

An IMB Trustee's Perspective on Recent Events in South Asia

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God created the heavens and the earth as a radiant display of his glory. God also has scripted and is executing the salvation of sinners from every nation on earth as an even greater display of his glory. We will spend eternity in heaven displaying, seeing, learning, and studying the glory of God as the basis of our ever-increasing praise. In the meantime, it is the greatest privilege of our lives to be called out of Satan's dark kingdom to take part in the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

I am completing my ninth year as a trustee of the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). These nine years have greatly enriched my understanding of and appreciation for the amazing labors of our brothers and sisters serving the Lord so faithfully all over the world. As part of that role, in March of 2022, I had the privilege along with two other trustees to travel to South Asia, to meet with key field personnel to learn more about the mighty works of God in this part of the world. In this brief article, I want to give some of my perspective on what I found.

The Cause for Inquiry

Every year, the IMB publishes a document called the “Annual Statistical Report” (ASR). It presents data culled from the eight affinities into which the IMB has organized its work throughout the world. The 2020 ASR¹ presented some extraordinary data which caused a number of the trustees to begin enquiries. The following is a table I organized from the ASR:

Affinity	New Believers	Baptisms	New Churches Planted
American	17,290	164	9
Central Asian	2,009	762	30
Deaf	189	135	10
East Asian	6,656	3,270	230
European	950	419	78
NAME	1,097	218	61
South Asian	100,566	76,904	17,772
Southeast Asian	4,165	3,097	105
TOTAL	132,922	84,969	18,295

Table 1. 2020 ASR

It is obvious that there is a remarkable work reported from the South Asian affinity. Simply put, 17,772 out of 18,295 churches planted by IMB missionaries worldwide were planted in that one affinity. That’s 97.1%! It was not long before some key leaders in the SBC, along with some of the trustees, began asking probing questions about this data.

¹ International Mission Board, *Annual Statistical Report: Reporting on 2020 Data* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2021). The IMB publishes a similar report each year. These reports can be accessed at <https://www.imb.org/research/annual-statistical-report/>.

The Backdrop: Church Planting Movement Methodology

Many of these questions came from the history of Church Planting Movements (CPMs) in mission work.² CPM methodology combines an explosive growth of individual converts with a rapid proliferation of local churches connected with these conversions. While that may well seem desirable to Christians who yearn for the Great Commission to be fulfilled, many of these CPMs have historically involved questionable (at best) methodologies. Anecdotally, some of the more toxic of these methodologies are 1) pressure for explosive evangelism/conversion numbers; 2) faulty reporting of such numbers; 3) altering of the gospel message to make it more appealing to the target group; 4) use of unconverted nationals in the work; 5) financial payment of nationals; 6) financial rewarding of numerical goals being reached; 7) hostility to careful doctrinal instruction of converts (i.e. discipleship) in the name of rapid multiplication; 8) truncating of pastoral ministry (preaching, teaching, shepherding, counseling, family ministry, care for the sick, etc.) so that all focus can go to evangelism. So, it seemed reasonable for these concerned trustees, representing concerned SBC churches, to do an inquiry.

Perhaps an explanation of the role of “trustee” would be helpful here. The word “trustee” implies a role of fostering a high level of trust among the donor churches of the SBC. The churches give two precious commodities to the IMB: people and money. The SBC has set up a system whereby their donor churches can be confident these two precious resources are being spent wisely. The trustees are a part of that system.

In this sense, trustees serve somewhat as loving “building inspectors” of the work done on the field. In 1 Corinthians 3, the Apostle Paul spoke of

² The Church Planting Movement missiological paradigm emerged in the last decade of the 20th century into the first decade of the 21st century. The influence of this paradigm is far reaching in modern missions practice. See R. Bruce Carlton, *Strategy Coordinator: Changing the Course of Southern Baptist Missions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 175-208.

his own role as the planter of the local church at Corinth, and the church itself as a building (1 Cor. 3:9), and he gives a serious charge to those who come after him to continue the work: “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds” (1 Cor. 3:10). The foundation he laid was the pure gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified (1 Cor. 2:2) and risen (1 Cor. 15:4). There is no other foundation that can be laid, for any other foundation is a false gospel. Paul then goes on to speak in that famous passage about others later building on his foundational work using gold, silver or costly stones versus those who build using wood, hay, or straw (1 Cor. 3:12). This clearly refers to the ongoing evangelism and discipleship done in Corinth by later preachers/leaders who came after Paul. He warns that Judgment Day will test the quality of each person’s work (1 Cor. 3:13-14).

