

Toward a Biblical Missiology of Mobilization

BY RYAN SHAW

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What is God doing in mission mobilization around the world? I believe the global Church is on the cusp of an explosion of focused mission mobilization across denominations, organizations and individual local ministries. More mobilization-focused ministries, courses, tools and trainings have sprung up globally in the last decade than ever before in history.¹ We are in a changing world—where a globalized Church is positioned as never before to reach a globalized world through globalized mission mobilization.

The in-depth study of mission mobilization has generally been a neglected subject in missiology. In fact, informal searches turn up next to no literature on a theology or missiology of mobilization. This is primarily because we tend to define mission mobilization in a limited, individualistic manner rather than a holistic, corporate way intended through Scripture. Thus, it is vital to clarify a biblical missiology of mobilization. Much work has been done in the name of mobilization while often failing to adequately root that work in an overarching, big picture missiological viewpoint, informing the global Church of her mobilization responsibility beyond recruiting.

Mobilization's Western Roots

Because much of global mission and mission mobilization efforts have historically derived from

1 Some of these include Let's Mobilize His Church (Latin America), Mission Campaign Network (Kenya), Global Mobilization Network (International), Center for Missionary Mobilization and Retention (USA), Global Cast Resources (International) and many more. While many more have been around longer than a decade and continue to gain clarity and focus in mobilization. Some of these include Center for Mission Mobilization, Simply Mobilizing, Perspectives, GMMI and more. In addition, almost all of the major global mission networks like the Lausanne Committee, COMIBAM, MANI, WEA Mission Commission and more now have mobilization tracks and departments which they did not have before.

Western cultures, the individual recruitment emphasis has become normalized. Western cultures generally see the world through individualistic lenses while non-western, majority world cultures see the world through a communal, group-centered lens.² Thus, a biblical missiology of mobilization informs local ministries as a whole, not merely recruiting a few individuals as message bearers³ (alternative term for missionary). We tend to overlook the theological truth that every believer is meant to engage, in some function, in Jesus' Great Commission—whether they ever leave their hometown or not.

Reading the Bible Through A Mobilization Lens

It is possible to read the whole Bible from the viewpoint of the global mission of God, as Christopher J. H. Wright reveals.⁴ God's global mission, realized through the delegated mission of His people, binds the Bible together from beginning to end. By rooting ourselves and local ministries in the purposes revealed in God's word, we recognize the singular truth, suggested by David Bosch, that global mission is not merely an activity of the global Church, but an attribute of God Himself.⁵ God is a missionary God, Jesus is a missionary Messiah and the Spirit is a missionary Spirit. Therefore, mission mobilization starts with God Himself, who is on global mission, aligning His corporate body with the priority purpose on His heart. This is why mission mobilization matters. We do not mobilize the Church to merely good works, but to come into alignment with the heartbeat of God, where He is taking history in the culmination of His redemptive purpose (Genesis 12:3; Matthew 24:14; Revelation 7:9).

The nature of God is to consistently invite every believer and local ministry into agreement with His will—living for Jesus' glory on earth. The late Dean Gilliland,

2 Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Ministering Cross-Culturally*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986, p. 19

3 Ryan Shaw, *Spiritual Equipping For Mission: Thriving As God's Message Bearers*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014, p. 18-19

4 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010, p. 38

5 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991, 389-390

professor of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Seminary cites, “Global mission can be said to be founded on the self-revelation of God.”⁶ There is no God besides Him. He alone is Father, Creator of all things and for whom we live (1 Cor. 8:5-6). If there is one God, then He is God of all peoples. He desires every believer to recognize the universal nature of the gospel, not merely individualizing it for themselves, as is so common in the global Church. God’s redemptive purpose throughout history at its core could be considered a mission mobilization effort among His people.

Jesus’ calling of the twelve disciples can be seen as foundational mobilization. He trained them over a three-year process to lead the Church forward in the Great Commission upon Jesus’ ascension. Jesus was training the apostolic leaders who would “*turn the world upside down.*” (Acts 17:6) His earthly ministry was primarily focused on teaching the gospel of the kingdom, paving the way for His followers to take His multi-dimensional message to all the ethnic peoples. This is a core principle of mobilization. Greg Parsons relates, “Jesus didn’t focus on planting churches, on evangelism, or theological training. Rather, His ministry concentrated more on the big picture than anyone.”⁷ The global Church is called to emulate Jesus in this way.

Paul also had the primary calling of a mission mobilizer, possessing the conviction that God was the God of all peoples, laying on the Church the inescapable obligation to mission.⁸ Paul adamantly stated, “*God through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... God was in the world reconciling the world to Himself... so we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us...*” (2 Cor. 5:18-20). For Paul, God took the initiative to redeem humanity, causing those reconciled to in turn become His message bearers of grace.⁹ Paul was mobilizing the churches with the vision of God’s glory among all nations.

