no discernible difference in inner or outer life has no biblical warrant. Yet there are countless millions of people on the rolls of our Baptist churches who have no discernible difference in their lives from the world. They are counted as converted though they don't have enough spiritual impulse to even show up among the people of

God in worship once a year. Our understanding of what it means to be a Christian needs to be biblically re-formed. We need a reformation of our Christian understanding of how a person becomes a Christian.

Related to that is our practice of evangelism. Actions such as walking an aisle, raising a hand, praying a prayer, or taking a dip in a baptism do not effect conversion. We need to rediscover the doctrine of the new birth and look again to the Word of God to see what is meant by repentance and faith. If we are wrong regarding what it means to be right with God, and what is required for a person to get right with God, then we are poised not only to propagate spiritual confusion and disease at home, but also abroad, as we send out confused people from our churches. And indeed, it is happening now.

Three years ago a well-known American Baptist preacher traveled to one of Russia's larger cities and conducted a two-week crusade. He came home reporting that two thousand people had been converted at his campaign. Two people, a husband and a wife, who heard the reports, were so overwhelmed with a sense of what God had done in this city that they took leave of absence from their jobs, got contact information for these two thousand converts, and traveled there intending to spend several months in the city following up with these converts and helping them get organized into churches. They were devastated by what they found, or rather, what they did not find. After weeks of searching, they could not locate even one of the supposed converts.

Five years ago a summer-long evangelistic emphasis in Albania was sponsored by American evangelical organizations. It was recorded back in the United States that two thousand three hundred converts were made. The missionaries whose job it was to follow up on those converts in the northern region of Albania said that they could find only six people of the hundreds whose names they had been given who had even a slight interest in spiritual things. They heard of only a few more from the southern region of the country.

When severe doctrinal error regarding conversion is wedded to practical zeal in evangelistic and missionary emphasis, the results are disastrous. Isn't this precisely the folly of the scribes and Pharisees? With zeal they traveled over their land and over their seas to make converts, yet Jesus said that when they did make a convert, they made him twice the child of hell as they themselves were. Why? Weren't the Pharisees sincere? Weren't they devoted to the cause? Absolutely! But at the same time they were dangerously wrong about the crucial issue of what makes a person right with God and how a person gets that way.

Recently, the North American Mission Board's "specialist in evangelistic follow-up" stated that, based upon his observations, fewer than one in ten people who make decisions as a result of Southern Baptist evangelism are active in Bible study one year later. He cited this observation as a part of his argument that we need to do a better job at "follow up." I appreciate his concern. I genuinely do. But might it be possible that follow up is not the issue, but that we need to do a better job at evangelism?

If General Motors discovered that ninety percent of all of their automobiles that were manufactured weren't running a year later, what do you think they would do? Would they claim we must build better repair shops? Let us increase production so that we have more automobiles this year than we had last year? Let's open up plants in Africa and South America and China? Now, all of these efforts are okay in their place, but none of them can justify ignoring the fundamental problem of needing to retool the manufacturing plant. Call out the engineers! Re-examine the schematics. Something's gone wrong. If we genuinely want to expand overseas, if we are genuinely concerned to see that productions increase, then we must retool at home.

In 1792, William Carey preached his deathbed sermon before a group of pastors as he called upon them to move forward in the missionary work. He said, "Expect great things and attempt great things." His text for that sermon was Isaiah 54:2-3. In that passage God says to His people:

Enlarge the place of your tent, And let them stretch out the curtains of your dwellings; Do not spare; Lengthen your cords, And strengthen your stakes. For you shall expand to the right and to the left, And your descendants will inherit the nations, And make the desolate cities inhabited.

Lengthen your cords *and* strengthen your stakes! Expand *and* deepen. Missions *and* reformation. Both are essential and neglect of either will result in unbalanced, unhealthy Christianity.

