FOUNDATIONS

CORE MISSIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS | KEY MISSION TERMS | THE MISSIONARY TASK

FOUNDATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Preface

A MESSAGE FROM IMB

The Word of God must define and direct the work of missions. For this reason, the International Mission Board commenced a multi-year initiative aimed at clarifying the foundations from God's Word that fuel our work around the world. This initiative involved collaboration between IMB trustees, staff, and missionaries from every region of the world; pastors across the Southern Baptist Convention and professors from every Southern Baptist seminary; and various other men and women in churches and missions organizations. The pages that follow portray the fruit of this initiative.

We believe the biblical, theological foundations of missions are critical not only for missionaries, but also for the churches who send and support them. In view of Christ's command to make disciples among all the nations, pastors and members of churches alike need to know who missionaries are, what missionaries do, why the church must send missionaries, and how the church can help them succeed.

Consequently, we offer these foundations in hope that they will help not only missionaries, but also pastors and church members play their God-given part in seeing the gospel of Christ known, the grace of Christ enjoyed, and the glory of Christ exalted among the nations, particularly among the billions of men, women, and children who have never heard His name.

Introduction

The purpose of these pages is not to spell out specific missionary tactics and tools, but to answer foundational questions of who we are and what we do with implications for how we live and work around the world.

The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention exists to partner with churches to empower limitless missionary teams to make disciples and plant churches among unreached people groups and places, to the glory of God. These teams include full-time missionaries, students, professionals, retirees, national believers, and others who are each filled with the Spirit of God and are all committed to spreading the gospel of God among the lost. For us to fulfill this mission effectively, we need a unified understanding of who we are and what we do. This is true for the organization as a whole, and it is particularly true for missionaries working on the field. The purpose of these pages is not to spell out specific missionary tactics and tools, but to answer foundational questions of who we are and what we do with implications for how we live and work around the world.

Purpose Statement

The IMB Foundations document describes who we are and what we do as the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Our intention in writing this document is to accomplish the following purposes:

01
TO ARTICULATE
in clear terms our understanding of missionary identity and the missionary task to ourselves, to the churches that support us, and to the larger evangelical missions community.

02
TO ENABLE
prospective missionaries and the IMB to know if the organization is a good fit for them.

03
TO SHAPE
the training we give our missionaries and our supporting churches.

This document will be used to assess and strengthen current goals, strategies, methods, and tools.

04
TO GUIDE
strategic planning and decision-making.

05
TO DEFINE
the parameters of our stewardship of resources.

06
TO PROVIDE
the criteria for creating, evaluating, and strengthening strategies and tools for the missionary task.

This document is not a game plan to be used globally. Rather, as the name indicates, it presents foundations and parameters on which strategies and tactics can be built.

This document will be used to assess and strengthen current goals, strategies, methods, and tools. Additionally, parts of it are intended to address pendulum swings that have occurred in missionary practice through the years. Much of the document represents a consensus of convictions within the IMB and our attempts as an organization to answer critical questions that missionaries have asked for centuries. It defines our understanding of the specific role we should play within the broad spectrum of good things that Christians can do in the world, and is intended to encourage, strengthen, and bless the missionaries of the IMB.

Foundations Quick Reference

WHO WE ARE

Fundamentally, we ourselves are disciples of Jesus Christ. We need to grow as disciples of Jesus through

- **Faithfulness to Christ**
- **Faithfulness to the church**

WHAT WE DO

We exist to play our part in the great work of global evangelization by

- **Playing our part**
- **On a missionary team**
- **Wisely stewarding resources**
- **For the missionary task**

CORE MISSIOLOGICAL CONVICTIONS

1 / God is our supreme passion and His glory is our ultimate motivation.

2 / The Word of God is our ultimate, controlling authority.

3 / The Spirit of God is our guide.

4 / Prayer is central to our strategy.

5 / Salvation from sin is the greatest need of every human being.

6 / The Great Commission commands us to make disciples.

7 / Making disciples means planting healthy churches.

8 / We are committed to biblical contextualization and indigenization.

9 / Our priority: Reaching unreached people groups and places with the gospel.

10 / Our goals: Setting them for ourselves, not for God.

