

Entry

Beginning Well

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One purpose of IMB's *Foundations*¹ is to highlight the foundation and parameters on which missionaries build strategies and tactics. There are six core components to the missionary task. The first task listed is Entry. Effective entry is critical to the process, as we must cultivate “access to people who need to hear the gospel” if we want to reach them.² That step requires missionaries not only to know the unreached peoples they are seeking to reach, but also to know themselves well so their access strategy fits within biblical parameters as well as their giftedness, training, and calling.

In some ways, entry starts when potential missionaries begin to address their calling and consider their options. Gailyn Van Rheenen notes that missionary candidates are frequently “certain of God’s call to missions but unsure of the place to which God is leading them.”³ God may burden a potential missionary for a particular people or place through study, short-term trips, or other means. These potential laborers wrestle through several

¹ International Mission Board, *Foundations* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2018), 7.

² IMB, *Foundations*, 76.

³ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Missions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2014), 154.

questions that precede actual entry into a ministry context.⁴ These questions may include:

- Could we be part of God’s mission in this context?
- How do we choose a place from all these possibilities?
- Where does God want us to minister?
- What will be our ministry there?

Entry thus begins when missionaries-to-be turn their hearts toward peoples and places.

Actual entry into a new people or place, includes four components: research, presence, identity, and communication ability.⁵ These four components should function simultaneously rather than sequentially. Research provides information about people groups and their locations that informs the missionary’s identity on the field, presence among a people, and commitment to strong communication skills. Presence deals mainly with access to a particular people group or location, with missionaries serving with integrity and intentionally seeking to reach non-believers in the context. Identity thus affords missionaries a role consistent with their “skills, training, and interests”;⁶ it facilitates opportunities to connect with the community where the gospel is proclaimed, disciples are made, churches are formed, and leaders are developed. Where governments restrict presence, gaining access through creative access requires field workers to live out their identity trusting that creative access work is “a calling from God, not a distraction or a nuisance.”⁷

Finally, communication skills are central to our task. Effective communication skills enable missionaries to engage in the heart language of the

⁴ Van Rheenen, *Missions*, 154–155.

⁵ IMB, *Foundations*, 76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

people to whom we are sent. These skills grow not only by study of the language and culture of a people group, but also from good research of peoples and places, consistent presence with the community, and authentic identity that opens doors for evangelizing. Each one of these aspects reciprocally informs and impacts the ability to communicate. This article focuses on research and communication ability while also briefly addressing presence and identity.

Research

With billions of unreached people around the globe, local churches and missions agencies must strategize wisely in using resources God provides. The number of unreached people groups varies based on the definition of UPGs and the research methodology,⁸ but the research is nonetheless essential as missionaries seek to understand people group demographics and prepare Great Commission strategies. That research should be done “soberly and carefully, to make sure the job is done wisely.”⁹

Research is practical. It helps the missionary see who the unreached people are, what work has been or is currently being done, and what contextual factors play into the missionary task. These factors include religious, historical, cultural, economic, and political issues that might affect the work of evangelism and healthy church planting. In today’s world where information is readily available, missionaries can begin initial research even before going to the field and then continue that work after arriving on the field. In some ways, research is an ongoing process for remaining current in missiological emphases and strategies.

⁸ J.D. Payne, and John Mark Terry, *Developing a Strategy for Missions (Encountering Mission): A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 128.

⁹ Zane Pratt, Jeff Walters, M. David Sills, *Introduction to Global Missions* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 260, Kindle Edition.

Though the *research* in these stories is unique, the Bible does offer some examples of people studying a context. The Lord directed Moses to send twelve spies to research the Promised Land (Numbers 13). God instructed his people to do research to see tangibly what he promised to give them. God had promised them the land, and he wanted the people to see not only the fruit of the land but also the obstacles in the land. God thus tested their faith in him to overcome the obstacles and fulfill his promise of a land flowing with milk and honey.

Similarly, the apostle Paul took note of the obvious idolatry in Athens (Acts 17:16–17) simply by observing the city as he waited for his teammates to arrive. So pervasive was the idolatry that it deeply distressed, even “infuriated,”¹⁰ Paul. One commentator noted that in Athens, “Its temples and statuary were related to the worship of the Greek pantheon, and its culture was pagan. Therefore Paul, with his Jewish abhorrence of idolatry, could not but find the culture of Athens spiritually repulsive.”¹¹ The result of his observation was not, however, his immediate departure from the city; rather, it was that he “reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (Acts 17:17). Observation compelled him toward proclamation.

