



The Mission Task¹

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My specialization is in the social sciences, particularly social science in reference to the way culture interacts with learning. I have done a great deal of writing in the field of human learning, and in the processes of human growth and development, and in particular have studied how culture relates to the learning process. This is the sort of background I had in my university career, and a great deal of my research work was done in the field in various countries overseas.

Much of my research work at the university was actually done overseas. As a Christian, I was doing what comes naturally, which is wherever I am, I am God's ambassador in that place. I engaged with the development of churches in work that we might call missionary work. So when people ask "Are you a short-termer?" Oh, many times over! I have a long-term track record in short-term missions!

There is perhaps no topic that has created more noise and less insight than the topic of short-term missions. It's one of those things where meetings and meetings are called to deal with the issue. Typically on day one, the rallying cry is "We must define this business of short-term missions. We're not all using the term in the same way." Four days later the conference breaks up with everybody saying, "Under God we will find ways to make our definitions more clear." You have the feeling that no one is getting anywhere.

One of the things we have to give up is the notion that by simply reorganizing our words, we're going to make a change in the world. We're not. It's not going to work. The best thing to do is get busy in God's work and let somebody else figure out what to call it.

I know that you were the first Jewish mission organization to actually embrace the idea of short-term missions; but I also know you've had your ups and downs with short-term missions.

In this regard, organizations may emphasize so much the unchangingness of God that they fail to notice that God is the author of change. He is the unchanging God. Yes. But it's amazing how much he enjoys the idea of change. There is no such thing as anything in the creation that is not in the process of change.

God, created that dynamic of change. Yet sometimes in his name we create institutions, we create traditions, we create patterns that are unchanging.

You are engaged as missionaries, bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ in appropriate ways to people in various situations. For what purpose? Again, change. Now if you don't see changed lives, you have to really wonder if the "conversions" that are claimed are real. What do you look for? You look for change. You look for changes toward godliness. All of us are maturing as Christians. It shouldn't be a strange idea that we of all people are engaged in this change business. Change is a way that God continually refreshes and retunes us to the circumstances around us. God would much rather hear us get up in the morning, and say, "It's a new one. I've got my ears and eyes open, and I expect you to reveal something to me today that's new and different that will require something different of me."

The message is this: It is possible to hold to a good idea so tightly and hold so firmly to your paradigms, your thought frameworks, that you can't even see what is happening, you can't even appreciate a significant change.

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The modern missionary era began two centuries ago. There is some debate about which mission is the oldest. My own understanding of circumstances would say it is Park Street Church in Boston. Park Street Church still stands and preaches the gospel. In 1814, they organized in their basement a Boston-wide thing called the Sandwich Islands Mission in response to the request of several young men who had been ship's crew on whaling vessels coming back from a Hawaiian venture. These fellows were kicked off the ship to freeze to death on the streets of Boston. They took up residence in the basement of the Park Street Church where instead of being booted out by the church they were embraced. They were brought to Christ, and they invited that church to "Send people back to our people in Hawaii. They've never heard about Jesus." To the great credit of that church and the grace of God, a boatload of people from Park Street Church went to Hawaii to give the rest of their lives. It's a long story, but they didn't do very well at first. After a number of years of perseverance there was a real breakthrough when they finally had their first blind convert. They had been approaching Hawaii as literate people, finding that these people couldn't read or write, didn't have a printed language, and in fact didn't even have an alphabet. They created an alphabet, taught them how to read it, translated the Bible in that language, taught them how to read the Bible, but the people still were not coming to Christ. Finally they realized that the blind man was really interested in the Bible, but obviously couldn't read it. They didn't stop and invent Braille, though they seemed to do just about everything else. They just read the Bible to the man, and he remembered all the stories as only a blind man can, and he went all over the islands evangelizing in oral tradition. The islands of Hawaii were rather successfully brought to Christ on a large scale. That mission organized itself out of business about 27 years later. It is one of the few American missions ever to say, "We've done what God asked us to do; we're shutting down, and we're all going to be doing other things from now on."

Here we are roughly 200 years later and mission agencies are experiencing significant transformation. The missionary era is not over, but it is facing another era of change. What is going on now is really a methodological shift of major proportion.

I would suggest three major issues in relation to this change.

1. In the 21st century, one of the major tasks is going to be a re-conceptualized evangelization so that it's much more clearly a task of integrating the way, and the truth, to the life. The only one way you can do that is to get into a greater degree of relationship-building with the people you're dealing with. In the next century, we will have to put a greater emphasis on relationship-building among people. Consider John 4. Jesus talks to the woman about what's going on with her life. He opens up the conversation for her to feel free to tell him things she wouldn't ordinarily tell him. He shares; she shares and they bring together their life stories. Then she wants to talk about religion; she wants to argue about this. Ultimately Jesus says, "I'm not going to argue with you about that because that's not the important stuff." What is the big issue? What's going on with you here and now?