6 MARKS OF A DISCIPLE

1 / Transformed heart

2 / Transformed mind

3 / Transformed affections

4 / Transformed will

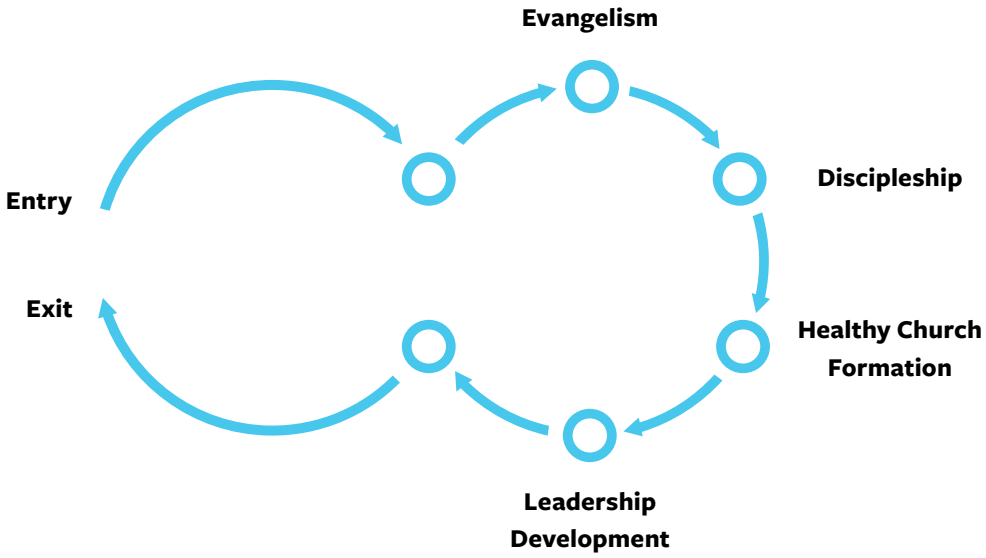
5 / Transformed relationships

6 / Transformed purpose

12 CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

- Evangelism
- Discipleship
- Membership
- Leadership
- Preaching & Teaching
- Ordinances
- Worship
- Fellowship
- Prayer
- Accountability & Discipline
- Giving
- Mission

THE MISSIONARY TASK



WHO WE ARE

Who We Are

Fundamentally, we are disciples of Jesus Christ. By His grace and by the power of His Holy Spirit, we have repented of our rebellion against God and put our faith in Jesus Christ to save us. Our primary identity is found in Him, as sons and daughters of the living God. We now live in His Spirit, by His grace, and for His glory. Our destiny is to be conformed to His image (Romans 8:29). His will for our lives is that we love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that we love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30–31). In order to be effective in making disciples for Jesus among the nations, we ourselves, both men and women, need to grow as disciples of Jesus through faithfulness to Christ and to His church.

- FAITHFULNESS TO CHRIST
- FAITHFULNESS TO THE CHURCH

Our primary identity is found in Jesus Christ, as sons and daughters of the living God.

FAITHFULNESS TO CHRIST

FAITHFULNESS TO THE CHURCH

Faithfulness to Christ in fellowship with Him must be accompanied by transformation in every area of life. / ROMANS 12:2

6 MARKS OF A DISCIPLE

1 / Transformed heart

2 / Transformed mind

3 / Transformed affections

4 / Transformed will

5 / Transformed relationships

6 / Transformed purpose

The fruit of these transformations should characterize every IMB missionary as each is continually filled with the Holy Spirit.

Effective gospel workers must walk faithfully with Jesus Christ, abiding in Him and growing as His disciples. Abiding in Christ is necessary for our personal lives as disciples, and for our strategic effectiveness as missionaries. As we abide in Jesus, His Holy Spirit gifts us, empowers us, guides us, and does more than we could ever ask or think on our own (Ephesians 3:20). This includes daily reading, studying, memorizing, and meditating on His Word. It includes daily extended, focused prayer. In keeping with the teaching and example of Jesus, it also includes periodic fasting, and probably days of more extended time in intimate fellowship with Him throughout the year. Walking faithfully with Jesus Christ as His disciple requires more than casual time alone with Him. It requires concentrated focus and ongoing discipline. Apart from abiding in Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5).

Faithfulness to Christ in fellowship with Him must be accompanied by transformation in every area of life (Romans 12:2). When we were born again, God transformed our hearts, making us alive in Christ where previously we were dead in our sin. This first transformation was instantaneous, but other transformations follow that are progressive in nature. The Word of God progressively transforms our minds as it reshapes our worldview. It transforms our affections as we grow to delight in the things that delight God, and to hate the things that God hates.

