



Turning the Corner in Missions¹

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Things are changing. Before this century comes to a close, many things we have taken for granted will be gone. The evidences of change are all around us, whether we like it or not.

These statements could refer to dozens, hundreds, perhaps thousands of aspects of human society. For the worldwide mission of the church, for example, change is already here. Many of the familiar assumptions are already outdated and unrealistic. Sadly, the strategies and practices of many missionary organizations seem to be so embedded in the old assumptions that timely change is becoming more difficult. Following is a commentary on a few of these ideas, so persistent in American missionary work, which can no longer be taken for granted.

We are carrying out missionary work the way it has always been done. That the mission of the church may be coming to an end is surely not the issue. God's redemptive purposes will continue to "the end of the age" (Matthew 28: 20). Our sense of history may be dulled by this assumption. The facts are quite different. The Apostle Paul, for example, was a highly itinerant missionary, working with a series of different partners. He rarely stayed anywhere very long. He planted churches and left them to the care of the Holy Spirit long before they were "strong" (Titus 1:5). He invited his associates to undertake itinerant teaching ministries to strengthen and "straighten out" the new churches, and they all kept moving.

In the past two hundred years, the so-called "modern missionary era," sitting in place, digging in deep, and persisting "until the church is strong enough to stand alone" has been the approved pattern. What lessons have been learned from such examples as the churches in China and Burma wherein the great growth has been from "weak" and "unready" churches left to the Holy Spirit's care?

Missionaries are needed everywhere. This assumption has given credibility to the notion that almost anyone can be assumed to be gifted for missionary ministry. It also is one of the two assumptions underlying the unforgivable habit of sending inadequately prepared and inappropriately gifted people into situations where they will do more harm than good. In fact, missionaries are *not* needed everywhere. As we gain a deeper appreciation of the way the Holy Spirit works in the emerging churches, it is becoming more evident that there are times when withdrawing missionaries helps to fulfill God's purposes. For example, *dependency* on outside resources and outside planning is a common consequence of overly long missionary presence. Non-emergence of local leadership is another consequence. Perhaps the most harmful consequence is the vast legacy of dysfunctional institutions which have been established by well-intentioned missionaries on the assumption that even the forms of institutions which the churches of the western world have built for themselves are needed everywhere.

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Missionaries can go anywhere. Yes, in the modern era missionaries *can* go anywhere, even if it means taking on a *cover* or disguise. But this assumption is based squarely in the ethos of colonialism; it is based on the presumed rights and the actual power of people from a dominant society to enter at their own choice wherever they choose within the empire. To some missionary agencies and churches, any resistance or delay is interpreted as evidence of Satanic works against the Gospel. When will it become more clear that resistance to outsiders and their agendas is an ordinary characteristic of people's sense of dignity and humanity? Why do those who carry the Gospel message assume that they have rights to do to others what they would not allow others to do to them?

Rediscovery of the importance of "frontier missions" in the past twenty-five years has stimulated the assumption that "missionaries can go anywhere." Indeed, some of the more valuable deployments of missionaries from any nation are on the frontiers of evangelization and church planting. But the limits on these open frontiers are often more severe than in the past. The easier frontiers are already used up and gone. The new frontiers are in situations and among people that are the hardest ever to reach, especially among the urbanized subcultures, rich and poor. Appropriate background, experience, education, and motivation for these frontiers are sadly lacking among American missionaries. Indeed, many American missionaries cannot go just *anywhere* without some fundamental changes in themselves that lie far deeper than willingness.

Missionaries can do anything. *Missionary* is a term loosely applied to people who go from one place to another with the intention of furthering the Gospel. This freedom of definition, combined with an increasing willingness to travel to seek a clearer view of God's will in one's own life, has led to all sorts of unnecessary investment and misdirected effort. In today's world, constraint is far more important than exuberance in the deployment of missionary resources. Doing things that local people should be doing, doing things that really don't need to be done, and doing things in ways that are culturally inappropriate and even resented are just a few of the unfortunate consequences of this very American assumption about willingness, eagerness, and omnifunctional competency.

The presumption of the versatility of missionaries is the other of the foundational assumptions underlying the bad habit of sending unprepared and inept people into situations which demand greater expertise, insights, and interpersonal sensitivity.

Missionaries can do things however they think best. No residue of colonialism is more persistent than the assumption that those who *do* missionary work should define how it is to be done. The very idea of an American missionary being subordinated to a non-western person is abhorrent to many--missionaries and sending churches alike. In the more effective ministries of international missions, even now and surely in the future, the missionary team itself is multicultural and multiethnic. American missionaries are facing a future in which following Christ will involve accommodations to the multinational church in very concrete terms. Modernization throughout the world is producing a deceptive similarity that causes the newcomer and the ossified old-timer to think that cultural adaptations are less needed than in the past. But these apparent similarities must not be interpreted as uniformity. The people of the world are becoming more like Americans only in superficial ways. Beneath it all, cultural history lies deep and strong.