Using that analogy, it seems reasonable for trustees to see themselves as “building inspectors” of the work done by missionaries, checking the foundation, framing, wiring, plumbing, siding, roofing, etc. to make sure it is up to code. Done with love and humility, this work falls within the purview of a trustee’s role, inspiring donor church confidence.

The Indispensable Role of Healthy Churches in the Great Commission

Foundational to my official inquiries into the works of God in South Asia was my understanding of salvation, the Great Commission, and the role of healthy churches. First and foremost, salvation. I believe the Bible makes it clear that salvation is a process: justification, then sanctification, then glorification. The true gospel is preached, sinners repent and trust Christ, and they are justified by faith (Rom. 3:23-25). All their sins, past, present, and future are forgiven. They are instantly given a position of perfect righteousness through faith in Christ. Next, they begin the sanctification journey of growth into Christlike maturity. Paul commands the Philippians to work out their

own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God at work in them both to will and to do his good will (Phil. 2:12-13). Paul says that Timothy should grow and develop in his ministry of the public reading of scripture, preaching, and teaching, because if he does he will save both himself and his hearers (1 Tim. 4:13-16). Paul is not saying Timothy is not yet a Christian... but just that his own salvation is not yet finished! And the ongoing preaching of the Word of God is essential both to his own completion of the salvation journey and that of his hearers. This journey is completed for each Christian in glorification, which occurs at death or at the Second Coming of Christ.

That is precisely why healthy churches are essential to the completion of the Great Commission. Whether in a bazaar in Mumbai, a coffee shop in London, or a corn field in Kenya, if a sinner genuinely repents and believes in Christ at the words of a missionary, that sinner's salvation journey has just begun. Without healthy churches, including elders faithfully preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God's Word (Acts 20:27), these converts will eventually fall away under the relentless assault of the world/flesh/devil. Jesus' own articulation of the Great Commission includes "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19). That comprehensive teaching resulting in comprehensive obedience is the essence of healthy church ministry.

What was necessary for us as trustees after the 2020 ASR was to be sure as best we could that those 100,566 new converts reported in South Asia were each in healthy churches, and that the 17,772 new churches planted were

healthy as defined by our *Foundations* document.³ That was the work of “building inspection” I felt led to do.

Opposing a False Dichotomy: Speed vs. Depth

Part of my critique of the toxic elements of CPMs listed above is what I perceive to be a false dichotomy between speed in evangelism and depth of discipleship. Some practitioners emphasize conversion over discipleship. Their sentiment seems to be that no time for theology or deep discipleship exists because people are dying and going to hell every day without Christ. This type of thinking is extremely short-sighted and dangerous. And, it is an unbiblical dichotomy. First, Jesus himself settled in the Great Commission whether or not comprehensive teaching of obedience to *all* aspects of his doctrine would be part of it. Any missionary who short-cuts thorough discipleship in the name of rapid evangelism is being disobedient to the Lord based on the Great Commission alone.

However, this whole thing is a false dichotomy. No one in the history of the church has been as zealous to win souls as the Apostle Paul. He is the one who prayed that the gospel would spread rapidly (Greek *trecho...* to “run”) in 2 Thessalonians 3:1, and he burned with a constant zeal to take

³ International Mission Board, *Foundations*, v. 4 (Richmond, VA: 2022). In my time as a trustee, I had the privilege of serving on the Search Committee that resulted in Dr. Paul Chitwood being presented to the trustees for their approval of him as President of the IMB. During that search process, I continually rang the bell for the candidate to be zealously committed to the *Foundations* document originally published in 2016 by the IMB’s leadership in Richmond. Thankfully, the other members of the Search Committee shared this conviction. This *Foundations* document spells out plainly the twelve characteristics of a healthy church, and it clearly advocates that healthy churches in this pattern are essential to the entire missionary enterprise. As a member of that Search Committee, I said “The ultimate goal of the IMB is *individuals* who stand holy before God through faith in Christ on Judgment Day. The penultimate goal is healthy churches to ensure those individuals arrive holy on that final day.” I thank God that Dr. Chitwood clearly articulated his commitment to the *Foundations* document and to the planting of healthy churches all over the world. Hence, I could gladly join the entire Search Committee in presenting him as our candidate to the trustees, and he was approved on that basis in 2018.

the gospel to the regions yet unreached (Rom. 15:20). He considered his life worth nothing to him if only to finish his race and complete the task of testifying to the gospel (Acts 20:24). No one in history has burned so hot for the spread of the gospel.