It transforms our wills as we learn to obey everything that God commands out of willing hearts. It transforms our relationships as we grow in love for the people of God, for our neighbor, and even for our enemies in the way that Christ loves us. We are progressively transformed in our purpose as we live for God's glory and for the advance of His gospel to all peoples and places on earth. The fruit of these transformations should characterize every IMB missionary as each is continually filled with the Holy Spirit. Our fundamental identity is that we are disciples of Jesus Christ, and this identity should shape every area of our lives (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Every IMB missionary is sent out as a member of a local church in North America. We believe that God uses the local church to disciple believers, to discern their giftings and callings, to train potential cross-cultural workers in the basics of Christian evangelism and discipleship, to assess their readiness for service, and to send them out to the nations (Ephesians 3:10). Even after they have been sent, we see the example in Scripture of gospel workers reporting back to the churches that sent them. Therefore, every IMB missionary needs to be discipled, examined, affirmed, and sent by a local church, and ideally all who serve overseas should maintain a relationship of accountability and partnership with their sending church. Not all churches understand how to send missionaries or to partner well with them, so we recognize our responsibility to provide training to churches in missionary sending and support.

Every IMB missionary also needs to be actively involved in a local church on his or her field of service. While it is true that IMB missionaries continue to relate to their sending churches in North America, such long-distance relationships do not fulfill all that is necessary in the lives of believers. Church happens where we are, with people we see and who see us on a regular basis. Therefore, IMB missionaries need active involvement in a local church, even as they seek to multiply new churches (Hebrews 10:24–25).

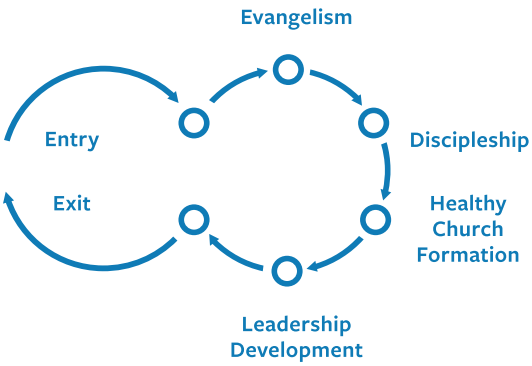
Involvement in a local church can take a variety of forms including participation in an existing church or one they are trying to plant. It can be made up of expatriates or local believers, or a combination of the two. It can meet in a house, an office building, outside, or anywhere else. Whatever the form, no believer is above the need for involvement in a local church. This means more than just attendance at worship services. All believers need committed relationships and participation in the "one another" commands of Scripture that constitute covenant membership in a particular church.[1] Therefore, all IMB missionaries should be actively involved in a local church, while maximizing fruitfulness as gospel workers engaged in the missionary task.

Even after they have been sent, we see the example in Scripture of gospel workers reporting back to the churches that sent them.

[1] *This statement reflects the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 statement on the church, which describes church members as "associated by covenant."*

All believers need committed relationships and participation in the "one another" commands of Scripture that constitute covenant membership in a particular church.

THE MISSIONARY TASK



Additionally, IMB missionaries on the field should actively participate as members of churches that align as much as possible with the theology, ecclesiology, and missiology of the churches we are planting.

In terms of **theology**, the churches in which we participate as members overseas should align as much as possible with the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*.

In terms of **ecclesiology**, these churches should reflect the Twelve Characteristics of a Healthy Church as much as possible: biblical evangelism, biblical discipleship, biblical membership, biblical leadership, biblical preaching and teaching, the biblical ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, biblical worship, biblical fellowship, biblical prayer, biblical accountability and discipline, biblical giving, and biblical mission. These should be churches in which missionaries are encouraged and nourished by the body of Christ, and in which missionaries can provide encouragement and spiritual nurture to others.

In terms of **missiology**, these churches should support, as much as possible, the missionary's commitment to the six elements of the missionary task: entry, evangelism, discipleship, healthy church formation, leadership development, and exit. Ideally, IMB missionaries should participate in a church that will partner (or is open to partnership) with their team in the missionary task. As much as possible, the churches should be churches that help, and do not hinder, our involvement in the missionary task.

IMB missionaries should seriously consider participation in churches that function within the local language and culture, and work alongside or through such indigenous churches, as much as agreement in the areas of theology, ecclesiology, and missiology will allow.

When local indigenous churches are not healthy and do not align with our missiology, we may need to do our missionary work around them. However, we should continue to seek good relationships with all genuine believers in Jesus, and ways we can work to strengthen or revitalize those churches.

- When local indigenous churches are theologically and ecclesiologically healthy but do not align with our missiology, we should seek to do our missionary work alongside them, always attempting to draw them into healthy missionary involvement.
- When local indigenous churches are healthy in all these areas, we should seek to do our missionary work within and through them.
- Our default should be to engage as much as we can with indigenous churches.

Our default should be to engage as much as we can with indigenous churches.