Some people charge us with the accusation that our concern for reformation is merely academic. You've heard the charges: "All these guys who like to engage in theological debate just like we did in seminary around the tables. They're just concerned in seeing if they can figure out precisely all the knotty, weighty theological questions that have plagued mankind throughout history. It's merely theological debate." They say that these kinds of discussions can be a distraction from the more important work of missions and evangelism. This kind of accusation betrays a false dichotomy. God himself has joined together missions and reformation. What God has joined together, let no man

put asunder. Passion for missions and commitment to reformation are not competing interests. Genuine passion for missions demands commitment to reformation.

In the last century, Austin Phelps of Andover Seminary said, "If I were a missionary in Canton, China, my first prayer every morning would be for the success of American Home Missions, for the sake of Canton, China."

Reformation and missions go hand-in-hand. If we do not strengthen our churches at home, we will ultimately undermine the efforts of the gospel abroad. Do not shrink back from the hard work of reformation. Do not let others around you ignore its importance. Don't let anyone intimidate you into thinking that if you are concerned to order your life and see churches ordered by the Word of God, that somehow undermines the evangelistic missionary impulse that the gospel is to have in the world. Don't be so selfish with your time, pastors. There are other pastors who need to think about the things you're thinking about. If you simply order your own life and your own church, and you're not winsomely trying to come along your brother pastors to challenge them and encourage them to start thinking about these things, then you are not engaged enough in the work of reformation.

We must commit ourselves to a reordering of our personal lives by God's Word. Encourage this reordering in your church and in other churches among other brothers and sisters of the faith. We must work for reformation.

Can you imagine the accusation that God will make against those Jews on that great Day of Judgment: "My Name was blasphemed among the nations because of you"? The Name we love, the Name that God Himself is jealous of—it is for the sake of the Name that we send out our loved ones to the outer edges to live and die for Christ. It is for the sake of the Name that we have given our energies and our efforts to make Christ known. What a tragedy, what a travesty, it would be if it is said of us that because of our unwillingness to do the hard work of reformation, the nations blasphemed the Name of God.

Work for reformation. Do it for your own soul's sake. Do it for your children's sake. Do it for your children's children's sake. Do it for the people of China and South America and Africa and Asia, all of the peoples of the world. But do it first and foremost for the honor and glory of our God and of his Son Jesus Christ, who bled for us to redeem us to God. It is his glory which unifies the great works of reformation and missions.

Lengthen your cords as never before! Go and call upon others to go. Send your best overseas. But don't forget to strengthen your stakes—that through you the name of God might be revered and not blasphemed among the nations. ♦

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*with* JOHN MACARTHUR

## JESUS PRAYS FOR ALL BELIEVERS

The unity Christ prayed for is not an outward, organizational unity, but the inward, spiritual unity based on believers' life in Christ. Because of their union with Jesus Christ, all believers are one with each other as well. How does that spiritual unity manifest itself in practice? In the name of love, many work hard to achieve a superficial, false, sinful unity that is broad enough to embrace false Christians and even those who deny the central truths of the Christian faith. Genuine biblical love, however, cannot be divorced from biblical truth. The true church of Jesus Christ cannot unite with those who deny the essential truths of the gospel, or who affirm a false gospel. True unity is the reality among true Christians.

As he concluded his magnificent High Priestly Prayer, the unity of his followers was very much on the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ. Having prayed for his glory (vv. 1–5) and for his disciples (vv. 6–19), the Savior expanded his prayer to include all future believers—those who would come to him through the power of the Word (v. 17), the witness of the disciples (v. 18), and the sacrifice of the cross (v. 19). The Lord made two requests on their behalf: that they would be united in the truth, and that they would be reunited with him in eternal glory. The first of those requests is the subject of this article.

The opening words of verse 20 introduce the third thing for which Christ said he was not praying. In verse 9 he made it clear that he was not interceding on behalf of the unbelieving world, while in verse 15 He said that he was not asking for the disciples to be removed from the world. His words “I do not ask on behalf of these alone” introduce another group distinct from the then-living disciples for whom he had just prayed (vv. 6–19). Jesus looked ahead through the centuries and prayed for all the believers who were to come in the future. Although the vast majority had not yet been born, they nevertheless were and had been for

eternity on the heart of the Savior. Christ's intercession for us, which began with this prayer 2,000 years ago, continues to this day.

