

What's the Harm in Calling Everything Missions?

BY **JEFF JACKSON**

Jeff Jackson is the founder of Shepherd's Staff Missions Facilitators, where he currently serves as the Director of Church Relations and Missionary Care.

About fifteen years ago, I noticed that an increasing number of church leaders were intentionally propagating a redefinition and broadening of what *missions* is and who the word *missionary* should be applied to.

10 CONSEQUENCES OF THE NEW VIEW

Though well-intentioned, the view that everything is missions and every follower of Christ is a missionary comes with significant and unintended mission-impacting consequences. Here are just a few of them:

1. It causes people to gloss over the pivotal, bigger-picture facts that are clearly described in the sweep of the New Testament, diminishing the attention and weight they deserve:
 - Jesus commissioned His church by way of the apostles to go and make disciples among every ethnic group, *where those groups reside* (Matt. 28:18-20).
 - The book of Acts is a record of the church's diverse but unified efforts to take Christ's commission seriously.
 - The book of Revelation unveils that the commission Jesus gave will ultimately be accomplished and that He will receive worship from representatives of every ethnic and linguistic group God created. This is His endgame plan for humanity.

Because these realities provide the overarching framework in which God unfolds His ultimate plan, the understanding and motivation for every Christian to contribute to its completion is missing.

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2. It provokes Christians to either ignore or reinterpret some of the key terminology that is plainly used in the New Testament:
 - Jesus is referred to as an *apostle*/missionary (Heb. 3:1).
 - He gave the title *apostle*/missionary to a small and select group of His disciples that He called to do something that would require a unique level of sacrifice and self-denial (Luke 6:13).
 - All of those called to be *apostles*/missionaries were disciples, but not all of His disciples were given the calling and title of *apostle*/missionary.
 - The title *apostle*/missionary is applied to people other than the original twelve in the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament, but not to all believers. The common denominator was their apparent willingness to be sent, crossing various boundaries for the sake of the gospel and the expansion of the kingdom.
 - When explaining the gifts given by the Holy Spirit, Paul lists *apostle*/missionary as one of them, and then uses rhetorical questions to make the point that not every Christian is given every gift and the title that expresses it (1 Cor. 12:27-31).

It's noble and well-meaning to find creative ways to encourage Christians to live out their faith and share the gospel. However, if God designed diversity and distinctions and the language used to communicate them is blurred, then language used to describe other diverse and distinct areas that God designed will be more susceptible to also being blurred to accomplish other apparently noble purposes.

3. It diminishes the desire to know and thus measure how much progress has been made toward the completion of the mission He gave to His people. And with that desire extinguished, the importance of becoming educated about the incredible ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity with which He created humanity and how it reflects His glory will be neglected.
4. It quenches the passion of God's people to pray for the remaining unengaged and unreached people groups, and the need to plead with Him to move churches and ministries to send missionaries to live among them and share the gospel.
5. It minimizes the value and significance of advocacy within the Church on behalf of those who are still unreached and the missionaries and ministries that are engaged in trying to reach them.
6. It diverts financial resources away from the small group of His people that God is still calling to relocate to places around the world that require that person to be funded from a source outside of the country where they live and serve.
7. It nullifies and neutralizes the opportunities for people to participate sacrificially and financially in completing the ultimate task the church has been given.
8. It dilutes the need and thus the passion for each member to discover what they can do to partner and participate in meaningful ways with God and the missionaries He sends to complete the task.
9. It dismantles the hard-wiring that God has placed within us to bestow gratitude, respect and honor upon those whose obedience to His calling requires an extraordinary level of self-denial, sacrifice and humility.
10. It deprives people of one of the simplest methods God has established for making the mundane meaningful—that whatever we're doing with cross-cultural missions is actually making a significant contribution towards the accomplishment of a

mission that matters, especially for those who have little to no access to the Good News.

PROVOKING A RE-EXAMINATION

Although it may seem like the consequences I've listed are possible, but not likely to become a reality, I've actually encountered each and every one of them within the sphere of the churches and their members with whom I interact as part of my job.

Because I'm convinced that this new view of missions and missionaries is harmful to the successful completion of the mission God has given to His people, I point out some of the consequences listed above to those who have bought in to it.

If that doesn't seem to get any traction or notice, I add these points:

- We don't say that every Christian is a pastor even though they do a few of the things that pastors do.
- We don't say that because every person is able to render some level of medical care to others that they should be given the title of doctor.
- We don't say that because every person in the Coast Guard knows how to swim, all of them should be called Rescue Swimmers.

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It is very important that we understand the biblical context and proper motivation to encourage people to share their faith. Our reasoning is easily influenced by our hyper-individualistic extreme egalitarian culture. There is a dangerous tendency to ignore the implications of redefining words like "mission" and "missionary." We must be very careful not to bend the meaning of words and manipulate them into what we want them to mean. Descriptive titles have meaning! Pastors, doctors, and Rescue Swimmers identify specific people with unique roles. If we manipulate words to mean something else then we lose the power of their descriptive nature. Words have meaning. 