John Mark Terry and J.D. Payne point out the importance of research when preparing a missions strategy. On one hand, missionaries need to research “past knowledge of the working of the Spirit among the people, in the church, the team, or the organization.”¹² This step would include discovering any historical events that might impact a group’s receptivity to the gospel. It also includes team members reviewing their personal histories and reflecting on “how their pasts will affect the present and future outworking

¹⁰ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 366

¹¹ R. N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 473.

¹² Payne and Terry, *Developing a Strategy for Missions*, 12.

of the strategy.”¹³ All missionaries bring their own stories to the field, and reviewing those stories of personal and team successes and failures can help prepare them for the future.

On the other hand, “present knowledge of what the Spirit is doing”¹⁴ is also critical. The questions to ask to discern what the Spirit is doing can be numerous, but a central one is, “Where is God currently working among individuals or groups?” At a practical level, this research might seek to know the status of Bible translation, the identity of other evangelical outreach efforts in the area (if any), and the number of believers and churches among a people group. It is a recognition that the Holy Spirit at times directed Christ-followers to people and fields where he was already at work among God-prepared people waiting to hear (e.g., Luke 10: “person of peace”; Acts 9: Ananias and Paul; Acts 10: Peter and Cornelius; Acts 18: Aquilla, Priscilla, and Apollos). God was already working, and he led his people on assignment to others he had already prepared.

Thus, research that increases knowledge of God’s past faithfulness and his ongoing work strengthens the missionary for present and future work. At a different level, Henry Blackaby points out that recognizing where God is working requires “living in an intimate love relationship with God. . . a tender, sensitive heart, prepared through a love relationship with the Father, will be ready to respond to God at the slightest prompting.”¹⁵ These believers “pursue him [God] as people empowered by the Holy Spirit whose hunger for him comes from the Spirit’s work within them.”¹⁶ Assumed behind good missiological research is also the researcher’s growing relationship with God.

¹³ Ibid., 352.

¹⁴ Ibid., 352.

¹⁵ Henry T. Blackaby, Richard Blackaby, and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group., 2021), 127–129, Kindle Edition.

¹⁶ A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2004), 181.

Concurrently, research is valuable in determining the most effective way to be a presence among an unreached people group. In a day when “Most of the unreached people groups and places of the world are found in countries that either do not grant missionary visas, or that severely restrict missionary activity at the least,”¹⁷ creative access strategies can be a significant component of an entry strategy. While some view platforms as only “a ‘cover’ for missionaries,”¹⁸ others see them as “a product of God’s calling, equipping, and gifting.”¹⁹ In fact, a legitimate platform provides identity for the missionary who must strive to do evangelism and discipleship while also being ever ready to answer the question, “What do you do?”²⁰ in a way that is true while not threatening their presence.

One might say, every missionary is on a platform in the sense that they have a legitimate presence among the people they engage. In some countries, missionaries can openly identify as religious workers; in others, the environment is hostile and a less overt presence is necessary in order to have access. A colleague described his situation this way: “Where we serve, the context is not hostile, but the locals’ perception of a ‘missionary’ is far from the reality. When asked, ‘Why are you here?’ I can respond, ‘I am a consultant for theological education [the official platform], but what I really enjoy doing is helping people come to know God in a personal way.’ This is all true and consistent with what I do, and it identifies me as someone who knows about and likes to talk about spiritual things.”²¹

Regardless of the type of visa cross-cultural workers might have, their identity in the community should be characterized by exhibiting the fruit of

¹⁷ IMB, *Foundations*, 77.

¹⁸ Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rhee, and Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book Group, 2005), 211.

¹⁹ Pocock, Van Rhee, and McConnell, *Changing Face of World Missions*, 211.

²⁰ IMB, *Foundations*, 78.

²¹ Personal conversation with author. Used with permission.

the Spirit (Gal 5:22–25), trusting the Bible as their authority (2 Tim 3:16–17), making disciples who obey everything Jesus commanded—including making more disciples (Matt 28:18–20), and leaning on prayer as “central to [their] strategy”²² (Luke 10:2). Thus, the call of Jesus for his faithful followers to pray for more workers for the harvest should lead to the next generation of gospel workers researching and seeking entry in more places.

