

FRONTLINE

BRINGING THE TRUTH HOME

The Future of Missions

- ▶ Missions: Are We Doing It Right?
- ▶ Missions: Looking Back and Looking Forward
- ▶ The Future of Christian Missions: What Should Change and What Should Stay the Same?
- ▶ People Groups: What is the Target of the Great Commission?

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Volume 36 • Number 3



4 MISSIONS: ARE WE DOING IT RIGHT?

Glen Galbraith

We must get back to the basics of cross-cultural ministry, becoming all things to all people.

6 MISSIONS: LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

Cléa Rathbun

Serving together as a missionary couple, my husband and I saw God at work saving, transforming, and calling Jamaican believers to full-time ministry in the same way He did to us.

8 IS MISSIONS WORK "KINGDOM BUILDING"?

Keith A. Kobelia

Many well-meaning believers describe missions in terms of kingdom work without careful attention to what they mean by this phrase.

11 THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS: WHAT SHOULD CHANGE AND WHAT SHOULD STAY THE SAME?

Ken Rathbun

Believers seeking to win the lost today must be aware of the changes that have taken root in the areas they live in.

15 PEOPLE GROUPS: WHAT IS THE TARGET OF THE GREAT COMMISSION?

Brian Trainer

Success in missions is not measured by how many people come to Jesus, but by the ingathering of people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation.

18 DEFINITIONS MATTER: PRESERVING THE MISSION OF MISSIONARIES

Brian Trainer

Every Christian should have a heart ablaze with evangelistic zeal, but not all Christians are to be called missionaries.



SOUND WORDS

INSPIRATION FOR THE PASTOR'S STUDY

I: First Partaker

When the Secret of God Was upon My Tabernacle

Mark Minnick

V: Bring . . . the Books

More Books for a Deserted Island

Mark Minnick

VI: Straight Cuts

The Invigorating View of the Invisible

Randy Fox

VII: Windows

NO KINGS? A Christian Perspective on Government "Rulers"

Mike Ascher



Our sincere thanks to Ken Rathbun for coordinating this issue of *FrontLine* magazine.

DEPARTMENTS

22 ON THE HOME FRONT

24 REGIONAL REPORTS

28 HEART TO HEART

Relieving the Pressure: A Romans 16 Perspective on Caring for Missionary Women

Bianca McCrocklin

30 AT A GLANCE

Does God Repent, or Not?
Layton Talbert

32 WITH THE WORD TO THE WORLD

The Unchanging Gospel for a Changing World

Jim Tillotson

34 STEWARDSHIP MATTERS

Missions Agencies: Essential Teammates

Corey Pfaffe

38 CHAPLAIN'S REPORT

Triumph Over Trauma: Renewed Hope for Living with Hidden Wounds

(Book Review)

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The Future of Missions

My good friend Glen Galbraith provides a stirring and yet humble approach to looking back on his twenty-five-year ministry in one of the more difficult mission fields—that of Scotland and England. His thoughts about how his approach to ministry has changed during that time and the encouraging signs of how it is being done there now, with younger missionaries—who happen to be his sons—is most revealing and instructive.

My wife, Cléa, speaks from her experience growing up in the Amazon region of Brazil. She discusses how she and her family perceived missions being done in her hometown by missionaries from the United States. One missionary couple had a tremendous impact on three generations of her family. The fact that God called her into missions and ministry in our local church serves as a reminder that God's call comes to people all over the world. That is a change we all should welcome in the future.

One of the things that needs to change about missions is how we talk about it. Since missionaries take the glorious gospel to those who need to hear, we have every responsibility before God to be precise when we present it. Keith Kobelia has done valuable service in getting that conversation started. I have heard both Catholics and Mormons talk about

building the kingdom through their mission work, but is that what we are doing? Are we trying to build the kingdom or fulfill the Great Commission? Let us be faithful with our task!

Along those lines, Brian Trainer has provided a beneficial article that is both historical and convicting. He exhorts us to rethink in broad terms the categories we use in talking about “reaching people groups” for Christ. Naturally that leads to thinking about the resources expended for that activity to happen. He challenges us to consider that one of the causalities of this philosophy may be the Great Commission itself. In another article, Brian challenges all of us, through a sermon of Spurgeon's, to take seriously our need to communicate the truth of the Great Commission and to practice it as well.

The article I contributed relates to what changes in missions and what should and must remain the same. Time passes, and people, technologies, cultures, even languages, change. We must stay aware. We must adapt where we can. But there are certain key objectives that can never change. These were given to us by our commanding officer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Every believer should consider that Commission precious and permanent. It is a holy task, and we must give it our all.

Ken Rathbun, Associate Editor

Glen Galbraith



Missions: Are We Doing It Right?

As a missionary of twenty-five-plus years, I often wonder if I'm doing this right! To be honest, when I look back on how I did ministry (and, specifically, cross-cultural ministry) all those years ago and how I do it now, I'd like to think that my approach to and execution of ministry has changed. Why would I want my ministry to look different now than twenty years ago? Because the world has changed. Culture has changed. People have changed. The only thing that hasn't changed is the message that we are taking to this changing world. There's nothing new in these statements; we've been saying these things for decades and even centuries. Charles Spurgeon once said, "We are not responsible to God for the souls that are saved, but we are responsible for the gospel that is preached and the way in which we preach it." And, so, I think one of the biggest struggles that a missionary faces in every generation is preaching the pure and unadulterated gospel to a new and ever-changing culture.

Perhaps cross-cultural missionaries are more aware of this than most

because everything in their life is new and changed. Once you leave your home culture you are faced every day with new and wonderful experiences. Whether in matters of language, food, clothes, or other outward expressions of culture, or even the unspoken things like humor, facial expressions, and manners, every culture is different than every other culture, and every present culture is different from every culture that came before it. I think these changes are made more rapidly in our present digital age and, at the same time, there is also a drawing together of cultures because of the world becoming "smaller and smaller" thanks to the ease of access to the internet (in most places). When our family landed in Scotland in 2004, we didn't even need to leave the airport to realize that we weren't in Kansas anymore! I can still recall my fear as I approached my first real roundabout! I can still remember my frustration the first time I went to a hardware store to ask for normal mundane things and realized that everything in Britain has a different name than I was used to. I still shake my head when I think about how every British

person can identify people as Americans just by watching them eat!

These daily reminders helped us to realize how American our presentation of Jesus was. It was during these early days that I took great comfort in Paul's words to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 9:22. Basically, Paul made it his goal to get the gospel into the language and culture of anyone and everyone he encountered. My family quickly learned that we needed not only to speak in a language that Scottish people could understand, but we needed to behave in a way that Scottish people could associate with.

After eight years in Scotland, my wife and I moved to England—southern England to be exact. We were now less than five hundred miles from Aberdeen, on the same large island, and (sort of) speaking the same language, but we might as well have moved to the other side of the world! Everything we had learned about Scottish culture now had to be learned all over again in regard to British culture. This time it was slightly easier, the way it is easier for a child to learn different languages at the same time, because the principles we had put in place were now part of our way of

operating. Not long after we moved to England, our family went through some challenges, and the lessons we thought we had learned were now being put to the test. Thank God for His unswerving grace and for the Scripture that had been so important to us at the beginning. The first part of 1 Corinthians 9:22 says that Paul was willing to become weak to the weak. Then in verse 23, Paul tells us why he became like someone weak to the weak: so that he might share with them in the blessings of the gospel. In our experiences we learned not only that British culture (and, indeed, working-class culture in Britain) is very different from middle-class American culture, but we also learned how to be a part of that culture. It was scary and exciting at the same time as we saw a culture from the inside out rather than from the outside looking in.

I believe we are living in an amazing time for the spread of the gospel. It may be that it has never been so easy to access and spread information. We must take advantage of these means, both for learning and for teaching. But we must also get back to the basics of cross-cultural ministry, becoming all things to all people.

My wife and I have been truly blessed to see our two sons enter cross-cultural ministry and return to the land that they grew up in. They do ministry very differently than we did. Their two families are teaming up together to plant a church just outside Edinburgh. I have learned so much by watching them. They are much more patient in the steps they take, allowing things to take root and become established before moving on to the next step. They are much more involved in their communities than we were. This is not because of a lack of desire on our part all those years ago, but the result, perhaps, of not being able to shed our former culture as easily as we thought we could. Maybe because the boys grew up in Scotland, it has been easier for them to be Scottish than it was for us. I think one of the lessons to take away from this is how important it is for us to encourage second, third, and fourth generations of missionary families to continue the work started by parents and grandparents.

An important question to ask of cross-cultural ministers is how we are raising our children. Do we raise them as Americans in a foreign land or as children of our new culture? The other sharp side of this sword has been driven home to us

recently as God has opened doors for us to minister stateside (somewhat against our natural inclinations), and yet all our children and their children have no desire to follow us back to the States. We are thankful to God for the light that these families are continuing to shine in the land that we love, and, at the same time, we are brought back to the question we have asked so many times: Are we doing this right?

As we now watch from a distance the ways that our boys do ministry, we must be aware and appreciate the differences from how we did ministry years ago. They are living in the same place that we did, but in a different time. They use many digital methods that we couldn't have even imagined twenty years ago. They are much more relaxed in their worship than we were. They are much more personal and patient with their charges. That is not to say that we were stiff and cold; we thought we were relaxed, patient, interconnected with culture, and all the rest of it. But as we watch our children, we realize that we were only just scratching the surface.

Ministry is about people and people are changing! We must adapt to cultural change in a biblically appropriate way so that we are not ineffective in ministry. It is already hard enough speaking a "religious language" that people have never heard before and if we compound these spiritual differences with physical differences then we create one more barrier that people perceive when they hear our never-changing gospel message. What do I mean by this, practically? I believe that our gospel message must be simple. Whatever language our new culture speaks, it is most likely not one that includes or understands our religious words. But while that doesn't mean we stop using terms like "sin" or "salvation," it does mean that we need to be aware that those in the present generation probably have never heard these words. Patience and understanding will go a long way toward reaching people. But we must also be prepared to learn their language. I can remember to this day the struggles I had as I learned the language in Scotland. But that is the point! I had to learn their language; I couldn't expect an entire community to learn my language. And, when I say "language," I don't just mean the words that come out of my mouth or the way that I pronounce those words, but rather, what those words mean. When I speak about a

Heavenly Father or the Holy Spirit, what are people hearing? Do they hear (because of their personal experiences) about a person who is mostly absent from their life? Do they hear me teaching them to ask to be possessed by some phantom? If we are going to reach people who are lost, we must speak their language. And, sometimes, that may mean using different words than we are used to using, depending on how they understand these words.

And maybe just as important as our words is our life. One of the big differences in modern culture (everywhere in the world) is that people are watching you! There was a time when people just went about their own business and did their own thing. But thanks to the internet, people have learned to watch others. I'm not sure if this is a good thing or a bad thing, but it is a reality. People watch you to see if you are living up to your words. When you say that you love them, they are watching to see if that's true. When you say that you love God, they are watching to see if that's true. People don't just take others at their word anymore. Again, thanks to the internet, nearly everyone has been taken advantage of in one way or another. If we're going to take the gospel of love and forgiveness to people whose only experiences are being taken advantage of and being mistreated, then we have a lot of work to do! We can't just say, "God loves you and so do I," we must prove it!

So, are you doing this right? Am I doing this right? I don't know, but I do know that the way I'm doing ministry is changing. It's slowing down and being more patient. It's watching and learning from the younger generation. It's making sure that there is less noise and more action. Our message hasn't changed, but our methods must! Change is uncomfortable—remember that when you are asking others to change. Change sometimes hurts and always involves sacrifice. But remember what Paul said: "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more" (1 Cor. 9:19).

Glen Galbraith has served with Baptist Mid-Missions in the United Kingdom since 2001. Glen and his wife, Tammy, have three children and eight grandchildren. Glen and Tammy have recently joined BMM's recruitment team and are endeavouring to enlist the next generation of cross-cultural gospel servants.





Missions: Looking Back and Looking Forward

I am a fruit of foreign missionary work. My pastor and his wife were American missionaries who spent their lives planting churches in the Amazon area of Brazil. The church I grew up in was their first church plant. They led me, my mom, my grandparents, one uncle, and three aunts to the Lord. My grandparents were both active church members, with Grandpa being a deacon and Grandma involved in women's ministry for many years. My uncle became a pastor. My mom and my aunts are serving in their local churches to this day. Our family is a sample of the fruits produced by the faithful ministry of this missionary couple.

As a child, I eagerly listened to missionaries who visited our church. They showed us old projector pictures of their way of living, the strange things on their menu, and their work among native tribes spread across the Amazon forest. They taught us Bible verses and songs in tribal languages. Some of these missionaries were from our local church. They had heard the gospel through the same ministry that shared it with my family and me. They had grown up seeing the work done by our pastor, being trained, challenged, and then sent to the mission field.

I pictured myself becoming a missionary someday, learning how to live in the jungle, how to speak a different language, and perhaps even how to help translate the Bible. I did not see the hardships those missionaries faced, I saw the thrill of adventure. Already being in a very difficult place to live, I did not consider it an obstacle to go just a little deeper into the jungle.

I eventually became a missionary in a very different way than I had anticipated. In His time, the Lord made me cross paths with another mission-minded person already in the field, not in the jungles of the Amazon forest, but on the Caribbean island of Jamaica. Serving together as a missionary couple, my husband and I saw God at work saving, transforming, and calling Jamaican believers to full-time ministry in the same way He had done so for us.

From my first pastor's example, my personal experience growing up, and the time my husband and I served in Jamaica, I have listed a few principles that I believe can be applied to other mission fields.

LIVE LIFE TOGETHER

Christ left his heavenly home and came to dwell among us. The beauty of foreign missions is that missionaries are called to do just that: leave their home and what is familiar to them and dwell among those they hope to share the gospel with. When I came to the States, I saw many things my pastor and his wife had left behind when they moved to Brazil. I had always taken for granted that they lived in the same way we lived. It was much later in life that I began to understand the sacrifice being made by those believers, and I admired them all the more.

Home missions might look a bit different from foreign missions, but we are still encouraged to move out of our comfort zones. I find it more difficult to reach out to my neighbors than to go canvassing in another country. So many things can get in the way, especially fear and pride. In order to build personal connections with the lost, we must risk our comfort, get away from the familiar, and rely on the power of the cross. We share life before sharing the Word of life.

LOVE PEOPLE

Another principle directly tied to building connections is a genuine love for people. Building connections may look different today than back in those years growing up. Local evangelistic attempts might look different than attempts on a foreign mission field, but the motivation remains the same. People can tell if we are reaching out to them out of love or because we see them as a project. My pastor had a strong accent, and sometimes it was difficult to understand everything he said, but his love for the people was readily translated in his smiles and the strong handshakes he was known for. He and his wife even chose to be buried among the people they helped reach for Christ. I look forward to seeing them in heaven to tell them, “I saw Christ in you.”

Christ is our ultimate example. We can love people only if we are connected to the source of love, Christ Himself.

MAKE THE GOSPEL MESSAGE CENTRAL

Evangelistic programs and special events can be effective in drawing people, but they might become a distraction from the Word. We must be constantly reminded that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation. Radical transformation comes through the hearing of God’s Word.

ENCOURAGE A SERVANT’S MINDSET

One of my best memories growing up was going on trips to rural communities where our church had established small congregations. We helped distribute tracts and invitations for evangelistic meetings, provided special music, and organized VBS, puppets, dramatic readings, and so forth. We were not there to be served but to serve, and that mindset did not allow for an indecisive attitude toward church attendance. Rather, it encouraged spiritual growth.