2. Recognizing the mission of the church in a much more precise, defined way is to make disciples of Christ. Too often that particular passage of Matthew 28 is read as if we were reading there the instruction to the church in mission. Well yes, but yes and no. He has the disciples around him, and he says, "You will be going into the world. And *as you are going*, make disciples." Who of us is exempted from that generalization? You can't stand here on this cold mountainside forever. You will be going and as you are going make disciples. That's the way you define what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

The second methodological cluster is, "*teaching them to obey*". Anywhere you go in the world people associate teaching with information and with the stuff you store in this marvelous filing cabinet that sits on top of your shoulders. That is not what Matthew 28 says. Jesus said, "Teach them to obey"—literally "to function in," "to act on," "to make their life on . . . what? "All things that I have taught you."

The emphasis in the Great Commission so-called is on baptizing as building an affiliation of a marked out, distinct, unique people, and that unique group is engaged in bringing people into a knowledgeable obedience, hence the idea of a Christian walk. The distinction between knowing something and walking is exactly the issue at stake.

In the Hebrew to know it is to experience it in the sense of being engaged in it, and if you don't engage in it, you don't know it. The epistemology of Hebrew is an experiential association of the idea of knowing. That's what's involved in Matthew 28. Until we put all that together, I think what we're going to have is a kind of missioning which has been enfeebled for 200 years. We've gotten away with it because these issues haven't been as critical in the world; but in the so-called postmodern era, these issues have suddenly come to a level of criticalness; and if we keep sending out people who simply pump truth out of pages and organize information to be studied and remembered, we're going to be wasting a whole lot of God's resources.

3. Resisting the cultural boundaries among Christians. One of the things that slowing down the church today are the boundaries that have been created between sectors of Christians. In the US the boundaries that are costly include denominational boundaries. One of the things that's exciting about being in a missionary region where the church is newly emerging and growing is that people say, "You know, the difference between Christians and non-Christians in this part of the world is so significant that we don't have any time to argue among Christians!"

We also have cultural boundaries in the US in our churches, and we have to start with self-criticism. "What is God saying to us? What is God saying to our part of the world?" The churches in the US are painfully boundary oriented in terms of socio-economic status and people aren't comfortable until they find exactly their niche. The "church shopping" is becoming more and more of a problem in other parts of the world as well.

In the twenty-first century we will face more cultural mixes. Consider, the world represented as a lot of puddles, each puddle being unique, slightly different color from every different puddle, and having its own little chemical additions to the basic H₂O. The world is just a mass of puddles. Each body of water is a bunch of people. These are sometimes referred to as "people groups."

The water table is rising. Those of you who know anything about puddles and land and water tables know that something happens when the water table rises. In this case, the water table is a rising world population. It is literally out of control. So the water table is rising. What happens then to these little separate puddles? They begin to mix and merge, and they begin to get bigger and bigger and pretty soon they flow together. What happens when these two fluids come together? Right where they touch there's an intense action as they try to sort themselves out and decide what they're going to become. So it's not just a matter of everything becoming instantly alike; there is rather a lot of rather frantic re-orientation going on at those points of contact. And as this goes on and on, you get more commonality.

We are in a world where all these separate puddles are cultures, ethnicity, languages, and they are flowing together. It won't be reversed, short of a major world catastrophe. Many of the people in our churches would like to see it reversed: If we could just go back to the good old days when you didn't have to think about those other people. "Look at them moving in here! Oh God help me!"

Now why do people think that way, even after coming to Christ? Because humans would rather be with people who are like themselves." "Yes, I'm glad to see them come to Christ, but I'm really more comfortable going to church and worshipping with people who are like me, representing my background."

Ethnic conflict and exaggeration of historic enmities is a world characteristic that is going to get a lot more so in the next century. I don't know if the whole century will be characterized this way, but if you are paying any attention at all to the world, you'll notice that most, if not all, problems on

the world scene have an ethnic conflict at their root. I believe these problems will become a *worldwide* characteristic, and it isn't as easy as sorting people out in terms of what *ism* they belong to.

We're also going to see experiential morality replacing orthodoxy. Experiential morality is when people figure out for themselves what's right or wrong without any reference to any other source. The differences in morality are becoming much more significant. There was a time when the common denominators of morality included, for example, the proposition that if it involves human life, most people will draw together and say, "Okay, that's where we draw the line." Thus relativism is replacing conviction, even among the so-called "principled people."

Donald McGavern came along and made a discovery. As he began to read social science, he discovered that people tended to *prefer to be among people who are similar to themselves*. When he discovered that, he called it the homogeneous unit principle. Is it true? Is it more true of Christians or non-Christians? We are instantly aware that it is true among Christians. In fact, it's almost embarrassingly true among Christians, and yet we have no particular reason to say it's more true among Christians. The problem is we can't readily and quickly say it's *not* as true.