Yet, no one did such careful and meticulous doctrinal instruction as the Apostle Paul. The whole book of Romans is his brief summary of the doctrine he would have taught the church at Rome if God had allowed him to be there physically. That 432-verse book has given birth to literally billions of words of careful theological analysis over almost twenty centuries. Paul did deep, thorough doctrinal instruction, even to the point of multiple times teaching the Thessalonian churches about the “man of sin” (Antichrist) who would reign at the time of the Second Coming of Christ (2 Thess. 2). That is a doctrinal detail that Paul felt worth going over again and again with these Christians. Paul would have been aghast at CPM versions that truncated sound theological instruction in the name of speed of evangelism.

The challenge for all missionaries is to combine Paul's zeal for the lost with his zeal for sound doctrine. That results in a life of hard labor for fruitful missionaries, but it is the calling. Trustees are not wrong to urge missionaries to hold to both, and to do loving “building inspections” to make sure that the solid foundation of Christ crucified and risen is being developed by the sound construction techniques of preaching/teaching the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) and the careful shepherding of souls. In fact, Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17-36 is really a handbook for sound pastoral ministry all over the world.

My Trip to South Asia

So, what did I find? First, I must be practical. The two other trustees and I who flew to South Asia were in one city for only five days. We were there at the very beginning of a process of internal inquiry led by the Affinity Group Leader Nathan Shank. He and I had excellent conversations based

on the scriptures listed above and many others about the essential role of sound New Testament church ministry for the final salvation of all these converts. My confidence in the future of the work in South Asia is ultimately in God, but I do trust Nathan Shank's heart, as well as the field personnel and national leaders in the area we were visiting who have been instruments in a remarkable work of God unlike anything else reported all over the IMB.

Through the use of micro SD cards that local people could put into their smartphones, clear gospel presentations were being made and converts were coming in like wildfire. The presentations of the gospel led people step-by-step through many Bible chapters in the Old Testament and the Gospels, leading to a clear understanding of the person and work of Christ. On those same micro SD cards were all the doctrines needed for healthy church life according to the *Foundations* document, and many sincere efforts were being made to ensure that each of the churches named in different parts of the state did in fact have the patterns of healthy church life described in that document.

Of course, these reported churches were new and growing. Like the Corinthian church itself, there will always be aspects of dysfunction in all local churches. Many of the 17,772 churches reported in the 2020 ASR will likely die; that happens all over the world. But as far as the IMB field personnel can influence, all of these churches are seeking to grow in the twelve characteristics of healthy churches. The national leaders are daily saturating themselves in the Bible by these micro SD cards and are training their own disciples in biblical truth as well. Based on these observations, the work inspected is not being driven by a false dichotomy of rapid evangelism at the expense of deep discipleship.

The numbers are so explosive, though, that it is hard to know what is going on in every place. The work is bigger than anyone can oversee. It requires ongoing shepherding and inquiry by the field leadership to be sure they continue to develop in healthy ways. One hundred thousand new converts represent a vanishingly small percentage of the overall population

of the country but even so it is far bigger than the IMB's field personnel can monitor in detail. The best they can do is keep training the national leaders in these New Testament principles. I have confidence that they will.

A Closing Exhortation

My final exhortation to the IMB, including its Richmond leadership and all the trustees, is to remain committed to both passionate urgency in evangelism and careful doctrinal instruction in discipleship. The IMB must make the *Foundations* document central to the training of missionaries before they are sent, and to the ongoing evaluation of their work on the field. And, the trustees must be faithful to do the work of loving and skilled building inspectors in the spirit of 1 Corinthians 3. Doing so is not disrespectful to the hardworking missionaries on the field, but it is essential to the role of trustees in giving a high level of confidence—*trust*—to the donor churches of the SBC that their investment of the precious elements of people and money is spent well for the eternal glory of God in the salvation of people in every nation on earth.

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