

## **Introduction**

We should all agree that the ideal is to have your cancer specialist doctor be world class when it comes to knowledge of his discipline, as well for him to have a great bedside manner. But if you have to choose . . .

There are certain theological issues that we need to work through—and they are the equivalent of memorizing charts out of *Gray's Anatomy*—before we come to the blessing of direct mercy work, which is the equivalent of the bedside manner.

## **Facebook Friend Missions**

Just about all of us have been affected (and in good ways) by the communications revolution. But there are downsides, advanced in part by our ability to move our ignorance around the world at spectacular rates of speed. But there is another danger besides high-speed gossip and slander, which is the danger of mistaking a superficial good for a real one.

Just like old-fashioned letters, on-line communication can solidify and buttress genuine friendships and family connections. But they can also be a cheap substitute for them. Let me illustrate the principle, and then move on to apply it to missions and networks of missions support.

If you have a number of Facebook friends, and your kid breaks his leg and you are in the ER with him, it is a true comfort to be able to send out a prayer request. The ones receiving the prayer request, even if they are not especially close, can offer up a prayer for what is a pretty clear situation. But many of the tangles and trials we go through in this life are not of the straight-forward broken leg variety. They usually have to do with complications of personal relationship, along with the ins and outs thereof, which relationship problems can many times be like trying to solve a melting jelly ball equivalent of a Rubik's Cube, with some unhelpful person jabbing at your elbows. When someone puts up a prayer request about something like that online, every yellow warning light on the console along the inside of your forehead ought to start blinking. You can pray, sure, but just don't think you know what's going on.

Scripture says this: "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him" (Prov. 18:17, ESV).

I can't tell you how many times I have seen a well-meaning crowd of sympathetic cyber-counselors trying to help somebody fix or address "their situation," when I know full well that there was much more to that situation than the prayer request would or could let on. This kind of thing is almost never just a broken bone in the ER. Sometimes I know this because I know the whole circumstance through other means, and other times I know it from how the whole thing is

being represented—and by how the whole thing is surrounded by pseudo-closeness from cyber-friends.

So apply this to missions. One of the great needs of the hour in missions is true accountability, connection, friendship, and dedicated support. This need is obviously not met through complete detachment or abandonment. But neither is it met through a showy media blitz—whether an old school slide show and newsletter, or the new school web site with Facebook updates.

If someone is on the other side of the world, we should never forget that they are on the other side of the world. The cyber-revolution has made it possible for us to deceive ourselves about how close we are and, we think, if we are that close, there must be true accountability. No, true accountability is a three dimensional incarnation, and involves mastery of languages, a biblical form of governance, competence in bookkeeping, and true face-to-face relationship. Distance communication, whether done with papyrus or ones and zeros, is a true blessing. But it is built on the foundation of true face-to-face relationships—which should not be confused with facebook-to-facebook relationships.

### **Inescapable Eschatology**

All human action has eschatological foundations. God created us to face the future, and that is where we are all going, like it or not. This means that any task that we undertake is going to have some eschatology associated with it, either express or implied.

If we try to deny this—by pretending to have no interest in "end times stuff"—then this just means that the work we do in Jesus' name will be shaped by an eschatology that is alien to the Christian faith. That eschatology might be Marxist, or one of consumerist progress, or environmentalist doom, but whatever it is, it does not culminate in the knowledge of the Lord covering the planet as the waters cover the sea.

So in order to be vibrant and healthy, I would argue that missions must be overtly and explicitly optimistic in its eschatology. Your eschatology will shape the day-to-day nature of your mission. Your eschatology will determine whether or not your evangelism is of the man-the-lifeboats variety, or one more conducive to culture-building. And culture-building is being used here as synonymous for "discipling the nations."

### **Five Degrees to the Left Is Not Upside Down**

"Those of low estate are but a breath; those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath" (Ps. 62:9, ESV).

The work of missions must be built on something more substantial than the need. The need, as Oswald Chambers put it somewhere, is not the call. And neither is the need able to provide the theology for the call. When it tries to provide that theology, what we get is a bog of sentimentalism—not a good place to pour the foundation for anything.

If you build your mission on the needs of those of low estate, you are basing everything on a breath. If you base it on power and influence, those of high estate, you are building the whole

thing on a delusion. Build on both together and they are together lighter than a breath—and will float off with your wood, hay, and stubble.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of God lasts forever. We are ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). We go because He told us to. We declare what we were told to declare. We live the way we were told to live.