WHAT WE DO

What We Do

We exist to play our part in the great work of global evangelization (Psalm 105:1). We recognize that we are not the only ones God is using to fulfill His purposes in human history. Other evangelical missionary organizations committed to the biblical gospel, are engaged in global evangelization. There are also evangelical churches all over the world sharing the gospel, making disciples, and multiplying churches among those who need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. By God's grace, we work alongside them by playing our part in this great work. We work as teams, wisely stewarding the resources God has given us for the missionary task. This is true for our personnel in North America, both men and women, who participate in teams that provide mobilization, training, support, and leadership for this endeavor. This is also true for personnel on the field around the world, both men and women, who focus their energies on the six elements of the missionary task.

- PLAYING OUR PART
- ON A MISSIONARY TEAM
- WISELY STEWARDING RESOURCES
- FOR THE MISSIONARY TASK

We work as teams, wisely stewarding the resources God has given us for the missionary task.

PLAYING OUR PART

- PLAYING OUR PART
- ON A MISSIONARY TEAM
- WISELY STEWARDING RESOURCES
- FOR THE MISSIONARY TASK

Every worker in the IMB, whatever his or her role, is essential, and every one of us needs to do our jobs with faithful diligence.

/ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:58

There are certain expectations for every IMB worker, whether overseas or in North America. All of us are to abide in Christ as faithful, growing disciples of Jesus (John 15:16). All of us are to share the gospel with the lost, and all of us are to disciple believers in the context of our local church (Mark 16:15). However, each of us also has a role that is unique. Every IMB worker has a job description that defines the responsibilities he or she needs to fulfill in order for all of us together to accomplish the missionary task. Each one of us needs to be diligent in the tasks particular to that job description. As an organization, we need to provide the training and support necessary to enable each of us to do our jobs well. Every worker in the IMB, whatever his or her role, is essential, and every one of us needs to do our jobs with faithful diligence (1 Corinthians 15:58).

It is never good for an individual, couple, or family to live and labor alone. In the New Testament we see consistent examples of gospel workers operating in teams, or at least in pairs (Luke 10:1, Acts 13:2, Acts 16:39–41). There is no specific command that a missionary can only go as part of a team, but we certainly see the wisdom in working together as teams. The IMB's 170 years of experience has shown that living and working in isolation is hard on missionaries, and people working alone have a harder time staying on the field, much less thriving in their work. Missionaries need the fellowship, encouragement, and accountability that come with the presence of co-laborers, and it is unwise to go without it. For these reasons, the IMB is committed to doing missions in teams.

ON A MISSIONARY TEAM

- PLAYING OUR PART
- **ON A MISSIONARY TEAM**
- WISELY STEWARDING RESOURCES
- FOR THE MISSIONARY TASK

Missionaries need the fellowship, encouragement, and accountability that come with the presence of co-laborers.

WISELY STEWARDING RESOURCES

- PLAYING OUR PART
- ON A MISSIONARY TEAM
- **WISELY STEWARDING RESOURCES**
- FOR THE MISSIONARY TASK

Because we are stewards and not owners of any of these resources, we should welcome accountability to our sending churches and to one another.

God has blessed us with amazing resources for the task. We do not own any of them. All of them belong to God (Psalm 89:11) and thus we are accountable to God, through the churches that send and support us, for our stewardship of these resources (Hebrews 4:13). Resources include the gifts, skills, and talents of our fellow workers, and we must train, lead, support, and nurture our personnel with wisdom and love. We also have physical resources such as money and property, which we have an obligation to steward with transparent integrity, using them with maximum effectiveness and with compassion. Each of us is a steward of our time, our relationships, and our abilities. Because we are stewards and not owners of any of these resources, we should welcome accountability to our sending churches and to one another, and we should participate willingly in the reporting and accountability processes established by our organization. Knowing the sin that so easily entangles us, we should never trust ourselves apart from appropriate accountability to others (Luke 12:48). Believing that good stewardship and accountability are vital to our work, we fully support some missionaries whose full-time focus is on promoting good stewardship and appropriate accountability.

The heart of the mission God has given us is to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8), to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name (Luke 24:47), and to make disciples of all nations and peoples on earth (Matthew 28:16–20). As we play our parts on missionary teams and steward our resources, we do so because God is holy, majestic, exalted, and worthy of the praise of everyone and everything He created (Psalm 145:3). He is the sovereign ruler (Psalm 115:3) and judge of all creation (Psalm 50:6). All people everywhere are accountable to Him for every thought, word, and deed, and His justice is absolute. No evil, no sin, and no impurity can stand before Him.