Jesus further identified these future believers as those who would believe in him, reminding all again that salvation comes through faith alone. The Lord's reference to believing in him again preserves the biblical balance concerning salvation. On the one hand, only those given by the Father to Christ will come to him. But on the other hand, their salvation does not take place apart from personal faith. In much the same way, the reality that the Lord will draw those whom he chooses to himself does not obviate the church's responsibility to evangelize the lost.

The disciples at that point hardly seemed ready to turn the world upside down. One of them, Judas Iscariot, had turned traitor, and was at that moment preparing to lead those who would arrest Jesus to Gethsemane. Their brash, bold, seemingly fearless leader, Peter, would soon cower before the accusations of a servant girl, and repeatedly deny the Lord. The rest of the disciples would abandon Jesus after his arrest and flee for their lives. But Christ's prayer ensures that the apostles' ministry would be successful. In his omniscience, Jesus knew that they would fulfill their role in redemptive history. The gospel would prevail, despite the apostles' weakness, the world's hatred, and Satan's opposition. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, those early disciples would begin the chain of witnesses that continues unbroken down to the present day. All of the church's evangelistic success is the result of the Lord's request in verse 20 for those who would believe in the future. This request guaranteed the successful establishment of the church, and the success of its evangelistic ministry from apostolic times to the present.

Despite their outward denominational differences, all true Christians are spiritually united by regeneration in

# GOD CHOSE IN ETERNITY PAST TO GIVE BELIEVERS TO CHRIST AS A GIFT OF HIS LOVE, AND CHRIST CAME TO EARTH TO DIE AS A SACRIFICE FOR THEIR SINS AND REDEEM THEM.

their belief that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, in Christ alone, and their commitment to the absolute authority of Scripture. All those who savingly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ “are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom 12:5). By the power of God, believers, united in spiritual life, are also united in purpose, share the same mission, proclaim the same gospel, and manifest the same holiness.

The actual fulfillment of Christ’s prayer began with the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost. Suddenly, sovereignly, supernaturally, believers were united by the Spirit into the body of Christ and made one positionally. All who have been saved since then have immediately received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, by which they were placed into the body of Christ. Consequently, there is an extraordinary, supernatural unity in the universal church.

The unity of nature Christ prayed for reflects that of the Father and the Son, which is expressed in Christ’s words, “You, Father, are in Me and I in You.” Because of his unity with the Father, Jesus claimed in John 5:16 and following to have the same authority, purpose, power, honor, will,

and nature as the Father. That startling claim to full deity and equality with God so outraged his Jewish opponents that they sought to kill him.

The unique intra-Trinitarian relationship of Jesus and the Father forms the pattern for the unity of believers in the church. This prayer reveals five features of that unity the church imitates. First, the Father and the Son are united in motive; they are equally committed to the glory of God. Jesus began his prayer by saying, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You” (v. 1), as he had done throughout his ministry (v. 4). In verse 5, he added, “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” Finally, in verse 24, Jesus expressed to the Father his desire that believers would one day “be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me.” In John 7:18 Jesus declared that he was constantly “seeking the glory of the One who sent Him.” He did not need to seek his own glory (8:50), because the Father glorified him (8:54). Both Jesus and the Father were glorified in the raising of Lazarus (11:4). In John 12:28 Jesus prayed, “Father, glorify Your name.” Then a voice came out of heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.” Shortly before his High Priestly Prayer, Jesus had said to the disciples, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately” (13:31–32). Jesus promised to answer the prayers of his people “so that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (14:13).

The church is also united in a common commitment to the glory of God. “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do,” Paul wrote, “do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Second, the Father and the Son are united in mission. They share the common goal of redeeming lost sinners and granting them eternal life, as Christ made clear earlier in this prayer:

Even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. . . . I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. (vv. 2–4, 6)

God chose in eternity past to give believers to Christ as a gift of his love, and Christ came to earth to die as a sacrifice for their sins and redeem them.

