

We Are Not All Missionaries, But We Are All on Mission!

An Interview with Dr. David Platt

DR. DAVID PLATT

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Over years of ministry you regularly speak and declare the centrality of missions to unreached and unengaged peoples as the primary missions focus of local churches. What is the foundation of your prophetic challenge to the local church?

Jesus' words. He has clearly commanded us not just to make disciples among as many people as possible, but to make disciples of all the nations, among all the peoples (Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 24:47). This, after all, is the ultimate purpose of God in history: to save men and women from every nation, tribe, and tongue for His glory (Rev. 5:7-9ff.). Therefore, every follower of Jesus and every leader in the church should live to see every nation reached with the gospel. If we're not focused on reaching those not yet reached, then we are either disregarding or disobeying the Great Commission.

For the past 50 years or more many believers have exited church doors and parking lots to a sign saying "You are now entering your mission field." Can you give us the good, the bad and the ugly of that phrase?

The good: we are indeed commissioned by Christ to live on mission wherever we go, and that starts wherever we live, work and play.

The bad: An emphasis on "your mission field" can cause unhelpful tunnel vision such that you focus on the people/place right around you to the exclusion of people/places far beyond you.

The ugly: If we all just focus on "our mission field" right around "our churches," then over two billion people will continue to be born, to live, and to die without ever hearing the gospel. We need to see the world as our mission field.

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○ How has the identification of every sincere viable ministry of the church as “missions” and calling every disciple a “missionary” been unhelpful to global missions efforts? How might you describe or illustrate the difference between one’s daily witness as His disciple to those of a missionary? Since we are all “sent” (John 20:21) isn’t every believer a missionary?

Absolutely, every follower of Jesus has been sent, commanded, and empowered to make disciples of Jesus. In this sense, we should see every facet of our lives in the context of mission. We see this all over the New Testament (arguably all over the Bible!). We are all disciple-makers on mission in the world, regardless of where we live. And even local ministry should ultimately be aimed at global mission (seeing disciples made among all the nations).

At the same time, we also see a clear picture in a place like Acts 13 where the Holy Spirit sets apart some (not all...actually only a couple of people in the church at that time) to go where the gospel had not yet gone. Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the church specifically to proclaim the gospel and plant the church where the gospel hadn’t gone and the church didn’t exist. While the word “missionary” isn’t specifically used in the Bible, I believe it’s wise to call such people “missionaries.” Specifically, based primarily on Acts 13:1-4, I would define a missionary as a disciple of Jesus set apart by the Holy Spirit and sent out from the church to cross geographic, cultural and/or linguistic barriers as part of a missionary team focused on making disciples and multiplying churches among unreached peoples and places.

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For this reason, I would not say, “Every Christian is a missionary.” Actually, to be completely frank, I have said that before! But I wouldn’t now, and here’s why. I appreciate the impulse behind this statement, wanting to emphasize how every Christian is on mission to make disciples. But that’s also the problem. As much as I want to encourage every Christian to be on mission right where they live, if that’s all we do, then thousands of people groups and billions of people will continue without even hearing the gospel. At some point, someone has to leave where they live to proclaim the gospel and plant the church where the gospel hasn’t gone and the church doesn’t exist.

So let’s not call everybody a missionary. Yes, let’s be on mission, making disciples in the power of the Spirit right where we live.

At the same time, let’s worship and fast and pray and ask God who He is setting apart from among us to spread the gospel among the unreached.

And let’s call them missionaries as we send them to the nations.

○ **What should the priority of cross-cultural missions to unreached and unengaged peoples look like in local churches? Can every church be engaged—or does size matter?**

By God's design, every local church not only *can* be engaged, but *must* be engaged in spreading the gospel to the unreached. This just isn't an option for any church that wants to obey the Great Commission.

The question, then, is what does this look like. Certainly this will vary among different churches of different sizes with different factors at play. But here are a few key things every single church should do:

- Preach God's Word, continually show God's zeal for His glory among all nations and continually point to how God's passion for His global glory should shape the purpose of our lives, our families and His Church.
- Pray for the world. This, after all, is a command from Jesus (Matt. 9:35-38) — to pray for laborers to go into the harvest field. Every church should pray for unreached people groups to be reached with the gospel and for laborers to do that work.
- Make disciples who make disciples of the nations. Biblical discipleship must always be accomplished in a global context (not disconnected from it) with a global goal (seeing disciples made among the nations). And the core competencies of disciple-making are consistent whether someone lives in the same town where they were born or among a global city where the gospel hasn't gone. As a pastor, I am working to equip every member of the church I pastor to make disciples in such a way that God could pick them up and put them anywhere in the world, and they would know how to make disciples and gather as a church in a way that more disciples could be made and more churches could be multiplied. This is a high goal, but I just don't think I as a pastor should aim for anything less.
- Send laborers. Every church, no matter what size, can ask who God is sending out for the spread of the gospel to the unreached and respond accordingly. In the church I pastor, we have an Acts 13-type weekend periodically, where we fast and pray and worship, and we all lay our lives down before the Lord and we ask who He is sending out from among us. Then when I preach that Sunday, I ask people who believe the Lord

may be leading them to stand. I've never been in a gathering where someone didn't stand.