We believe that all people everywhere have rebelled against God (Romans 1:21). Sin has corrupted every part of human nature, and sinful people are completely unable to save themselves or even to contribute to their own salvation. Apart from the intervention of God, every man and woman on earth is headed to eternal and just condemnation in hell (Ephesians 2:1–3).

Our God is also a God of grace, mercy, and love. Entirely of His free grace, God intervened in human history and launched a rescue operation to redeem sinful people from the condemnation they deserve (Ephesians 2:4–5). In love, God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived the life we should have lived as our substitute, and then died the death we deserved to die, taking on Himself the wrath of God due to us because of our sin (1 John 4:10). He rose from the dead, the eternal victor over sin, death, and hell. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father, where He intercedes for His people (Romans 8:34). At the end of history, He will come again to judge the living and the dead, and His reign will never end (2 Timothy 4:1).

We believe that God now commands all people everywhere to repent of their rebellion against Him and to trust in Jesus alone to save them and to rule over their lives (Acts 17:30). All who put their trust in Jesus are saved, but all who do not put their trust in Jesus are justly judged for their sins (John 3:16–18). There is no other means of salvation. We are convinced from Scripture that people must receive, understand, and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to be saved (Acts 4:12).

FOR THE MISSIONARY TASK

- PLAYING OUR PART
- ON A MISSIONARY TEAM
- WISELY STEWARDING RESOURCES
- **FOR THE MISSIONARY TASK**

In love, God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived the life we should have lived as our substitute, and then died the death we deserved to die, taking on Himself the wrath of God due to us because of our sin. / 1 JOHN 4:10

CORE MISSIOLOGICAL CONVICTIONS

Core Missiological Convictions

01
God is our supreme passion and His glory is our ultimate motivation.

02
The Word of God is our ultimate, controlling authority.

03
The Spirit of God is our guide.

04
Prayer is central to our strategy.

05
Salvation from sin is the greatest need of every human being.

06
The Great Commission commands us to make disciples.

07
Making disciples means planting healthy churches.

08
We are committed to biblical contextualization and indigenization.

09
Our priority: Reaching unreached people groups and places with the gospel.

10
Our goals: Setting them for ourselves, not for God.

GOD IS OUR SUPREME PASSION AND HIS GLORY IS OUR ULTIMATE MOTIVATION

The glory of God summarizes the seriousness, the perfection, and the infinite significance of all of God's attributes.

This is the first and most important of our missiological convictions. Real Christianity is God-centered (Colossians 1:18). Real Christianity recognizes, as Jesus Himself said, that the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Those who have glimpsed the greatness, the majesty, and the excellence of our triune God through the eyes of trust in Jesus never get over that vision (Philippians 3:8). An obsession with God and His glory is the hallmark of true knowledge of God.

What is the glory of God? The original meaning of glory implies weightiness. The glory of God summarizes the seriousness, the perfection, and the infinite significance of all of God's attributes. It sums up who He is in the awesome brightness and weightiness of His perfections.

We urgently need to capture the centrality of glorifying God in our lives and work. Too much of what passes for evangelical Christianity globally is man-centered or even self-centered. God is reduced to a means to some other end, whether it is self-fulfillment or the welfare of others (2 Corinthians 11:3–4). Discipleship becomes a self-help program that leaves huge areas of life untouched, rather than a life-long love affair with God that lays every area of life on the altar to be consecrated to Him and conformed to His image.

If the glory of God is our ultimate motivation, this will define both the goal of our task and the manner in which we pursue that task. The goal of our task is that the earth be filled with the knowledge of His glory as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14). Our passion is to see Him receive the glory that is due His name from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Psalm 96:1–9). Everything we do in missions is a means to that end. This invests a new, holy seriousness to discipleship and to the life of the church. We are not content unless His glory is proclaimed, reflected, upheld, and adored among the people to whom He has called us. The task is not about us, and it's not even ultimately about the nations. The focus is on Him (Isaiah 48:9–11).

A passion for the glory of God will also define how we pursue our task. If our supreme goal is to glorify Him, we will not be able to separate our personal lives from our work lives (James 1:21–26). The way we treat our families, entertain ourselves, spend our money, relate to others, treat our bodies, and the hidden attitudes of our hearts, cannot be compartmentalized away from our "work." It is our job to glorify Him in every area of life, not just through the tasks in our job descriptions (1 Corinthians 10:31). We also cannot accept any means to the end that does not equally bring glory to God. This passion thus has a purifying effect, safeguarding us from the temptation to take shortcuts or use worldly means in the pursuit of our work (2 Corinthians 4:2).

