

The Mission of the Local Church

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I am always delighted to be with Christian leaders who represent the exuberant Christian movement in Korea. What an astounding change has taken place in Korea in the last hundred years!

Today, Koreans are not just focused on that one peninsula but on the whole world. Many good things come from Korea today, blessing the whole world. It is significant that South Koreans earn ten times as much per person as North Koreans.

But Koreans everywhere in the world are noted for being energetic, productive and visionary.

My topic, given to me by the leaders of this conference, concerns the mission of the local congregation. This is exciting and significant. The Bible talks much more about the activity of local congregations than of individuals. Almost the entire Christian movement we see in the New Testament consists of "ecclesias," which are home-centered fellowships. This brings me to my first point that the first "mission" of the local church is to build and foster family units.

Mission One: The Family

If the families in a congregation crumble, the whole church is weakened.

It is surprising to the average Evangelical that the NT *ecclesias* were home based, family-centered fellowships. They were not week-end "associations" as in America today, which are often a loose collection of isolated individuals from many different families. American "churches" attract individuals. Families in America are less important. Asia, Africa, and Latin America recognize the family, especially *the intergenerational family* as a more durable and significant group than is the case in the United States, where, by contrast, individuality has harmfully been made more important.

In many mission fields church member-

ship is by family. Whole families join at the same time.

It is important for people of Asian background to realize that in America both "individualization" and age "stratification" are *serious perversions of God's intention*. These evil tendencies of individualization and stratification drastically damage the fellowship, the productivity and the mission impact of local churches.

How did this happen to America and what can pastors and churches do about these terrible tendencies?

Young people in America spend most of their time each week in schoolrooms where they are both separated from others who are older or younger and where they are treated as *individuals* whose separate grades and performance are more important than any group activity, group accomplishment, or group achievement. Only in some sports activities do young people work together for a common aim.

In church it might be considered to allow young people to help in the church services, reading the scripture, leading in prayer, giving testimonies, being recognized for their birthdays and even school achievements. They can report world events which affect the Christian movement and the progress of the Kingdom.

However, in my thinking the most important thing a pastor can do is to make sure all of the members are part of spiritually healthy families. What goes on *daily* in homes is more important than what goes on *weekly* in church.

Daily family devotions and worship is important. However, every week the families ought to conduct a special family spiritual time that will involve the participation of young and old. It is a terribly weak faith that is evident only on Sunday. The Mormons

annually publish an excellent book which contains 52 plans for weekly family gatherings. It is sad that Evangelicals do not do the same. It is possible that the Mormon book could give a lot of hints and ideas about how to have a weekly family time of prayer, Bible study and singing.

Many churches encourage their young people to go on "Short-Term Missions." This is helpful but even more helpful is when whole families visit mission work either in the United States or in Mexico.

Finally, pastors must encourage young people to respect their parents and to reject the American pattern of disrespect. One reason for the growth of disrespect is due to the degree of isolation of children from their parents. For most of the week children and parents are separated from each other by school and jobs.

"Homeschooling" helps keep a family close together. If there are family activities of various kinds that helps. Unfortunately, even when a child comes home from school, "homework" from school often keeps the child in an "individual" activity isolated from the family.

It is sometimes possible for a child to go with his father or mother to visit the work the parents do. One summer when I was twelve years old my father invited me to go to work with him. All day long I wandered around the engineering office which he was in charge of and I got to know my father much better that way. In reverse, some schools arrange special days when parents can come to school with one of their children.

Nothing is as effective as the fortunate family that can work together in a family business. Americans don't like this. In my home town years ago a family from Vietnam ran Baskin-Robbins ice cream store. The younger children helped out. The older children actually served customers. But when the city government found out what was going on they forced the family to exclude their children from participating.

It has been said that "the family that *prays*

together stays together." That, in fact, is often untrue. More significant is "the family that *works* together stays together."

Children need to see their parents doing things that are important. Otherwise their teachers at school appear to be smarter and disrespect begins to grow that way. If our young people are pulled into worldly entertainment, foolish pursuits, computer games, silly pastimes Mission is damaged. Mission is impossible if our children are not growing up in their honesty, their willingness to love and to be helpful, their understanding of the mission of Jesus Christ—"to destroy the works of the Devil" in the process of glorifying God among all the peoples of the world.

This is the most important concern of the local church. By contrast, common church goals of attendance, giving, and activities are less important than what goes on in the families. However, what goes on at our church buildings is still very important. Let us look at that now.

Mission Two: Church Activities

We have already seen how churches can incorporate young people into their church services. They can encourage families to accept responsibilities as a group. If the church is trying to help a poor family or help an elderly person clean house, it may be that an entire family could do that together.

