

Refining Our Philosophy of Mission Work by Bob Young

INTRODUCTION

It is time to talk about mission work!

- With the beginning of the new school year, the short-term-mission (STM) season is almost over. Perhaps I will not step on too many toes!
- In many churches, the coming of fall means that the mission budgeting season is approaching.
- Many churches do not have defined philosophy of missions – they do not know what they are trying to do, they do not know if they are succeeding, they have no goal and hit it consistently!

How is your mission work doing? How many souls are being won? How many churches are being planted? What evidences are there of spiritual growth, increased capability among members in the mission church? Are churches being developed that are self-sustaining, maturing (becoming capable of doing God's work with a minimum of external help), self-edifying, self-directed, and self-propagating (mission churches that establish more churches)?

REVIEWING

Dan Hardin describes three mission philosophies in his book *Mission: A Practical Approach*. A **first philosophy** sees missions primarily as helping meet the physical needs of this world -- feeding the hungry and clothing the poor; providing child care, medical care, education or other training; liberating the oppressed. A **second philosophy** believes that as long as there are Christians in an area or region, missions is carried out by their presence and example. A **third philosophy**, reflecting biblical teaching and examples, understands that mission "emphasizes winning souls, discipling, baptizing, church planting and nurturing" (Hardin).

Considering biblical teaching, examples, and models, the ultimate goal must be seeking and saving souls and establishing mature indigenous churches. A mature indigenous church is "self-governing, self-sustaining, and self-propagating" (Hardin).

LESSON

This sermon surveys the Bible teaching and examples, suggests how the context of the mission point must inform the work, and concludes with my list of the "Ten Commandments" of mission work.

-1- Bible teaching and examples

When the early church became involved in "mission work," the gospel spread like wildfire during the early decades of Christianity. What made this possible? First, the focus was on the message, and benevolence seems to have been mostly focused inwardly (Acts 2-5). Second, the gospel spread when average Christians (not the apostles) were dispersed (Acts 8:1-2). Third, the gospel was carried to new regions and new ethnic groups (Acts 8-12). Fourth, when missionaries were sent forth, they taught the good news, established churches, and then moved on to new sites (Acts 13-14). Fifth, the missionaries returned to the newly established churches to strengthen, encourage, and train (Acts 13-14). Sixth, continuing support was provided with additional visits and letters of instruction. Seventh, at least one of the newly established churches (Philippi) immediately became involved in mission work as the church sent funds to help Paul in Thessalonica.

We see the fourth, fifth, and sixth steps repeated again and again in Paul's work of taking the gospel to Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia Minor. Paul's longest "mission work" was 1 ½ years in Corinth, except that he spent three years in Ephesus teaching in the school of Tyrannus where it seems his purpose was to send forth Christians to establish more churches. (Paul never visited some of the

churches in Asia Minor—Colossae, Laodicea, and Hieropolis.) Paul continually sent workers to strengthen the churches and he wrote letters to encourage and teach the new Christians.

With regard to the seventh step, it is safe to say that this step is most unlikely and unusual in the mission work we know today. Where are the newly established churches that are sending money or missionaries to spread the good news? Where are the newly established churches that almost immediately become senders rather than receivers?

Paul also worked to establish leaders in the new churches (1 Thess. 5:12-14; 1 Cor. 16:7-9, Acts 20, Titus 1, 1 Timothy 3-5). Within a short time, the churches had leaders. Paul personally revisited many locations.

Need I say more? How unlike the majority of the mission works the church is involved in today!

-2- Mission corresponds to the needs in the mission field

Mission work must be informed by the needs of the receiving mission church and its culture, not by the needs and desires of the sending or sponsoring church. The problem with many short-term missions is that nothing is done that genuinely advances the gospel in the mission field. What are the needs on the field?

The primary needs are spiritual and eternal. The first need is salvation. The world needs Jesus more than it needs physical help. The churches need spiritually mature Christians – but we are often sending spiritually immature Christians to reach this goal. The churches need spiritual leadership; member training in evangelism; instruction in discipleship – how to be a committed disciple of Jesus. The churches need encouragement to grow in number, to plant more churches, to keep on keeping on.

Mission work that desires to reach out with the gospel to win souls and plant mature churches will study and consider the needs of the receiving location.

-3- “Ten Commandments” of mission work

These ten concepts are suggestions to guide mission work. The concepts reorder and expand Hardin’s eight “indigenous church principles” which provide a primary focus on evangelism and spiritual needs.

- **Foreign (inserted) missionaries should interpret mission primarily as church planting in regions where the gospel has not gone.** Initial efforts will be heavily focused on church planting and evangelism, but church development should also be in focus from the beginning. Initial church planting efforts must keep in mind the goal of developing healthy, stable, mature congregations. (**NOTE!!** As a generalization, foreign missionaries are not inserted in areas where the gospel has already gone, because if developed, mature churches already exist in an area, those churches are expected to be the first line of sharing the gospel in their region.)
- **The goal is to develop stable, mature churches.** Foreign missionaries are often tempted to share the gospel with those easiest to reach because of the emphasis on the number of baptisms that is typical of supporting U.S. churches. This process often leads to small, struggling congregations without natural leadership, and congregations that must be propped up continually with U.S. financial support. (This points to the need for additional, broader evangelism efforts either by different missionaries or through periodic visits and efforts.)
- **Foreign missionaries should naturally integrate church planting and evangelism with the initial stages of church development,** including the natural development of indigenous teachers and leaders. (If the initial missionary presence is withdrawn too soon, this work can also be done with periodic training visits.)
- **Growing, developing, maturing congregations select and support their own leaders and evangelists.**
- **Leadership is transferred as rapidly as possible from the inserted missionary presence to the indigenous leaders,** understanding that leaders of local churches learn by doing. The missionary

is not present to protect from every potential mistake, but to facilitate church and leader development.

- **The involvement of the entire church in ministry**, including evangelism by the entire membership, is facilitated.
- **Continued member development, including discipline, is the role of the local church.**
- Because the members are active and indigenous leaders are in charge, **non-Christians interact primarily with the local members and unpaid indigenous church leaders** like themselves (rather than the foreign missionary).
- With the involvement and responsibility of the local members, the work is not limited to the investment or support of U.S. or supporting churches, and **the goal is that the local church become independent of outside financial support.** (This allows sponsoring churches to focus on supporting evangelists rather than located 'ministers'.)
- From the beginning, **churches are encouraged to become missionary churches**, with the desire and ability to self-propagate, with the result that the church multiplies in extraordinary places.

The contemporary church will do well to consider afresh these concepts. We have developed lots of "mission work" that does very little to expand the borders of the kingdom and bring the lost into a saved relationship with God. We have inserted too many missionaries into mission fields with the primary purpose of meeting physical needs. Sometimes, needs-meeting provides opportunities to bring people to Jesus, but such results are often (usually) fairly limited. At best, one might affirm that our covert and indirect approach primarily helps people with basic needs with a limited secondary focus on eternal salvation. At worst, one might observe that we are not doing what God sends us out to do, the most important thing we can do -- to seek and to save the lost.

Let us return to the Biblical teaching and Bible examples. Let us sensitively evaluate and address the spiritual needs of the mission point. Let us pray to understand how the application of "indigenous church principles" can catapult our mission work to the next level so that 100s and 1000s of souls are brought to Jesus!