Third, the Father and the Son are united in truth. “The words which You gave Me,” Jesus said, “I have given



to them” (v. 8), while in verse 14 he added, “I have given them Your word.” Earlier that evening Jesus had told the disciples, “The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works” (14:10). The church is also unified in its commitment to proclaiming the singular truth of God’s Word. Far from dividing the church, a commitment to proclaiming sound doctrine is what defines it.

Fourth, the Father and the Son are united in holiness. In verse 11, Jesus addressed the Father as “Holy Father,” and in verse 25 as “righteous Father.” The utter holiness of God is expressed throughout the Old and New Testaments. God’s holiness is his absolute separation from sin. When they see believers united in the pursuit of holiness, unbelievers will be drawn to Christ.

Finally, the Father and the Son are united in love. In verse 24, Jesus affirmed that the Father had “loved [Him] before the foundation of the world.” In John 5:20 Jesus said, “For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing” (cf. 3:35). Similarly, love is the glue that binds believers together in unity, and it is that love for one another that is the church’s ultimate apologetic

WHEN  
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HAVE BELIEVED IN  
HIS SON.

to the lost world. Though not to the same infinite divine extent, the spiritual life and power that belongs to the Trinity belongs also in some way to believers and is the basis for the church’s unity. This is what the Lord meant when he said, “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as we are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity” (vv. 22–23). That stunning truth describes believers as those to whom the Son has given glory—that is, aspects of the very divine life that belongs to God. The church’s task is to so live as to not obstruct that glory.

The observable unity of the church authenticates two important realities. First, it gives evidence to the world so that it may believe that the Father sent the Son. That familiar phrase summarizes the plan of redemption, in which God sent Jesus on a mission of salvation “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). Jesus prayed that the visible unity of his church would convince many in the world concerning his divine mission of redemption. The church’s unity is the foundation of its evangelism; it demonstrates that Christ is the Savior who transforms lives.

The church’s unity also authenticates the Father’s love for believers. When unbelievers see believers’ love for each other, it offers proof to them that the Father has loved those who have believed in his Son. The loving unity of the church made visible is used by God to produce a desire on the part of unbelievers to experience that same love. On the other hand, where there are carnal divisions, strife, backbiting, and quarreling in the church, unbelievers are driven away. Why would they want to be part of such a hypocritical group that is at cross-purposes with itself?

The effectiveness of the church’s evangelism is devastated by dissension and disputes among its members. It must be the goal of everyone who is part of the body of Christ through faith in him to do their part in maintaining the full visibility of the unity that believers possess, as Paul wrote:

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:1–3). ♦



# REVISITING THE GREAT COMMISSION

**GEOFF THOMAS**

**T**he closing words of the gospel of Matthew consist of the last words spoken by the resurrected Son of God. The farewell was not tearful. What Christ said was breathtaking. Our Lord gave them an extraordinary challenge mapping out what was to be the future of all these disciples.

His commission was couched in terms of the highest theology. Here is the greatest New Testament statement of the doctrine of the Trinity. We have it taught plainly that there is one God, the one divine name, and that that name belongs equally to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, so that each of these different persons is divine; each one is God, and each one is equally God. The one name of God is “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” That glory is conjoined to our words of evangelism.

The passage also is notable because of what it tells us of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. He makes the claim that all authority and power has been given by God the Father to him in heaven and earth. We are told that he reigns supreme over the beings who are in heaven, and over the demons of hell, and “all people that on earth do dwell.” He is the preserver and governor of all his creatures and all their actions. His sovereignty and control lie behind everything that occurs in human history.