Stated at this level, of course, every professing Christian agrees. But the Spirit is in the details, and I have three in mind. First, for us this must mean a grounded and foundational faith in the penal, substitutionary death of Christ on the cross for sin. If missions are not based on an evangel with actual good news in it, then it will all come to nothing. Second, our work of missions must be Reformed and Kuyperian. This is because mission work must of necessity engage with the way unbelieving cultures actually are, and the task we have been assigned is utterly transformational. The only theology capable of doing this biblically is Reformed and Kuyperian. And third, we must have an eschatology that leaves room for victory, that leaves room for actually accomplishing the mission. Otherwise, we will find ourselves signing peace treaties with Ammonites.

A good foil for these three points can be found in Donald Kraybill's book *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. First, Kraybill is pretty clearly an Abelardian on the atonement, which obliterates any possibility of a true "up-side down" kingdom. One of the reasons we must focus on Christ and Him crucified is because it is the message that actually brings every thought captive. But all those thoughts out there, all those high imaginations that don't want to be made captive are quick to suggest to us that a cross of moral suasion and influence would be so much nicer. I dare say it would be nicer, but it wouldn't be *good*, and it wouldn't be potent. If we are going to be engaged in missions, we need a gospel that kicks the devil in the teeth. And that means it must be a message of penal, substitutionary, vicarious blood-bought atonement. When it comes to *this* substitute, we must accept no substitute.

Second, radical discipleship is found in Kuyper's great statement that there is not one square inch in all creation that is not in the possession of the Lord Jesus. If this is missing, radicalism in discipleship always reduces to posturing and striking poses for the cameras. This is why Kraybill is stuck in a profound paradigmatic blindness, one which does not enable him to see how radically he truncates his calls for radical discipleship. This is scratch n' sniff radical discipleship. This is radical discipleship lite. This is shadow boxing, pull-the-punch radical discipleship. He gets all the rhetorical steam he can get out of passages like Luke 14:33.

This is posturing. The point is clearly not to *do* what you are actually maintaining that Jesus said to do. The point is to maintain a rhetorical superiority over those of us who say that Jesus taught nothing of the kind. Kraybill says that Jesus taught that we are to live in a "up-side down" way. This can be accomplished, he goes on to reassure us, if we lean just slightly to the left. But leaning five degrees to the left is not upside down. Sorry.

And third, an optimistic eschatological vision will prevent us from borrowing an eschatology of population explosions, monga carbon footprints, and global warming from the secularists who are without God and without hope in the world. There are only two forms of engagement that

Christians can engage in—we must either adopt a transformationalist approach or a compromising approach. If we are not going to go the escapist route, waiting for the rapture, we must either take every thought captive, or we must split the difference.

### **Unintended Missions Consequences**

C.S. Lewis famously says somewhere that when Jesus tells us to feed the poor, He does not give us lessons in cooking. There are certain craft competence issues that we have to figure out ourselves, relying on industry standards and our own sanctified wits. Of course, industry standards of craft competence and our own sanctified wits do not outrank the Scriptures, but we will discover, if we reflect on this carefully, that craft incompetence and folly have attributed to Scripture things it never said.

For example, we have not a word in Scripture that instructs us how missionaries from a first-world nation should interact with a third world nation. The book of Acts contains absolutely nothing about frontier missions. All the mission work in the book of Acts occurs, if I may speak this way, in North America. Mission trips were the equivalent of a church in Toledo deciding to plant a church in Baltimore. We do not have an apostolic example for work among bush men or aborigines, and we ought not to act like it just involves just a little bit more than a plane ticket to Baltimore and willingness to share.

I am not speaking here of the *necessity* of universal missions. The imperative encompasses everyone. Preach the gospel to every creature means that we should preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). But since we must start somewhere, it should be done in an orderly way, one which takes into full account the true nature of the obstacles confronting us.

Men who do not understand the law of unintended consequences, and who are not willing to think through how that law might apply to the work of missions, are men who should be removed from the mission field. One of the principal areas where unintended consequences kick in is in the realm of politics, about which more later.

### **Thinly Disguised Brigandage**

The Christian faith is inescapably political. Jesus is a king, and we are His *polis*. We are charged with bringing the gospel to every nation, and we are to preach that gospel in such a way as to topple the central idols of every people group. When those idols are toppled, the worship of God the Father through Jesus Christ must be offered instead, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Then, and only then, will the power of the gospel to transform the surrounding culture kick into gear. In nations where this process happened centuries ago, it is easy for secularists to pretend that they are the ones who invented indoor plumbing for us. Civilized behavior and standards happen "all by themselves," like magic. You know, one day, Enlightenment arrives. No—this process is driven by the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen, and the yeast works through the loaf. All missionaries need to know that the end of this process will be what we would instantly recognize as a free market economic system. When they arrive in a pagan society, they cannot establish that kind of system instantly—there are preconditions. Certain things must happen first. But the missionary must know where it is all going. The inexorable work of the Spirit will not allow commies, fascists and crony capitalists to get their chains back on those who were liberated by the gospel. Missionaries should look forward to the time when the people in their

villages and towns will be able to buy and sell, unhindered by highwaymen, pirates, revolutionary armies, bureaucrats, or tax men. Economic liberty is what the Spirit is bringing to us.

