

Is it really mission work if there is little or no evangelism?

By Bob Young

OK, some part of me gets it. Mentally, I understand. Mission has to do with sending or being sent, so technically if one goes somewhere to do something specific, it is a mission. In contemporary English, the word mission is used to describe things as mundane as going to a crowded grocery store: "My wife sent me on a 'mission'." Some churches use the word mission to describe everything done internationally: we hear talk about medical missions, benevolent missions, relief missions, educational missions.... Churches talk about domestic missions, many of which involve service projects, for example, going somewhere and building a house.

Will you forgive me if some part of me wants to hold out for more precise terminology? Should anything and everything the church does internationally (and domestically if it involves travel) be labeled missions?

Phil Slate, a missiologist with lots of mission experience, counsels, "When someone comes asking you to fund a mission trip, you ought to at least ask them what they are going to be doing; because a lot of what is done in the name of missions isn't."

I agree with Slate. Something in me would like to reserve the word "mission" for purposeful evangelistic efforts that have as their primary goal and primary impact sharing the gospel, planting churches, and bringing people to Jesus as Savior.

- Last July, I spent a week with eight evangelists in Venezuela where the church had 150 baptisms last year. My role was to help with ministry training, facilitate more evangelism, and encourage. The church has grown to nearly 600 and has two services to accommodate all the people. They are actively planting churches in nearby towns.
- In August, I was at a church in Colombia where two elders serve. They recently had to buy more chairs, they are expanding their building with their own resources, they had nearly 50 baptisms during the year; they are actively working in new church plants.
- In February this year, I was with a new church in Guatemala, barely one year old, averaging 30+ in attendance, with over 20 baptisms in the first year but struggling to keep new converts faithful. We worked in evangelism and restorations. Last week I received word of four more baptisms.
- As a contrast, about six months ago during a mission trip to South America I visited a team of five couples that had been on the field almost 3 years with one soul won for Jesus. They are trying to figure out what's wrong: lots of activity, lots of meetings, fellowship, games, practical classes.... Some of the problem can be focused with one simple challenge: make sure the gospel is included and is at the center of all the activity.

More and more churches are talking about becoming missional. I'm glad. Nothing is wrong and much is right with realizing that the mission field of lost people is right next door and that God is calling us to take our Christianity outside the four walls of our church buildings. But again, something within me longs for more precise definitions and descriptions. When I deliver a Christmas basket of groceries to a poor family, is that being missional? When I drive an elderly

neighbor to the doctor, is that missional? When I go on vacation, visit a local congregation and on the spur of the moment teach the Bible class at their request, is that missions?

When I was growing up, I learned about the three major activities of the church—evangelism, edification, and benevolence. I know the Bible doesn't describe the work of the church in those precise terms, but the descriptions are helpful. I believe the church should be able to say what it is doing. Are we delivering food baskets in hopes that someone will decide on the spot to become a Jesus follower, or are we simply seeking to be compassionate like Jesus and meet a need in the spirit of Jesus?

Please do not misunderstand me. I have no objection to Christians and local churches providing school supplies and weekend backpacks filled with food for needy children, feeding the hungry, caring for the homeless, providing counseling and addiction relief, providing free medical and dental services to needy children as they begin a new school year, doing fall auto maintenance for widows, etc. I am simply asking whether we can accurately describe such programs as evangelism. I appreciate the work done by children's homes. I think we should do everything we can to reflect the spirit of Jesus in our spheres of influence and to be Jesus' presence in this world. But before I label such efforts as evangelism or outreach, I want to know the long-term evangelistic impact and results. I recognize the value of one soul, but I also remember Jesus' parable where we are challenged to use our resources as wisely as possible.

It seems to me that local churches do pretty well in understanding the difference between benevolent programs, support ministries, education programs, and service projects at home. If the distinction is helpful in the work of the local church, perhaps it would be helpful also as we think about missions and the work the church does internationally. I have no problem with Christians who travel domestically or to foreign countries to play with children, set up baseball games, teach sewing and knitting classes, teach vocational or farming skills, set up self-sustenance programs, etc. etc. etc. What I am questioning is to what extent these get to the heart of Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost. Rather than lump everything together under the umbrella of missions, can we figure out some other way to describe programs of benevolence, feeding programs, addiction recovery programs, child care, medical care, counseling programs, etc., when they occur away from the home congregation or overseas? If the work is focused on Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost, let's call it missions. But if the work is not primarily focused on bringing souls to Jesus, let's call it what it is.

The mission of church can never be separated from Jesus' mission to seek and to save the lost. God's purpose is to unite all people under the Lordship of Jesus in the church. It is good when the church reflects the heart of Jesus and seeks to touch its world with compassion and concern, but it means very little if souls are not brought to the feet of Jesus where they find salvation and eternal peace.