DISCIPLE AND TRAIN BELIEVERS TO DO THE WORK OF THE GOSPEL

The key verse in our ministry in Jamaica was 2 Timothy 2:2. My husband and I taught at a Bible college, assisting students in preparing for the work of the ministry. It is always a joy for us to hear of former students serving in their local churches and other fields where God has placed them. Over the years my husband has discipled several young men as he spent time studying the Bible and praying with them. I have had the privilege of being discipled and trained by godly ladies who invested in me. I have had the honor of helping young ladies in like manner. Making disciples is right after “go” in the Great Commission.

ENTRUST THE MINISTRY TO OTHER BELIEVERS

It is wonderful to see the fruits of our labor. It takes time, and it is not always a given this side of heaven. One plants, another waters, others harvest, and Christ is glorified in all. But it is uplifting to witness mature believers being fully equipped to take on the ministry without training wheels. It is important to have that end goal in view.

Paul did not consider those he had reached for Christ to be forever dependent

on him for their spiritual food. He entrusted them with the ministry. He saw them as fellow workers and fellow servants of Christ. In foreign missions there is the risk of creating long-term dependency, and in our local churches there is also the risk of creating a similar culture, where believers are not being challenged to serve. Serving God in the local church is crucial to spiritual maturity. All believers are called to serve. They are to be trained and challenged to do just that.

APPLICATION

Strive to build connections. In this era of social media and virtual interactions people are hungry for real and meaningful relationships. Yet it can be daunting to reach out to those around us. Pray for opportunities, have a plan, and cast your fears before the Lord.

Be prepared. One reason why we fear is the lack of preparation—so, get ready before the opportunity arises. One way I have found helpful is to have my testimony written and memorized. Some people find it helpful to have at hand a script of the Romans Road or another method to share the gospel. God is faithful and He will give us the opportunity if we ask Him. Practice sharing the gospel. Let us also ask for wisdom as we prepare for the task.

Rely on the power of the Spirit and not in your own strength and intellectual ability (1 Cor. 2:1–5). We look to Christ, “in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

Have the right motives. Am I sharing the gospel with people because I care about their soul condition or because they are my gospel project? God can save when the gospel is preached out of selfish ambition, but we are called to do it out of love (Phil. 1:15–18).

Ask God to instill in you a love for people and for His mission. Pray that you will also be used to ignite this love in others. May Christ be glorified in all that we do.

Cléa Rathbun (MA, Faith Baptist Theological Seminary) is the mother of two children (ages 7 and 10). She was a great asset to her husband Ken as a missionary in Jamaica, being active in various women’s ministries. Currently she faithfully serves in her local church in women’s ministry. She also serves in the youth department with her husband.



IT IS WONDERFUL TO SEE THE FRUITS OF OUR LABOR. IT TAKES TIME, AND IT IS NOT ALWAYS A GIVEN THIS SIDE OF HEAVEN. ONE PLANTS, ANOTHER WATERS, OTHERS HARVEST, AND CHRIST IS GLORIFIED IN ALL.

Is Missions Work “Kingdom

In broader Christian circles, the equation of “missions” with the idea of “building the kingdom” is fairly common. Many evangelical ministries describe their missions endeavors as “kingdom” work. However, is this an appropriate equation? Is the church currently fulfilling God’s kingdom program?

The aim of this brief discussion is to encourage the use of theologically accurate and biblically derived language to describe the work of missions in the church. Specifically, while describing the work of the church as “kingdom building” may sound appealing and current, such statements can be theologically imprecise and do not reflect biblical terminology related to the work of the church.

As the following discussion develops, various observations will be addressed that should at least call for caution and care when describing the work of missions with kingdom language. While the kingdom program is an important biblical theme, and the church does benefit from God’s kingdom program, the relationship between the kingdom and Christian missions should be carefully expressed, consistent with one’s theology and New Testament emphases.

THE AMBIGUITY OF KINGDOM LANGUAGE IN THE MODERN CONTEXT

The relationship between the kingdom and the church is obviously a complex question, involving many significant systematic-theological presuppositions. In particular, one’s millennial view (e.g., amillennialism, postmillennialism, or premillennialism) significantly influences one’s view of how the kingdom relates to the church. So, if someone believes that the church replaces Israel (which is common in amillennialism and postmillennialism) then one would be predisposed to see a greater continuity between God’s kingdom

program and Christian missions. However, if one holds to premillennialism (which advocates a future kingdom), seeing a greater degree of discontinuity between God’s kingdom program and His plan for the church is natural. Even within the broad categories, no consensus exists as to the nature and fulfillment of God’s kingdom program.¹

Beyond the theological categories, one must also define how the church is “bringing in the kingdom.” What does this look like on ecclesiastical, societal, and personal levels? Again, little continuity exists. Some limit the work of the kingdom simply to preaching the gospel, but this does not seem to do justice to the rich and varied nature of the kingdom theme in Scripture. Others advocate selective application of the kingdom in selected areas such as relieving societal ills (e.g., the social gospel), the presence of kingdom power (e.g., the signs-and-wonders movement), or even political application of kingdom principles (e.g., theonomy).

The practical takeaway from this discussion is that the diverse understandings of God’s kingdom program make it difficult to know what someone means by phrases like “building the kingdom.” The kingdom concept deserves more careful explanation and must be understood within a broader theological context. Unfortunately, many well-meaning believers describe missions in terms of kingdom work without careful attention to what they mean by this phrase and may actually use the phrase in a way that is inconsistent with their theological beliefs.

THE LACK OF KINGDOM LANGUAGE IN THE GREAT COMMISSION

What is the mission of the church? The quintessential statement on the purpose of the church is the Great Commission: Matthew 28:18–20. After the resurrection, Jesus taught His disciples for forty days (cf.

Acts 1:3). At one point when they were in Galilee, Jesus gave them their mission:

All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matt. 28:18–20).

The mission of the disciples and, by extension, of the church is to “teach” or “make disciples of” all nations. This is accomplished by calling for a commitment to the gospel message (evidenced through their identification with Christ in baptism) and instructing these believers in the truth (beginning with instruction from Christ Himself).

Noticeably absent from this commission is any kingdom language.² While the Gospel of Matthew is replete with kingdom language and themes, the Great Commission contains no kingdom language. The disciples are not called to “bring in the kingdom” or to do “kingdom work.” They are not commissioned to establish the kingdom. They are called to be witnesses, and that is the heart of missions. This seems to indicate that the mission of the church is unique and is distinct from God’s kingdom program.

In practical terms, it is better for the mission of the church to be explained in terms of the Great Commission rather than in terms of God’s kingdom program. A focus on the Great Commission more clearly and precisely identifies what the goal of the church is and what the work of Christian missions should be.

THE SPARSITY OF KINGDOM LANGUAGE IN ACTS AND THE EPISTLES

The kingdom of God is a major theme in the Bible, which highlights various aspects

Building”?

of the kingdom (e.g., physical, political, spiritual, etc.). In particular, the Old Testament Prophets develop this theme, and the Gospels record the presentation of the kingdom in conjunction with the proximity of the King, Jesus. However, when one turns to the book of Acts and the Epistles, kingdom language is much less frequent. This is not because the kingdom theme is unimportant or abandoned (cf. Rev. 19:11–16), but it reflects the fact that the church has a unique role in God’s plan for the ages.

The book of Acts uses the term “kingdom” eight times.³ The first two of these uses occur in Acts 1 related to the words of Jesus to His disciples before His ascension. In His post-resurrection teaching, Jesus instructed the disciples about “things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). However, when the disciples asked about the timing of the kingdom (1:6), Jesus basically ignored their question and reiterated their commission to be witnesses of Him (1:8). Rather than being concerned about the timing of the kingdom (1:7), which implies that it will be a future reality, they should focus on proclaiming Christ “unto the uttermost part of the earth” (1:8). This use is especially intriguing considering the work of the church. If Jesus wanted to equate the work of the church with the work of the kingdom, this would be a natural opportunity. Jesus neither equates the commission with kingdom work nor does He equate the church with the kingdom.

While the mission of the church is not described in terms of kingdom work, the kingdom was an important element in the teaching of the early church. In several passages in the book of Acts, teaching is specifically related to (i.e., “concerning”) the kingdom of God (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31), offering no elaboration or alteration of this theme. In the book of Acts, the only use of the term “kingdom” that addresses its timing (Acts 14:22)

seems to view the kingdom as a future reality rather than a present one. Thus, the references to the kingdom in the book of Acts assume the foundation found in prior revelation, and this nature of the kingdom is not altered.

Specific references to Christ’s kingdom in the Epistles are limited. The vast majority of references to the kingdom in the Epistles view the kingdom as a future inheritance of the saints (1 Cor. 6:9, 10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:1, 18; Heb. 12:28; James 2:5; 2 Pet. 1:11). A couple of passages acknowledge the fact of Christ’s kingdom and reign (Heb. 1:8; 1 Cor. 15:24) without addressing timing of the kingdom or correlating this concept to the current mission of the church.⁴

In Colossians 4:11, Paul speaks about his Jewish coworkers as “fellowworkers unto the kingdom of God.” Again, this passage indicates that the work of the early church was related to the kingdom theme (as in Acts), but this does not necessitate an equivalence between the mission of the church and the kingdom program.

This brief survey of the book of Acts and the Epistles shows that the witness and mission of the early church is not equated wholesale with the kingdom program. While the kingdom message does relate to the future hope of believers, the biblical-theological foundation that was laid in the Prophets and Gospels persists in Acts and the Epistles. The church is a unique body (cf. Eph. 3:1–7) with a unique task: to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

AN APPEAL FOR PRECISION IN MISSIONS TERMINOLOGY

The practical appeal of this article is to exercise precision and caution when describing the work of missions. Christian missions should be described in theologically accurate terms that are consistent with biblical usage. Personally, I do not

believe that equating the work of missions and God’s kingdom program is theologically precise or biblically justified. I believe describing Christian missions in terms of the Great Commission is better and appropriately highlights the distinctive message and methodology of the church.

Keith A. Kobelia (PhD, Dallas Theological Seminary) has taught in the Bible and Theology Department at Faith Baptist Bible College since 2014. He and his wife, Elizabeth, reside in Ankeny, Iowa. They have six children and one grandchild.



¹ For example, within premillennialism a spectrum of views exists. Some premillennialists speak of an initial form of the kingdom (e.g., an “already, but not yet” kingdom, popularized by George Eldon Ladd), others of a mystery form of the kingdom (e.g., J. Dwight Pentecost and John F. Walvoord), while still others would see no current form of the Davidic kingdom operational today (e.g., Stanley D. Toussaint).

I advocate dispensational premillennialism, holding to a literal, future, earthly fulfillment of the kingdom promises related to the Davidic Covenant (cf. 2 Sam 7:12–16). Consequently, in the context of the current discussion, I am hesitant to describe the work of the church using language of “kingdom” fulfillment.

² While Jesus possesses all authority (v. 18), this reflects His divine status and should not be limited to His role as the Davidic king.

³ The use of the term “kingdom” (βασιλεία, *basileia*) is prevalent in the Synoptic Gospels. Most of these uses relate to the concept of the “kingdom of heaven”/“kingdom of God” in Matthew (around 52 times), Mark (around 16 times), and Luke (around 31 times).

⁴ I take Colossians 1:13 to be a more generic use of the term “kingdom” in the sense of “sphere of authority.” However the term is interpreted, the passage addresses a reality that is done for believers, and it is not the work of the church to accomplish this transaction.



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The Future of Christian Missions: What Should Change and What Should Stay the Same?

As I age, I am realizing increasingly that change is inevitable. This applies to the task of missions as well. To do an effective job at the task of missions, leaders in missions understand the need to adapt. That begs the question of the title of this article. Yes, change is constant, and yes, we need to build flexibility in our models for missions. But what needs to change, and how will that change come about? In other words, what should change, and what should remain constant?

In this article I will convey some ideas of what principles, methods, and strategies need to continue, and what other ones should be utilized in a flexible manner.

WHAT SHOULD CHANGE?

Let's start with the latter. One area of life pertaining to the cause of missions is the realization that cultures change over time. This is true whether comparing

one nation with another or considering an individual nation itself. I sensed this a great deal when our family visited England recently. Though I have visited the UK many times, there had been a seven-year gap since our last visit because of COVID-19 and our need to visit my wife's family in Brazil. For the most part, I still felt at home during our visit, and driving on the other side of the road did not bother me (thanks to driving in Jamaica for fourteen years). However, there were times I could sense that things had progressed culturally further than I was used to seeing. Some of that was a bit unsettling.

We know this is also true here within the United States. What worked to welcome people to church in the 1970s would not even be considered today. Generally, as our nation secularizes, people's concern about their spiritual destiny and their confidence in the Word of God are not what they once were. They also have more

options to choose from today. It has been over a decade since I last visited India, and I miss it very much. But I know every place changes over time, and I would be very surprised with the changes I would observe if I get to return someday.

The truth is that believers (missionaries) seeking to win the lost today must be aware of the changes that have taken root in the areas where they live. Often those influences need to be refuted, and that takes time, study, and effort to do well.

Another area of change affecting cultures is how the task of discipleship takes place. The dynamic of people gathering to learn about how to live godly lives within the culture they live in needs careful awareness. What Americans are used to in their own context may not work in other settings, as I have witnessed. Discipleship can still be done well, but it does not necessarily have to follow American patterns.

IN PLANTING CHURCHES IN VARIOUS PLACES AROUND THE WORLD, ANOTHER PRIORITY MUST BE THE TRAINING OF A GENERATION OF LOCALLY CALLED MEN AND WOMEN INTO THE MINISTRY.

Travel is also an area that is different than it used to be. Our family loves to take teaching missions trips (my wife and I both have teaching qualifications). It is our preferred method of teaching. Though not as effective as when we were career missionaries, repeated visits to the same area give us opportunities for lasting influence.

Of course, with technology, the locations of the teacher and those taught no longer need be in the same place. My wife has effectively taught live online classes to ladies in both Brazil and Jamaica—all from our home in Iowa. I as well have taught online courses, and the reach can be very wide. Being adaptable and having an open mind to new methodologies is important to have an influence for Christ.

The opportunity to reach people around the world without either the teacher or those taught having to relocate is a tremendous blessing. I have really enjoyed getting to know the online students in my classes. We can interact despite the great distances.

A precious opportunity that the Lord allowed me to observe and witness throughout my years as a missionary in Jamaica was the calling of one of the students at our Bible college to be a missionary. This determined young man had a quiet confidence that God was going to send him to Africa to reach people for Christ. He persevered despite many, many obstacles.

Humanly speaking, the task seemed impossible. Funds were definitely lacking. Our Bible college was doing well just to keep the dorm roofs from leaking on our students. But over the course of years, God allow this young man to finish his Bible college education at Faith Baptist Bible College (we offered only a three-year degree) and then pursue and finish a Master of Divinity degree at Faith Baptist Theological Seminary. Today he ministers with his family in Mozambique, and we have the joy of supporting him in his work.

The United States has been sending out many missionaries around the world for many years. However, the flow of missionaries from America has slowed

down a good bit in recent years. While we should not throw our hands up in despair, perhaps we should recognize and encourage this shift of missionaries being sent out from other mission fields. Many of those mission fields have had a gospel witness for generations. It seems only natural that they would send out their own missionaries to continue the work of the Great Commission.

Finally, the one thing that needs to change is the natural desire for people to feel comfortable as they serve the Lord. This is a universal issue. But I found on the mission field that I needed to get out of my comfort zone and forsake the need to feel comfortable in my surroundings. Many times, I did not feel at ease. But those were frequently the greatest times of God's blessing, often despite my efforts. The truth I found is that being comfortable is not a requirement for serving God!

WHAT SHOULD REMAIN?

