

Is it really mission work if there is no evangelism?

By Bob Young

[Note: this is a January 2021 update of the original article written in 2014]

Some part of me gets it. 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 all international activities—churches talk about their medical missions, benevolent missions, relief missions, educational missions.... Churches also talk about domestic mission work, often describing service projects done within the U.S., for example, the youth group that goes somewhere to serve, or to help build a house.

Some part of me cries out for more precise terminology. Should anything and everything the church does internationally (and domestically, if it involves travel) be labeled mission work?

Phil Slate, a missiologist with years of mission experience, wrote, “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.”

Slate has watched churches doing “mission work” for many years. I hear his heart. Something within me would like to reserve the word “mission” for purposeful evangelistic efforts that have as their primary goal sharing the gospel, planting churches, and bringing people to Jesus as Lord and Savior. While much of my mission experience has involved evangelistic, productive efforts, I have also observed mission work that failed to win souls.¹

- 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, arts and crafts classes.... I believe the problem can be solved with one simple change: make sure the gospel is included and is at the center of all the activity.

Many churches are seeking to become 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 something within me also longs for more precise definitions and descriptions. When I deliver a Christmas basket of groceries to a poor

¹ The examples I share here have not been updated.

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 mission work?

Somewhere along the way I heard about the three major activities of the church—evangelism, edification, and benevolence. The Bible doesn't describe the work of the church in those precise terms, but the descriptions are helpful. The church should understand what it is doing. Are we delivering food baskets to share the gospel, or are we simply seeking to be compassionate like Jesus and meeting a need in the spirit of Jesus?

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, or doing fall auto maintenance for widows. I am simply asking whether such efforts are 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 consider the evangelistic impact and results. I recognize the value of one soul, but I also remember Jesus' parables and the challenge to use our resources as wisely as possible.

It seems to me that churches do pretty well in understanding the role of benevolent programs, support ministries, education programs, and service projects at home. These efforts do not connect directly to the God's purpose for the church and its ministry. If the distinction is helpful in the activities of a local church, perhaps it can be helpful as we evaluate missions and the work the church does internationally. I have no problem with Christians who travel, either domestically or internationally, to play with children, set up baseball games, teach sewing and knitting classes, teach vocational or farming skills, or set up self-sustenance programs. What I am questioning is to what extent these correspond to Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost. Rather than put everything under the umbrella of mission work, can we find a more accurate description for the programs of benevolence, food distribution, addiction recovery, child care, and medical care that are supported in locations away from the home congregation? When the efforts fulfill Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost, let's call them missions. 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. Certainly the church should reflect the heart of Jesus and touch its world with compassion and concern, but such efforts mean very little if the souls are not brought to the feet of Jesus where they find salvation and eternal peace.