- Participate in short-term mission trips. Much could be said about the unhealthy pictures of short-term mission trips, but there are healthy ways to utilize short-term missions for long-term impact, both around the world and in our churches. Short-term missions will often lead to long-term missionaries (and missions engagement on exponential levels).
- Give resources toward the global purpose of God. Where our treasure is, there our heart will be also (Matt. 6:21). If we want our heart to be with God's heart for the nations, then we need to put treasure here. Every church should give financial resources for the spread of God's glory among the nations.
- I could go on and on...but hopefully this is a helpful start!

○ **We all realize the significant role and influence that pastors and key leaders, elders, etc. have in leading churches in missions vision. Why do they seem reluctant to do so?**

I think many pastors and key leaders aren't leading churches with missions vision (i.e., with a vision for how their local church can play a significant part in spreading the gospel to those who have never heard it) because those pastors and key leaders don't have a missions vision themselves. Many (maybe most) pastors and key leaders think Jesus just told us to make disciples right around us yet don't have a vision for how Jesus has commanded (yes, commanded) us to work to see disciples made far from us.

Then, when pastors or key leaders do get a missions vision, they will most certainly receive pushback in the church to that vision. You look through Scripture, and you see that the people of God have always pushed against the global mission of God. So it won't be easy. It will be costly. That means any pastor or church leader must have not only the vision of Jesus, but His courage, as well.

○ **We often observe pastors and leaders who are confused and disconnected about the mission of the church and her central role in global missions efforts. If "knowing comes before doing and shapes and informs the doing"— how**

might you encourage these pastors and leaders in their missiology and learning so they might rightly influence and lead their local fellowships?

There are many things pastors and church leaders can do to grow in this area; here are some good places to start:

- Read. Pick up a copy of John Piper's *Let the Nations Be Glad*. Read a missionary biography like *To the Golden Shore* about Adoniram Judson. Study through "God's Heart for the Nations" (a resource by Jeff Lewis available at radical.net). As you read, pray for your heart to be conformed to God's heart.
- Go. Spend time spreading the gospel where it hasn't yet gone. Lead the way in missions by being involved in missions. The key is: don't go where the gospel has gone. Go and spread the gospel where it hasn't yet gone.
- Come. We are about to start hosting Radical Intensives where we bring pastors and church leaders together to help one another think through how to shepherd, serve and lead the local church for global mission. Stay tuned for more information at radical.net.
- See. Look for the relationship between local ministry and global missions. For example, when I preached last week on marriage and divorce encouraging our members when it comes to all the challenges they're facing in marriage, I showed them the relationship between our marriages and mission. Our marriages are designed by God to display the gospel in the world. Marriage is not an end in itself. Marriage is designed by God, yes, for our good, but ultimately for His glory in the world. So let's see this tie not just in marriage, but across every facet of the Christian life. Pastoral ministry is about shepherding disciple-makers among the nations.

○ **How does having a robust missions sending culture to unreached peoples impact the health of a church? Can a church be healthy and NOT engage in "go and make disciples of all nations?"**

No. Simply put, a church will not be healthy (or biblically faithful) if it is disregarding or disobeying the Great Commission. And the converse is true. We can trust that when we are obeying and giving ourselves to the Great Commission (working to make disciples of all

the nations), we will be a healthy church. We need not worry that obeying the Great Commission will make us an unhealthy church.

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○ **During the first 300 years of church history it seems that its structures were very nimble and organized for mission rather than being structures of command and control. How can our churches including pastors and leaders reclaim, simplify and return to a missions-centered paradigm? What needs to change?**

I'm a bit hesitant to assume a "golden age" of sorts in the early Church, particularly when it seems from the New Testament that they had a lot of struggles from the start, and I assume those struggles continued in subsequent centuries. I'm also hesitant to say that the most significant problems in the Church today are structural and organizational. I think more significant challenges include consumerism, materialism, unbiblical views of the Church's mission, a lack of conviction about the gospel and a lack of zeal for God's glory.

Consequently, I would say that the challenge for any church leader in any age is to serve and lead the church with zeal for God's glory among the nations, deep conviction about the gospel (including the need for Christ to be proclaimed among all peoples) and radical surrender to be and do all that Jesus calls us to be and do in this world. As we do this, we then prayerfully ask God for wisdom to know how best to organize structures to support making disciples and multiplying churches among the nations. And as God grants wisdom, we pray for courage to do all that He is calling us to do. MF