However, in this brief paper there is not time or space to describe the many things which a congregation can do as a congregation. I would like to recommend a book and present the main points this book mentions. I have no desire to criticize what is normally thought of for the local church. I do want to bring out some additional perspectives, and even some which are different from those of this book. First let me introduce a new book.

This book is still in the publishing process, but it is one that I recommend highly, even though I see things somewhat differently at certain points. It is by James R. Eby, and its title is *World Impacting Churches*. Its subtitle is, *Ten Essential Characteristics for Changing the*

World and Finishing the Great Commission. I will list those ten characteristics.

But those ten chapters of Eby's book are preceded by four introductory chapters. Incidentally each chapter concludes with a list of "Practical Applications" which include resources and web sites to consult.

Chapter One, "God's Vision for the World," presents the purposes of God.

Chapter Two, "The Passion of the Christ," points out that Jesus' passion was not merely the Cross.

Chapter Three, "Understanding the Missionary Task," is a very helpful description of nine concepts: *mission, missionary, unreached people, closure*, etc..

Chapter Four, "A Tale of Two Churches," describes the differences between two congregations, one with true "World Impact."

From here on he presents in ten chapters the ten characteristics of a "World Impacting Church, or a "Great Commission Church":

Characteristic #1: "Sense of Destiny": Such churches "have a strong awareness that there is a Divine *call* from God upon them to participate with Him in building His Kingdom."

Characteristic #2: "Perseverance in Prayer and Intercession": Such churches "know the power of prayer, they know how to pray and they pray."

Characteristic #3: "Passion for Evangelism": Such churches have members "capture the passion for lost people that motivated the life of Christ." Four keys to effective evangelism are given.

Characteristic #4: "Ministering with Supernatural Power": Such churches understand that "the Kingdom of God" is coming, and that the "spread of the Kingdom" includes mighty works of God.

Characteristic #5: "Effectively Discipling New Converts": Such churches "understand that the essence of Jesus' command in the Great Commission is to make disciples and not just to win people to Christ or to see them baptized." The author gives a host of suggestions on how to disciple not just teach.

Characteristic #6: "Dedication to Church Planting": Such churches plant multiple branch churches and house fellowships and train many of their people to be able to do so. In this case, the author is thinking of a local church as becoming a mission agency. I will comment on this below.

Characteristic #7: "Commitment to Finish the Great Commission": Such churches have a clear idea that, along with the entire global workforce of Jesus, they are actually *finishing the job*. They believe in "closure." This chapter is packed with statistics proving the feasibility of such vision.

Characteristic #8: "Clear strategy for Growth and Expansion": Such churches "Do not grow because their circumstances are conducive to growth or because other churches are growing in their area. They grow in almost any set of circumstances because they have a passion to reach lost people and a wise plan for growth and increase."

This characteristic, along with #6 presumes that the local church will act like a mission agency. See comment below.

Characteristic #9: "Sending Trained Laborers into the Harvest": Such churches "Send trained laborers into the harvest fields." This chapter also conceives of the local church as a mission agency. See comment below.

Characteristic #10: "Giving Generously to World Evangelization": Such churches should give a minimum of ten percent of their income to "world evangelization" and then continue to give a higher percentage until they are giving thirty percent. Ways of increasing giving are described.

The very next chapter, "Together We Can Finish the Great Commission" highlights nine positive factors in the global situation:

1. The global prayer movement.
2. The targeting of Unreached Peoples.
3. The emergence of mission efforts from the former mission fields themselves.
4. The pentecostal / charismatic explosion.
5. The re-emergence of "power evangel-

ism" (signs, wonders, healings and miracles).

6. The technological explosion (radio, TV, computers).

7. Fast and affordable travel, bringing Short Term Missions into existence and enabling the field situation to be brought closer to the churches back home.

8. The birth of Church Planting Movements of a special and new variety.

9. The translation of scripture.

The final chapter is a ringing challenge to the reader to be completely given over to the Great Commission.

Mission Three: Mission Agency Activity

In the previous paragraphs I have covered a fairly comprehensive picture of what the goals of mission are and the role of the local church, as stated in an excellent book which will soon be available.

One major difference of opinion which I have with this book is not so much what it says as what it does not say. What I believe needs to be added is not so much a criticism of this book as it is to widespread perspectives which tend to dominate peoples' thinking about missions today. In this book there is no reference to mission agencies.

Local churches are growing where they are planted all over the world today and their multiplication is a wonderful reality. But the unfinished task also requires thousands of new breakthroughs to unreached peoples on a cross-cultural basis, which is a task mainly beyond the capabilities of local churches.

In this book almost nothing is said about the necessary task of learning a strange language. Almost nothing is said about the need for many more long term workers who can stay for ten or twenty or thirty years. Instant results tend to be glorified. Nothing is said about the fact that most all of the expansion of churches has never effectively penetrated the major remaining blocs of peoples, the Muslims, the Hindus, Buddhists, etc.

