

## EQUIPPING THE PEOPLE OF GOD FOR THE MISSION OF GOD

# HOW ARE WE DOING?



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Seven years ago, I wrote an article for this magazine entitled "What DNA Are We (Really) Reproducing?" (*Mission Frontiers*, July 2006) In that article I questioned the ability of the American Evangelical Church to field adequately conceived and prepared missionaries without a major reorientation of the culture of the Evangelical Church. After seven additional years of reflection and time working with several more cohorts of missionary candidates (their agencies and their churches) I have to confess that my 2006 assessment was overly optimistic on more than one front. In the 2006 article I said;

We will never be free of the problems that cultural Christianity breeds unless we deal with these problems at their root. If we are content to maintain and promote a mission strategy that accepts the status quo in North American Christian culture, we can assume the strong likelihood of either failure or recidivism in our training of missionaries. It is likely that North American Evangelicalism will need to reinvest or reinvent itself as a new people and a new culture for these problems to be completely eradicated.

When I wrote this I was hopeful that given time, the Evangelical church would make the necessary corrections in how it is the Church and how it does church. What I failed to take into consideration was how deeply ingrained the problematic values were to the culture of Evangelicalism. The culture of the American Church has developed over a considerable period of time. One of the battles that the Church has fought is to be in the world but not conformed to the world. Every human is in a constant process of being conformed to the world (and his culture) or being transformed and remade in the likeness of Christ (Romans 12). The most significant problems for the Church originate in our becoming lost in earthly cultures. The net effect is that we attribute our cultures' values and beliefs to God and, in essence, reinvent God in our own image. This process has changed our reading of the Bible, our understanding of the gospel and our perception of our place in the world as the Church and our duties as the children of God.

There are a number of biblical values that the western Church has contextualized to the point of syncretism. This syncretism has forced the Church further and further away from biblical patterns of behavior and has blinded us to how it has changed us as a people. In the process we have lost most of the belief-driven values that empower us to be a world changing force, a reflection of the eternal Word and a people that show the unmistakable presence of Jesus in our midst. We have sacrificed transformation for culturally-determined “sacred cow” practices.

Sacred Cows that need to be turned into hamburger:

1. Worship services  
ad nauseum
2. Preaching without  
teaching/training
3. Orthodoxy without  
orthopraxy
4. Proliferation of  
church property  
dedicated to no one  
but those already Christians
5. Education as sufficient preparation for ministry  
without character development and competence  
in disciple-making
6. Understanding the “gospel” as primarily an issue  
of salvation.

As we have worked with young men and women these deficiencies have become very notable and visible. American evangelicals do not understand “worship” as something we do to honor our relationship with God and that requires us to bring something to the presence of God as an act of worship. Quite often a worship service is an event that is viewed as either entertainment or an event from which we should get something. God is secondary if he is a factor at all. The idea that our lives should be seen as an act of worship is often something completely missed by the evangelical.

One of the more disturbing offenses is the idea that what is experienced as “preaching” in a service is somehow teaching or equipping the congregation for future ministry. The idea of teaching denotes that learning is going on or that the desired outcome of teaching is learning, where revealed truth is applied to life in obedience. There are a number of

incompatibilities with calling what we do in our services as “teaching.” First the setting is all wrong. Our Sunday experience is a one-way communication process where congregants are passive listeners. If we were concerned about teaching it would need to be two-way with active participation from both sides of the conversation. But it is also possible to utilize the service to communicate a message that we come back to later in the week in small groups or other venues where two-way communication is possible. This would enable something approaching learning to take place. Since many, if not most, churches never take the message preached beyond the time it consumes in

the service, most missionary candidates do not understand the difference between teaching and entertainment—I mean preaching. The missionary candidate is seldom shown disciple making or church

planting, nor is he trained or apprenticed in these roles as he seeks to become a competent disciple-maker himself.

The issue of orthodoxy being a litmus test of a healthy church and healthy believers is one of the historic developments that has been forgotten by the Church. Right thinking (orthodoxy) is always paired with right living or right behavior (orthopraxy) in the Scriptures. The understanding is that a changed allegiance from living in spiritual darkness to following Jesus will also bring with it a changing lifestyle. Historic records prove this point. *Fox’s Book of Martyrs* is full of such evidence. But with dramatic and, most often, unfortunate culture changes that took place in the Church from the second century onward, orthopraxy became less and less a virtue and signing statements of faith or ascribing to

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doctrinal statements became the measure of success. When this is paired with a lack of understanding or interest in discipleship, we end up with missionary candidates who know what is doctrinally accurate, but who do not know how to apply these values to their total existence in their own culture, to say nothing of how this would be done in another culture.

