

Mission Confusion

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Over the 25 years of my missionary career, I have heard many comments made by missionaries about their ministries. I list a few here. These comments have been made by North American missionaries. My own personal response to these comments are noted in the parentheses which follow each comment.

“My ministry as a missionary is to develop profit generating employment for the people of this country who do not know how to start their own businesses in their new democratic or capitalist environment.” (Dale: Is the winner the one who dies with the most “stuff”?)

“As a missionary I am drilling wells for clean drinking water and building houses for the poor people in this country because they have so little. Someone else will need to try to reach these people with the gospel.” (Dale: Is someone really a missionary if she does not desire to proclaim the gospel? What makes a Christian missionary different than an atheist or secular non-government organization worker?)

“I joined this two week short term missions team in order to have an interesting cross-cultural and international experience.” (Dale: Is the purpose of missions to give the missionary a good experience?)

These kinds of comments lead me to suggest that mission confusion might be a problem among our North American evangelical churches and missionaries. Evidence for the confusion is sourced in what seems to be a lack of clear focus upon the purpose of our missional ministry. I have probably made a few of these kinds of comments myself! And maybe you have too.

But is our confusion limited to a place like North America? How about here in Japan?

On December 1, 2008, the Japan leadership of Lausanne III (Cape Town, 2010) convened in order to begin the process of nominating people from Japan to attend Lausanne III. I represented JEMA at that meeting. A few expatriate missionaries in Japan can be nominated to go, but they will have to cover their own costs.

In early February, several leaders of the Japanese Lausanne III planning team visited Seoul, South Korea, in order to meet with the North Asia Lausanne III planning committee. One of the documents coming out of that meeting in Seoul includes a brief history of the influence of the Lausanne movement in Japan.¹ The following four paragraphs summarize that document.

John Stott was one of the main speakers at Lausanne I in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974. Shortly thereafter, Stott was the keynote speaker at the first Japan Congress on Evangelism, held in Kyoto in 1974. He taught that mission ought to give equal weight to evangelization and social responsibility. This teaching had a great impact on Japanese evangelicals. As a result, Japanese evangelicals quickly moved through the following three

¹ Satoru Kanemoto, “Future of Japan Lausanne and the Evangelical Movement in Japan” (Feb 6, 2009).

models for thinking about how evangelization and social action might be related: from “salvation of soul as primary,” through “social responsibility as pre-evangelism,” to “evangelism and social responsibility as the two equal arms of mission.”

The impact on Japanese evangelicals was not only due to Stott’s teaching on this issue. It was also due to the fact that Kansai Mission Research Center had translated into Japanese several Lausanne I occasional papers on contextualization and social responsibility.²

Lausanne II was held in Manila in 1989. Japanese evangelicals were well represented. But the theological perspective of Lausanne II is said to have had an overemphasis upon the charismatic movement and evangelization. Many Japanese evangelicals were disappointed and therefore withdrew from the Lausanne movement. Apparently no important documents of Lausanne II were translated into Japanese.

But Drs. Makito Masaki and Gyoji Nabetani began to pray about bringing Japan back into the Lausanne movement. At the Lausanne Forum in Pattaya, Thailand, in 2004, Dr. Masaki became the leader of the Lausanne movement in Japan and as a result formed the Japan Lausanne Network. The first official meeting of the JLN was on December 1, 2008—the meeting I attended. JLN desires that a solid theology of mission be presented at Lausanne III and hopes that Japanese evangelicals will appreciate the meaningfulness of that theology.

What can we learn from this description of the Lausanne movement and its influence upon the Japanese evangelical world? The meaningful theology of mission which JLN wants to see developed at Lausanne III is the kind of missiology which gives equal weight to evangelism and social work. In this way of thinking, evangelism has no higher priority than social work. The idea is that if we do not give equal weight to these two arms, we are not balanced in our theology of mission.

I wonder how many of us expatriate evangelical missionaries in Japan share this desire to give equal weight to evangelism and social action in our understanding of what mission is. Viewing ourselves from the perspective of the Japanese leaders of the JLN, I would guess that we are seen to be unbalanced. We are probably seen as giving inappropriate emphasis to evangelism. We are probably considered dualistic thinkers, separating the soul from the body. We are probably seen as placing too much emphasis on saving the soul, and not enough on social action.

If so, then I suggest that confusion about mission is not a uniquely North American phenomenon. There also seems to be some confusion in Japan.

So what is mission? In attempting to provide one possible answer to this question, I will ask two more questions.

1) What do we find in the New Testament, especially in Paul, about mission?

When it comes to the issue of mission, there is an immense amount of material in the Bible for us to digest, especially in the New Testament. I will concentrate here only on Paul’s missionary ministry. What were Paul’s priorities in mission? Was he as confused in his mission thinking and practice as I think we might be today?

To see Paul’s priorities in mission, one of the best kinds of texts to use are his statements about his own understanding of mission. One such text is Romans 15:20-25, where Paul describes his personal ambition about his mission work.

² Lausanne documents are available at <http://www.lausanne.org/documents.html>.

V.20—“It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.”

Paul’s goal was to preach the gospel where there was no foundational knowledge of Jesus—where there were no churches.

V.21—“Rather, as it is written: ‘Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.’”

Paul saw his ministry as a fulfillment of OT prophecy in Isa. 52-53 about the Messiah, Jesus Christ. That is, the Messiah will be seen and understood by those who hear the preaching of the gospel.

V.22-23—“This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you...”

Paul’s work of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ resulted in new churches being established throughout the Mediterranean world. That is, churches were birthed in the places where he preached. When Paul penned the letter to the Romans, he had already served as a founder of new churches for many years. Paul and those who worked with him started dozens of churches.