First and foremost, what must remain the same in missions is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for people who are condemned by their own personal sin. That means everyone who is born into this world. First Corinthians 15:3–4 declares in no uncertain terms that Christ died for our sins. Those sins had to be forgiven by a perfect sacrifice. Christ was that perfect sacrifice. He died an actual death and was buried, but then He rose from the dead! He went through all that suffering on the cross for us, because it was the only way God the Father could accept us.

Romans 5:6–8 assures us that even though we were miserable sinners, God loved us enough to save us. Romans 5:12 reveals to us why this great sacrifice was needed—we have all sinned. We could not pay for our own sin. Someone perfect, who knew no sin, had to do it. Christ was our substitute.

Though it is not a truth that many people like to hear, we must tell them the reality about what their sin means to God, and

their need for His divine forgiveness. That message must never change.

The call of God upon a believer for His service is another unchangeable truth. Paul reminded and encouraged Timothy in a ministry context to “stir up” (“fan into flame,” “kindle afresh,” and “keep ablaze” are alternate translations) the gift of God (2 Tim. 1:5–8). Because of the gift Paul recognized in Timothy, he called for his protégé to act in boldness, strength, love, and a sound mind.

God is still calling people into His ministry, both at home and far away. Sometimes it surely seems that not as many people are answering that call. But God is still calling His people to take His truth to the lost world that He loves. We must preach this as though we expect it, because we *should* expect it.

Another constant truth that must never change is the need for discipleship. Discipleship is the command of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20. We are to make disciples of those in all the world. What a task, but what a privilege. The dynamic of discipleship is such that a dedicated believer can disciple another believer, while also being discipled by a more mature believer. That process should be continuous and constant. Churches at home and overseas will be strengthened when believers focus completely on what God told us to do.

I mentioned discipleship in the context of a local church. That was purposeful, because establishing healthy, reproducing, and stable churches is the directive for us in the church age. A task that all believers have, and that missionaries endeavor to fulfill, is establishing local churches. That is what the apostle Paul did as a missionary. It is what missionaries today must do. While there may be differences in what those churches look like from one culture to the next, the fact that church planting is happening reveals the top priority it should have.

The local church is *how* believers today can serve the Lord. The New Testament seems never to have known a true believer who was not attached to a local church. Because the church is God's priority, it should be ours as well. In terms of missions, that means we seek to establish churches everywhere people can be found. Missionaries learn to adjust and flourish in cultures with which they are not famil-

iar. They eat food that (initially) can be strange. (I think my most memorable experience was the “joy” of eating cow hooves!)

In planting churches in various places around the world, another priority must be the training of a generation of locally called men and women into the ministry. I well remember the veteran missionary who told me, “Planting churches without training people to pastor them is an exercise in futility.” Training pastors to serve in local churches is not an effort to produce a professional class of clergy. Rather, it should be a determination to equip those called into the ministry to do purposefully and faithfully what God has called them to do: disciple believers through the messiness of life.

Who better to look to for an example of this than the Apostle Paul? Paul was mentored by Barnabas, and after his split with him in Acts 15, he quickly found his most famous disciple, Timothy, in Acts 16:1. In addition to these two individuals, Paul also mentioned many more: Silas, Titus, Sosthenes, Apollos, Tychicus, Epaphroditus, Epaphras, and many others. He mentioned some thirty-four people in Romans 16 alone! While perhaps we do not know as much about these dear saints as other ones, we do know they worked together with Paul, and all of these

individuals were close friends, associates, and dearly beloved fellow laborers for the gospel. Some he calls his “beloved in the Lord,” his “helpers,” his “brethren,” those “approved in Christ,” his “kinsmen,” those “in the Lord,” those who “laboured much in the Lord,” and those “chosen in the Lord.” No doubt he had a tremendous influence on them, and they on him. Discipleship flows both ways.

Perhaps one of my favorite names is Aristarchus, who, with Gaius, encountered stiff opposition in Acts 19 for the sake of the gospel. He is named again in the next chapter and in chapter 27. He is also mentioned as one of Paul’s fellow prisoners in Colossians 4:10 and called one of Paul’s fellow laborers in Philemon 24. It seems wherever you find Paul in Acts and the epistles, you encounter people he was working with for the gospel. What an example for us in missions at home and on the foreign field.

One of the greatest opportunities we have to influence future missions work is to disciple our children (and grandchildren) toward tenderness and openness to the mission field. I am rapidly passing the range of middle age. Yet God has seen fit to bless our family with two young children. My son is eleven, and my daughter is eight. God gave them to

my wife and I to disciple. Though I know of parents who have actively discouraged their children from pursuing missions, I would be thrilled to see God call one or both of them to the mission field. Having been on the mission field, I know it is not an easy life. However, it is rewarding to serve the Lord. My prayer is that one or both of my children will do so. We personally support several missionary families, we talk about and pray for our missionaries a good deal in our home, and we take our children to the mission field. We pray that fruit will abound through God’s leading.

The last thing that should never change is the desire and determination of local churches to support missions. Fewer missionaries are going to the field now. That is a concern. But for the ones that do go, may they never lack the support they need from God’s people in His local churches to fulfill the Great Commission.

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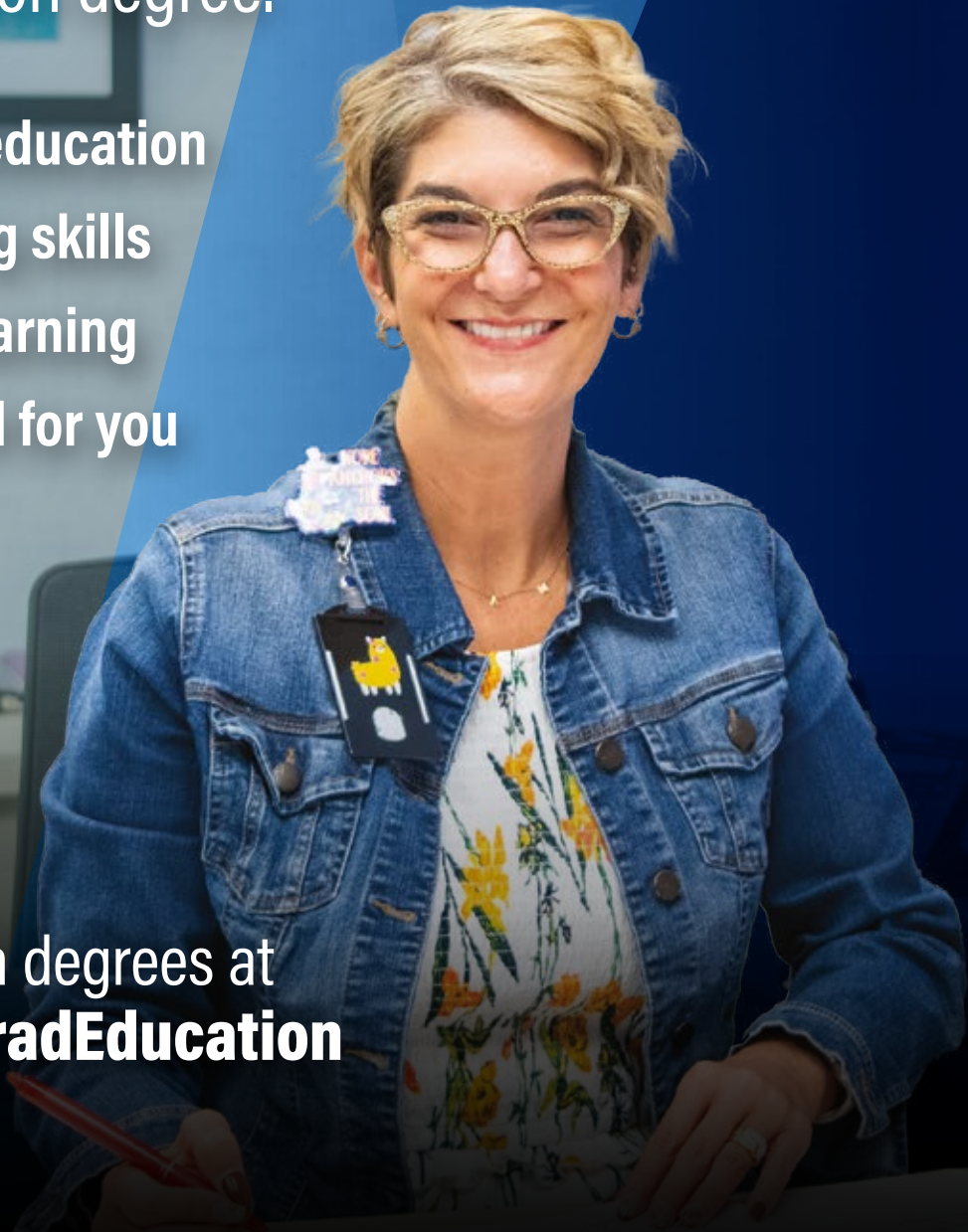
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People Groups: What Is the Target of the Great Commission?

Mission conferences evoke childhood memories of slide show presentations, snake skins on display tables, and a church auditorium lined with colorful national flags. Before Google made it easy, the flags prompted a congregational game of “Can you name the country?” The contest sometimes ended in embarrassment and laughter if no one could name the national flag of a visiting missionary, but it reminded everyone that missions is a global enterprise. From the outset, the church was commanded to go “to the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The annual display of national flags assured the congregation that it was fulfilling its part in reaching the nations in accordance with the Great Commission.

At the Lausanne Conference in 1974, two well-known missiologists, Ralph Winter and Donald McGavran, permanently reshaped the discussion on the role

of flags, nations, and mission strategy. They redefined the meaning of “all nations” in Matthew 28:19 and Matthew 24:14, shifting from the traditional view of “countries” or “nation-states” to “people groups” distinguished by distinct ethnicities. This change introduced concepts such as the 10/40 window, unreached people groups (UPGs), and the finishing-the-task strategy. The adjustment to the target of the Great Commission necessitated changes in the methods used to achieve it. The purpose of this article is to reflect on the significance of this modification and evaluate it biblically and strategically. It is important to understand the trends in modern missions so that we can appraise their value and respond appropriately.

The foundational goal of missions is to fulfill the Great Commission. The commission has a task: making disciples. It has a message: the gospel of Jesus Christ. It has a process: baptizing into local churches and teaching all that Jesus commanded.

It also has a territory: all nations. The church’s responsibility is to fulfill each of these aspects of the Great Commission as Jesus commanded, without change. In scope, success in missions is not measured by how many people come to Jesus, but by the ingathering of people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev. 5). The church leaves fertile fields to go where the gospel is not proclaimed, because we are commanded to “bring salvation to the end of the earth” (Acts 13:47, NASB). Ultimately, missions is propelled by our desire to “declare his glory among the heathen, his wonders among all people” (Ps. 96:3). The declaration of God’s glory, as seen in the gospel message and in the church’s redemption, is the song of eternity and the heartbeat of missions (Rev. 5:9–10). The question at hand is this: How does the church fulfill the Great Commission in reaching the nations?

In 1974, Winter and McGavran sought to answer that question by offering a

corrective to traditional missions policy. Up to that time, the church had focused on reaching every country in the world as a benchmark for Great Commission fulfillment. There was particular emphasis on reaching vast areas where the gospel was well received. Winter challenged this perspective:

I'm afraid that all our exultation about the fact that every country of the world has been penetrated has allowed many to suppose that every culture has by now been penetrated. This misunderstanding is a malady so widespread that it deserves a special name. Let us call it "people blindness," that is, blindness to the existence of separate peoples within countries—a blindness, I might add, which seems more prevalent in the U.S. and among U.S. missionaries than anywhere else.¹

Winter estimated that more than 16,000 hidden peoples, distinct in language and culture, lacked a gospel presence. He challenged the church to view "nations" not as bordered countries but as unique ethnicities, called "people groups." Winter argued,

By the phrase "all the nations," Jesus was not referring at all to countries or nation-states. The wording He chose (the Greek word *ethnē*) instead points to the ethnicities, the languages, and the extended families which constitute the peoples of the earth.²

Church leaders broadly embraced Winter's message, and missions strategies were transformed. Organizations sought to define what a "people group" is and to determine how many exist worldwide. This was followed by determining how many of those "people groups" had access to the gospel message or were "reached," versus those without a gospel presence and thus "unreached." Since each of these categories lacked specific biblical definitions, sociological definitions were developed. A people group is defined as a large community sharing a common self-identity, often defined by a shared language, ethnicity, culture, history, and customs, forming a natural unit where the gospel or ideas can spread without major cultural barriers. Joshua Project, the largest and most influential proponent of this movement, defined "reached" and "unreached" as percentages. A "reached people group" refers

to an ethnic or cultural group in which at least 2% of the population are evangelical Christians, indicating the presence of a self-sustaining movement. An "unreached people group" (UPG) is defined as having less than a 2% evangelical presence. When mapped, the majority of these people groups are located within the 10/40 window, the rectangular area of North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia between 10° and 40° north latitude. To date, the Joshua Project has identified 16,382 distinct people groups, of which 7,124 are unreached, representing 3.57 billion people.

Embracing this new understanding of "people groups" has reshaped mission strategy and expectations. For many mission organizations and churches, fulfilling the Great Commission now requires reaching unreached peoples, as they represent the full scope of Jesus' command. Further motivation comes from understanding the great heavenly worship scenes (Rev. 5, 7) as promises that at least one member of every people group will be present before the throne of God, because redemption is for "every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation [people group]." Other mission organizations and churches further stimulate efforts to reach every people group by treating this goal as the benchmark for Christ's second coming, citing Matthew

24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations [people groups]; and then shall the end come." Two mission leaders exclaim, "For as I look at what is happening in the Church and in the world, I feel the prophetic word welling up within me that the consummation of the age is at hand. It is within our grasp to actually complete the Great Commission and thereby pave the way for the return of the Lord." Similarly, another writes, "The completion of Mt. 24:14 is approaching: This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come!"³

An evaluation of the "people group" emphasis in missions must proceed along two lines: theological and strategic. The initial standard for assessment is biblical accuracy, since a proper understanding of Scripture serves as our authority. The most critical issue is whether the New Testament authors understood "all nations" (*ethnē*) to refer to distinct cultural and ethnolinguistic people groups. If they did, the primary target and thrust of modern missions would be to pursue Joshua Project's goal: to reach the unreached people groups one at a time, thereby fulfilling the Great Commission. Constructively, Winter and McGavran rightly rejected a purely geographical and

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nationalist understanding of nations. But their solution of employing a sociological definition does not correspond to biblical usage. Upon hearing Jesus's command to go to all nations (*ethnē*), the disciples would likely have grounded His instructions in the Abrahamic Covenant. Through Abraham's seed, "all families of the earth" would "be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Those families represent all the Gentile nations outside the promises for Israel. A Jewish perspective of nations (*ethnē*) was primarily religious. Paul's use of the term "nations" (*ethnē*) affirmed this in Galatians 3:8. God's covenant with Abraham—that all the *ethnē* would be blessed in him—was fulfilled when God justified the Gentiles through faith. Again, Paul notes that the Gentiles (*ethnē*) were initially outside the promises of God but are "now brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:11–13).

The demographic target of the Great Commission is not divided into thousands of distinct groups but is universal. This is the emphasis of Matthew 24:14. Jesus presents the period between the resurrection and the second coming as defined by universal mission. He is not telling the disciples about a sequence of events that will trigger a chain reaction leading to His return. Instead, Jesus reveals that the "end of the ages" is marked by both tribulation and universal mission. This does not mean that a representative from every people group will be converted before the end; rather, the universal proclamation will continue until the end. This is highlighted by John's vision of future worship in Revelation 5, which emphasizes the global scope of redemption. One author notes, "The universal scope of redemption receives mention with the piling up of expressions to show that the redeemed come not from any restricted group but from all over the world."⁴

Why does this matter? This may seem like a lengthy discussion that merely reiterates what is already known: the gospel is for all people. But the discussion offers a valuable warning and a challenging opportunity.

