



“The Other Side of Zeal”

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David Platt’s book is a mission mobilizer’s dream. Rarely do high-profile pastors take it upon themselves to call the church to a lifestyle of radical obedience in fulfilling God’s global purpose. Rarer still are those who end up saying it better than we do. God will use this book to inspire many to global service, just as He has used John Piper, Rick Warren and Bob Roberts (to name a few) who have also used their pastoral role to cast a global vision.

That said, I would like to focus on a couple problems that often accompany mission zeal. Before I begin, let me say that I am one who, if forced to decide between the two, will take zeal over knowledge any day of the week. I don’t want to rain on our own parade or take anything away from the inspiration and fervor resulting from this book or any other kind of mobilization. However, since we don’t have to decide between zeal and knowledge, and can actually pursue both, a word of caution is often necessary to guide our zeal in a positive direction.

One consequence of mission zeal is triumphalism, which still remains on the American mission landscape. Let me pick on the word “transformation” for a minute, a word now common in mission parlance. It is ironic to me that we evangelicals, whose personal transformation is often suspect, are quick to launch extravagant ministries and projects declaring the transformation of a people, city or nation. I realize that we’re merely following the ideals found in Scripture, but the result is that our bark is always worse than our bite. Have we ever achieved such transformation anywhere in the world? Everywhere I’ve looked where God has undoubtedly and irrevocably re-directed lives in a Christ-ward direction, there are still evidences of depravity and sin. Why?

If it is true that every believer today has been transformed by Jesus, shouldn’t we expect a greater result? Shouldn’t a billion or so individual transformations make a bigger dent in the world? If Jesus and His disciples turned the world upside down, what is wrong with the rest of us?

The only answer I see is that transformation is usually a process, not a point-in-time event. I guess it just wouldn’t suffice to speak of God “saving us,” “forgiving us” or “guiding us” (all biblical phrases, by the way, and all parts of a process). That is not enough for us. We’re after total transformation. Can we be a little less dramatic? Can we be a little more realistic this side of heaven? Unfortunately, it just occurred to me that we used the word “transformation” in our recent vision statement re-write. Back to the keyboard!

A second consequence of mission zeal is amateurism. Dr. Ralph Winter used to say that the process of taking the gospel from one culture to another is the most complex enterprise known to man. Think about it. Not only do we have to cross cultures to even understand the Bible which records the message of salvation (culture A to culture B), we have to cross yet another culture every time we take it somewhere else (culture B to culture C). Each of these cultures is irreducibly complex, and yet we must navigate among three of them. Now, if this is the case, should it not be handled with great care? Does this interplay between cultures become a sandbox for us to play in or a vast universe for us to humbly and diligently explore?

Don’t get me wrong here. I’m not suggesting that the world and its cultures are off-limits to all but the elite. But there needs to be a much stronger relationship between that elite (in this case, missiologists) and the rest of us who

simply want to obey the Great Commission. The best present example of such amateurism is the short-term missions movement. In a January 2008 article in *Missiology*, Dr. Robert Priest writes, “The short-term missions movement is a populist movement, emergent not out of the strategic vision of leading missiologists or theologians, but out of grass-roots impulses. It is largely a lay movement, and the writings intended to train and orient short-term leaders are missiologically unsophisticated and frequently anti-intellectual.” Priest goes on to decry the lack of intention on the part of missiologists to engage with short-term practitioners. In short, a gap exists between mission enthusiasts and mission “experts.”

Whose job is it, then, to bridge this gap? In my opinion, both sides need to take some steps toward one another. Missiologists need to help create practical programs that encourage wise mission theory and practice among mission enthusiasts. In turn, mission enthusiasts need to see the value and necessity of good missiology and seek all the help they can get before heading out.

Short-term workers *CAN* go overseas and bring credible contribution to mission efforts. Churches *CAN* get involved in global mission without creating dependency and dysfunction. But that road has not yet been paved, and is at present a mere trail. Those of us in the mission world owe it both to the people at the end of that trail as well as those walking on it, to turn it into a highway. While David Platt has inspired mission zeal, we in the mission industry must do all we can to help direct that zeal in appropriate and effective ways. Zeal is great. Zeal combined with wisdom is greater. f