All Paul did was focused on planting communities of believers who would multiply themselves outward in concentric circles. His apostolic teaching had mission mobilization at its core. He was constantly pushing the boundaries of where the kingdom was already known,

looking to the “unreached” of his day (2 Cor. 10:16). His followers and churches did so as well (Acts 19:10). Paul revealed the nature of the Church with multiplying and reproducing as its core identity, not something peripheral (Romans 1:5). Mission mobilization, then, includes calling the global Church to the totality of all God meant for local ministries. This requires a clear biblical view of the essence, nature, purpose and identity of the global Church as being God’s missionary community.

The Birth of the Church at Pentecost

Acts 2 is the root of the great tree of the Church that has sprung up in every nation over the last 20 centuries. The global Church was birthed through the coming of the Holy Spirit as a completely new, unique entity. A simple interpretation of the Spirit’s filling is for the purpose of revealing God. Wherever a believer goes, whatever they do, the primary purpose of the Holy Spirit’s filling is enabling us to reveal and manifest God to others. Using this simple definition, we conclude the primary reason for the Holy Spirit’s coming is empowering a corporate people who reveal God to the world.

The global Church, God’s ‘missionary,’ Spirit-filled people, exists to reveal God to all the ethnic peoples of the world, bringing glory to Jesus as He draws millions to Himself. It is the purpose that God has put within us. This spiritual expansion principle is in our DNA, the natural outworking of a healthy organism. To be a stagnant local ministry is an oxymoron, counter to divine and natural order. Local ministries becoming ablaze with mission vision, mobilizing and equipping their own through the implementation of mobilization principles within, culminating in influencing unreached people groups are God’s primary strategies in mission. Every local ministry, no matter its size, possesses a responsibility before God in the Great Commission.

Defining Mission Mobilization

In recent decades, “mission mobilization” has become synonymous with individualized missionary recruiting, a far cry from the big-picture viewpoint of Scripture. Because we believe the Lord is inspiring a surge in biblically rooted mission mobilization across His global Church, it is vital to pursue shared understanding of what we mean by these words.

Let’s consider a few definitions as building blocks toward a comprehensive whole. Fred Markert, YWAM Strategic Frontiers leader, says, “Mobilization is the process of envisioning and educating God’s people about His

⁶ Dean Gilliland, *Pauline Theology and Mission Practice*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998), p. 50.

⁷ Greg Parsons, “Why Stay Here? Mobilizing the Home Front,” *Mission Frontiers*, January–February (1995), <http://missionsfrontiers.org>.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 51

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 56

strategic plans for the world. And it is the means of keeping them involved and moving forward until they find their specific place and role in world evangelization.”¹⁰ Larry Reesor adds to this mobilization outlook by asserting, “Mobilization is teaching believers in a local church to understand God’s global plan, motivating them to a loving response to God’s Word, and providing opportunities for them to use their gifts, abilities and resources individually and corporately to accomplish His global plan.”¹¹ In addition, Steve Shadrach helps draw attention to what he calls the “unsent” suggesting, “The ‘unsent’ are the hundreds of millions of Bible-believing Jesus followers around the world who have little or no mission vision.”¹²

Building on these helpful definitions, while rooting ourselves in a biblical viewpoint of the Church’s purpose, we can thus define mission mobilization from a global perspective in two separate ways - from a macro, body of Christ-wide perspective, as well as from a micro, individual local ministry level.

At a macro level, mission mobilization is the strategic process through which the global body of Christ is empowered by the Spirit of God to emphasize the message, vision and strategies of the Great Commission within local ministries in every nation, activating every member in their assigned roles, toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

At a micro level, mission mobilization is the strategic process of an individual community of believers moving along the journey of being educated, inspired and activated in the Great Commission, every disciple engaged and fulfilling their assigned roles in the Great Commission.

The Laborers Are in the Harvest

A favorite verse among mission mobilizers is Matthew 9:37-38, “Then He said to His disciples, “the harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.” Who are these laborers? Where do they come from? Over the last 50 years, there has been an unprecedented move of the Holy Spirit globally, thrusting millions of people

into the kingdom of God. According to Todd Johnson, director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, a majority of these are in non-western, majority-world countries throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America.¹³ So much so that Johnson affirms, “Christians can be found today in every nation of the world.”¹⁴

A friend once told me, “the laborers are already in the harvest.” What he meant was these significant “harvests” (coming to Christ within currently unreached peoples and nations) in time, produce the kingdom laborers who themselves become “scattered,” crossing cultural barriers, among the remaining unreached peoples within their own countries (near culture) and beyond (distant culture). The vast majority of newly scattered message bearer teams are part of previous “harvests” bringing them into the kingdom. This process relies on effective mission mobilization implemented within the local ministries planted through the present “harvests” across the nations coming to Jesus.