Missionaries must show their willingness to help. Helping always sounds good, but what motives does this willingness reveal? Sometimes helping is just one more way to gain control of the situation. The urge to exercise power will drive a person to engage in a short period of servanthood in order to get as quickly as possible to the authority and glorification that is assumed to follow.

Willingness to help is surely not an undesirable attribute for a missionary, but perhaps in today's world of missions it is equally important to show willingness *not* to help. The assumption that one should "hit the ground running" produces an overeager and often overbearing pushiness. Getting the picture, letting others tell about what is happening and why, and displaying a reluctance to dump ideas all over people demands patience and time. Surely this is not new. Nehemiah's remarkable effectiveness in the rebuilding of Jerusalem shows this investment and patient attitude (Neh. 2:11-16).

When missionaries help *best*, it is in response to requests and invitations. Special attention to the competencies needed and acquiring the preparation to help effectively distinguish the best approach to the missionary's helping role. Specialized ministries of itinerant helpers are emerging. The best of these new missionaries are highly skilled and they use careful judgments about the situations wherein they can best serve.

Missionaries can work best among people who are willing to help. True indeed. Missionaries should rarely do things for people that the people could do for themselves. But in the *modern missionary era* this assumption has been used primarily as a basis of judgment of the sincerity and the worthiness of the local Christians. So anxious has been the concern not to leave any *rice-Christian* undetected that this willingness to share in the load (as defined by the missionary) has been seen as an evidence of spiritual maturity.

But what is needed today is the attitude of openness and vulnerability that Jesus showed to the woman of Sychar (John 4:7). Our Lord opened his conversation with this woman by showing himself to be human, thirsty, and willing to ask even a woman of Samaria for a drink. He opened himself to her mocking and ridicule, through which she quickly sought to grasp control of the situation (v.9). This meaning of the criterion "willing to help" demands that the missionary communicate an honest *willingness to be helped*. Herein lies the truly Christian basis of reciprocity and trust.

There are two kinds of missionaries: short term and real. The rediscovery of the idea of the "short-term missionary"—the Apostle Paul was probably the first one—has brought many more Americans into firsthand contact with the overseas ministries of the church. The trend is likely a consequence of 1) the need to redress the remoteness of missions from the churches in these last times of the *modern missionary era* and 2) the increased affluence of American Christians. As a result, there are more and more local mission committees in churches which include at least one or two members who have *been there*. All in all, more good than harm has resulted, though in the years ahead, the missionary organizations that do a more thorough and thoughtful job of articulating the workings of long-term and the short-term missionaries will set the path toward a more effective use of resources. Meanwhile, the old-timers tend to see themselves as the *real* missionaries, too often demeaning, avoiding, or misusing the naive and sometimes demanding short-termers.

But there is another sort of short-term missionary re-emerging: the highly competent specialized fellow-laborers whose gifts and expertise are on-call to serve the churches of the world in response to invitation, planning, and negotiating, in genuine partnerships. Such persons in earlier times would have been expected to become "full-time missionaries" and to confine themselves to some small circle of locations within a single region of a country. The trend is to utilize such persons in small teams, usually composed of peer partners from at least two nations. The church's crying need for leadership development throughout the world is being addressed through this process far better than by sending in one after another ill-equipped and inexperienced teacher of canned curriculum for leadership in the church.

Turning the corner gracefully. As always, change comes at great price. The changes that are taking place are too few and too slow. One fears that much opportunity will be lost because of rigidity and timidity. The status quo always makes prior claim on righteousness. It is tempting to resort to hostile behavior and high explosives. Caution! The ways of our Lord must be the model. Our God is the Lord of the universe. He is the creator of opportunity itself. We need not fear losing an opportunity or letting him lose one. Absurd. Our job is to commit ourselves to his leading, read the signs of the times, and wherever possible establish new models of mission in response to the guidance of his Holy Spirit and the disciplines of the Holy Scriptures.

Some guidelines are offered for the next few years as we turn the corner in missions:

1. Build competent teams of consultative missionaries and increase their levels of expertise.
2. Learn to work in response to and in partnership with leaders of the churches in other places.
3. Bring resources to bear on a short-term basis to augment *not to replace* local resources.
4. Put major emphasis on developing local leaders.
5. Be ready to pull out and wait for the next moment of call.
6. Maintain a *home base* that is not “on the field.”