Minority or oppressed populations will

jump at the chance to tie in with some foreign body of believers. They have nothing to lose. Well-established groups like the Japanese simply have not sensed the need to accept a different culture in order to gain a promise of heaven.

Rural people, uneducated people, people who seek Western ways, many city people, can be drawn into congregations that may represent primarily quite Western culture. But the vast masses of Hindus, Muslims, Japanese, and Buddhists have not yet seen their way clear to "become Christians."

Let's take the Muslims as an example. Their concept of Christians is distorted by American movies, by the high divorce rates in the USA, by our drinking populations, and so on. To persuade them to be a Christian sometimes is successful only if the Muslim wants to drink alcoholic beverages. Within many Muslim communities in the Middle East today a "Christian" reminds them of an elderly bearded priest who is drunk all day. Or, they are reminded of a miniskirted tourist.

It is shocking but true that many Muslims, when they think of a Christian, think of these words: westerner, imperialist, colonial, loosely dressed, wine drinker, pig eater, immoral, polytheistic and infidel.

It is sad to hear but many of the Christians in Egypt would prefer to live within the Muslim society of Egypt than in America.

There is, therefore, a strong movement of mission leaders today who are going back to the Apostle Paul as an example of a missionary who reached out to Greeks and welcomed them to follow Jesus Christ without requiring them to give up their Greek culture. Paul was wise enough to do that because he grew up in a Greek city. He was bilingual. To achieve what he was able to understand most missionaries need years of language and culture learning.

The idea is that Muslims can follow Christ just as Greeks could follow Christ—without giving up their culture and their society. Radical changes of life take place when a person

repents, and turns to Jesus as Lord and Savior. But the Bible does not say that a person needs to give up his language and culture as well. Greek culture was “an earthen vessel” which was nevertheless fully adequate to carry the treasure of the Gospel.

Today there are hundreds of thousands of Muslims who are earnest followers of Jesus Christ and yet who still retain their identity as “Muslims.” There are even more Hindus who have surrendered their lives to Christ but who still consider themselves to be “Hindus.” In fact, in India today there may be two or three times as many devout followers of Christ who consider themselves still part of their Hindu families as the number of believers who call themselves Christians. The reason is that most of the Christians of India represent a decidedly different cultural tradition, and are significantly Westernized.

However, most “missions” to India are content to deal just with those who call themselves Christians. The Christians need help. It is a good thing to do because the Christians represent millions of very poor people. But the hundreds of millions of Hindus are not likely to merge with that group, certainly not very soon.

In any case it is not good enough just to contact “Christians” in India. We need to go to advance the cause of Christ among other spheres of India.

One of the key movements today among mission leaders is called the Insider Movement. This is an approach, somewhat like what I have already described Paul the apostle doing, which understands the Gospel as the treasure we carry in “earthen vessels.” The vessels themselves represent the culture and the language differences around the world. There are many different vessels, but there is only one Gospel and we need to realize that we are preaching Christ and not the earthen vessel called Christianity or Presbyterianism.

Missions today is often mainly an effort to be in touch with believers in other countries rather than an attempt to extend the Gospel

where there are no believers. In some cases it is as if the Great Commission has been rewritten to say, “Go into all the world and meddle in the existing churches.” Many churches are involved in “playing missions” as if it is a curious game. They send their young people on short visiting trips but they do not know how to penetrate the major blocs of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Japanese etc.

Furthermore, if local churches send their own missionaries directly to the field those missionaries will often be very poorly prepared and often be working alone rather than with a whole field team as would be the case if the church sent their people under the auspices of a standard mission agency.

Unfortunately many churches are so independent of all other churches that they can’t imagine mixing their missionaries with missionaries from other churches. This is a terrible mistake. Even a very large church, unless it establishes a mission agency within the church that draws upon leadership with extensive field experience, will find that their missionaries don’t stay very long on the field, can’t get good guidance from their home church, and become very frustrated. Mission agencies today are as professional as the banking industry. Most churches don’t set up their own bank, don’t even print their own Bibles, so why should they think that they are capable of sending their own missionaries without the help of a professional mission agency?

Confusion and surprises, thus, will meet those sent directly to the field from a local church. They are unlikely to understand the situation well enough to work as Paul did. They may feel they have to pull people out of their culture in order to save them when in fact they need to save them within their culture so that God’s will may invade and change that culture from the inside.

This leads to the next point: what indeed needs to happen to whole societies?

