

What is Missions?

(And why does it matter?)

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In the course called *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, I teach the topic called "The Task Remaining." This session examines the great remaining barriers to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. I have taught this class to a few hundred students in perhaps 30 or more different classes.

To begin we consider, "What is the *task* of world missions?" I ask the students in pairs to write down what they consider to be *the task*. What is the goal? What is it that we work toward?

By this time in the course the students have a pretty clear and common understanding of what fulfillment of the Great Commission would mean. They express it in a number of different ways, but it usually sounds a lot like an evangelizing, discipling church movement for every language, culture, and people. Or, as the AD2000 Movement put it, "A church for every people and the Gospel for every person."

Having obtained a general consensus on the *task* of missions, I next ask, "What is *missions*?" Again, in pairs, I ask them to write a definition of missions. This time, the results are not nearly so homogenous. In most classes the definitions of missions range from the extremely narrow (e.g. planting churches among unreached people groups) to the very broad (e.g. loving people in Jesus' name).

At this point I usually offer a series of scenarios and ask the class to vote by

raised hands on each scenario as to whether it classifies as missions. I begin with a clear E-3 evangelism situation (crossing three kinds of barriers to present the gospel). An individual goes to a foreign country, learns a new language, and witnesses for Jesus among people who have never heard the Gospel. Virtually everyone agrees that this is missions.

Step by step I move away from other cultures toward our own, away from spiritual ministries toward social ministries, and away from non-Christians to ministry to Christians. At each step fewer people vote that it is missions.

I usually end up by asking, "If I take a bouquet of flowers to my devout Christian neighbor next door who is ill, is it missions?" Almost invariably a few in the class will declare that it to be missions (and explain why they consider it so.) This never ceases to amaze me. But why? Why does it amaze me? And why does it matter?

In the first place, I suppose it offends my sense of logic or common sense that what missions *is* seems only vaguely related to what missions seeks to accomplish. The definition (in many cases) is not connected to the goal. It's like the man who was so desperate to reach his destination that he jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions.

OK. So it offends my thinking patterns. But does it really matter and, if so, why does it matter? It matters because I think this disjunction between the goal of missions and the definition of missions is partially responsible for the slow progress in ministering to the most spiritually needy in the world and the declining vigor of world missions in the local church.

What Has Happened?

Stage 1. *The Mission* of discipling the nations has been demoted from the primary task of the church to one of its many ministries called "missions." It has been reduced from a purpose (a primary reason for existence) to a program (one of the things we do).

Stage 2. *Missions* has traditionally consisted of international or cross-cultural ministry for spiritual purposes, i.e. evangelizing and discipling the world beyond our community and culture. In many churches, *missions* has now come to include many other good ministries that 1) are primarily social or economic in nature with questionable spiritual impact and/or 2) serve primarily our own community or culture. Cross-cultural outreach and ministry has thereby been reduced from a program to one part of a program.

Why Does it Matter?

This is important because

- 1) A great deal of urgent ministry is required to evangelize and disciple the people of the world who have the least access to Christian resources.
- 2) The great majority of such people are separated from us by cultural, physical, and/or language barriers, and
- 3) A great abundance of Christian resources are located in the North American Church.

The Results

As a result, the full participation of the church in the U.S. toward the great goal of world evangelization is markedly reduced.

Some of the results of this marginalization and dilution of missions may be observed as follows. Look down through the list

below and check those things that you think may be occurring in your church.

- There is no clear understanding or appreciation of what a missionary is or does. A missionary can be and do anything.
- There is no career path to become a missionary.
- Individuals see themselves as missionaries when they serve or witness in their own culture.
- Individuals who have little training or experience believe they are serving as a missionary when they go on mission trips or get involved in local same culture ministries.
- Prospective missionaries assume they can go serve Christ effectively in other cultures with little preparation and experience.
- Mission funds are increasingly allocated to communities and cultures where substantial Christian resources are already available.
- The proportion of church resources being used for local, same culture ministry expands as the missions budget is tapped.
- Social ministries are considered missions, whether or not there is a clear spiritual component.
- Church leaders assume they are investing more to reach the world (based on the size of the missions budget) than they actually are.
- Resources are dispersed over such a broad range of ministries that it is difficult to keep track or see progress anywhere.
- Because we see little progress, church leaders may question the value, effectiveness, and priority of doing missions.

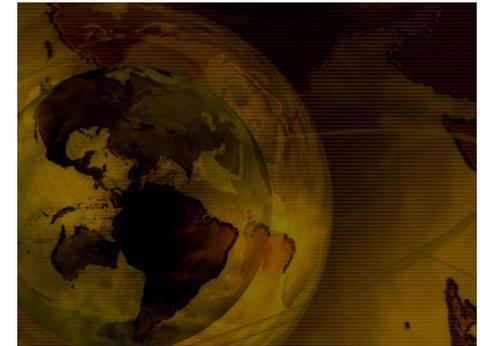
- Church leaders see the missions budget as a *miscellaneous budget* (because of the conglomeration of ministries) and subconsciously discount its priority in favor of clear church purposes.
- The missions budget is a convenient source of funding for things leaders want to support but don't want to pay for from other budget categories
- The congregation's commitment to global missions fades because of a weak and fuzzy image of missions.

Steps for Change:

Small step: Define missions. Draw boundaries around it. Put same culture ministries and social ministries in their own categories and fund and resource them separately so that it is clear how the church is stewarding its resources. For additional thinking on the scope and boundaries of missions, see *More Stuff you need to know about Doing Missions in Your Church* by David Mays, p. 11. You can see this page at <http://www.davidmays.org/Current-BN/MoreStuff.pdf>

Large step: Establish God's glory in all the earth as the overarching goal of the church and reform and redirect all ministries and programs to contribute to this greater goal. For a brief description of what this would look like and how to do it, see http://www.davidmays.org/article_gc_drive_n_church.html

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