The relevance of his Lordship to their evangelism is plain enough. As Peter later wrote to a church, “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (1 Pet 3:15). The most fundamental element in witnessing to Christ is that we are in a right relationship with the Son of God, that he is our Lord over everything in our lives, over every interest, every concern, and every affection. We must make sure that we acknowledge that he reigns on the throne over our hearts. Witnessing is not a matter of gaining people’s attention by some striking ploy, dramatic words, a technique, or a method. There is something more fundamental than that. Are we right with God? Because if we are, then nothing will prevent us speaking a word for him, and if we are not, we will be incompetent and disinclined to bear witness. Our guilty silence will not be due to the absence of a dramatic hook on which to hang our words, or that we have failed to take a course in witnessing, or that we are not quick-witted enough, but that we are not right with God. The way to sort that out is to consider afresh the glory and greatness of the Christ who saved us and see where that relationship has gone wrong.

Wordsworth once gave a famous definition of poetry. He said that it was the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Of course, that definition can be disputed, but there is no question that this is something essential

to Christian witness. It is the spontaneous overflow of the dynamic place Christ has in our lives. The light shines because it is the light. The lips speak because there is something they love and can’t be silent about. There is gratitude for sins forgiven. Deep, experiential religion must be the foundation of effective evangelism.

Why were some men like Luther, Bunyan, Whitefield, Spurgeon, and Lloyd-Jones such examples of Great Commission preachers? It was not simply a matter of intellect, natural gifts and talents, personal industry, and self-denial. Of course, all those graces were present in their lives, but they were effective because their deepest feelings concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit overflowed. And what we should be crying for is not better techniques but that in our hearts we have set apart Christ as the Lord.

The Lord Christ then informs us concerning the nature of Christian evangelism. The church’s commission is to go and teach every nation on earth everything that Jesus taught his disciples. What is fascinating is to see how this mighty theology concerning the Trinity, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ, is used in the Great Commission to motivate believing sinners to speak to people about their Savior. This is a characteristic of New Testament teaching. Think of the church in Philippi and how divided it was due to a dispute between two women who each knew their rights. Paul brings to bear the most glorious doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God on that division. Our Lord knew his rights, and yet he made himself of no reputation and was found in fashion as a man, taking the form of a servant, humbling himself to the death of the cross. Then, the exhortation comes from the apostle to the whole church, “Let that mind be in you!” The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, made his long journey to earth to teach fishermen and peasant farmers about the kingdom of God, living thirty anonymous years in Nazareth. Where are you going, and what are you doing, to let fellow sinners know of the grace of Jesus Christ? Magnificent truths are used here to motivate us to fulfill the Great Commission.

Yet, in many ways, this commission is a paradoxical undertaking, because the world does not want the church’s gospel. There is no universal demand for it; there is no sympathy toward it; and in the heart of men, there is no natural comprehension of it. Thus, the danger is that the professing church should become desperate in luring people to attend its meetings, including men and women who don’t want to attend. Our places of worship are being infantilized to make them accessible to people who would rather be anywhere else. Our meeting places are being destroyed by believers in the Trinity and the deity of Christ who are marginalizing many truths that Jesus taught,

truths he asks us to pass on to the world. Many professing churches are judging Jesus' teaching to be unacceptable to the outsider—the reverence it inspires, the prayerful spirit, the silence, and the godly fear, which to Christ's disciples makes his services so attractive.

Almost all the churches I visit are warm, comfy, free, brief, and welcoming. The good news they have to share with the world is the most incredible and life-changing truth that could ever be heard. How much more accessible can you get? Yes, parking a car in surrounding streets can be difficult, but apart from that, the real problem is that the message of the Great Commission can be swamped in this all-consuming desire to appeal to people who don't want to come. Millions of disciples appreciate hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ without Sunday morning worship clutter, but they are having their delight spoiled by the church's desperate attempt to appeal to people who are not in the least interested in such things, or to keep a hand on children who don't yet appreciate them. We are all gradually learning to be grown up and to enjoy serious things.

If the Great Commission is to become effective in many in our congregations, there is yet another essential to consider. Peter joins to the sanctifying of Jesus as Lord the maintaining of a good conscience. It is also disappointing, isn't it, that there is not a word about technique or methods? But all the time, heart matters dominate the thinking of one who heard the Great Commission from the lips of the Lord himself.