Mission mobilization, then, is meant to directly empower local indigenous ministries in every nation, full of these harvested laborers. This massive harvest force, from all nations, is made ready to be “thrust out” primarily among near culture peoples sharing language, traditions and customs, yet being from a different tribe or ethnic group, directly around them. They are mostly lay leaders and lay people—regular disciples growing in experiential knowledge of God, empowered and anointed by the Spirit, acting as conduits among every unreached community.

The Natural Response— Three Levels of Scattering

Renowned mission practitioner and author, Roland Allen, suggested God has put within every believer a natural instinct to communicate and influence others with the gospel of the kingdom using their own initiative.¹⁵ This isn’t forced upon them or even something that necessarily needs to be encouraged. It is innate to a follower of Jesus because the Holy Spirit has taken up residence within that person. Effective mission mobilization is dependent upon helping believers embrace this natural inclination, not squelching or resisting it. This inner drive is powerful, even moving the people of God to risk their lives to

10 Article in *Mission Frontiers Magazine* (January-February 2000) titled “A Fresh Perspective On Mobilizing the Church.” <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/a-freshperspective-on-mobilizing-the-church>.

11 Steve Shadrach article in *EMQ*, Volume 54, Issue 3, “Mobilization: The Fourth (and Final?) Era of the Modern Mission Movement.”

12 Article in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* titled “Status of Global Christianity 2015” https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308361629_Status_of_Global_Christianity_2015_in_the_Context_of_1900-2050

13 Todd Johnson and Sandra Lee, Article in *Perspectives Reader Fourth Edition* titled “From Western Christendom to Global Christianity”, p. 387

14 Shaw, R. Daniel. 1990. “Culture and Evangelism: A Model for Missiological Strategy.” *Missiology* 18:291-304.

15 Allen, *Spontaneous Expansion*, p. 9

impart life-giving faith to others. The hope of the gospel and the experience of its power within a believer cannot be held in for long without grieving the Holy Spirit. So, what happens when a local ministry (no matter how big or small), made up of such believers, acts on this inner impulse and is mobilized into action as a community? They are *scattered out as laborers* (Matthew 9:37).

“Scattering” has multiple layers.¹⁶ It is safe to say that biblically speaking every disciple in a local ministry is meant to “scatter” in one way or another. This can be understood as *Level One Scattering*. This predominantly means within the natural environments near the local ministry that God has put them in - their workplace, neighborhood, school, relatives and more.

Level Two Scattering is when a team of believers (lay leaders and lay people) from a local ministry, previously faithful to *Level One Scattering*, respond to the Spirit leading them to a near culture unreached people within a 50-200 mile or so vicinity of the existing local ministry. In order to raise our vision, I suggest a goal of at least 15% of members of every local ministry being scattered in this near culture way.

Level Three Scattering takes us into the more traditional approach of mission sending and is when a team of believers (lay leaders and lay people) from the local ministry embraces God’s leading to a distant culture unreached people. These may be within the same geopolitical nation; in a neighboring country; or even further away, crossing continents. If around 15% of church members have been called to *Level Two Scattering*, it is consistent to suggest 5% of members from a sending local ministry are called to *Level Three Scattering*.

The Common Unnatural Response

Contrary to the above, what is common today is for believers to remain to themselves, hidden in their cluster of Christians, taking the position that the Church is to be isolated from society at large. Believers in Indonesia, for example, may rarely interact with their Muslim neighbors, coworkers or peers in the university. This is largely due to the societal divide among Christians and Muslims and the fear sown related to the other which has been enforced over generations. This could be repeated

over and over among minority Christian communities and yet is never the intent of Scripture. God wants to be right in the midst of society, relating with the broken, the worldly, the religious, revealing Himself through wholehearted disciples.

Seeing mission mobilization in this missiological light requires taking off some blinders. Although it can seem a bit far-fetched and unrealistic, it is because the global Church has tended to minimize the biblical emphasis of the Great Commission, overlooking our core identity. The global Church’s view of mission has generally been lowered from the New Testament’s. Thus, it is necessary to regain a high view of God’s plan of redemption history, calling others to it and sparking the contagious fires of mission mobilization in our spheres of influence.

*Author’s Note—This article has been adapted from the author’s new book being released in March 2022 called *Rethinking Global Mobilization: Calling the Church to Her Core Identity*. The book seeks to lay foundations of a biblical missiology of mobilization while providing a practical framework to mobilize and equip the global Church in mobilization. The publisher, IGNITE Media, has given permission for portions of the book used in this article. MF

¹⁶ Ralph Winter, in his breakthrough presentation at Lausanne 1974, labeled three types of evangelism to three different groups - E-1 is evangelism from one person of the same culture to another; E-2 evangelism is from one culture to a near culture to their own; E-3 evangelism goes from one culture to a distant culture. These three levels of scattering are based on this E-Scale. Perspectives Reader, Ralph Winter, William Carey Library, p. 347-360



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