

# When Everything is Missions

A REVIEW BY  
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“You keep using that word; I do not think it means what you think it means.” Any respectable connoisseur of American film recognizes this quote from Inigo Montoya in the 1987 romantic comedy *The Princess Bride*. Throughout the movie, the Sicilian boss and hot-air artist, Vizzini, repeatedly describes the unfolding events as “inconceivable.” Eventually Montoya, the personable swordsman, points out the obvious—when you keep using a word in so loose a fashion you eventually stop making much sense!

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Much like the intelligent Montoya in *The Princess Bride*, Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison in their book *When Everything is Missions*, bring to the surface the state of confusion surrounding the term *missions* and its variations. They observe that a rampant embrace of “missional” language in the Body of Christ, while helpful in some regards, has led to an unfortunate or even tragic disconnect from the biblical mandate to make disciples of all peoples and plant churches cross-culturally. Words and definitions matter. Unless we are clearer about our words and definitions, we risk making the tragic mistake of missing the specificity, and by default, the priority, of God’s essential purpose.

If we’re going to be missional, we’d better learn what it means that God has a mission! Spitters and Ellison point out that this is an innately biblical pursuit. When we’re not biblical in our broadest frame of reference, our activity boils down to personal passions rather than God’s revealed purpose or direction. The many varieties of Christian activity such as personal evangelism, helping the poor and serving the local church are all biblical but are not God’s *central* purpose. Rather, they are outcomes

of his purpose, of His mission. God’s mission is to be known and worshiped among all peoples. This purpose is worked out through the sending of His Son who is to be declared among the nations.

While the authors do embrace Christian ministries that pursue social transformation, they see true transformation as dependent on the prior existence of Christ followers in every culture. Spitters writes:

To cross the barriers that missions requires, we must bring significant focus and special emphasis in the Church to making disciples resulting in churches. Without this regular and specific emphasis on “making disciples of the nations,” the needs and outreach of the local church will always, quite naturally, receive the greatest attention of our efforts...while the voices of those with no access become a distant memory until next year’s “Mission Sunday.”

In other words, fully equipped disciples in every nation is the priority outcome.

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The priority outcome! This one concept alone stands in contrast to ministry activists whose mandates for action might, if we’re honest, be derived from rabid passion for quick success stories and adventurism. The pursuit of *the priority outcome* often requires a long obedience in the same direction. Unfortunately, many pastors and churches find it much easier to pursue project-based strategies, both locally and cross culturally, whose benefits are far more for the success of the church and credibility of the church leaders. If we can say “we’re global,” “we’re missional,” “we help people,” then we are good pastors, good churches and good Christians. This cannot be our goal. If we are passionate about transformation, our

ultimate pursuit must be the gospel within every people. Spitters and Ellison remind us that when the work of missionaries has focused on *the priority outcome*—one centered in seeing obedient, worshiping communities of Jesus followers emerge where they didn't previously exist—we see the most overall transformation. This includes economic development, health improvement, infant survival, societal justice, literacy, benefit to women, and local ownership of problem solving. Truly, “making disciples who birth the local church is the key to both evangelism and social transformation.”

While some will certainly be uncomfortable with the narrow specificity of missions defined in this book, the inflated distortions of biblical mission are potentially far more devastating. Ellison spends well-placed effort illustrating the detrimental effects when Christians with weak concepts of missions encounter organizations or leaders who peddle equally weak frameworks. In one example, we see finances directed to schemes which pay “native missionaries” who aren't even missionaries! Aside from the devastating dependency this creates, it also wallows in an ideology of “proxy” mission where comfortable Westerners exempt themselves from the biblical identity of being “the sent out ones.” Ellison provides numerous other examples of so-called mission activity, some of which are clearly unethical or deceptive, such as calling something global when it's clearly local. Other activities such as children's outreach or Christian radio can be applauded and supported, but should not be confused with the essential task of discipling the nations. Conflating all ministries into the missions bucket leaves a massive imbalance of effort and prioritization applied toward those without any access to the knowledge of Jesus.

*When Everything is Missions* leaves us with the exhortation and fundamental tools to pursue the critical soul searching required of thoughtful, caring and biblical Christians. This soul searching is multi-faceted. Inwardly it calls each of us to be an audience to our own motives and passions which unexamined may or may not line up with the desires and passion of God. Soul searching also includes evaluating the soul of the Church itself. We are defined by our priorities which are expressed in what we actually *do*. The church must be evaluated by its faithfulness to God's priorities and by its tenacious stand against mission drift. Spitters and Ellison leave us with practical ways to pursue and live out a well prioritized mission vision. These range from the somewhat inward disciplines of prayer, repentance and reclaiming mission but they also include practical alignments with God's mission—embracing ministries such as mobilization, giving, training and organizing.

Above all, soul searching must include the pursuit of biblical clarity and obedience. In one excellent example, the authors discuss the “deadly sin of sequentialism” or our tendency, based on a misinterpretation of Acts 1:8, to exempt ourselves from cross-cultural or “ends of the earth” efforts. We do this, because we believe we must first focus on “our Jerusalem” and miss, or disregard that “the vision for a ministry to all nations was to be a part of all discipleship and church-planting efforts from the very beginning.” In compelling fashion, Spitters and Ellison exhort us to

renewed and reinvigorated commitment to the biblical, apostolic, missionary model and vision that fueled the apostle Paul, Barnabas and Silas and that has propelled the expansion of the Church throughout the last 2,000 years – that the gospel must reach those who have never heard (Rom. 15:20).

In a world of tribal knowledge and utilitarian confusion about missions, Spitters and Ellison provide us with a conceptual and practical grounding in the beautiful essence of God's missional heart and activity. If shared with Christian leaders and passionate believers, it will be a meaningful contribution to the great cause of seeing God worshiped and followed in every place and people on earth.

These thoughtful writers and leaders also embrace the difficult conversations that still must take place in missions. Certainly, we would all benefit from more clarity on the pros and cons of church-based sending and the role of agency partnerships in a culture that some missiologists evaluate as containing excessive and culturally bound church localism. We should also study pressure of success models that Western churches and pastors experience. This may help relieve us from the trap that missions, however people like to define it, is often a password that gives us a distorted credibility. Spitters and Ellison welcome these conversations and many others. They've even created a publicly viewable platform for discussion with top mission leaders—check out *The Mission Table* at [www.themissiontable.org](http://www.themissiontable.org).

*When Everything is Missions* is an accessible little book that, like Inigo Montoya, remind us that words should mean something—particularly the word missions. But this book does much more. It gently exposes a sensitive issue—Christians are missing a biblical paradigm to guide our motives, our understanding and our strategies. Biblical paradigms don't come through practical utilitarian plans to fix the world; they are revealed to us in the outworkings of a God who is fulfilling His mission. Our greatest need is to be formed and molded in this paradigm. We need to be disciplined. Few Christians take the time to explore in depth the idea that we have a great God, who is fulfilling a great purpose, to form a great people from among all peoples, for His ultimate glory. Maybe the Church needs to slow down its missional activism just enough to reacquaint itself with this foundational story. Once we encounter and respond to this revelation, we will be blessed and we will be a blessing. 