Peter is telling us that we are to make sure that there is nothing in our relationship with Christ that is a barrier—some idol we are clinging to, or some unmortified sin. We are to make sure that there is nothing in our relationship with our neighbor that makes it impossible for us to bear witness to them. How difficult and delicate such problems can be, often having nothing to do with religion but with matters as trivial as pets and noise and parking. A tension exists, and as a result, we cannot share with them a word about God. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to speak to them about God?" The answer is not to find some juniper tree and lie in an untidy heap underneath it, but to get your conscience right with God, to have the sin dealt with. Then, we will have back again that old boldness.

"But how can I personally share with others the things that Jesus said?" What an important question. "Invite them to church," is one answer, but hearing the message of Jesus will not happen if public indifference to Christianity is resulting in a permanent dumbing down of our worship. The entire framework of our worship has to serve everything that Jesus said. The indifferent world must have explained to them all the things that Jesus said about such things as

## WE ARE TO MAKE SURE THAT THERE IS NOTHING IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR NEIGHBOR THAT MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR US TO BEAR WITNESS TO THEM.

what is coming out of the heart of man, and the reality of the judgment of hell that awaits the unconverted, and the universal need of a birth from above. And what goes on before the preacher announces his text serves to clarify and endorse this explanation of Jesus' teaching. In other words, the preparation in praise and prayer for the climactic proclamatory aspect of worship also has to speed home the message of the same God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as the deity of Christ.

Should the church become a concert, a debating society, a series of endless trailer announcements for the "real" meetings that are going to take place during the week, or a place to hear B-list celeb interviews, or see the performance of witty personalities with jolly handovers between worship leaders and preachers, then it becomes more difficult to carefully explain all that Jesus said, and apply the consequences of his serious words to all the congregation. We expect serious places to be serious, and so, just occasionally, a little dull. If that dimension of awe is extracted, then a church has lost its point, and the Great Commission cannot be effectively fulfilled. We don't want the leaders of the church to extract the reverence and godly fear from hallowed places in the name of accessibility. We wish the church leadership would take very, very seriously the words of the Great Commission.

Then again, the Great Commission will be more effective if we join it to Proverbs 15 and verse 28: "The heart of

the righteous ponders how to answer.” It is a warning about blurting out religion. We are to study, if we are to take our commission seriously. We are to weigh our words. We are not all called to be academic theologians, but we are all to weigh our answers. The Christian soldier girds himself with truth. He is able to wield the sword of the Spirit. He makes time in his life when he is alone with God. He ponders the Lord’s words, and assimilates them and imbibes the truth. God’s Word is his mediation day and night. He immerses his soul in the arguments of Scripture. That is why the people of God need to be taught. Sometimes today the evangelical church drives a great wedge between evangelism on the one hand and theology on the other. Surely, God’s order is that we must study if we are to give an answer for the hope that is in us. We must know what

we believe and why we believe it. We must be able to tell people the reason for our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and why we think they also should trust in him.

Most of all, we are to cultivate a dependence on the Holy Spirit, intuitively to invoke his help, and at every moment of crisis seek for his energy and insight. There will come many occasions when we are facing situations we’ve not foreseen. We have no prepared answers. We lack any formulae, and the answer, then, is to know what you believe and to learn to depend on the Spirit of the living God to give you words and tell you what to say. Without him, we can never fulfill the requirements of the Great Commission. With him, we can do more than conquer; we can gather new recruits who will speak for Jesus far better than we do ourselves. ♦



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THE FIELDS ARE  
WHITE FOR HARVEST

DONALD S. WHITNEY

**W**hen you see few, if any, conversions in your place of ministry, it can be hard to believe that what Jesus said in John 4:35 is true. In that verse he said to his disciples, “Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, and then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.”

It’s important to realize that he said this in Samaria—a place where Jews (like Jesus and His disciples) weren’t welcome and where Jesus had seen only one convert, and that one just a few minutes earlier.

In other words, the twelve apostles did not consider Samaria a place where there had been, or likely ever would be, many conversions.