Leaders within the modern missions movement voice caution as they reflect on the impact of a people group focus:

With all the emphasis on people groups over the last 50 years, however, we've

made a course correction at the expense of our mission. Specifically, the focus hasn't been on making disciples of all nations (evangelizing, baptizing, teaching, establishing churches, and training leaders) but instead on finishing the task (i.e., getting the gospel to every last people group). Matthew 28 has been usurped by Matthew 24. And the results? Material and personnel resources have been redirected out of areas no longer deemed strategic. "Reached" nations have been abandoned, along with their seminaries. The hard and messy work of raising competent leaders has fallen to the wayside. Missions research now centers around identifying and categorizing groups of people. Missions reporting now emphasizes evangelism, and our methods focus on speed.⁵

This corrective is constructive. A seemingly small shift in the meaning of "nations" has sparked a movement that has significantly redefined mission strategy. For many, the Great Commission is fulfilled within a people group when 2% of its members are "reached" with the gospel. Once that is documented, it is necessary to proceed to the next people group. This mindset undermines the robustness of the Great Commission imperatives by limiting them to evangelism alone. This strategy can easily prioritize minimalism over maturation. It also questions the legitimacy of missionaries who serve as church planters among a "reached" single people group, seeking to reproduce multiple churches and develop indigenous leadership. We should be cautious about any approach that fails to prioritize biblical principles.

Helpfully, Winter and McGavran identified a critical need in missions. Throughout the twentieth century, mission work focused on regions with a growing gospel presence and an increasingly healthy indigenous church. As the geopolitical climate changed, little pioneering work was undertaken among the expanding Islamic and Hindu populations. The research prompted by the people-group emphasis is both instructive and staggering. Unreached people groups constitute more than 40% of the world's population. Most of them are Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus living in the 10/40 window, and 86% of them have never had a meaningful conversation or relationship with

a Christian. Islam recently surpassed two billion adherents and is on track to be the largest world religion by 2050. Yet, fewer than 5% of foreign missionaries work in these areas. This discrepancy is often referred to as the Great Imbalance in missions. It is a need that must be addressed in the coming decades.

The New Testament record clearly shows that the gospel was on the move. The church was never stagnant. It followed the Great Commission mandates from Jerusalem to Samaria to Antioch to Cyprus to Asia Minor to Rome and beyond, to the ends of their world. Paul's heartbeat was to go where the gospel was not named. As the church looks to the future, our heart's cry should be the same as Paul's. There is a desperate need for pioneer missionaries to go to the most challenging places and people in the world. Reaching these areas will require courage, creativity, and non-traditional methods. The fields are ripe for harvest. We must pray, prepare, and send workers to the world's neediest areas for the sake of His name. That is the joyful mission of the church.

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¹ Ralph D. Winter, "The New Macedonia: A Revolutionary New Era in Mission Begins," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (William Carey Library, 1999), 346.

² Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, "Advancing Strategies of Closure—Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 19.4 (2002): 16.

³ Cited in Matthew A. Bennett, "Finishing the Task? A Cautionary Analysis of Missionary Language," *Southeastern Theological Review* (2018): 33–34.

⁴ Leon Morris, *Revelation*, TNTC 20 (Eerdmans, 1983), 99.

⁵ Darren Carlson and Elliot Clark, "The 3 Words That Changed Missions Strategy—and Why We Might Be Wrong," Sept. 11, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/misleading-words-missions-strategy-unreached-people-groups/>.



Definitions Matter: Preserving the Mission of Missionaries

In March 1873, Charles Spurgeon's homily titled "A Sermon and a Reminiscence" was published in *The Sword and the Trowel*. In the introduction, Spurgeon warmly and transparently shares that he is struggling with a head cold. His words are an encouragement to all pastors who ascend to the pulpit in less-than-perfect health.

When one has a cold in the head it is a very effectual hindrance to thought; you may do what you will, and select what subject you may, but somehow or other the mind has lost its elasticity. I frankly confess that for this reason I selected this text for my discourse. I thought that perhaps if the head would not work, the heart might; and, that, if the thoughts came not, yet the emotions might.¹

He then expounded on the text "Unto you therefore which believe He is precious" (1 Pet. 2:7). This was the same passage used twenty-two years earlier for his first sermon at the age of sixteen at the chapel in Teversham. We do not have a record of what was said at his first attempt in this text, but even when physically limited, this sermon contains one of Spurgeon's best-known aphorisms. His concluding declaration is "Every Christian here is either a missionary or an impostor."²

"Every Christian here is either a missionary or an impostor." The quote is meant to be jarring. Spurgeon's goal was to convict silent Christians and compel them to broadcast the gospel. The statement confronts a Christian mindset that seeks the comforts of Christ without the cost of evangelism. Spurgeon's assertion birthed, or at least reinforced, a familiar contemporary maxim that

"every Christian is a missionary." This pronouncement is often repeated by well-meaning individuals with intentions similar to Spurgeon's. But is it true? Is every Christian a missionary? In the context of his sermon, was Spurgeon declaring that all members of the Metropolitan Tabernacle were missionaries? The contextual, biblical, and necessary answer to that question is "no." Not every Christian is a missionary. The purpose of this article is to explain why there is a need for precision in defining the role of a missionary within the mission of the church.

Some may take offense at the perspective that not all Christians are missionaries. It may be regarded as an assault on personal evangelism. There may be concerns that such a statement could foster a mindset that only vocational pastors and missionaries are to evangelize. From the outset, let's be clear that to deny that every Christian is a missionary does not diminish Scripture's imperative that every Christian is to be a gospel proclaimer, regardless of vocation or location. The Gospels and Acts abound with imperatives for disciples to make known the story of Jesus. Both contain numerous illustrations of individuals who believed the gospel and immediately went to tell others. The book of Acts employs twenty distinct Greek words to describe how the nascent church orally communicated the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Gospel sharing was the expected activity of all believers. Spurgeon's use of the term "missionary" echoes this urgency. He is not referring to the role of a missionary, but to the evangelistic heart that a missionary and all other believers should possess. Spurgeon's application of 1 Peter 2:7 was that if a Christian counted Jesus as precious, personal evangelism must follow. He argued:

Once more, he who really has this high estimate of Jesus will think much of him, and as the thoughts are sure to run over at the mouth, he will talk much of him. Do we so? If Jesus is precious to you, you will not be able to keep your good news to yourself; you will be whispering it into your child's ear; you will be telling it to your husband; you will be earnestly imparting it to your friend; without the charms of eloquence you will be more than eloquent; your heart will speak, and your eyes will flash as you talk of his sweet love. Every Christian here is either a missionary or an impostor. Recollect that. You either try to spread abroad the kingdom of Christ, or else you do not love him at all. It cannot be that there is a high appreciation of Jesus and a totally silent tongue about him.³

Every Christian should have a heart ablaze with evangelistic zeal, but not all Christians are to be called missionaries. In the New Testament, the term *missionary* does not occur, but a definition can be derived by examining the terms used to describe the role and its responsibilities. Our English word *mission* derives from the Latin verb *mittere*, which corresponds to the Greek verb *apostellein*, which occurs 137 times in the New Testament. It generally means "to send" and, more specifically, "to dispatch someone to achieve a particular objective." It denotes Jesus as "sent" by God, and the Twelve as "sent" by Jesus. The language of sending appears in Acts 13:1–5, where the Holy Spirit separated the first missionaries, and then, in partnership with the Spirit, the church "sent" them away. One author notes, "The New Testament affirms that the apostolic messenger (the

missionary) becomes the person authoritatively sent out by God and the church on a special mission with a special message, with particular focus on the Gentiles/nations.”⁴ Thus, a missionary is someone identified and sent out by local churches to proclaim the gospel and to gather, serve, and strengthen local churches across ethnic, linguistic, or geographic divides. The sending of a missionary implies a sending authority, a selection process, an intended destination, a prescribed message to be delivered, a defined task to be performed, a shared standard for success, and clear accountability. Each of these elements is biblically essential. For our purposes, we will highlight two.

First, a missionary’s authority is grounded in a local church. The New Testament does not portray missions as a primarily volunteer movement. An individual may express willingness to go, but only a church can affirm worthiness. The church selects, trains, commissions, supports, holds accountable, shares in the spiritual fruit, and labors in prayer for its missionaries. The local church affirms the intended destination and the expected result of the labor. Just as not all members who teach the Bible in a local church are designated as pastors, not all members of a local church should be entrusted with the role or title of missionary. A missionary is a spiritually mature individual whom a local church sends to do Great Commission work in global contexts.

Second, the missionary’s defined task is to fulfill the Great Commission as described at the end of each Gospel and demonstrated in Acts. Each of the five commission passages highlights its author’s theme and comple-

ments the others. Matthew 28:18–20 is the most comprehensive. It includes four verbs in verses 19–20—one main verb and three supporting participles. The main verb is the imperative “make disciples.” The making of disciples begins with the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. The other three participles, which carry imperative force, enlarge on what is entailed in the disciple-making process. Believers go, they baptize, and they teach. “Going” implies being sent. “Baptizing” implies repentance and forgiveness as well as inclusion in God’s family (Acts 2:38, 41). “Teaching” validates that Jesus desires more than evangelism. He wants obedient, mature disciples who establish churches that model bride-like purity, body-like unity, and salt-like influence. The work’s intended sphere is to make disciples of all nations. God envisions worshipers and followers present in every cultural-linguistic group worldwide. When viewed comprehensively, the Great Commission passages define the church’s mission and, by extension, the role of the missionary.

Stated fully, the church’s mission is to go into the world, make disciples, and declare the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, gathering newly baptized disciples into churches so they might worship the Lord, obey His commands, and further His mission to the glory of God the Father. A missionary is God’s agent to accomplish that task.

As the church seeks to fulfill the Great Commission, why is it necessary to clearly define the church’s mission and the role of a missionary? Why can’t we use the term missionary broadly, as Spurgeon did, to express a sincere desire to be a gospel witness?

First, we must protect the distinctiveness of the missionary role. If everyone is a missionary, the significance of selecting and sending is diluted. Paul describes his mission in terms of movement (sent to the Gentiles) and intentionality (to proclaim Jesus Christ). The result of this was the establishment of local churches. When we define a missionary and missionary work, the selection process, the intentionality of the message, geographical movements, and intended results are legitimate elements of such a definition. If we fail to provide precision to the church body regarding the use of terms, it is difficult for them to determine who is worthy of affirmation for missionary service and what that individual should be doing. If every Christian is a missionary, then the term loses its biblical weight, authority, and accountability.

Second, we must protect definitions to ensure mission clarity. Over the past fifty years, broad Christianity has expanded the meanings of the terms “mission” and “missionary.” The causes of this expansion are varied, but many argue that limiting the church’s mission to the Great Commission is overly restrictive. Some, like John Stott, declared, “We give the Great Commission too prominent a place in our Christian thinking.”⁵ Others, such as Christopher Wright, believe that everything a Christian does that aligns with God’s work constitutes joining God’s mission. He states, “If everything is mission . . . everything is mission.”⁶ By doing so, Christians can be *missional* by digging wells in Africa, providing food for the impoverished, protecting the vulnerable, and serving their neighbors. Some of the motivations for broadening



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ISSN 1526-8284

the term “missions” are commendable. It reflects a sincere desire for Christians to be zealous in doing admirable and God-honoring activities for all people, first in their neighborhoods and then throughout the world.

Yet by redefining the church's mission and the missionary's role, this missional movement marginalizes biblical priorities and responsibilities. It is appropriate for churches to encourage individual Christians to participate in worthy activities that align with their personal giftedness and abilities. James 1 makes it clear that, when given the opportunity, Christians are to provide for the hungry, clothe the poor, and care for widows and orphans. These activities are the biblical outworking of the Great Commandment to love your neighbor as yourself and of the creation mandate to provide for and protect God's creation. But they do not replace or redefine the church's mission. What makes the church's mission uniquely Christian is making new disciples.

Definitions matter. Many sincere individuals, past and present, have defined every Christian as a missionary and multiple activities as missions. Their intent may be virtuous. Much of what takes place under the banner of missions within larger Christendom falls

short of the biblical standard set by the Great Commission. The church and its members should continue doing good works, but we should protect our priorities and definitions. If an individual or an activity is defined as missions, it should reflect biblical mandates and model the apostles' work.

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¹ C. H. Spurgeon, “A Sermon and a Reminiscence,” *The Sword and the Trowel* (March, 1873), 120.

² Spurgeon, 127.

³ Spurgeon, 126–27.

⁴ William David Taylor, “Missionary” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Baker, 2000), 644.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: What the Church Should Be Doing Now!* (InterVarsity, 1975), 29.

⁶ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (InterVarsity, 2006), 26.



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SOUND WORDS

HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS—2 TIMOTHY 1:13

FIRST PARTAKER

“The husbandman that laboreth must be first partaker of the fruits” (2 Tim. 2:6)

When the Secret of God Was upon My Tabernacle

“Is the God I have, a God that is to me above all circumstances, nearer to me than any circumstance can be?”
—Andrew Murray¹

This is an article about daily, devotional communion with God. After all these years, how little qualified I still feel to attempt writing anything about this. But what I can say with great gratitude to God is that at least I have been desiring and pursuing it (though occasionally only feebly) ever since the autumn of 1971. That was my freshman year in college. For the first time, I began to try beginning every day with reading my Bible and praying. And because I was introduced almost simultaneously to the better sort of Christian biography, I became aware that through those practices something actually could be experienced with God that was warmly personal. But I don't recall realizing that it would be a literal *fellowship* with Him.

The instinctive, hidden hunger of every truly Christian heart is for this fellowship. But young or uninformed believers seldom recognize this primal yearning for what it is. Sadly, years of counseling have constrained me to the reluctant conclusion that, despite their having been rightly and insistently taught, many older Christians persist in trying to satisfy this gnawing ache with all sorts of earthly substitutes.

OLD TESTAMENT GLIMPSES

Sometime I would like to read entirely through the Bible with the one objective of finding all the various

ways in which fellowshiping with God is implied, if not explicitly expressed. What is the implication, for instance, of God's creating man in His own *image* and *likeness* (Gen. 1:26)? Does it not suggest potential, even divine intention, for companionship? Or what may we conclude about the subject from the fact that Adam and Eve *heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden*, and in their fallen shame and fear, *hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God* (Gen. 3:8)?

Many such Old Testament references state or at least suggest warm person-to-person relationships between God and men. Granted, some of these were for the greater purpose of God's revealing His mind to the select individuals who would inscripturate it in words for the rest of us. The most unique instance of this was when *the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend* (Exod. 33:11). But there are other glimpses that evoke hopeful images in my mind. Some that I find especially suggestive are those of individual men who walked with God (Enoch and Noah, Gen. 5:24; 6:9), met with Him even though they were common “nobodies” (everyone in Israel who sought the LORD, Exod. 33:7), were themselves after God's own heart, even in their youth (David, 1 Sam. 13:14), desired no one or nothing besides Him (Asaph, Ps. 73:25), or panted for Him amidst the estrangement of the exile (sons of Korah; Ps. 42:1–2).