If a missionary has an over-realized eschatology, and tries to force economic justice before it is time, he will wind up becoming the worst thing that ever happened to that part of the world. For many unthinking evangelicals the step between "politics should matter to Christians" and trendy "soft socialism" is a very short step. But that doesn't keep it from being a step over a cliff. This is particularly the case, sad to relate, in the case of English evangelicals. But the fact that Jesus is Lord doesn't mean that He has given His divine imprimatur to economic illiteracy. Swathed in the rhetoric of helping the poor, evangelist-do-gooders have left a trail of destruction behind them.

My postmillennialism is of a particularly robust variety. I believe the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea, in spite of all our labors. I believe in a kind of consubstantiation for our mercy ministries—the grace of God is apparent in, with, and under all our incompetency. How so? It's a mystery, my son.

But the day is coming when all that will be overcome. Not only will justice and mercy kiss each other, but the Spirit of the Lord will perform a great miracle. No longer will soft hearts have to be accompanied by soft heads. No longer will hard heads result necessarily in hard hearts. No longer will we have the worst combination of all, that of the evangelical leftists, who have hard hearts and soft heads.

No, what we need are hard heads and soft hearts. Love the poor. Give them what they need—the free gospel of free grace, which will result in free men and free women, which in turn over time will create Christ-honoring free markets. And in case anyone was wondering, such free markets are the *only* economic system that is capable of being Christ-honoring. All the others are thinly-disguised brigandage.

### **The Mission to Ramothgilead**

A common way of reasoning in Proverbs is to contrast two options in order to illustrate for us what our priorities ought to be. For example, it is better to be poor and righteous than rich and unrighteous. But we have to remember that this is a choice between two when there are actually a total of four options. And because of our culture's rampant egalitarianism and propensity to fuzzythot, *we* need regularly to consider all four. So still in the background is the question of whether it is better to be poor and unrighteous or rich and righteous.

Let's apply this principle to what it takes to be faithful in our missions work. It is better to be faithful and ill-equipped than unfaithful and well-equipped. This is certainly true, and it applies to *every* task we might undertake. It is better to take on a job you cannot do in your own strength while under the blessing of God than it is to take on a job you think you can do in your own strength without the blessing of God. Some men trust in chariots, and some in horses, but we trust in the Lord our God. So faith plus a great challenge reveals the glory of God. Faithlessness without a great challenge often reveals how self-sufficient men trip over nothing, and come to nothing. Nothing we say here should take away from how much God loves to tell David and Goliath stories.

But there are two other options. It is possible to be under-equipped and presumptuous and well-equipped and faithful. History is littered with the kind of faithlessness that glances at the surface of the Bible, and determines that whatever it wants, however outlandish, must be given if they just wave the name of Jesus over it. From the occasional story in the newspapers of devout Christians not taking Uncle George to the mortuary because God told them he would be raised, to the Children's Crusade, to the invasion of Canaan after Moses told them no dice (Num. 14:41,45), to the false prophets telling Jehoshaphat to go up to Ramothgilead (2 Chron. 18:11), we see the bane of presumption.

And do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings (Prov. 22:29). When God told Samuel, who was reviewing the sons of Jesse, that man looks on the outward appearance while God looks on the heart, we think that he would then have had to go through seven ruddy, tall, and powerfully built warriors until he came to David the scrawny hunchback king-to-be. But David was powerful, and good-looking, and musically-talented, and prudent in wisdom—a regular Rhodes scholar. He was one of *those* guys. God looks on the heart.

The fact that God looks on the heart does not mean that we have to be ill-equipped, or that we are supposed to plan poorly. We are supposed to trust in God, as Cromwell once said, and keep our powder dry. In missions work, craft competence should never be set aside unless the clear providence of God has determined that it must be set aside. So far as it depends on us, we should strive for excellence in linguistic mastery, excellence in cultural understanding, excellence in true accountability, excellence in economic understanding, excellence in logistical training, and excellence in theological breadth and depth. And above all, beneath all, and through all, excellence in faith.