

# A Biblical Understanding and Practice of Missions<sup>1</sup>

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Is bigger and faster always better than smaller and slower?

There once was a delicious drink that came with powerful positive side-effects. When this drink was introduced to a new country, everyone loved it. The drink was good and good for them. Some business consultants discovered this new drink and saw potential to make a profit. “Don’t you want more people to taste this amazing drink and benefit from it?” they asked the company owner.

“Of course!” the company owner said.

“Then leave it to us,” they re-sponded.

Within a few weeks, the drink went on sale in cities around the country. Rumors about the drink circulated even before a national ad campaign was launched. Yet quickly after the drink’s release, people voiced their displeasure. The drink wasn’t bad, but it was hardly everything that was promised.

The company owner was shocked by people’s negative feedback. His product had never failed before. He raced to a store, opened one of his drinks, and took a sip. “This isn’t my drink!” he exclaimed. In fact, the promoters

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had changed the formula in order to sell more cheaply and quickly. When the owner insisted on taking back full control, he discovered it was too late. He couldn't stop the consultants from producing and marketing the cheaper drink. Even worse, he had a hard time convincing people to try his drink, because they thought they already had, when they had only tried the cheap substitute.

Such is the challenge for any missionary who wants to bring the good news of Jesus Christ somewhere only to discover that watered-down substitutes have already done their damage. Previous, maybe well-meaning missionaries had brought a watered-down version. Like the business consultants, they thought they could make Jesus's news more desirable and easy to spread.

For instance, "Christian" churches and "Christian" missions far too often employ lost people to tell lost people how to have religion rather than sending saved people to tell lost people how God saves through Jesus Christ.

I'm convinced that one of the marks of a healthy church is a biblical understanding and practice of missions. Those are the two things we will consider in this chapter. I pray that as you read this, God will help you understand what he intends for the local church in the Great Commission.

## **What Should Churches Believe about Missions?**

*Missions* is not a word we find in the Bible, but it is a biblical idea. We use the word to refer to spreading the gospel and planting churches across significant boundaries, especially geographic and language boundaries. While we use the word *evangelism* to refer to sharing the gospel, sometimes with people who don't know it, *missions* is evangelism and church planting in a place and among a people who largely have never heard the gospel. This mission's

aim is “to transform the nature of humanity.”<sup>2</sup> To transform in what way? To bring more people into a reconciled relationship with God.

This message of reconciliation is the basic storyline of the Bible. The Bible begins with a cosmic scope. It is worldwide. God created a world that was perfectly good, and although humankind fell, God promised to redeem them. God’s plan to redeem begins with a pagan man named Abram from an area we now call Iraq. God told Abram, who’s name became Abraham, that all the families of the earth would be blessed through his family. This one promise set the trajectory for the rest of the Old Testament—God would bless Israel, the nation descended from Abraham, as a precursor and a means to bless the entire world.

How would God bless the world through Israel? By sending a Jewish messiah through whom God’s salvation would “reach the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). That messiah is Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Savior of the world. After having won the victory through his death and resurrection, Jesus instructed his disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18–20 ESV)

Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples of all nations. This wouldn’t be easy, and it wouldn’t be quick. But Jesus promised that he would be with them, as long as it takes—even to the end of the age.

When Jesus first gave that command and promise, the disciples began sharing the good news with anyone who would listen. The result has been churches planted around the world. And yet there remain many people who live in lands with little or no access to this good news. This is why

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<sup>2</sup> Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2015), 18.

churches remain on mission to spread the gospel as far as God would give them opportunity.

## **What Should Churches Do in Missions?**

How should churches go about participating in this mission? Let's consider seven ways your local church can pursue a biblical practice of missions.

1. *Learn about God's Word and God's world.* The main way a church becomes a missionary-sending church is by preaching God's word. Our preaching should show the centrality of Christ's death and resurrection. We should also want to make clear that Christ's work is aimed at the entire world, not just our city, state, or nation (Rev. 5:9). Every Sunday we should present the gospel so that non-Christians may believe and Christians be built up.

2. *Pray for the spread of the gospel in other places.* The gospel should be central not only in our preaching but also in our prayers. From private prayers to public ones on Sunday morning, we want to ask God for wisdom to know how he would use us in his mission.

3. *Plan to make your church increasingly useful to the spread of the gospel.* What would it take for the gospel to spread in your area? One answer may be for your church to partner with other gospel-preaching churches so the gospel can be preached in an area that your church is not suited to reach. Think about international communities, areas in your city or state where there aren't already good churches, or college campuses. How could partnering with other churches help advance the gospel in these areas? Another way the gospel could spread in your area would be for you to encourage your members to use their time and treasures to reach out to non-Christians and serve their community.

4. *Support those who go out for the sake of the name who can't or shouldn't support themselves.* Just as the Philippians supported Paul so that he could labor among the Corinthians, it is our privilege, duty, and honor to support those serving in missions today. Through prayer and discernment and with

generosity and joy, churches should be raising up, sending out, and financially supporting missionaries who take the gospel where it hasn't already gone.

5. *Send pastors and others to help establish churches in gospel-needy places far away.* The biblical pattern for evangelizing the world is to send preachers and plant churches. Church-centered missions may seem painfully inefficient, but it is how we get to that great multitude finally gathered around the Lamb's throne in Revelation 7. Therefore, churches should challenge members, train pastors, send both, and support them in their work.

6. *Care for those you send.* We cannot care well for our supported workers if we don't know how they're doing. Paul knew as much when he returned to every city where he had preached the gospel to "see how they are" (Acts 15:36). It's important for your church to remain in contact with your supported workers as well. Knowing how they're doing will help your church assess how to best serve them in their needs.

7. *Wait for a faithful witness to be established and help those sent out to endure.* We want our workers to be faithful to the gospel. One way we help them remain faithful is by refusing to pressure them to produce numbers. Often in missionary contexts, fruit comes only after years of laboring. That is why the partnership between your church and the workers you send should be built on patience and a long-term commitment to faithful gospel preaching.

## **Conclusion**

In one sense, missions is where all the marks of a healthy church lead. I once asked a worker in a closed country how we could better support him. He said, "Keep working to make your church healthy, and work to make more churches like it, because if you don't, there won't be anyone left to send out more missionaries like us!" That's ultimately how we love God and love others, isn't it? Healthy churches spreading the gospel and planting more churches among the nations.

So meaningful membership in a healthy local church is the first step toward a biblical understanding and practice of missions.

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