Mission Four: The Mission of the Kingdom

The “mission of the church” is to build families, gather believers together to worship and to challenge one another, to build buildings and plant other churches, and all that is good. But down through history that has often become the sum total of the church’s mission. However, the mission of the church is supposed to be the same as the mission of Jesus Christ: the mission of the Kingdom. The mission of the Kingdom is bigger than just getting more people saved and into the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is the Will of God, and Jesus taught us to pray “Your Kingdom Come, Your will be done *on earth ...*” This means the citizens of the Kingdom have some duties to do besides recruiting more people for the Kingdom.

When the Great Commission says that we are to “disciple the nations” it is common for people to think that “discipling” means teaching. They have the idea that missionaries go around the world to teach people about Christ.

However, that is only partly true. The Great Commission ends up with a statement that Jesus’ disciples are to teach people to “obey” His commands. This is radically more than for people to simply learn new truths. It means they must yield their lives to those truths. It means very clearly that they are to “do the will of God.”

This very same sentiment is described in the Lord’s prayer as we have already seen. The Lord’s prayer is a prayer that the Kingdom of God will come and God’s will will be done.

Jesus opposed every evil, every corruption, every injustice, every disease. This reveals the heart of His Father, and our Father, in heaven. This essentially means that the followers of Christ are shock troops who are sent out into the world to purge every evil, destroy every work of Satan, and to do so in the Name of Christ.

This, of course, is what is already happening in many ways in a limited sense. It was a Presbyterian woman who exposed the fraud of the famous Enron Corporation. It was

missionaries who attacked the disease of leprosy and discovered how to eradicate that terrible disease. It is honest people who are the salt and the light of this world. The great strength of the American economy depends on the very nearly invisible presence of millions of sincere believers.

Nevertheless, our formal Christian theology is strangely silent on the things that the Bible takes very seriously. 1 John 3:8 puts it this way: “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the Devil.” When all we do is gather people out of the world and into church we are *leaving behind*, not *fighting against*, “every evil, every corruption, every injustice, every disease.” We are not fully representing Jesus or the Father.

Every believer in Jesus Christ is called of God, not just those who are going to be pastors or missionaries. The call of God upon every believer is to glorify Him. In Matthew 5 where Jesus said we are supposed to be the salt of the earth, Jesus goes on to show how that happens. He explains that we are to be a shining light through our good deeds which glorify our Father in heaven.

However, we live in the twenty-first century not the first century. Believers today have absolutely unprecedented access to information about the past. It is tragically unfortunate that what has happened since Abraham is so little known and even less understood. The gradual conquest of disease and the consequent growth of population is not understood as a measurement of the expanding Kingdom of God. The meaning of “good deeds” in the twenty-first century is radically different from the first century. Jesus couldn’t talk to people about germs about which they knew nothing. He couldn’t expect poor rural people to pass new laws that would change society, rule out slavery, or oppose plural marriage.

Today, for example, a businessman who is a believer in Jesus Christ must not falsely advertise the virtues of his product. A surgeon who is a believer must not urge an oper-

ation which is really not essential. An attorney must not bend the truth in order to win a case. This is all to the good and if all believers were absolutely honest, absolutely loving, this world would be radically different.

But the works of the devil require teamwork to defeat in many cases. There's no way to rid the world of malaria by individuals being honest and loving to their neighbor. Newer organizations must be created. New mission structures must be designed. Believers must work collectively to correct some of the major evils in this world, not just human evil where human beings with evil intent must be restrained, but natural evil where deadly germs must be eradicated.

This may not sound like the usual message of missions. But in fact the most successful breakthroughs in the history of missions have resulted from missionaries whose practical love in a strategic fight against sickness and disease has prepared the way for the Gospel - just as Jesus did by actually demonstrating the character of God. This is not merely a humanitarian idea, it is an essential means of glorifying God and drawing people to Him. The Kingdom of God is not merely a huge basket into which we throw as many souls as we can helping them to escape this world. Rather the Kingdom of God is the domain of God's will working its way through all of society even into the evil forces of nature demonstrating the goodness and power of God.

Conclusion

It is not as though the local church should choose between Mission One, Mission Two, Mission Three or Mission Four. All four of these missions are essential. But it is true that the first three are actually part of the fourth. The overarching message of Jesus Christ is "the Kingdom of God is at hand." The Kingdom is here and has been growing in influence ever since Abraham was called to be a blessing to the nations. As the Bible unfolds that "blessing to the nations" becomes in the New Testament more clearly the expansion of God's will in this world. In the New Testa-

ment we begin to see the active, intelligent evil existence of Satan.

In the last two thousand years our understanding of the nature of Satan's works has been increasingly clear. We now know much more about the evils that tear down God's glory and therefore the content of mission in the twenty-first century is radically more complex.

My prayer is that churches today will discover the increasing knowledge of the wonder of God's creation and also the increasing scope of Satan's evil doings. When we worship we recognize God's wonders. When we leave the doors of the church we work against Satan's monstrous evils. Only in that way can we glorify God in all the nations.

That is our mission.