The American evangelical preoccupation with church buildings and massive building projects is primarily a problem in its lack of focus on serving others and particularly the have-nots of the world.

The whole discussion of whether property and buildings are a good investments for the kingdom would change dramatically if our buildings were done to meet the needs of the larger community, particularly those suffering or in need.

The Christian habit is to build to meet Christian needs and this preoccupation is most often the single most significant evidence of an earthly culture at work conforming the Church to the world instead of to Jesus.

A more realistic understanding of our “edifice problem” is that in much of the unreached world, church buildings will be neither possible nor affordable and so the missionaries and the believers will need to conceive of a church system that exists and thrives in the absence of buildings. For American evangelical missionaries, this will require learning unlike any they have had to do up to this point, and the ability to think outside their own cultural box. The patterns and practices that they have learned as spectators at countless church services will be counterproductive in preparing them for cross-cultural disciple-making.

For many Christians the word “training” connotes education. I would never want to have be operated on by a surgeon who had never been to medical school, but neither would I like to be the first person on which that a surgeon, fresh out of medical school, operated. The medical profession is a good example from which to draw. A person desiring to be a surgeon needs to jump through a fair number of educational hoops in order

complete his or her undergraduate degree. Then, the grueling first year of medical school happens where the intention seems to be to either torture the student into withdrawing or hardening the survivor to the reality of his or her profession. After three years of medical school, the student must intern for a year during which he or she is disciplined by a more experienced doctor. This is followed by three or more years serving as a resident. Medicine is one of the few professions where mentoring or discipleship is a common and indispensable practice.

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Often the only requirement to serve

as a missionary is to pass some psychological tests, be able to raise financial support and attend the mission agency’s one or two week indoctrination session. After these cursory preparations, the person can report and in many situations, if they are serving on a team, no one on the team has more experience in disciple-making than they do, including the team leader! One more facet of this problem is that many missionary candidates have significant and deep personal issues that need to be dealt with before entering the pressure cooker of foreign cross-cultural service. When they do not remediate these issues ahead of deployment, the pressures, spiritual warfare and interpersonal complexities of life often turn them into casualties and attrition statistics. In the current state of the Christian world it is incomprehensible why any mission agency would not prepare their candidates thoroughly. Should not missionary candidates have proven their ability to make disciples and plant churches before they are sent to do so cross-culturally?

Lastly, we come to the word “gospel”. What does this mean? For the American Evangelical Christian, it is most often associated with the idea of Jesus’ death and resurrection as an act of penal substitution for the sins of the world (or some subset of this depending on your

theology). In a recent book, Scot McKnight describes the situation this way:

Most of evangelism today is obsessed with getting someone to make a decision; the apostles, however, were obsessed with making disciples. Those two words—decision and disciples—are behind this entire book. Evangelism that focuses on decisions short circuits and—yes, the word is appropriate—aborts the design of the gospel; while evangelism that aims at disciples slows down to offer the full gospel of Jesus and the apostles.<sup>1</sup>

In the world of the Muslim sheikh, Buddhist priest or Hindu guru decisions are neither individual nor do they lead to visible transformation in society. The world outside the kingdom of God awaits the King and his kingdom that defeats sin, suffering and death once and for all. Most statistics related to conversion from these mission fields say that Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus become followers of Jesus because of the noticeably different and changed lives of the missionaries with whom they have relationships. In spiritual terms, they see Jesus and do what they have been meant to do before the foundation of time; they fall on their knees and confess, “My Lord and my God.” But what must happen next in their life is discipleship. No one can call himself a follower of Jesus who is not being changed into his likeness. This is true in Asia, Africa and the Middle-East and it is true in North America.

The most significant issue that we face in preparing men and women for the mission field is that American Christians are not primarily representative of the biblical idea of being a follower of Jesus and they do not embrace enough of the beliefs and values associated with Jesus. What the American Christian missionary represents is a culturally conformed church that will unwittingly reproduce its own culture and communicate its values as the gospel and as central to being a follower of Jesus. Across the world this has led Muslims,

Buddhists and Hindus to believe that being a follower of Jesus means becoming a western Christian, and most want no part of this. In the course of this author’s almost thirty years of working with missionary candidates I have found that the majority of those men and women required major reconstruction of their understanding of reality, and very frankly, our efforts were not always successful. Matthew 28 tells us to go and make disciples of all *ethne*. We need to thoroughly rethink our methods and practices of pre-field training of missionary candidates with a focus on effective disciple-making, because if we do not, if discipleship happens at all, it will be to make disciples of American evangelical culture and not of Jesus and the kingdom of God. MF

<sup>1</sup> McKnight, Scot (2011-09-06). The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited (p.18). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