Communication Ability

The work of ministry is about communicating the gospel. Regardless of the form of communication, missionaries are to abide in Christ, share the gospel with the lost, and disciple believers.²³ Doing this work most effectively requires learning the language of a people group, understanding that this task is “both absolutely necessary for a successful missions experience and a significant contributor to [one’s] culture shock.”²⁴ The work is not easy, and it requires devoting time and energy to language and culture study. Only in knowing the language and understanding the culture will missionaries “be able to have deep conversations about heart issues if they are to share the gospel, teach the Bible, and disciple believers effectively.”²⁵

In language learning, missionaries are “digging a well that you and others will drink from for the rest of your life.”²⁶ Van Rheen wrote about a significant aspect of language learning: evangelizing as a missionary even while acquiring language skills. This quote is worth pondering when one thinks about the entry stage of the missionary task:

²² IMB, *Foundations*, 30.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁴ Pratt, Walters, and Sills, *Global Mission*, 231.

²⁵ IMB, *Foundations*, 78.

²⁶ Pratt, Walters, and Sills, *Global Mission*, 234.

Some missionaries, passionate about reaching the lost and planting churches, want to bypass the crucial stage of language and culture learning. Missionaries, however, cannot be effective teachers unless they are first learners. Neglecting language and culture learning during the first months on the field reduces missionaries' effectiveness in all other stages, and the resulting movement is often anemic rather than vibrant.

Even during the early learning stage, however, we [Van Rheenen and his wife, who served as missionaries] did not abandon our identity as missionaries, ambassadors for the kingdom of God. We learned the language as Christians. Learning a language is inherently a social exercise, and the people with whom we interacted during this process were also the reason for our effort. Language learning provided an arena for building relationships and learning to communicate the essentials of the gospel message, though initially in an elementary way.²⁷

Foundations makes a similar point: "It is unproductive to postpone gospel sharing in the new language until the language learner is relatively proficient."²⁸ Not only can reaching language proficiency take some time, but the missionary can also get out of the habit of sharing the gospel during the work of language school. Limited language skills should not be permission for limiting evangelistic efforts; they should be a means to first learn cross-cultural evangelism using the most basic tools. Simplicity, in fact, often communicates best regardless of one's language level.

The missionary is first and foremost a "communicator of God's word in obedience to the Great Commission."²⁹ Missionaries learn the local lan-

²⁷ Van Rheenen, *Missions*, 349.

²⁸ IMB, *Foundations*, 79.

²⁹ Scott N. Callaham, "Language and World Mission," in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, ed. Scott N. Callaham and Will Brooks (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), location 3444, Kindle Edition.

guage not because they simply want to know another language, but precisely because the message they proclaim is the message of redemption through Christ. Scott Callaham is correct: studying a language in order to communicate the gospel cross-culturally means “laying aside the closely held ‘right’ to use one’s native tongue.”³⁰ Indeed, he concludes, “if a missionary never effectively learns the language of the host-nation community, he or she severely limits the scope of ministry only to the atypical people who can cross to the missionary’s side of the language bridge.”³¹ Such a self-imposed limitation should not be the choice for a Great Commission missionary.

A word of caution is in order at this point. At its core, communication on the mission field assumes relationships with nationals. It “involves a careful study of language and culture and time spent with people.”³² A worthwhile consideration regarding entry is the tensions missionaries face between learning culture and language on the ground and remaining connected to their family and home through electronic means. Those connections are important, but immediate access to “people back home”³³ sometimes gets in the way of relationship building with locals. Technology that could prove helpful in cross-cultural work may, in fact, become a hindrance to that work. That is particularly the case when relationships are *on the screen* in one’s mother tongue more than *face-to-face* in the language of the people a missionary is called to reach.

Conclusion

Entering a new field for the sake of the gospel can seem an impossible task, and it is indeed impossible by mere human ability. God, however, calls his church, sets them apart, sends them, and equips them for the assignment

³⁰ Callaham, “Language and World Mission,” Location 3675.

³¹ *Ibid.*, location 3714–3715.

³² Pocock, Van Rhee, and McConnell, *Changing Face of World Missions*, 316.

³³ *Ibid.*

he has for them. Relying on him lessens the pressure on the missionary as he or she first engages a new ministry field. Rather, it leads the missionary to walk in step with the Spirit into the very field that is white unto harvest.

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