An especially precious glimpse occurs in Job's anguished reminiscing of “months past”: “His candle shined upon my head . . . the secret of God was upon my tabernacle” (29:3a, 4b). The Hebrew word translated *secret* is rendered *friendship* (NASB95; ESV), and even *intimate friendship* (NET). This connotation of personal intimacy is confirmed by other passages:

- “. . . a man my equal, my companion and my familiar friend; we who had sweet **fellowship** together . . .” (Ps. 55:13–14a, NASB95)

INSIDE

Bring . . . the Books (Key books for the pastor's study) V
Straight Cuts (An exegetical study) VI
Windows (Themed sermon illustrations) VII

- “He [God] is **intimate** with the upright.” (Prov. 3:32b, NASB95)
- “The **friendship** of the LORD is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant.” (Ps. 25:14, ESV)

I can scarcely see those words without crying out inside, *Yes, LORD! Me too! Shine on my head! Please, LORD, share your friendship with me!* And I can scarcely doubt but that God intends that every one of us should react similarly. Why else are such things told to us—dangled out in front of us, as it were—if not to enflame our passions and our hopes?

They have the same effect upon us that the sight of a particular old man did to Andrew Bonar and some of his friends during their student days. On their way to classes, they would sometimes meet an old man going to work and walking along holding his hat a little way off his head. No one could help but wonder why. So, one day one of them was so bold as to ask. At first the old man seemed reluctant to discuss it. But he finally said, *Well, if you will know, I will tell you. As I walk along the street I have sometimes such fellowship with the Lord Jesus, that I feel as if He were close beside me, and I lift my hat in token of reverence.*

Dare any of us laugh? Except, perhaps, in sheer delight? How can any warm heart not covet the same sense of companionship with God?

THE MOST REVEALING NEW TESTAMENT EXPRESSION

If we advance our search to New Testament references, we discover that we who are in Christ do, in fact, have the possibility of such an intimate communion (in addition to spiritual union) with God. I say “possibility” because there are conditions to it. But before considering any them, we need to turn our attention to the most revealing word for what we’re considering. It is, of course, the word *fellowship* (κοινωνία, *koinonia*).

Remarkably, the Septuagint never uses either *koinonia* or its verb form for a relationship between God and an individual. But in the New Testament there are six times that the noun is used for it. I want to quote all of these, bolding the specific Person(s) of the Godhead each verse singles out.

- “Ye were called unto the fellowship of **his Son Jesus Christ** our Lord.” (1 Cor. 1:9)
- “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of **the Holy Ghost**, be with you all. Amen.” (2 Cor. 13:14)
- “If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of **the Spirit** . . .” (Phil. 2:1)
- “Truly our fellowship is with **the Father**, and with **his Son Jesus Christ**.” (1 John 1:3)

- “**God** is light. . . . If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie.” (1 John 1:5–6)
- “But if we walk in the light, as **he** is in the light, we have fellowship one with another.” (1 John 1:7)

Those of us who have been reading the Bible ever since childhood may never have been arrested by how startling these statements actually are. When David Martyn Lloyd-Jones reached the words, *truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ*, in his series through 1 John, he testified,

I am ready to admit that I approach a statement like this with fear and trembling. It is one of those statements concerning which a man feels that the injunction given to Moses of old at the burning bush is highly appropriate: “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet; for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). Here we are given, without any hesitation, a description, the summum bonum, of the Christian life; here, indeed, is the whole object, the ultimate, the goal of all Christian experience and all Christian endeavour.²

That assessment may seem to some to be a considerable overstatement. But weighty considerations are in its favor, ones that go to the very heart of experiencing both the overwhelming joy and the warm security of *daily devotional communion with God*.

First is the issue of the kind of experience that *koinonia* is referring to. Writers and speakers often point out that it is used for having things (such as material goods) *in common* with other people—as in Acts 4:32, where the adjective κοινός (*koinos*) is used. But if that’s all that we understand fellowship between ourselves and God to be, our conception will fall short. Fellowship between persons isn’t merely sharing a *thing* in common, like people jointly owning and using a timeshare cabin; or two Christians talking about the same sermon or sharing a hug. And fellowship with God isn’t merely our sharing His work, His purposes, or even His thoughts together with Him.

Fellowship, not of things but between persons, occurs when they, in some way, are sharing *one another*. John Donne was attempting to put this differentiation into words when he wrote, *More than kisses, letters mingle souls*. Kisses are close, even intimate, physical sharing. Two people share them and participate in them *in common*. But there’s a sharing (a fellowship, if you will) that is far, far more intimate: the mingling of souls. That’s the connotation of biblical fellowship between persons—mingled souls.

And yet, helpful as that illustration is, it still falls short. If left to stand alone, it would contribute to a conception stunted and wooden. I put it that way because there are fine, entirely orthodox Christians whose conception of fellowship with God is largely non-experiential and fixedly objective. It is, in their understanding,

almost entirely a matter of words. We read God's words in the Bible and He listens to our words in prayer. That's our fellowship. I read your letter, and you read mine, and that's our mingling of souls.

God's inspired words and our responsive words are, undeniably, vital to informed, growing, and satisfying fellowship with Him. But they are the *vehicle* to it, not the *fullness* of the thing itself. We can be confident of this clarification for several reasons, two of which can be only briefly mentioned at this point.

One reason is that there is such a thing as the phenomenon of being divinely illumined when we read God's words (Ps. 119:18; Eph. 1:17–18). This is something supernatural that we experience subjectively.

A second reason is that there is another supernatural, subjective experience that is described as being *strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith* (Eph. 1:17–18). This is written, not to unbelievers, but to Christians who already have been indwelt by both the Holy Spirit (*if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his*, Rom. 8:9) and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (*I in them*, John 17:23). Yet Paul speaks of an additional *dwelling* of Christ in our hearts *by faith*. He goes on to say that it is necessary to the ultimate experience of knowing *the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge*, in order that we might be *filled with all the fulness of God* (Eph. 3:16–19).

Please don't get snagged right now over attempting to understand fully what these passages mean. All that I'm intending to establish is that they speak of our having literal experiences of relationship to God that are beyond merely reading His words and then praying our own in return. And though we haven't yet explored their relationship to this experience of fellowshiping with Him, it ought to be fairly obvious that they evidently are identifiable elements in it.

So, to return to the main point, here are at least these two reasons (divine illumination and the dwelling of Christ in our hearts by faith) for confidently embracing the truth that the full experience of a fellowship with God is not merely in letter (words), but in literal, personal, occasional experiences. I'm using that last qualifier, *occasional*, in order to indicate that when the Bible describes the kind of fellowship that this article is about, it isn't referring to a fixed, unvarying position that we have in God's presence. Older writers (John Owen, for instance) distinguished carefully between our unalterable *state* of communion (essentially our union with Christ) and any *actual* communion that we might have with God. The first is non-experiential. Like our justification, it is an objective, unalterable fact, even though we cannot perceive it by way of our feelings or senses. But the latter (*actual*) is experiential and, to various degrees, perceivable. For this reason it is accurate to classify it, as we do Spirit-filling, as *occasional* (though not *rare*).

What then is the experience of really fellowshiping with God? If it is more than sharing *things* with Him (even divine things), and even more than sharing *words* with Him, what is it? For this, we really must start with the Lord Himself. What did He say about it? There are two primary passages in which He described it. Both times He was promising it. I'll bold what He said it was.

- “He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and **will manifest myself to him**. . . . If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will **come unto him, and make our abode with him**.” (John 14:21a, 23b)
- “**I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me**.” (Rev. 3:20)

Note that this latter promise is said, not to the unsaved, but to Christians, of whom He said, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten” (v. 19).

What can be meant by these words? The first promise, *will manifest myself to him*, was evidently no clearer to the Twelve than it is to us upon our first encountering it, for Judas (not Iscariot) asked, *Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself unto us, and not unto the world?* And what was the answer? *My Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him*. But note! This would be the experience of only those who love Him, and keep His words.

It cannot be without purpose that sixty years or so later, He dealt with a church of people who were failing in these very conditions. So He portrayed Himself to them (and to us!) as standing outside their door, rebuking them, and knocking for admittance. Then, and only then, would He again do as He had promised in the Upper Room: *come in to him . . . sup with him . . . he with me*.

How can we not feel that there is some great mystery here, something not entirely explicable by us? Nor perhaps, given our finite understanding, even by Him. But J. C. Ryle wrote that as much as Christ did say, He said to be

another encouragement to the man who strives to keep Christ's commandments. Christ will specially love that man, and will give him special manifestations of His grace and favor, invisibly and spiritually. He shall feel and know in his own heart comforts and joys that wicked men and inconsistent professors know nothing of. That the “manifesting” of Himself here spoken of is a purely unseen and spiritual thing, is self-evident. It is one of those things which can only be known by experience and is only known by holy and consistent Christians.

We should carefully observe here, that Christ does more for the comfort of some of His people than He does for others. Those who follow Christ most closely and obediently will always follow Him most comfortably, and feel most of His inward presence.³

I want to continue with this subject in a further column or two, but let me at least share the similar convictions of other thoroughly orthodox Christian leaders.

In one of John Flavel's sermons in a series titled *England's Duty*, he attempted to assure his listeners of the reality of this subjective fellowship with God.

*The thing is real, sure, and sensible: if there be truth in any thing in the world, there is truth in this, that there are real intercourses betwixt the visible and invisible world; betwixt Christ and the souls of believers, which we here call communion. . . . We tell you no more than we have felt.*⁴

Note Flavel's descriptions: *real, sure, and sensible*. By *sensible*, he means that it is something of which we're aware at the time, something noticeable, identifiable, and experienced knowingly—something that he says that he himself has *felt*.

If this sounds to us like mysticism, we should recall that Flavel is understanding these experiences to be anchored by the Word. They can go no further than what the Bible itself testifies to. They cannot depart from the Bible, add to the Bible, or even supplement it. But nevertheless, just like receiving wisdom from God upon request, they are individual and experiential.

Here's a similar testimony, one of many such in David Brainerd's journal.

*Lord's Day, August 15 [1742]. Felt much comfort and devotedness to God this day. At night it was refreshing to get alone with God and "pour out my soul." Oh, who can conceive of the sweetness of communion with the blessed God, but those that have experience of it! Glory to God forever, that I may taste heaven below.*⁵

Notice that Brainerd, like Flavel, testifies to a communion, not merely positional, but experiential. And he says that only those who have had this experience can conceive of its delight. Please do understand that neither of these men is saying that this thing is actually the case, simply because they *feel* that it is. Remember that it was the Scripture which informed them that this communion is an actual event. Having been informed by God's Word objectively, they sought to know subjectively what He promised.

Another example emerges from one of Hudson Taylor's daily prayers. His biographer tells us,

A sheet of notepaper bearing a few lines in Mr. Taylor's writing reveals, perhaps, more than anything else the secret of his inward life at this time. Found between the pages of his diary, it brightens the record with unexpected radiance. From the brief entries in the book itself one learns little; but that well-worn paper, used evidently as a marker and moved on from day to day, what does it not reveal?

*Lord Jesus, make Thyself to me
A living, bright Reality:
More present to faith's vision keen*

*Than any outward object seen;
More dear, more intimately nigh
Than e'en the sweetest earthly tie.*

*Was it not the answer to this daily prayer that made endurance possible? "Strengthened by His Spirit with power penetrating to your inmost being that Christ may make His home in your hearts through faith"—is it not the very experience for times of trouble?*⁶

I'll close with one further trusted voice testifying to this experience. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in a sermon he preached in 1956 and subsequently published in *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ*, expounded Paul's prayer for believers, *that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith* (Eph. 3:17).

*And when Christ manifests Himself to us it is not merely a figure of speech, it is real, it is actual. It is so definite that there is no doubt at all about it. . . . It is not a question of visions or of trances, but of a spiritual knowing of Christ. The Holy Spirit brings Him to us, and through the Spirit He manifests Himself so that He becomes real and living and true to us. . . . This, in turn, leads to a conscious sense of fellowship with the Lord and an enjoyment of Him. Do we know what it is to enjoy a conscious fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ? . . . This is what the Apostle desires for these Ephesians.*⁷

Lloyd-Jones's admonition later in this volume is a fitting conclusion for now.

*The first thing we have to do is to realize the presence of the Person, to seek the Lord Himself—not His blessings, not thoughts or teachings concerning Him. These things are excellent and we must continue to seek them; but we must not stop at them. We must go through them and use them to seek the blessed Person Himself.*⁸

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¹ Andrew Murray, *The Master's Indwelling* (Zondervan, 1953), 39.

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Fellowship with God* (Crossway, 1993), 77.

³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. John*, vol. 3 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1878), 83.

⁴ John Flavel, *Works* (London, 1820), 4:236.

⁵ *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, 7:176.

⁶ *Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission: The Growth of a Work of God*, 463.

⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ: An Exposition of Ephesians 3* (Baker, 1998), 148–49.

⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ*, 262.

More Books for a Deserted Island

I'm not right now stranded on a desert island, but nearly the next thing to it. I'm sitting in an airport terminal, awaiting a late evening flight, and I feel almost as desolate as I imagine myself being were I Robinson Crusoe.

If an uninhabited island were to be my actual semi-permanent home, what five books (in addition to the Bible, a hymn book, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*) would I most covet for company? To answer, I've decided to begin not by choosing titles, but categories.

Including **Bible texts** as the first of these categories is a non-negotiable for me. Even though my island comes pre-stocked with an English Bible I can't imagine any consideration successfully arguing me out of my insistence on having the full text of both Testaments in their original languages. But I'd want to have them in an interlinear format. *The Interlinear Bible: Hebrew-Greek-English* (Hendrickson, 2005) would probably be my preference. Its pages include not only the Hebrew or Greek text accompanied by an English translation (by Jay P. Green), but also the *Strong's Concordance* numbers for each word. I'll be able to use those in tandem with my next choice.

My second category, **Bible concordances**, is not quite another non-negotiable, but nearly so. Opting for it means that I'll have to omit the category of lexicons, and I'd dearly love to be able to have at the very least my *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*. But I've reconciled myself to its omission, in that by choosing to bring a *Strong's Concordance*, with its Hebrew and Greek dictionaries, I'll be able to access all the various ways each Hebrew or Greek word has been understood by English translators. And after all, as the old quip goes, *Strong's is for the strong*.

For a choice in my third category, **Bible dictionaries**, I'm going to have to go out on a limb and trust entirely to recent reviews, rather than to my own experience. I'd want the most up-to-date, exhaustive tool available, and I'd prefer one with lots of color charts and pictures. Zondervan has published the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary: The Most Accurate and Comprehensive One-Volume Bible Dictionary Available* (2011). I purchased this as a Kindle book several years ago, in the event that I'd be overseas or in a meeting somewhere without any other quick access to basic Bible facts. That would be my exact situation on the island. Conservative reviewers caution about the presuppositions or positions reflected in at least a few of this dictionary's articles. But it does contain over 7,000 entries, updated by archaeological findings, and also has 75 full-color maps and over 500 full-color photographs, charts, and illustrations. I like the thought of a little bit of color on my bleak island.

Category four, **systematic theologies**, brings me to what I think is a fairly easy decision. But just to be sure, I got up and went over to the shelves to look through all systematics that I own. (I finally made it home from my late-evening flight, by the way.) Since whatever I take to the island will have to be a one-volume edition, the possibilities narrow down pretty quickly. The one-volume systematic that I often turn to first is Robert Duncan Culver's *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*. I don't have space left to explain why, but if you don't own that work you might want to take a look at it. There's another possibility—one for which I have high expectations, but which I've not yet used enough to know whether it would be my first choice. It's *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* by John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue. Without giving anything like a careful reading to its sections on pneumatology and eschatology, I nevertheless feel confident that it would be more in keeping with my own positions in those areas than my first choice. But because I haven't really familiarized myself with it over a period of time, I'm going to stick with what has been my first recommendation of a one-volume systematic when someone asks: Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.