McGavern had a pragmatic motive: How do you effectively evangelize? If it is true that people prefer to be among people like themselves, how would you evangelize a given group of people? Become like the people or bring one such person into that situation and find people who are a lot alike and use a unit of strong-likeness as the nucleus for your planted church, hence, a homogeneous church. Question: Was he on the right road?

"He was on the right road for the puddle scenario, but not for the mixing."

Good answer! He was on the right road for the puddle work, but when we're dealing with wild mixes, what you do when you go at it that way is you tend to return that mix to its own earlier state. In other words, you regress. But I think there are bigger problems than this. I prefer to look at this as a problem of misusing a descriptive principle as a prescriptive principle.

It is true that as men get older, they tend to lose their hair. That's a descriptive principle, right? Now in order to get older and more mature, you ought to lose your hair. See that would say, "Ward, the reason you're not growing up is you haven't pulled out enough hair." I'm taking a descriptive principle, misapplying it, and therefore making a poor prescription of it. That's what the homogeneous unit principle does and it turns into real mischief. When people say, "What the churches ought to be is homogeneous unit." The only legitimacy for the argument is that may work in some cases as a better starting place for a small group of people to identify with each other long enough that the work of Christ can be begun within and then they will become in fact more alike around the oneness in Christ. Don't turn it into a prescriptive principle: "The reason your church isn't growing is that you have too many different kinds of people in it." Not likely. I say that the resultant mischief is that Christians justify to themselves habits of cultural isolationism. If you don't believe that churches are characterized by cultural isolationism, you haven't spent much time in the US.

The purpose of the church is to bring people to Christ. People come to Christ most easily in situations where they are culturally comfortable. *Therefore evangelism and church planting should take place among culturally similar groups*. When you go that far with it, you turn it into a prescription. In general and in many cases, it's true in the sense that it works. But the issue that I think is the harmful consequences of this deduction; in other words, if you really accept that as your dogma, each local church and denomination will reflect a given cultural ethnic commonality.

It is possible that the church will grow even though it is a homogeneous unit. That's why I bring this general study down to Acts 6. The church by that point has not been systematically persecuted as a church, but it is growing substantially. Up to that point in chapter 6, some leaders have been persecuted; but there was no organization or mobility until we get to Acts 6. Don't tell me it was the stoning of Stephen: that's another part of the consequences, but that was not the trigger. What was the event in chapter 6 that triggered the big change in the worthiness of the church to be

persecuted? The church began to move in on its own flaw in its own mono-culturalism. What was the big problem in Acts 6? Systematic discrimination, deprivation, ignoring a sector of people who were within the church.

It wasn't until the church came to grips with that and they decided they had to do something about it. Seven people were picked out. Don't ever call them deacons. The Bible doesn't and it doesn't work in light of the rest of the use of the word deacon. A committee of seven to solve that problem was set apart. The issue was systematic neglect, so that committee was assigned to deal with systematic neglect.

Their task was to work with the majority to help solve this problem of discrimination. Note that all those selected had Greco-Roman names? Not a Jewish name in the bunch! Here it is: a Jewish church, the first church in Jerusalem. Their problem was systematic neglect. Not one of the seven chosen to deal with the problem had a Jewish name. Luke gives us that detail, which by the way, throws us back to the question of who did Jesus pick out for his disciples? Jews, yes, but quite a variety. He had some compromisers with Rome; he had some who were a lot alike because they were fishermen, but they weren't all alike, and they had one guy who had some kind of a strange family background. Did you ever notice all the disciples by name? There's a non-Jewish name there among the 12.

Anyway, the church in Jerusalem had to come to terms with its narrowness and its bigotry and its discrimination, and it wasn't until they did that they truly became a threat worthy of being persecuted.

Although a church may most easily be formed among people of similar interests and socio-cultural background, as the church matures, it would be likely to increase in grace, thus becoming more culturally open and accepting as well as reaching out to do evangelism and nurture without regard to socio-cultural barriers. Does that describe a maturing church to you?

Has identification with Christ made any difference? It should, because if I'm understanding the Scripture correctly and I know what Christ is doing in my heart, I find myself in a whole new set of relationships in which my real unity is not with people like me in terms of how I look, how I talk, but it's people who are like me in terms of whom I'm representing, who I am aspiring to be like. That seems to be what conversion ought to bring us to, not necessarily instantly, not magically, but developmentally, so that over time, whatever differences there are are dealt with in God's own way. Then we become brothers and sisters in Christ.

I would beseech you, by the mercies of God, to see the difference between this kind of a view of missions and evangelizing and a view that simply says, "Our burden is to bring Jewish people to Christ." That doesn't go far enough. That's a good starting place, but what kind of a trajectory do you lay out for these people as they mature in Christ? Is it an isolated trajectory or is it an outreaching mission? In fact, is it much like we find in terms of the reformation that occurs in Acts 6?