The goal of our task is that the earth be filled with the knowledge of His glory as the waters cover the sea.

/ HABAKKUK 2:14

THE WORD OF GOD IS OUR ULTIMATE, CONTROLLING AUTHORITY

We believe that the Bible is the Word of God. God inspired the human authors of the sixty-six books of the Bible in such a way that every word they wrote is His word, even though their human styles and personalities are evident (2 Peter 1:21). What the Bible says, God says. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Because God inspired the Bible in this way, we also believe that it is true, that it is clear, that it is sufficient, and that it is utterly authoritative.

The Bible is true. It is the very words of a God who cannot lie and who is never mistaken. The Western world may well have lost its capacity for conceptualizing absolute truth; in the Bible, absolute truth is precisely what we have, both in the big picture and in the details. God has said it, and that settles it. We can have complete confidence in everything Scripture tells us. Everything merely human, whether it is tradition, organizational policy, expert advice, personal experience, or our own wisdom, can be mistaken. The Word of God is always true. (Numbers 23:19, Psalm 119:160, John 17:17)

The Bible is clear in everything we need to know. People sometimes complain that the Bible is hard to understand, but the problem is more often reluctance to obey. God is not a failure at communication. It is true that there are minor points not essential to salvation that arouse disagreement among believers. However, in everything that is essential to know, the Word of God is clear to regenerate people who approach the text to read out of it what it says, rather than reading into it what they want it to say. (Psalm 119:99, 104, 130; Proverbs 2:6; John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:12–16)

The Bible is sufficient. We do not need another source of revelation. We do not need to look outside the Bible to learn who God is, or how to be saved, or how to live as a Christian or serve God in the ministries He has given us. In particular, in the great work of global evangelization, we do not need any source other than the Bible to shape and determine our strategies. Information from other sources may assist our labors, and God often calls on us to use wisdom in making decisions, but the Bible alone is sufficient to direct our work. (Psalm 119:98–100, 2 Timothy 3:16–17)

Finally, **the Bible is authoritative.** It is the very Word of God, so it carries the authority of God Himself, and God is the sovereign king of heaven and earth. The Bible is a higher authority than any human government or any human teaching. It is the highest authority in the universe. Therefore, we must approach the Bible with a precommitment to trust and obey everything it teaches us. (Deuteronomy 12:28, 13:4; 1 Samuel 15:22; Isaiah 66:1–2; Acts 5:29)

All of this means that we must derive our strategies and tactics from the Bible. We do not devise our own plans and then seek support for them in Scripture. Rather, we go to the Bible to learn what it teaches us to do, and we do that. We evaluate every teaching, every method, and every result by the supreme authority of Scripture. Because God rules our lives and our work, His Word must rule over them.

NOTES

THE SPIRIT OF GOD IS OUR GUIDE

We believe that God has given His Holy Spirit to everyone who trusts in Jesus as Savior and Lord. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts sinners of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). It is the Holy Spirit who brings spiritually dead people to new life in Christ through regeneration (John 3:8). The Holy Spirit conforms believers into the image of Christ by putting sin to death and cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in them (Galatians 5:22–23). It is the Holy Spirit who gives believers spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ, and who empowers their service in the church and in the world (1 Corinthians 12:4–11). The Holy Spirit inspired the words of the Bible, and now illuminates the minds of believers to understand and believe the Bible (2 Peter 1:20–21). It is the Holy Spirit who guides believers into truth, and the same Spirit who enables them to obey the truth (John 16:13). Apart from the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no Christian life and no Christian ministry or mission.

The Holy Spirit exalts Jesus and points to Him, and the work of the Spirit can never be separated from the centrality of Christ as He is revealed in the Bible (John 16:14). The Holy Spirit is also inseparably connected to the words of Scripture. The Spirit who inspired the words of the Bible will never guide anyone to believe or to do anything contrary to the Bible. Rather, the Holy Spirit primarily works by calling to mind and applying the words of the Bible in the life of the believer (John 14:26).

We recognize that there are many areas of life where the teaching of Scripture gives us general parameters and principles where there are no specific commands or instructions to help us make a particular decision. (An example is marriage, where the Bible tells us what kind of person we should marry, but not which particular person we should marry. The same thing would apply to a decision between equally biblical and equally urgent ministry options.) In these cases, as in all decisions, we look to the Holy Spirit for guidance, recognizing that He often works through ordinary means—the counsel of others, the circumstances of divine providence, and the exercise of wisdom and sound judgment.

