On Being A Missionary

Abridged Edition



An Introduction to
Cross-Cultural Life and Ministry

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On Being a Missionary (*Abridged Version*): *An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Life and Ministry*

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Introduction

Writing a book about being a missionary doesn't mean one has mastered the subject. This book is written by learners for learners.

Missionaries make a broad subject. They represent almost every profession. They come short term and long term. Some come as students; some are retirees. Some are church-supported, others self-supported. Some come under mission boards and societies, and some come independently. They come from Europe and North America; they come from the other side of the equator in the Global South. And they go into all the world.

In this book we don't differentiate "sending nations" and "receiving nations," because almost every nation has become a "sending nation." Indeed, in a massive shift that caught the mission world by surprise, there are already more missionaries going out from the Global South, the lands we used to think of as "receiving countries," than from the old standard-bearers in the North. The reason is simple: the non-Western world is now home to more evangelical Christians than the West. The balance has shifted. The missionary enterprise has become truly international.

Although this book is necessarily written from a Western, or Global North, perspective, much of its content applies equally to missionaries from other parts of the world. Even those problems which seem particularly related to the Western missionary will, with some modification, also be faced by most of our brethren from newer sending countries. Hopefully, they too will find this book instructive.

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This book is not primarily concerned with theology or mission strategy. It is not a handbook on how to plant a church, run a community development project, or start a mission hospital. Neither is it a treatise on anthropology, comparative religion, or cross-cultural communication. Though all these are important topics for the mission enterprise, this book is about "being" a missionary. It endeavors to describe what that life is like, with its challenges, heartaches, and joys. This book also addresses the problems, struggles, and failures of missionaries because it's from these difficult topics that we learn the most.

Missionary life is two parts joy and fulfillment and one part frustration and defeat. We can only hope to reduce the frustration and defeat by facing it, not denying it. Far from wanting to scare off missionary candidates, we want to be sure they know some of the reality they are facing, so that they may avoid many of the problems that have plagued others.

Missions Is for Everyone

The church is missionary in nature. Missions, therefore, is the task of every member, not just a few. In the early church, missions gave rise to theology. Missions is more than just one subject in a seminary curriculum; it lies at the heart of all subjects. Missions is what makes theology relevant. It's what makes seminaries relevant. It keeps seminaries and churches from becoming inward-looking and self-absorbed—putting their lamp "under a bowl" (Matt 5:15).

Theology and missions cannot be divorced. Theology inspires missions because God's word is full of missions. As academic disciplines, theology and missions are, of course, distinct. This distinction explains why seminaries and Bible colleges are right to offer courses in missions, cross-cultural communication, non-Christian religions, and related subjects. These courses, however, should be core subjects, not electives. Missions is the province of every Christian, not just specialists.

Jesus told us to "go." First to Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and then "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Nothing in that text suggests that this command is only for a few. All Christians are to go and be witnesses—to their families, to their neighborhoods, to their cities. Every Christian is sent into the world on a mission.

Thus, there is no biblical basis for elevating the cross-cultural to a superior status. The value of our work is not based on whether or not we have crossed geographic or cultural boundaries; it is based on our love for Christ and our

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obedience to him. Very simply, the call is to all, and it is to all places where God has need of us, whether it be "Jerusalem," "Judea and Samaria," or "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

That being said, we will limit the use of the word "missionary" in this book to its more narrow and conventional sense of "cross-cultural witness." The reason is twofold. First, there are some peculiarities about crossing cultures that set this kind of witnessing apart from witnessing in one's own culture. Second, the vast majority of unreached people are not found among the main Western cultures; they are found in the cultures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America—and, to a lesser extent, the inner-cities of the West. The greatest need today is to reach these people, and doing so requires crossing cultures. If every church were to continue witnessing only within its own culture, these people would never be reached. Thus, in limiting the use of the term "missionary" to "cross-cultural witness," we are highlighting the particularly urgent need for this special kind of witness.

Consider the figures. The Joshua Project tells us that there are more than three billion people in the world who have not yet had the chance to hear the gospel presented in a way they can understand. With that in mind, let's consider how we spend our financial resources.

For every one hundred dollars raised in Western churches, ninety-nine are spent on ministry among our fellow Christians. Only one dollar is spent directly for reaching non-Christians. And of that dollar, only a few cents are spent to reach the more than three billion unreached people. As someone has said, "We Christians tithe to ourselves."