My last category is **devotional works**. If allowed six categories, I'd include commentaries. In that case, my choice for a devotional work would be a volume of Spurgeon's *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, and my commentary selection would be what I'm going to talk about now.

It's a two-categories-in-one work that is both warmly devotional and also a commentary on the entire Bible. The font is necessarily small, but in my view, there's no rival even close to *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible, 1-Volume Edition: Complete and Unabridged*. Happily, my choice is confirmed by J. I. Packer's testimony: "Henry is astonishingly good as a scholarly commentator. People believe he was a Puritan devotional author and not a scholar. The proper response to that is 'balderdash.' Henry is outstanding and is very undervalued."

So, there are my five selections for the island. I'll miss my whole library terribly! But if occasionally I can remember it, Joseph Hall's wise perspective will compensate:

I care not so much for multitude as for choice. Books and friends, I will not have many; I would rather seriously converse with a few than wander among many.

Mark Minnick pastors Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina. His sermons are available at mountcalvarybaptist.org/sermons and on your favorite podcast app: search for "Mount Calvary Baptist Church" and subscribe.

The Invigorating View of the Invisible (2 Cor. 4:1, 16–18)

The word *egkakeō*, “to lose heart” (2 Cor. 4:1, 18) introduces us to the important topic of 2 Corinthians 4. Paul is talking about ministerial motivation. Words related to “ministry” (*diakonia*, *diakonos*, etc.), occur ten times in 2 Cor 2:14–6:10. He is addressing the danger of “fainting” or “losing heart” in the ministry. Galatians 6:9 uses the same verb (*egkakeō*) to warn us that the cost of losing heart results in forfeiting the hard-earned harvest.

Skopountōn (v. 18; cf. English “scope”) means “to fix one’s gaze upon” or “to concentrate one’s attention upon.” The present active participle speaks of continual action. When Paul speaks of “looking,” he is not asking for a quick glance, but is calling for a prolonged observation. Persistent focus enabled Paul to keep on course with his calling. This is the source of endurance that allows us to “finish our course with joy.” It is the only way to run the race that is set before us.

Isaiah’s despair at King Uzziah’s death ended when he “saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.” It was important that Isaiah look beyond the empty throne of Israel to the unseen Throne that is forever occupied.

Paul begins with instruction to look away from temporal things (v. 18a). We are not to look at things “that are seen.” To clarify, Paul is not stating that encouragement derived from temporal things is bad. The apostle himself was refreshed from simple everyday enjoyments such as meetings with friends or receiving material provision. The word for “temporal” is *proskairos*. *Kairos* speaks of time in the sense of “season.” We should appreciate these God-given “seasons of refreshing.” However, while the daily mercies from the Lord provide us with a temporary boost of encouragement, the minister will soon learn he must have much more than that to keep himself from losing heart.

While the ministry comes with many blessings, it is not without trial and affliction. Regarding the decay of the outer man, Paul uses the Greek words *all’ ei* (v. 16), which refers to a condition known to be true. A main source of affliction comes from our perishing outer man. Here is the reminder that we cannot count on our bodies to motivate us. In our youth we could harness the physical energy necessary to propel us in ministry. However, as we age we lack the youthful perspective to motivate us.

Neither can we allow unending opposition, unceasing slander, or unresolved misunderstandings to stop us. We must keep going. There are three passages where Paul lists trials and difficulties he has experienced. Studying the Greek words in these lists provide many colorful pictures to illustrate his “afflictions.” In 4:8–9 we read of the apostle being perplexed, persecuted, troubled, and cast down. In 6:4–5 he records hardships, distresses, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, dishonor, evil report, accusation of deceit, sorrows, poverty, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger. The afflictions are rounded out in 11:24–26 with the mention of imprisonments, five beatings of thirty-nine lashes, three beatings with rods, and a list of the dangers he faced. Despite all of this there is no hint of bitterness or victimization. The opposition that Paul faced raises this question: “What kept Paul going?”

Paul explains his method of maintaining a sense of newness and freshness in a difficult ministry. Renewal of the inner man begins by focusing on things which are not seen. While it may sound strange “to look at something you cannot see,” we find that the Bible is full of examples of people focusing on the unseen. Hebrews 11 records how the heroes of faith were able to look at “things not seen” (v. 1). Noah, being warned of God of “things not seen as yet,” prepared an ark (v. 7). Moses forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king, for he endured, as “seeing Him who is invisible” (v. 27). Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets all died in faith, not having received the promises, but “having seen them afar off” (v. 13).

Isaiah’s despair at King Uzziah’s death ended when he “saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.” It was important that Isaiah look beyond the empty throne of Israel to the unseen Throne that is forever occupied. Elisha prayed that the eyes of his terrified servant would be opened, “and he saw . . . the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kgs. 6:17). Job found relief when he could finally say, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee” (Job 42:5). These are just a few examples of those who found relief from despair and received the fortitude to move forward by purposely looking at what they could not see.

People will put forth great effort to get a good view. They will climb numerous stairs, hike long trails, or even scale mountains. The view of the unseen is likewise demanding. But you can be assured that when the unseen comes into focus your strength will be renewed, you will run and not be weary, and you will walk and not faint.

Randy Fox pastors Faith Baptist Church in Orange, California.

“No Kings”? A Christian Perspective on Government “Rulers”

Shouts of “No kings!” have been in the news recently as activists clamor against perceived government overreach, even when federal law is being enforced. Christians reject real tyranny and authoritarianism since it contradicts God’s instructions on how rulers should exercise authority (2 Sam. 23:3; Prov. 16:12; Rom. 13:3–4; 1 Pet. 2:14). However, do God’s people really understand what the Scriptures teach about kings and the rulers who govern nations? Many who cry “No kings!” reject biblical truth regarding God-ordained civil authority, the kingship of Jesus Christ, and the authority the Messiah has delegated to believers. Whether participants know it or not, the movement is a frontal assault on these doctrines.

Every pastor should consider how his flock has internalized the “no kings” marches. The sad reality is that many American Christians are sympathetic to their “cause.” This article examines biblical teaching about kings so the reader’s perspective may come to agree with that of the King of kings.

GOD ORDAINED GOVERNMENT AUTHORITY

We must begin with the fact the Scriptures teach that God ordained governmental authority, including kings. Take time to meditate on Proverbs 8:15–16, Romans 13:1–2, and 1 Peter 2:13–15. These passages explain that God determines who will lead nations and how the governed should respond. Herbert Lockyer summarized God-ordained kings this way:

All monarchs, whether godly or ungodly, owe their exaltation to God who ‘putteth down one, and setteth up another’ . . . (Psalm 75:7). Kings themselves have been apt to forget that God is able ‘to do whatsoever his hand and his counsels determined before to be done’ (Acts 4:28). It is by Him that ‘kings reign’ (Proverbs 8:15) and it is He who is able to smite ‘great kings’ (Psalm 136:17–18).¹

Even “the king’s heart” and what he determines are “in the hand of the LORD” (Prov. 21:1).

Man’s sinful nature directly resists divine authority as well as the authority He has delegated to government. The problem is compounded by the fact that kings also possess selfish, fallen natures. The English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson expressed the sentiments of many royal subjects this way: “By blood a king, at heart a clown.”² Scripture is replete with examples of good and bad kings. With the exception of King Jesus, every king in the Bible failed in some way. Yet, God never promotes subversion. His will is submission to government unless it orders us to disobey what He has commanded us (Acts 5:29).

Someone may be asking, “Didn’t the American Revolution throw off the authority of human monarchy, particularly the British Crown?” It is important to remember that the colonies were not fomenting an anti-authority movement. Many of our founding fathers held Christian convictions, and their resistance to the king opposed his tyranny, not the principle of divinely appointed government. Their whole supposition was “law over king” and not vice versa.

Our nation’s founding and Constitution were based on the biblical concepts of delegated authority, checks and balances, and popular consent. Biblically, God was Israel’s King (1 Sam. 8:7; Hos. 13:10), yet He delegated authority to Moses, Joshua, the judges, and then anointed monarchs. A biblical republic recognizes the ultimate sovereignty of God while rejecting the idolatry of human power. The Lord Christ was not displaced by the Constitution; rather, the Constitution and our other founding documents were written deliberately with accountability to God.

THE KINGSHIP OF JESUS CHRIST

Those who shout, “No kings,” not only resist God-prescribed authority, but they also deny the kingship of the Lord Jesus. Listen to Psalm 2:1: “Why do the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing?” The word *heathen* is a common biblical reference to Gentiles. *Rage* means a tumultuous, riotous assembly driven by blind hatred. The word *people* in verse 1 is plural. The peoples or people groups, by means of their empty reasoning, are driven by hate and rage. Who is inciting them to this hateful rage? Verse 2 says it is the governmental authority over these nations. “The kings of the earth set themselves [take their stand in opposition to], and the rulers take counsel together.” This is supercharged deliberate scheming, motivated by absolute hate, against a perceived opponent.

This begs a question. What has been done to these nations to bring about such hatred and turn them into a riotous mob? Psalm 2:3 answers: “Let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us.” *Bands* are fetters (iron restraints) and *cords* the ropes that bind captives and prisoners. If this were speaking of a tyrant oppressor, we could sympathize with these Gentile nations. But who are the rulers of earth against? Look back at verse 2. They rage “against the LORD, and against his anointed.” They despise Jehovah God and His Messiah.

Psalm 2 does not tell us who its human author was but Acts 4 does. Acts 4 records the incident where Peter and John heal a lame man on their way up to the temple. When a crowd gathered to see this man jumping and praising the Lord, Peter began to

preach to the people. His preaching was cut short when he was arrested and brought before the high priest and the council. After being threatened twice not to preach in Jesus' name, Acts 4:23–29 records the following.

And being let go, they went to their own company, and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said unto them. And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: Who by the mouth of *thy servant David* hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel [not Herod or Pilate or the Gentiles or the Jews, but what God] determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word.

What had Jehovah and His anointed Messiah done to cause the heathen to hate them and to turn into a murderous mob? The answer is found in Acts 4:12. “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Psalm 2:3 tells us that the people, spurred on by wicked government, are ultimately saying, “We don’t want the restraint of having to believe that salvation is only through God and His Messiah. We don’t want the fetters of His decree that says we are lost and need a Savior.” Psalm 2 was fulfilled in the parable of the nobleman in Luke 19:14. He went into a far country to receive his kingdom. While he is away, the people say: “We will not have this man to reign over us.” On the day Jesus was crucified, all three synoptic Gospels record Pilate asking Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus responds: “Thou sayest it.” How do the Jewish leaders respond? They say, “We have no king but Caesar” in total denial of King David’s lineage through which King Messiah would come.

Are those who shout “No kings” saying “No kings at all”? If so, they are revolting against God’s master plan of redemption, which told Israel they would have a king (David), and that through him a divine King—the Messiah—would come to bear away the sins of the whole world (John 1:29). Ultimately, the nations of earth at Armageddon will turn to fight Israel’s returning King. Revelation 17:14 declares, “These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful” “And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS” (Rev. 19:16). After He conquers, King Jesus will reign over the nations for a thousand years. The government will be on His shoulders, and He will be called “Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” At the Great White Throne Judgment, “every tongue should

confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11).

BELIEVERS AS KINGS AND PRIESTS

Lastly, the sentiment that there should be “no kings” denies who the Christian is in Christ. Christians should understand the theological reality that they are royalty (kings). The following passages make this very clear:

- “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Pet. 2:9)
- “And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” (Rev. 1:6)
- “And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.” (Rev. 5:10)

The point of our delegated kingship is that we share Christ’s authority *now* (Acts 1:8) and during His millennial reign (Rev. 5:10). This is not metaphorical. The church has real spiritual authority from King Jesus to go to the uttermost ends of the earth to share His gospel and be His light. Each Christian is the King’s “active co-regent” declaring salvation and coming judgment as we intercede for lost humanity.

It is true irony that Christians who support a “no kings” movement are, in fact, kings themselves. They have been given authority from the King of kings to represent His kingdom on earth to those who are still “aliens . . . and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). Unless the children of the kingdom tell a lost world they must be born again, unbelievers “cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Much more could be said about the topic of kings in the Bible. However, to protest that there should be “no kings” is to express theological error with serious repercussions. God has ordained that there be civil authority, including kings, and those who resist lawful authority resist Him. Jesus reigns at this very moment on Heaven’s throne. “The Bible is clear: Jesus is King, and those who follow Him are kings and priests with Him. American Christians must not conflate opposition to earthly monarchy with opposition to Christ’s divine reign. To deny His kingship is to ally with the nations who rage against the Lord.”³

Mike Ascher pastors Good News Baptist Church in Chesapeake, Virginia, and is an FBFI-endorsed police chaplain.

¹ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Kings and Queens of the Bible: The Life and Times of Biblical Royalty* (Zondervan, 1961), 9.

² Lockyer, 9.

³ Nathaniel Bright, “Jesus is King and So Are We: A Biblical Refutation of the ‘No Kings’ Protest,” June 14, 2025, <https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2025/06/14/white-paper-jesus-is-king-and-so-are-we-a-biblical-refutation-of-the-no-kings-protest/>.

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Coordinator: Caleb Phelps

October 24, 2026

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Dover, NH 03820

Coordinator: Taigen Joos

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Regional Reports

ROCKY MOUNTAIN FBFI REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Dan Unruh, Regional Coordinator

The ice storm that hit the South brought some uncertainty about whether our guest speaker, Dr. Mark Minnick, would be able to get to the airport and out of Greenville, South Carolina, to fly to Colorado. God, however, graciously allowed him to arrive safely and those who attended the Rocky Mountain regional meeting of the FBFI were richly blessed by his ministry. The conference was held on Tuesday, January 27, and our host church, Westside Baptist of Greeley, happily welcomed and served about fifty men, women, and children from Colorado, Wyoming, and western Nebraska.

Dr. Minnick presented three challenging sessions on prayer and “The Man of God’s Ministry of Intercession”—beginning with “Hard to Pray,” continuing with “Dealing with the Difficulties,” and concluding with “With Christ in the Ministry of Intercession.” The ladies had a breakout session, led by Juanita Unruh, entitled “The Art of Pondering,” which focused on deliberately allowing God’s

Word to shape their hearts, homes, and walk with Him.

Throughout the half-day, the sessions were punctuated with singing, fellowship, and visits with exhibitors. The conference concluded with a catered lunch from a favorite local BBQ restaurant, providing a relaxed setting for further fellowship, encouragement, and the forming of new relationships. Our next fellowship will be February 2, 2027.



SOUTH FBFI REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Malinda Duvall

Could there be any better venue for a regional fellowship than the beautiful Wilds of North Carolina camp? For the 79 of us who attended this year’s South Regional fellowship there on March 9-12, it was a much-needed retreat, and we enjoyed every minute whether we were eating together in the dining hall, listening to edifying preaching, praying together in small groups, or heading into nearby Brevard for our Wednesday afternoon excursion.

Tony Facenda (Regional Coordinator) and his wife, Karen, did an outstanding job (as usual) covering all the details: preparing gift bags for the ladies, providing tons of candy, and making sure that these days together were for the whole family. Our general sessions were on topic with our theme, “Courage in Cultural Conflict,” and they included messages by Bud Steadman, Mike Manor, and Bruce McAllister. Even though Tony Facenda had to fill in at the last minute because one of our speakers got sick, his message, “Staying Persistent Under Pressure,” ministered to many

hearts. Micah Alexander’s workshop, “Protecting Our Kids Online,” was much needed in today’s world. Karen Facenda and Jessica Alexander gave workshops for the ladies (“Women of Grace in a World of Noise” and “The Pressures of Teen Girls”).

This time together strengthened our friendships and refreshed us spiritually.

