

## Mission drift By Bob Young

I applaud the increased emphasis on missions that I see in many churches. The sacrifice that many Christians are making to contribute to mission work is encouraging. I also observe in the mission works of some churches that it is not easy to stay true to the mission to which God calls his people. Staying on task often takes all we have. It means knowing our purpose. It means knowing why we are going and what we are called to accomplish. It means setting in place the evaluation mechanisms that will help us answer the hard questions about timing, effectiveness, results, and staying true to our calling.

Those involved in the mission work of the kingdom often experience “mission drift.” We start out one way and end up going another. Understanding the purpose of the church, and the purpose of the mission work of the church, is crucial. That purpose has been defined by God—to bring everyone and everything under the umbrella of the lordship of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:9-10). The ultimate goal of mission work is not defined by our preferences or the countless human needs we encounter in this world. The ultimate goal of mission work is that the world come to know Jesus. Why do we so easily lose sight of God’s purpose and begin pursue other goals?

Forgive me if I use my prophetic voice too loudly. I do not mean to be demanding, immovable, or dogmatic, but I feel compelled to share my concerns. I want to encourage self-reflection, self-evaluation, and thoughtful analysis. I hope for positive results: that the bar is set a little higher, that problems and blind spots are identified, and that self-congratulation is excluded. I hope my discontent is a holy discontent. I find it unbelievable that we would ever domesticate the message, hide the message, or try to control it. The Bible is subject—we are object. Never vice versa. Forgive me if I am too much a purist, but we need to talk about missions, and about mission drift.

Consider eight things that contribute to mission drift.

**We do not understand that “doing missions” and “doing church” are two different things.** Mission work is the task of establishing the church in a new location. Mission work involves missionaries—doing church requires local ministers. Mission described in the simplest way is planting or establishing a new church. Afterward, the new church matures and begins to do what churches do. In this process, doing missions leads to doing church (and the missionary can go do missions in a new place). The processes that are part of mission work are different than the processes of being or doing church.

**We try to “do missions” by “doing church” in a different place.** This comes from the misunderstanding of missions described above. We are not called to simply transport our church model to a new place. Too much of what is done in the name of missions is just doing church in a different location where the gospel is not well known and does not have a solid foothold.

**How we “do missions” is decided more by the needs we see than by the purpose of God.** Another way of saying this is that mission work is often more reactive than proactive. Such mission work generally corresponds to physical needs and fails to do the work God has called the church to do in spreading the good news of Jesus, advancing the kingdom, and bringing people into saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

**“Doing missions” has little to do with proclamation of the gospel.** I am not opposed to doing church, but I am opposed to doing church without proclamation. I am concerned because we have learned how

to “do church” without sharing the gospel. What happens when “doing missions” is no more than “doing church” in a different place. In too many places, we have learned to be content in a church where evangelism and proclamation either do not occur or occur only infrequently. Likewise, missions can degenerate to the point where the proclamation of the good news is not a part of the work. The church has always been, and must always be, about message and outreach in the name of Jesus.

**It is hard to “do church” in the mission field because there is not a local support system.** If doing church in the mission field follows the same patterns as in the United States, doing church requires a lot of money and support. The problem with doing church in a foreign field is that there is not solid foundation on which to build the work. This shows again that we have the cart before the horse. We are trying to do fellowship and service and ministry and a host of other things before we evangelize and bring people to Jesus and participation in the faith community.

I am not opposed to doing church. I am simply saying that mission work precedes doing church. The gospel must have a foothold; churches must be established; Christians must be developed, matured, trained, and strengthened; the church planting process must continue; and when healthy churches are established, doing church will be natural. The local people are called to do church in their own arena, which will include becoming a self-duplicating, self-propagating missionary church.

**Sometimes, missionaries go (or are sent) and they end up going as good people rather than as Christians with a message.** The result is that some mission work only does what non-Christian organizations can do just as well or better. Too often, missionaries do good things but their actions are not explained. One person called this practical atheism. To the extent that those we are trying to reach in the “mission field” do not realize that we are motivated to serve by Christ, we fail to take the message God has given us.

**Sometimes, missionaries go (or are sent) and they do in the mission field exactly what they would do if they were living in the U.S.** They work, they play, they help, they build families. If we would not pay someone to live in the U.S. and follow a certain occupation, why would we pay them to live outside the U.S. and follow the same occupation? What is the purpose? Is it not to take a message? Is it not to deliver the message to those who do not have it?

**Sometimes, those who go end up doing lots of other stuff more than “doing missions.”** I am not opposed to schools, medical care, and other good works, but the healthy, biblical mission process makes those projects the work of the local Christians. Otherwise, these projects will require funding forever.

Learning precedes living. We cannot live right until we learn right. In the gospel, we are calling people to put their unbelieving lives under the rule and reign of God. What happens is that lives are changed—people become Christians and as a result they live differently.

There is a big difference between the reflexive form—I change my own life, and the passive form—my life is changed. We can teach people about family, drugs, addictions, and many other subjects, and on the basis of their changed knowledge they can try to change their lives. That is not gospel change. That is the power of positive thinking, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, do it yourself, lean on the human support system we are making available to you. There is a big difference when people come to understand that life change is the result of God’s presence and power in one’s life. To take the gospel to places where the gospel is not known—that is the work of missions!

A final observation: If everything becomes missions, nothing is missions. If everything falls within the definition, the task of taking the gospel to the world gets lost.