Looking at personnel, only one in a thousand Evangelicals goes into cross-cultural ministry—that is, becomes a missionary. And of those who do, over ninety percent of them end up working in areas that have already been evangelized. A very small shift in resources could triple or quadruple the amount of people and funds available for reaching the more than three billion unreached. Even a modest increase could make a hundredfold difference. Is that really too much to ask of the church, which is meant to be the light of the world?

Clearly, if the world is to be reached any time soon, it is going to take, in the words of Lausanne II, "The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world." There is no room for bystanders.

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Clarifying Some Issues

Every Christian is a witness, but not every Christian is a missionary (by our definition). A missionary is any Christian who crosses cultural boundaries to further the building of Christ's church and the expansion of God's kingdom. The title "missionary" presupposes that one has crossed cultures for these express purposes and has received God's call to do so. You're not a missionary simply because you wake up one day in a foreign country. You're not a missionary if you're simply out for adventure, enjoying cool tourist sites, or hoping to get away from your in-laws. You are a missionary only insofar as you are obedient to a call from God.

Though the missionary's work differs in many respects from the work of those who stay at home, the missionary will still be rewarded on the same basis as every other Christian, to the extent they are motivated by the glory of God.

This book makes no real distinction between short-term and long-term missionaries, because the changes brought by globalization and easier travel are making those categories harder and harder to define. In years past, someone going to the field for a one-year commitment would have been considered "short term" by almost all mission agencies, but today that distinction is fading. Furthermore, I want to avoid any implication that short-term missionaries are somehow inferior to the long termers. All who answer God's call should be first-class witnesses, wherever they are.

Before the days of air travel, missionaries went out for life. Today, that expectation no longer holds true. We need waves of missionaries coming and going as the Lord directs. One thing, however, must be clearly said in favor of a long-term commitment. Study after study has shown that as a general rule, the longer one remains in a given culture, the more fruitful he or she becomes. Thus we would urge those who are now cross-cultural witnesses to remain within that culture until God clearly leads them out.

A final word about the use of the term "mission field" in this book. This term conjures up an image of the white missionary going out to primitive lands to preach to the heathen. Because of this connotation, the term has fallen into disfavor in certain quarters. However, it is very hard to write a book on missions without using it. In this book the term "mission field" will be used to refer to wherever nonbelievers are found, especially those areas where there are few or no Christians. The Muslim enclaves of New York City need missionaries just as much as the highlands of Irian Jaya. Thus, the mission field is any place where missionaries are working—or need to work—whether overseas or at home.

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Myths to Puncture

Any field is bound to develop a body of myths. This reality is certainly true of missions. Every missionary on home assignment must contend with the mythical notions of his home constituency. Let us examine some common ones.

- Myth number one: "The church has been planted almost everywhere." While the church is almost everywhere geographically, there are thousands of distinct people groups with no local witness.
- Myth number two: "Global South churches don't want Western missionaries to help them." It's true that they don't want to be controlled, but do desire genuine peer-to-peer partnership.
- Myth number three: "The responsibility for evangelism in each country belongs to that national church." It is not biblical to think in terms of anyone exclusively "owning" a country or territory. Reaching the world is the responsibility of the whole body of Christ.
- Myth number four: "The 'heathen' are eager to hear the gospel and become like us." Try this line with most Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists! They are proud of their religion and believe it is superior to ours.
- Myth number five: "Missionaries are misfits." Now to be honest, there's a bit of truth to this one, but to suggest that missionaries as a group are those who "couldn't make it" back home is pure fiction.
- Myth number six: "Missionaries are super-spiritual." To dispose of this one, just keep reading.

Pressing On

Yes, it's easier to write about being a missionary than it is to be one. I know.

I make no pretense of having successfully followed all the precepts laid out in this book. But I have tried to. Daily, and sometimes many times a day, I have prayed that I might be a missionary pleasing to God. I have striven to be that missionary. I have striven in the sense that all of us must strive to be Christlike. Some people say we shouldn't strive, but that's wrong. With the Apostle Paul, we must "press on … straining toward what is ahead" (Phil 3:12–13). It's salvation we mustn't strive for, but for holiness and maturity, we must strive. And to the extent I have "attained"—whether little or much—I attribute totally to God's grace. It is also by his grace that I have ventured to write this book.

The reader will observe throughout this book that much of what is written is really about Christian living. The principles are applicable to any Christian,

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