

The Tensions of Missions

By Bob Young

Anyone who has been involved in missions for very long is aware of the tensions. The challenge is constantly before the missionary. How does one balance all of the things that need to be done? How does one decide about priorities when the number of things that need to be done is almost overwhelming? This is the tension of missions.

Consider three tensions. In each case the tension is described, the result of a misplaced focus is summarized, and the need is outlined.

First, there is a tension between evangelism and benevolence. The missionary goes to share the gospel, but the physical needs that exist in many places around the world are staggering—disease, unmet medical needs, homeless children, poverty...the list is almost endless. How does one balance spiritual needs and physical needs, evangelism and benevolence? At one end of the spectrum, focusing primarily on evangelism may cause us to neglect human needs. At the other end of the spectrum, focusing primarily on human needs may create unhealthy dependencies and ministries or missions that require continuing financial support. Benevolent efforts can open doors for preaching the gospel, but often they do not. It is possible to do both evangelism and benevolence, but it is increasingly uncommon. Mission work that does not seriously and aggressively share the saving message of Jesus Christ is ultimately a failure, even when many good works are done in the name of Jesus (Matthew 7:21-23). Doing the will of the Father does not mean accepting correct doctrine; it means doing what God wants done, including the preaching of the gospel.

In some places around the world, after the gospel has been introduced into a region or country and a missionary presence has existed for many years, the result is not strong churches and mature Christians who are capable of taking the gospel into their own country. Instead, the results are numerous small, struggling, financially dependent congregations; numerous “mission works”—medical missions and facilities, food programs to ease the pain of poverty, child care institutions, and similar programs focused on meeting physical needs; and US churches continuing to send missionaries to places where the gospel has already gone. The need is to renew the fire of evangelism in the hearts of the local Christians so that the gospel will be shared naturally.

Second, there is a tension between evangelism and development. The original goal is almost always to evangelize—to share the gospel. The goal is to bring people to Jesus. But once people come to Christ and a church is established, there is a need to help the Christians mature spiritually. Sending churches often want to hear about the number of baptisms and the growth of the new church, but the missionary sees the need to help the new church find stability and biblical organization. Sending churches want to hear about numerical church growth but the missionary sees the need to help with organic church growth.

The result of this tension is that when the initial missionary presence is withdrawn, small struggling congregations are left. This tension is difficult to manage. The desire is to evangelize, but congregational development is the path to maintaining a continuing evangelistic presence. There is a need to help local churches with church development and the development of natural leaders who can help the church become biblically organized as a missionary church focused outward. Healthy church development leads to churches capable of self-governance, self-sustenance, and self-duplication.

Third, there is a tension between present needs and future needs. This tension is often seen in the contrast between a continuing missionary presence to evangelize (focusing on present needs) and equipping local Christians to do the work (future needs). How does one do the present work in evangelism and at the same time prepare the local church for the future? Will the work continue to depend on inserted missionaries or will we train nationals within the culture who will pick up the work and move forward into the future? Can we anticipate a time when the gospel has gone to a country and there is no need for more US missionaries because the local churches have taken up the task of spreading the gospel in their own country?

In many places, the churches established as a result of past mission efforts are not biblically organized and lack leaders within the congregation. The preacher often functions as “the” leader who continues to receive U.S. funding with little hope of reaching a future point where the congregation can become self-sustaining and the US funding can be withdrawn. There is a need to help develop leaders within the congregation who will help local churches mature so they can continue the process of taking the gospel into their region and country.

How can these tensions be addressed?

Three needs are described above: a renewed focus on evangelism with member training that will help every member become involved in evangelism, the development of local congregations and local leaders who will help the church become biblically organized, and the development of leaders who have a vision for taking the gospel into the world.

Specifically-focused seminars can address these needs. The seminars should help develop Christian maturity in the members and also develop effective ministries within local churches.

- A focus on evangelism helps the local, indigenous members develop an evangelistic message in the context of their culture. This builds up the local church and also encourages the establishment of new congregations by the local churches.
- Spiritual training helps develop healthy, mature churches that are strong and edified in the faith, with the desire to spread the gospel. I call these missionary churches.
- Specific teaching and training helps produce churches that are biblically organized with leaders and teachers.
- Training helps develop healthy ministry models so that church leaders and members work together as a team to accomplish the work

The seminars should identify the specific needs of a local church and seek to help the church develop according to a normal growth process.

- After a church is planted, it must be encouraged to continue to grow, to escape self-satisfaction and to continue to develop itself by seeking new members through evangelism and by planting additional congregations
- Churches must be “turned over” to the nationals
- This necessarily involves leadership training
- Biblical leadership and organization leads to self-governed, self-owned, self-sustaining, self-edifying churches where members actively participate to do the work of the local church
- Biblical leadership leads to self-propagating missionary churches capable of planting additional churches
- Teaching and training according to the biblical model leads to evangelists that evangelize rather than local ministers who essentially serve as pastors