We’re already looking forward to next year’s meeting at Good News Baptist Church in Chesapeake, Virginia, on March 15-17, 2027, hosted by Pastor Mike Ascher and the church family. The theme is “Peace: Breaking the Cycle of Conflict.” Recordings of this year’s fellowship are available at <https://www.fbfisouth.org/2026-conference-courage-in-cultural-conflict/>.

NORTHWEST FBFI REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Greg Kaminski, Regional Coordinator

We had an amazing time at Grace Baptist Church in Puyallup, Washington, March 16-17. Pastor Andy Oliver and his wonderful folks outdid themselves in the meals and hospitality they provided for all of us.

The messages were so refreshing! Dr. David Oliver preached on the theme

“When My Heart Is Overwhelmed.” Preachers and their wives came from all over the Northwest, including Canada. The warm fellowship and refreshing atmosphere were such a blessing. The women were able to have their own special time together, and we saw heartwarming, lasting friendships develop. Truly, the importance of regional fellowships exemplified itself at Grace Baptist Church. I believe all of us went away encouraged and looking forward to next year.





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Relieving the Pressure: A Romans 16 Perspective on Caring for Missionary Women

Looking back, before going to the mission field, I saw myself as strong and steady. What I wasn't prepared for was the emotional weight of missionary life. This came as a shock to me and is a shared reality for many missionary women. If we want to see women endure beyond their first term, we can no longer ignore the often-overlooked emotional needs that affect their ability to stay.

It's fair to wonder why the emotional needs of missionary women can feel heavier than those at home. The difference is like a steam burn as compared to a hot-water burn. The source is the same, water, but pressure intensifies the impact. Missionary women share the same emotional needs as other women, yet those needs exist under pressures most at home never experience. As pressure builds, the scalding it leaves behind can manifest itself as discouragement, marital strain, and, at times, leaving the field. If we want to relieve this pressure, we must first understand what intensifies it in the life of a missionary woman.

CHALLENGING REALITIES FOR MISSIONARY WOMEN

Missionary life often means isolation. Some women are pioneering with no church body to provide fellowship and counsel. Others join existing teams but remain on the outside as newcomers. For singles, isolation often includes safety concerns, cultural barriers, limited adult connection, and the reality that they may never meet a spouse on the field.

Additionally, missionary women are often not the primary point of contact with supporters. Regular communication and field visits typically involve pastors and administrators, which may limit meaningful connection with supporters' wives.

Missionary life can feel like becoming a child again, but with an adult mind. Previously automatic tasks must be relearned: driving, shopping, laundry, schedules, social cues, medical visits, transportation, finances, and even speech. Each simple task demands twice the time and energy.

Missionary women often watch their children struggle with school. They must adapt to new systems, learn in more than one language, and possibly endure bullying. Mothers sometimes feel helpless in easing their child's pain.

Many missionaries can face hostility from nationals. They might face those who try to drive them away through quiet intimidation or outward attempts to destroy their home or ministry.

On top of this, missionaries miss irreplaceable life moments. Weddings, birthdays, and funerals all happen without them. Many times, their children who go off to college cannot come home for breaks. For many older women, a bond with grandchildren is limited. These losses quietly add to an already heavy load.

Finally, missionaries today live in a world of hyper-connectivity. Watching friends' lives online while feeling forgotten can intensify loneliness. It's like standing outside a warm house and looking in through the window.

These are not rare problems. I've personally walked through most of them, and they represent the reality of many missionary women that I am in contact with today.

CARING MINISTRY FOR MISSIONARY WOMEN

So how can we help these women who so often live the reality of "out of sight and out of mind"? In Romans 16, Paul closes his missional letter with a long list of greetings to a network of supporters. It is evident through this list that Paul had many people providing various kinds of support to him throughout his ministry, including women—Phoebe, whom he commends; Priscilla, who risked her life; and Mary, who worked hard for him. Paul thrived because he had a network of men and women who prayed for, supported, hosted, encouraged, and refreshed him. Missionary women today need the same **network of care**, and that requires intentional change. They are not meant to be isolated superwomen but sisters in Christ who are known by name, story, and struggle. Just as Paul urged the Roman church in Romans 15 to strive together with him in prayer, we ask you to strive together with us. Shaped by the insights of other missionary women, these ten practices reflect a Romans 16 ministry of care.

- **Be a friend. Reach out.** Ask, "How's your heart this week?" Listen without fixing, but please keep confidence.
- **Be consistent with your correspondence.** Picking just one missionary woman to adopt helps you remain faithful in contact.

Continued on page 39



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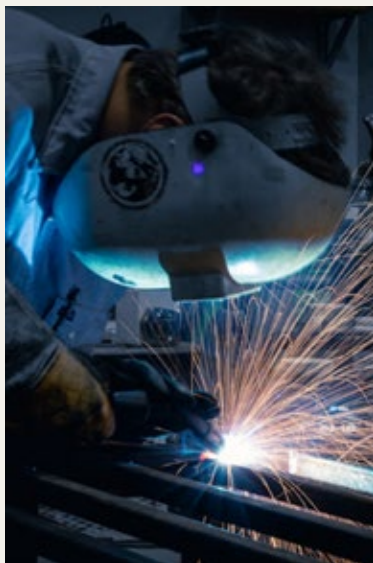
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Our instinctive answer to the title question may well be “no,” on the basis of a brace of well-known scriptural statements that seem to offer an obvious and unambiguous answer (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). But did you know that many more passages state that God *does* repent than that He does *not*? Out of 105 occurrences of the Hebrew verb in question (*nacham*), 35 (33%) refer to God. Of those, 27 (77%) indicate that God does repent,¹ while only 8 (23%) imply or insist that He does not²—only 2 of which (cited above) state in direct propositional form that God does not repent as a point of principle or divine character.

Of all the texts that address the issue of divine repentance, none illustrates the problem more economically than 1 Samuel 15. This passage includes, within a single context, point-blank assertions that God *does*, and *does not*, and once again *does* repent. The following citations represent my own translation to illustrate the consistency of the Hebrew term in the text, which is otherwise masked in various translations.

I repent that I have set up Saul to be king. (15:11)

The Strength of Israel will not repent, for he is not a man that he should repent. (15:29)

The LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel. (15:35)

How can Scripture sensibly affirm both that God does not, and yet does, repent? Moreover, if “repent” means to change (one’s mind), how can God do that if He elsewhere affirms that He is changeless or immutable (Mal. 3:6)? Does God repent, or not? If so, what does that mean? And how does this impact our understanding of the nature and character of God?

COMMON EXPLANATIONS OF DIVINE REPENTANCE

Several attempts at resolving this conundrum surface in the literature. Some offer helpful insights. But all of them seem to me to fall short of a satisfactory solution.

References to God’s repenting communicate an emotional nuance, not a volitional nuance. On this view, when God “repents” it means He regrets the way a situation has turned out (though, of course, it never surprises Him). By contrast, assertions that God does *not* “repent” imply a *volitional* sense of the word. So, some explain that the Hebrew word is to be understood in a sense that is alternately “weak” (in 15:11, 35) and “strong” (in 15:29).³ This suggestion seems too arbitrary, too subjective, and too convenient. It seems a less-than-compelling explanation for how the same Hebrew word can be used within a single context both to deny and to affirm that God does this. A more objective, exegetically anchored solution would be preferable.

References to God’s repentance are to be understood only in terms of a change of action, not a change of mind. In addressing the apparent discrepancy in 1 Samuel 15, Matthew Henry offered a theologically astute and arresting juxtaposition: God “does not alter His will, but wills an alteration.” In other words, God does not change His mind, only His method or His ways. In a way, that’s a helpful distinction. But what exactly does that mean? And how does it adequately explain, for example, Exodus 32, where God announced His intention to destroy Israel and start over with Moses (32:9–10), and then “repented” by diametrically reversing His previously stated intention (32:14) in response to Moses’ intercession (32:11–13)? Henry’s turn of phrase sounds theologically snug, but fails to reflect a meaningful reading of the divergent uses of the Hebrew word for “repent.”

References to God’s repentance are examples of anthropomorphism (more properly, anthropopathism). That is, they express God’s response to situations from a strictly human point of view; if it were us responding to the situation, we would call it “repenting” or “changing our mind.” It is a purely human way of expressing God’s posture toward a situation, but it does not represent any *actual* divine experience or action. But in what way is this helpful, or even meaningful? Though this is a common explanation among theologians, it strikes some as unsatisfying, unnecessary, and *perhaps* even unauthorized. After all, we are dealing with expressions that go to the heart of God’s very nature, character, and behavior. Moreover, the issue is not merely scriptural assertions that God does not do this, but also repeated and apparently contradictory assertions to the contrary that God *does* do this (under certain circumstances).

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

It will be helpful to look more closely at the major “problem” texts—Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29. A number of considerations can help us navigate our way through the bramble of seemingly contradictory scriptural statements about divine repentance.

The centrality of context. Numbers 23:19 is uttered by Balaam in his second prophetic pronouncement regarding Israel. Balaam was hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel. Balaam agreed, on the condition that he could utter only whatever God put into his mouth, and Balak conceded. When God put into Balaam’s mouth only blessings on Israel (23:1–10), Balak—frustrated and displeased—moved Balaam to another vantage point, hoping to elicit a different pronouncement (23:11–14). Balak’s third try in 23:27–28 clarifies his thinking: “Perhaps it will please God that thou mayest curse them for me from there.” It is in this context that Balaam utters the assertion of 23:19: “God is not a man that he should lie; neither the son of man that he should repent. Hath he said, and shall he not do it? Or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?” God is not fickle. Once He has committed Himself by stating His intentions, a mere change of location or vantage point is not going to make Him change His mind or go back on

or Not?

what He said. First Samuel 15:29 involves precisely the same sort of context; God had issued an explicit charge and warned of the consequences of disobedience (1 Sam 12). Now that Saul had not only broken that charge but also failed to own his sin and repent sincerely, God is not about to go back on His word.

The point of other non-repentance passages. If you examine the rest of the “non-repentance” passages (besides Num. 23:19 and 1 Sam. 15:29), you discover that they are not categorical assertions that God does not repent. Rather, they are either (a) specific historic pronouncements of He *did not* repent, or (b) prophetic pronouncements of which He *would not* repent.

God responds genuinely to human actions. God’s capacity to grieve in response to our changing circumstances is an element of His infinite personality, in the image of which we are finitely fashioned. Sometimes we make a decision with the caveat, “I know I’m going to regret this”—and sure enough, sometimes we do. That does not necessarily mean we shouldn’t have done it, or that it was a bad decision at the time. We just came to regret the way it worked out—even if we suspected the possibility ahead of time. Similarly but omnisciently, God knew the sin and sorrow that would enter the world when He created man. That does not mean He wished He had never created, or that it was a bad decision, or that He was unpleasantly “surprised” by the outcome. It is part of God’s real response to developing circumstances, even when they are fore-known. The same is true with His reaction to Saul in 1 Samuel 15.

God responds to prayer. If God is omniscient, then He already knows what He will end up doing. So how can that honestly be called “changing His mind”? But if God is not only omniscient but also immutable (unchangeable) in His character, purposes, and pronouncements, then how can He meaningfully respond to prayer? Because part of His immutable character is His mercy and grace and self-professed responsiveness to man. Note God’s response to Abraham’s prayer regarding His purpose for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18). But note also God’s assurance to Ezekiel that even the intercession of Noah, Job, and Daniel could not deter His decision to judge Judah (Ezek. 14:14, 20).

God responds to human responses. God never changes His character. Part of His character is His reliability and faithfulness to His Word. But also, part of His character—according to His self-revelation in the Bible—is *to change His posture and actions when people change theirs toward Him*.

This is not a mere anthropomorphism. We were aliens from God under His wrath and condemnation; and yet, now we are accepted in the Beloved. That represents an actual change in God’s posture and action toward us. God pronounces judgment on the sinner, but when the sinner repents of His sin, God repents of His judgment—without ever changing His character or renouncing His word. That’s easy for us to understand because the condition is built into the gospel. God sent Jonah to Nineveh with an unqualified warning (“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed”), yet

when they repented, so did God—again demonstrating that God “repents” without ever changing His character or contradicting His word (Jonah 3:9, 10; 4:2).

Similarly, God may promise blessing on obedience to His word, but when someone like Saul rejects the word of the Lord, the promised blessings are forfeited. In that case, the Lord may be said both to regret or grieve over man’s actions, and to “change His posture” regarding the setting up of Saul. Whereas He would have blessed Saul with an endless dynasty (1 Sam. 13:13) those *bona fide* (good faith) intentions have also been forfeited.

By way of illustration, we can watch a movie we have seen before—even several times—so that the events and the outcome are not surprising to us, and yet still laugh or cry as we watch the familiar events unfold. Or we may watch a recording of a ballgame whose final score we already know, and yet display genuine emotional reactions to events we already foreknow.

We are dealing with a dimension of mystery, because we are finite representations of an infinite God, with limited capacities of the perfections of His personality. God reveals Himself to have an emotional capacity (He loves and hates, may be grieved or joyful). This may strike us as strange, because most of our emotions are generally reactionary to largely unexpected events. With God there are no unexpected events. When we “repent” in the sense of changing our minds it is often due to the *unanticipated* development of circumstances or the reception of new information—both of which are impossible for God.

CONCLUSION

So, does God repent or not? Yes and no. That is the only genuinely biblical answer to the question, because the Bible says both “yes, He does” and “no, He does not.” The difference lies not in subjective explanations based on what makes sense to us, nor in invented lexical senses that allow the same word to be used in completely contradictory ways, but in the objective implications of the context. Three conditions can be summarized as follows:

God never “repents” of any absolute and unconditional pronouncements; to do so would be to lie, like man does. God is always unfailingly true to His covenants and His words.

God may “repent” in the sense of altering His posture or disposition, or changing from His expressed intentions of conditional promised good or conditional warned judgment in response to (a) intercessory prayer (e.g., Exod. 32:9–14) or (b) a change in man’s posture toward God (Jer. 18:7–10).

God does “repent” in the legitimately lexical sense of regret or grief over evil and its effects. That does not mean He “changes” His mind in the sense that He realizes that He made a bad decision, or wishes He hadn’t done something, or is surprised by the outcome. It simply means that He responds genuinely and emotionally even to foreseen developments.

Continued on page 36

Jim Tillotson

The Unchanging Gospel for a Changing World

Missions is a subject close to my heart. Missions is important because Christ commanded it. When Jesus gave the Great Commission, He made it clear that the gospel was never meant to stay in one place. Christianity that does not move outward eventually turns inward and becomes unhealthy. The mandate has not changed, but every generation must decide whether it will obey Christ according to Scripture or according to current trends.

At the center of missions is a message that cannot be altered. Jesus said that repentance and forgiveness of sins were to be preached in His name among all nations (Luke 24:46–47). Paul summed it up simply: “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23). Methods may change, but the gospel does not. Salvation is still by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8–9). When the message changes, missions ceases to be biblical.

One noticeable shift today is the heavy emphasis on short-term missions. In previous generations, missionaries were often sent for life. They learned the language, planted churches, and trained leaders over time. Missions is not about giving believers an experience; it is about giving lost people the gospel (Rom. 10:14–15). Short-term missions is a wonderful way to expose people to the needs in other fields and give them a burden for missions, but this cannot replace the need for long-term ministry. The goal of short-term missions should be to thoroughly expose those participating to the need and the work and, as a result, give them a burden for long-term gospel ministry.