This gospel-centered, Christocentric preaching and church founding ministry and passion of Paul prevented him from visiting Rome. He was so focused on this work and so busy in it, that the church in Rome had to take a back seat to his work in Asia Minor. He really wanted to visit the church in Rome, but could not. At least, he could not visit right away. But he eventually considered that the birth of these new churches signaled the end of his ministry in the eastern part of the Mediterranean world. In some fashion, he reasoned that his work there had come to an end. Thus being released from that work in Asia Minor, he could at last begin to fulfill his dream of heading to Rome.

But even then, his planned and hoped for visit to Rome did not have the purpose of simply visiting Rome.

V.24—“I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.”

So Paul planned to visit the church at Rome while on the way to Spain, where he planned to continue his work of preaching and establishing churches. Rome was not the destination for Paul. It was a stopover on his way to Spain. He desired a partnership with the Roman church—a church he had not founded. That sounds like what we missionaries do when we take home assignments. We sometimes seek churches to become our ministry partners. Paul wanted the Roman church to partner with him in his work of preaching the gospel way out west in Spain.

V.25—“Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there.”

However, before going to Rome enroute to Spain, Paul would first take a financial gift to Jerusalem from the churches he had founded in Asia Minor. This was a relief project which had significant theological meaning for Paul. He understood both his preaching and this financial offering as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies. In the case of the offering, he understood it as bringing the wealth of the nations to Jerusalem.

So Paul had the ambition of preaching the Christ-centered gospel so that new churches would be started. This was his ambition because he understood that he was

fulfilling the Biblical injunction to help others know and believe on Jesus Christ. He had already done all this in Asia Minor, and now, with the partnership of the believers in Rome, he wanted to do the same in Spain.

2) What was the main mission thing for Paul?

It is difficult to reduce the answer to one point. Rather, it seems Paul displayed three major commitments in his missionary ministry.

1. Paul was committed to proclaiming the gospel (evangelism). Proclamation of the gospel was central to Paul's understanding of mission. Everywhere he went he was a proclaimer of the gospel and of the power of God found in the gospel.

2. Paul was committed to founding churches (church planting). As he proclaimed the gospel, churches were born. Churches seemed to spring up everywhere Paul went! That was no accident. It was Paul's intention. Jesus commanded his disciples to go and make disciples. So Paul went forth, preaching the gospel and founding churches.

3. Paul was committed to strengthening churches (church strengthening). Moving beyond our focus on Romans 15, Paul did not stop with evangelism and church founding. He also had a heart for strengthening the new churches and the new believers in those churches. He wanted to move those microcosms of the kingdom of God which we call local churches toward maturity in Jesus Christ. Paul was more than a church founder—he was also a church strengthener. Evidence for this can be found by recalling the names of many of the letters we find in the New Testament. Many of those names are taken from the places where Paul founded new churches. The New Testament provides convincing evidence that Paul was more than just a starter of new churches. He was also a teacher and one who strengthened churches.

So a strong case can be made that for Paul, evangelism, church planting, and church strengthening were the primary foundation stones of his missionary work. That is a descriptive statement. But there is a valid way to consider it to also be prescriptive. That is, if the Bible is truly authoritative for us who claim to be evangelical Christians, then we should be able to connect our mission work to these major mission themes found in Paul's writings and in the New Testament.

This would mean that rather than an outreach English teacher viewing herself as an English teacher, she should be able to see herself as using her English teaching as a means of evangelism. Or, if her English teaching takes place in a church, then she should see herself as strengthening that church's ministry. She is not merely an English teacher. Rather, she is an evangelist who desires to proclaim the gospel or the evangel through her English teaching. She could understand herself to be a missionary disguised as an English conversation teacher. If she uses the tool of English wisely, people will come to believe the gospel she proclaims. She is a missionary English teacher with a passion for the gospel.

Rather than a missionary saying, "I am here to dig wells for fresh water! That's my job!" he should be able to envision his digging of wells as a practical way to earn credibility so that at the appropriate time he can share the gospel (if permitted). His greatest desire is to proclaim the light of God's salvation in a world of spiritual darkness and lostness. This is his heartbeat. Digging wells for drinking water is merely the means.

Missionaries have many jobs. They do many different kinds of work. But they should have a purpose which aligns with the New Testament idea of mission. They might do the work of a nurse, a doctor, a Bible translator, a missionary kid school teacher, a writer of curriculum, an airplane mechanic, or a construction worker. But they should all

have a desire to proclaim the gospel, or plant churches, or strengthen churches. And they should be able to describe how their job fits with those kinds of missional purposes. When they are able to envision their own ministry in this way, then they are missionaries in the New Testament sense of the word.

Certainly this kind of prioritized way of thinking about mission leads us closer to the Biblical way of doing mission. This way of trying to link what we do in mission with what we discover to be New Testament foundations for mission will, I believe, take us a long way toward reducing the confusion about mission which might be present in our sending constituencies.

Here in the evangelical world of Japan where there is apparently a desire to place equal missiological weight upon evangelism and social action, we would do well to ask whether evangelism and social action are given equal weight in the New Testament. If our conclusion is that evangelism, along with church planting and strengthening, receive the highest priority in the New Testament, then the appropriate question to ask is this: “How does social action connect with the major missional themes found in the New Testament?” We could reply that social action is the result of evangelism. We could say that social action is the context for evangelism. We could say that social action brings credibility to our evangelism. But I am hard pressed to find a solid foundation in the New Testament for claiming that social action and evangelism should be equally weighted in our understanding of mission.³

How about you? May the clarity of Scripture clear away our mission confusion.

³ The following publications have been helpful: David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005). See especially Chapter 5, “Incarnationalism and Representationalism: Who is Our Missionary Model—Jesus or Paul?” (pp. 141-65). Andreas J. Kostenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998).s