Given the essential role of the Holy Spirit in all areas of Christian life and mission, everyone who seeks to serve God should labor to keep in step with the Spirit, doing nothing that would grieve or quench Him through unholiness or neglect (Galatians 5:25, Ephesians 4:30, 1 Thessalonians 5:19). Given the strong connection between the Spirit of God and the Word of God, those who desire to serve God should fill their minds and hearts with Scripture, learning it and meditating on it (Psalm 1:2). Finally, given the close connection between the Spirit of God and the body of Christ, believers who wish to be useful to God should participate faithfully in the teaching and accountability of their local church (Colossians 3:16).

Apart from the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no Christian life and no Christian ministry or mission.

PRAYER IS CENTRAL TO OUR STRATEGY

We are unashamedly supernaturalist in our worldview, and we believe God works supernaturally through our praying.

Jesus commanded us to pray for laborers for the harvest (Matthew 9:37–38). He told us that we should always pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1–8). The early church prayed for evangelistic boldness in the face of persecution (Acts 4:29). The apostle Paul told us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and requested prayer for His own evangelistic witness (Ephesians 6:18–19). We can do no less. We believe that apart from Jesus we can do nothing (John 15:5). Therefore, prayer must be central to all our strategies. This includes praying diligently ourselves, recruiting others to pray for us and for our work, and training new believers to pray. It also includes giving thanks to God for His answers to our prayers (1 Thessalonians 5:18). We are unashamedly supernaturalist in our worldview, and we believe God works supernaturally through our praying. Prayer is not just something we do before we work. Prayer must permeate our work.

SALVATION FROM SIN IS THE GREATEST NEED OF EVERY HUMAN BEING

The world is full of need, and people who are filled with the Spirit of Jesus Christ are drawn to meet needs wherever they find them. Because the vastness of human suffering tugs us in so many directions, it is necessary for us to identify the greatest need of humanity, and to keep that need in its proper place of priority. The greatest need of every human being is salvation from sin and eternal life with God.

The Bible paints a sobering picture of human sinfulness. Flowing from the rebellion of our first parents against God, every person who has ever lived (except for Jesus alone) has been born a sinner (Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:23, 5:12–19). According to the Bible, sinful men and women are guilty before a holy God and deserve His wrath. Their sin has affected every area of human nature so that they cannot understand the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14), they do not love the things of God (John 3:19–20), they cannot obey the commands of God (Romans 8:7), they are not seeking God (Romans 3:11), and they cannot please God (Romans 8:8). Sinful men and women who have not

been set free by the grace of God are slaves to sin (Romans 6:16–18). They are not merely sick; they are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1). They are under the wrath of God (Romans 1:18, Ephesians 2:3). They face condemnation in hell, which is eternal, horrifying, and completely just (Matthew 10:28, 13:36–43, 18:9, 25:41–46; Mark 9:43–47; Luke 12:5; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10; Hebrews 10:26–31; 2 Peter 3:7; Revelation 20:11–15).

In His incredible mercy, God has provided a way of escape from this judgment that we deserve. Our Lord Jesus, who is God the Son in human flesh, lived the life we should have lived and then died the death we deserved to die, taking the judgment we deserved on Himself (2 Corinthians 5:21). He rose from the dead as the eternal conqueror of sin, death, and hell (1 Corinthians 15:3–4, 20–28). He is now sending out His people to every people group and place on earth to bring the good news that everyone who repents of their sins and trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ will be forgiven and granted the free gift of eternal life with Him (Matthew 28:16–20, Luke 24:44–49, Acts 1:8). This is the only way for us to escape judgment. People must hear (or read, or have signed to them) the gospel message and believe it in order to be reconciled to God and saved from hell. There is no other way to be saved (John 3:18, 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 John 5:11–13).

This has clear implications for the missionary task. We must make it our priority to proclaim the gospel, particularly to those who have never heard it. In light of the realities of sin and judgment, we are unapologetically evangelistic.

The greatest need of every human being is salvation from sin and eternal life with God.

THE GREAT COMMISSION COMMANDS US TO MAKE DISCIPLES

6 MARKS OF A DISCIPLE

1 / Transformed heart

2 / Transformed mind

3 / Transformed affections

4 / Transformed will

5 / Transformed relationships

6 / Transformed purpose

The Bible never envisions evangelism that simply results in converts. The destiny of every believer in Jesus is to be conformed to His image (Romans 8:29). The central command of the Great Commission is to make disciples, which means that the task of missions is to make lifelong learners/followers of Jesus who progressively put sin to death (Romans 6:1–23, 8:13) and who clothe themselves in the character of Christ (Galatians 5:22–23, Colossians 3:1–17, Hebrews 12:14, 1 Peter 1:16).