Another area requiring discernment is cultural contextualization. Missionaries should be humble, teachable, and culturally aware. When I was a missionary in Canada, I saw many missionaries come to Alberta and want to plant a church exactly like their church back in the US. This was eventually a big turnoff to Canadians. I remember on

my first Canada Day (July 1), I preached a patriotic Canadian message, and I had several men come and tell me, “You can tell you are an American.” I had a lot to learn about Canadian culture. I will say that our people appreciated that Joan and I learned their culture and became dual citizens. I believe we saw that open up opportunities for the gospel without a needless barrier. Paul became “all things to all men” so that some might be saved (1 Cor. 9:22), but culture must never be allowed to shape the content of the gospel. Paul warned that altering the message produces “another gospel” that is no gospel at all (Gal. 1:6–9). Sin, repentance, and the exclusivity of Christ are not optional truths. Jesus said, “I am the way” (John 14:6).

God is also at work globally. Strong churches are growing around the world, and many are now sending missionaries themselves. This should humble us. Over my last ten years serving at Faith Baptist Bible College, I have witnessed many more churches having to cut their missions budget rather than expanding it. I am burdened to see an evangelistic passion in our students and churches. As one of our professors at Faith Baptist Bible College, Dr. Dennis Wilkening, says, “People listen to a sermon much differently when they have an unsaved guest sitting next to them. When you bring a guest, you want your pastor to preach the gospel. You are championing the gospel instead of critiquing it.” Too often, we become hearers of the Word and not doers. We have almost become inoculated to the gospel. God’s plan for missions flows through the local church. In Acts 13, the church prayed, fasted, and sent missionaries under the Spirit’s direction. Missions was never meant to be detached from church accountability. The church is to care about the lost, both at home and abroad. The healthy churches that I have seen over the years always share that passion.

Technology has opened new doors for the gospel, and we should thank God for that. Yet Christianity is an incarnational faith. “The Word was made flesh” (John 1:14). Discipleship requires life-on-life ministry, not just digital connection. Technology is a tremendous tool that we should use to further the gospel. Our churches need excellent websites, as this is how unsaved people are checking out churches today. Artificial-intelligence tools are helping with Bible translation work in a way that could not have been imagined in the past. Churches and missionaries that do not use technology are missing out on a great advantage in sharing the gospel, but it cannot replace life-touching discipleship. Finally, missions must not be reduced to humanitarian work alone. Filling a shoebox, coaching a Little League team, doing disaster relief, and going to the neighborhood block party are all good things, and they are definitely avenues to share the gospel. But if we do these things without the goal of sharing the gospel, we are no different than many cults. Caring for physical needs matters, but eternal life is found only in Christ (John 6:35). When social action replaces gospel proclamation, missions loses its eternal focus. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).

As missions continues to change, the church must remain steady. We are called to test all things by Scripture (Acts 17:11), pray for laborers (Matt. 9:37–38), and faithfully proclaim Christ. Our confidence rests not in methods, but in Christ’s promise: “Lo, I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20). The mission belongs to God. Our responsibility is to be faithful witnesses until He returns. May we all continue to faithfully take the Word to the world.

Jim Tillotson has served as the president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, since June 2015.





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Corey A. Pfaffe



Missions Agencies: Essential Teammates

The apostle Paul paid great attention to detail. Good thing! His missionary journeys were busy and complex. Traveling by land and by sea. Arranging lodging and meals. Finding new friends and new foes. Reporting and writing. Planting churches.

Paul was a planner. As he closed his letter to the Romans (15:15–33), he laid out bold objectives: pioneering, groundbreaking, stretching boundaries. And he had teammates: Luke, Timothy, Silas, Priscilla and Aquila, and others. Certainly, he engaged in one-on-one gospel conversations, he taught, he preached, he studied, and he prayed, but not without a team to support the work.

Modern missionaries also need teams: the local churches that send them and the missions agencies that serve them both. Unlike denominational practices that pool and allocate missions dollars, independent Baptist missionaries commonly raise their own support. Three to ten percent of their support typically goes to the mission agencies to cover the carefully managed costs of serving their appointees.

When your church acts as an agency on behalf of one of its missionaries, it takes responsibility for myriad functions typically served by a “full-service” missions agency. This role is also largely served by your church when it calls a missionary who uses a clearing house that solely collects and distributes funds. Some churches serve these functions admirably, but many can provide only minimal support.

There are many stewardship benefits when your church and the missionaries you support team up with missions agencies. These ministries steward your investment in missions and the courageous

gospel advances of their missionaries by providing budget management, tax-smart policies, and financial protections.

BUDGET MANAGEMENT: ENSURING WISE USE OF EVERY DOLLAR

Supporting a missionary family in a foreign country requires a large financial investment by God’s people. Missions agencies serve important functions as resources come in from churches and donors and as they go out in long-term sustainable support of God’s church-planting servants.

Managing church and individual support. Missions agencies receive and acknowledge contributions received on behalf of your missionaries from both your church and individual donors. A local church serving this role on behalf of a missionary must be prepared to receive and acknowledge gifts from many more sources than its own members. This places a burden on your church’s mission to its own community—your Jerusalem. Missions agencies team with the missionaries your church calls to go to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Budgeting expenses. Missions agencies use their extensive knowledge of costs of ministry in other countries to ensure that your gifts are wisely employed. They gain intimate knowledge of international living expenses, out-passage costs, in-country tax obligations, and ministry expenses such as facilities costs. Missions agencies can also manage cash transfers from US banks to foreign financial institutions and keep an eye on currency exchange rates.

TAX-SMART STRATEGIES: PRESERVING THE FULL IMPACT OF YOUR GIFTS

Agencies implement tax-smart strategies that preserve the full impact of your support for global outreach.

- Providing policies to account for your missionaries’ extensive travel costs while they are on deputation and during furloughs.
- Navigating the complexities of both ministerial compensation and tax rules for US citizens living abroad (e.g., IRS Publication 54 Tax Guide).
- Managing special projects donations to avoid tax consequences to your missionaries’ personal Form 1040 filings.
- Arranging tax-favorable retirement plans and housing designations by serving a substantial number of missionary families.

As missionaries near retirement, they may face challenging tax concerns. A Baptist agency recently teamed with the financial advisors of a couple who had served many years in Africa, and their collaboration saved the retirees tens of thousands of dollars.

FINANCIAL PROTECTIONS: SAFEGUARDING YOUR INVESTMENT

A local church may not understand the dangers of making risky financial transfers to unaccountable foreign sources. While it is rare, some generous Christians have supported foreign ministries that have not been vetted by a missions agency, only



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to discover appalling misappropriations. Missions agencies protect their appointees and the investments of their supporting churches by adopting and enforcing policies designed to avoid embarrassing or even illegal use of funds.

Business as missions. Closed or limited-access fields may often be reached with the gospel only by Christians living in-country as business owners. Missions agencies understand the intricacy of these works and cooperate with legal and accounting professionals to assure that US citizens do not run afoul of our own laws (e.g., the complex six-page IRS Form 5471 required for foreign business ownership). Local churches and clearing houses are rarely prepared to address these matters and the meticulous accounting that must be maintained.

Financial support of foreign churches, organizations, and individuals. Your giving supports missionaries who will establish independent Baptist churches that can gain financial independence. Missions agencies carefully steward their missionaries' support of non-US citizens and ministries to comply with strict rules related to compensating non-resident aliens and foreign organizations.

Foreign local and national regulations. Your church's missionaries likely have many stories to share about challenging and confusing foreign regulations. It is a rare local church that can develop the resources to assist a missionary in these matters. The weight of learning and complying with often-obscurer requirements can be a significant challenge even for experienced full-service missions agencies.

Of course, missions agencies also offer non-financial support (e.g., training, emergency assistance, visa help, and networking).

As you consider your family's missions giving, be generous and be involved in your local church's missions support decisions. Understand the financial burdens your missionaries carry and weigh carefully the value of missions agency services. You will find that missions agencies are great teammates, returning both temporal and eternal returns on investment.

Corey Pfaffe serves as the CEO of MinistryCPA, a certified public accounting firm based in Watertown, Wisconsin. The firm works with ministry clients in virtually every US state and every continent. He and his wife Laurie have served in various lay capacities as members of Calvary Baptist Church of Watertown for more than thirty-five years.



Does God Repent, or Not?

Continued from page 31

So, for example, the threats of God that express His hostile posture against sinners are neither empty words, nor are they necessarily irrevocable (unless He indicates otherwise, as He does on occasion, Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). God's threats are warnings designed to produce a repentant and submissive response. When they don't, the threat is unfailingly fulfilled. But when they do, God may change His posture toward that person or pronouncement.

Layton Talbert is professor of theology and biblical exposition at BJU Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.



¹ Gen. 6:6, 7; Exod. 32:12, 14; Deut. 32:36; Judg. 2:18; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35; 2 Sam. 24:16; 1 Chr. 21:15; Ps. 90:13; 106:45; 135:14; Jer. 15:6; 18:7-10; 26:3, 12-13, 18-19; 42:10; Joel 2:13, 14; Amos 7:1-6; Jonah 3:9, 10; 4:2.

² Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 110:4; Jer. 4:28; 20:16; Ezek. 24:14; Zech. 8:14.

³ Bruce Ware, *Their God Is Too Small* (Crossway, 2003), 33-34. That is, "when Scripture speaks of God changing his mind, we are to read that metaphorically, but that when Scripture says that God [does not] change his mind, we are to read that literally" (Scott Oliphant, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* [Crossway, 2012], 123).



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TRIUMPH OVER TRAUMA: RENEWED HOPE FOR LIVING WITH HIDDEN WOUNDS

The typical treatment for moral injury and trauma is medication and clinical counseling, and while Chaplains Gary Fisher and Jeremy Van Delinder do not disparage those practices, they have personally seen the power of faith, grace, forgiveness, and a supportive community for those in need. Fisher's and Van Delinder's experiences in ministry, military service, and emergency services have revealed the necessary role of spiritual, emotional, and communal support in a person's journey to recovery.

Written for combat veterans, fire fighters, law enforcement members, and their families, *Triumph Over Trauma* supports those seeking to understand and overcome moral injury and trauma. It is unique in its emphasis on a person's soul health—something often ignored in the medical and mental health communities.

REVIEW BY CH JOE WILLIS

Over the past few years, many books have been written on topics such as post-traumatic stress disorder/injury (PTSD/PSTI), battle fatigue, moral injury. The book *Triumph Over Trauma*, co-authored by Jeremy Van Delinder and Gary Fisher, is the latest in this field of study. The expertise of these two professionals in their respective fields as chaplain and counselor makes this a very insightful book.

Several things stood out to me as I read this book recently. It is easy to read, written at a level that is not too academically over the reader's head, yet still very scientifically accurate about specific psychological, emotional, physiological, and spiritual conditions/disorders. Second, the book includes several first-hand experiences that help readers personally identify with the different aspects/levels of trauma that they may have experienced. Third, I love how these authors provide the reader hope and restoration to live a "new-normal" life. I really appreciated the fact that they conveyed the truth that the person who is suffering the effects of trauma is not crazy, abnormal, or broken beyond repair. I also appreciate that they clearly stated that trauma is not just a military combat issue and that many civilians have been affected by trauma in various ways.

Triumph Over Trauma is not overtly spiritual in nature but offers just the right amount of biblical insight to help people seek help spiritually if they so desire. However, I do provide a word of caution: I have experienced different levels of trauma on the battlefield and on the city streets as a sheriff's department chaplain. The "true-to-life" descriptions of some of Gary's and Jeremy's

experiences caused some personal emotional stress as I read these accounts. I can attest to the fact that the conclusions they came to for hope and restoration are the same ones I had to come to in my own life. These are also the same truths that I shared with multiple servicemen and servicewomen in counseling as a chaplain over the years. This book would be first on my list as a resource to help those who have suffered any form of trauma in their lives and are trying to figure out how to recalibrate life after a traumatic event.

Thank you, Gary and Jeremy, for a well-written book.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CH (COL) Gary Fisher is an active-duty Army chaplain currently assigned to the US Army Western Hemisphere Command (formerly known as FORSCOM). Gary has been in the military since Moses was a boy and has worked at every level of military command. Gary is currently an FBFI Chaplain and is on assignment to the Pentagon as the operations chaplain for the Army Chaplain Corps.

Jeremy Van Delinder is currently a chaplain with the Texas Task Force (Urban Search and Rescue Team). He has over two decades of experience in emergency services, having worked as an EMT, firefighter, and public safety officer. Jeremy was an endorsed chaplain with the FBFI when he was a fire chaplain in Round Rock, Texas.

Editors's note: *Triumph Over Trauma: Renewed Hope for Living with Hidden Wounds* by Jeremy Van Delinder and Gary T. Fisher is available on Amazon.

NOTEWORTHY PROMOTIONS AND COMMENDATIONS

K. C. Hansen

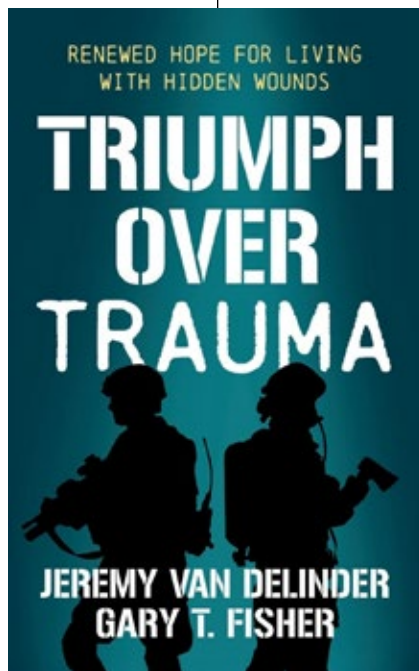
Ordained by Crossroads Baptist Church (CBC) on November 30, 2025, and accepted a part-time position at CBC as an associate pastor

Samuel Jackson

Received a meritorious unit award for working with our Air Mobility Command. Also received a longevity award for being in the reserves for five years

Greg Kaminski

Received the basic leadership course fulfillment from the naval Chaplain school



Tavis Long

Awarded Legion of Merit medal for 3-year tour at last command

Matthew Myers

Promoted to major and pinned on at December's Battle Assembly (2025)

Jeffrey Rybold

Won Religious Support Team of the Year for Kadena AB

Tim Senter

Received VITAS Best of the Year award for excellence in professionalism and service as a Bereavement Services Manager and Veterans Liaison

Casey Stephens

Indiana Guard Reserve (IGR) Service Award – 3rd Award

Daniel Toweh

Brigade Commanders Coin of Excellence: December 2025

Adam Yates

Graduated from Chaplain Basic Officer Leadership Course (CHBOLC) on December 12, 2025

Relieving the Pressure: A Romans 16 Perspective on Caring for Missionary Women

Continued from page 28

- **Pray and tell her when you do.** A short message—"I prayed for you today"—can feel like water on a steam burn.
- **Acknowledge her gifts.** Being reminded that "your gift of hospitality is powerful" is deeply encouraging to someone who is relearning everything.
- **Inform yourself about her life and ministry.** Learn about her context and ask thoughtful questions: "How are the kids adjusting?"
- **Update her about your life or church happenings.** Relationships need to be two-way in order to feel connection.
- **Give rest.** Provide support for retreats, especially when on furlough.
- **Nurture the whole family unit by taking mission trips that minister to the family with date nights, MK outings, and intense rest and fellowship.**
- **Love on her children.** They still love cards with personal notes. Send gifts that refresh, but always ask first.
- **Be mindful to include single women in your contact and care, ensuring they receive the same, if not greater, attention as married women.**

As those in Romans 16 were commended for supporting Paul, so those who care for missionary women today, individually or corporately, are worthy of the same commendation. This kind of renewed, intentional care will have an immeasurable impact on missions today.

Bianca McCrocklin and her husband, Russ, serve with BMM as church planters in Germany. She is committed to caring for women by grounding them in a deep, biblical theology.



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