And yet Jesus said it was—and by extension the places where we serve him now are—one of the fields white for harvest.

But most of us know too well the grim reality that one can labor faithfully for a long time and see few, if any conversions. Hosea prophesied God’s Word for seventy years. Isaiah preached faithfully for fifty. But both of them had reason to pray the prayer of Isaiah, “Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Isa 53:1).

J. I. Packer, in his great book *A Quest for Godliness*, writes of one early Puritan preacher who knew what it was like to preach God’s Word for years and see little evident fruit:

Richard Greenham was [pastor] at Dry Drayton, seven miles from Cambridge, from 1570 to 1590. He worked extremely hard. He rose daily at four and each Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday preached a sermon at daybreak, to catch his flock before they dispersed into the fields; then on Sunday he preached twice, and in addition catechized the children of the parish each Sunday evening and Thursday morning. Mornings he studied, afternoons he visited the sick or walked out into the fields “to confer with his Neighbors as they were at Plough”. In his preaching, Henry Holland, his biographer tells us, “he was so earnest, and took such extraordinary pains, that his shirt would usually be as wet with sweating, as if it had been drenched with water, so that he was forced, as soon as he came out of the Pulpit to [change clothes].” . . . He was a pastoral counselor of uncommon skill. . . .

His friends hoped he would write a book on the art of counseling, but he never did. . . . In a letter to his bishop he described his ministry as “preaching Christ crucified unto my selfe and Country people”. . . . Yet for all his godliness, insight, evangelical message and hard work, his ministry was virtually fruitless. Others outside his parish were blessed through him, but not his own people. “Greenham had pastures green, but flocks full lean” was a little rhyme that went round among the godly. “I perceive no good wrought by my ministry on any but one family” was what . . . he said to his successor. In rural England in Greenham’s day, there was much fallow ground to be broken up; it was a time for sowing, but the reaping time was still in the future.

Of course, he never saw the results during his lifetime, but it’s hard to say that Greenham’s ministry was unfruitful given that we are still talking about it more than 425 years later.

Nevertheless, occasionally, if not often, most ministers feel about their ministries as Greenham did about his—they seem virtually fruitless.

Another who ministered quite a bit later in Cambridge was Charles Simeon. He faced something of what Greenham experienced. For twelve years he was so opposed that those who rented the pews (which was the custom of the

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day for providing financial support for the church) would not only stay away from worship; they kept their empty pews locked so no one else could sit in them. Those who wanted to hear Simeon had to stand in the back of the church or in the aisles for the entire worship service, and this went on for twelve years. Despite such opposition, he persevered as pastor and eventually enjoyed a fruitful ministry for half a century.

Speaking on this same statement of Jesus in John 4:35, Simeon said regarding those who don't see a harvest, "The Lord of the harvest will not suffer any one of his labourers to work for nought. In the very work itself he shall find a rich reward."

The Apostle Paul was inspired of God to put it this way in 1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."

One of the reasons Richard Greenham kept preaching and ministering so faithfully, even though there was absolutely no response, was because he believed that the fields are white for harvest. Even when, like Greenham, we see few conversions, and when, like him, we are in a

ground-breaking, foundation-laying, reformational ministry, we must see with spiritual eyes that the fields are white for harvest.

Yet, while it is true that faithful men can labor long without conversions, one of those familiar with Greenham's life, Charles Spurgeon, said,

If I never won souls, I would sigh till I did. I would break my heart over them if I could not break their hearts. Though I can understand the possibility of an earnest sower never reaping, I cannot understand the possibility of an earnest sower being content not to reap. I cannot comprehend any one of you Christian people trying to win souls and not having results, and being satisfied without results.

Let us "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord," even when we see few conversions. But may we never be "content not to reap."

Preach the Word. Remain faithful. Share the Gospel. Pray for the Spirit's blessing. For "the fields are white for harvest." And "in the Lord your labor is not in vain." ♦



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*presented by* STEVEN J. LAWSON *and* ONEPASSION MINISTRIES  
*in partnership with* LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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