Evangelistic campaigns, while good, are never enough. Biblical missions always includes intentional strategies and diligent work to nurture new believers into the image of Christ. This includes the **six transformations:** transformed heart, mind, affections, will, relationships, and purpose (see "Disciple"). This lifelong process is never complete until we see Jesus face to face (1 John 1:8–10, 3:2–3). The missionary role is particularly critical in the early stages of the life of a new disciple. Just as a newborn baby requires much more help than an adult, so also new believers need help to acquire biblical knowledge and spiritual disciplines to continue their growth toward the image of Christ (1 Peter 2:1–3). These disciplines include such things as Bible study, prayer, and fasting, but critically, should also include engagement in a healthy church.

MAKING DISCIPLES MEANS PLANTING HEALTHY CHURCHES

Local churches are incredibly valuable in the sight of God. Each local church is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25–33). What groom does not cherish and go to great lengths to protect and provide for his bride? Each church is also the body of Christ, with Jesus Himself as the head (1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Ephesians 5:23). Scripture calls local churches the household of God (1 Timothy 3:15), the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16–17), and the pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). Jesus shed His blood for the church, purchasing it with His death on the cross (Acts 20:28). God takes the church so seriously that He promises destruction to anyone who destroys His church (1 Corinthians 3:17). If God places this kind of value on the local church, so must we.

Although a number of different settings can contribute to a believer's spiritual growth, the full measure of biblical discipleship happens in a local church. First Corinthians 12 makes it clear that God intentionally gave believers different gifts and made us mutually interdependent, and Ephesians 4:1–16 teaches us that we grow to maturity in Christ in the context of a local church. Not only are the gifts of the leaders essential to healthy spiritual growth, but also each part of the church, each member, must fulfill His or her role for any of us to grow up into Christ.

Although a number of different settings can contribute to a believer's spiritual growth, the full measure of biblical discipleship happens in a local church

This has four implications for our missiology:

1 / Since missionaries themselves are disciples of Jesus who cross barriers to make other disciples for Jesus, missionary training should be rooted in healthy local churches.

2 / When we make disciples where there are no churches, the task necessarily includes church planting.

3 / The most effective way to advance the gospel into the unreached world is to plant churches that multiply churches.

4 / Discipleship requires churches in which each part, each member, works properly, so our aim must be healthy churches that exhibit the characteristics of a biblical church as soon as possible.

WE ARE COMMITTED TO BIBLICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION AND INDIGENIZATION

Our goal is to become acceptable outsiders.

The gospel is not tied to any culture, including our own, and it can make itself at home in any culture, while challenging and transforming every culture. Our goal is not to turn people from other cultures into North American Christians, but rather to allow the Holy Spirit to transform them into biblically faithful Christians within their home culture. Our goal is also not to create dependence on any foreign source, but rather to raise up disciples and churches that are self-governing, self-financing, self-propagating, and self-theologizing, while remaining healthy and biblical. This has implications for how we work as missionaries, for the gospel message we proclaim, and for the churches we plant.

Missionary Workers

We should work hard to become part of the community we are trying to reach by building relationships and putting down roots among unbelievers in our focus people group. We should be lifelong learners of language and culture. We communicate the gospel most effectively when we communicate in the heart language of those we're trying to reach, and when we understand what they think and how they hear what we say. We should voluntarily give up freedoms that erect barriers to the gospel (Romans 14:13). We should act in ways that show respect for our host culture. We should distance ourselves from forms of cultural Christianity that dishonor God or that cause unnecessary stumbling blocks to our host culture. We should serve our host community and look for ways to be a blessing, on their terms and according to their understanding of their needs.

At the same time, we must never give the impression that we have converted to the local religion. We should not deny our identity as followers of Jesus (Matthew 10:32–33), even if cultural Christianity carries historical baggage and unbiblical connotations in our host culture. We need to understand where a culture is going as well as where it is, and make sure that we don't adapt ourselves to the past instead of the present. Our goal is to become acceptable outsiders. Finally, we must

not adopt any local cultural practice or attitude that violates Scripture.

The Gospel Message

Like the apostle Paul, we can use local religious or cultural references as a bridge to the gospel, as long as we do it in a way that does not imply divine inspiration or equality with the Bible. (Acts 17:28, 1 Corinthians 15:33–34, Titus 1:2)

We can and should utilize the full scope of biblical narrative to establish a worldview in which the gospel is intelligible. The Bible doesn't jump straight from the fall of man in Genesis 3 to the birth of Jesus in Matthew 1. God took centuries to establish who He is, what He requires, what humanity is like, and what He intended to do about it, before He brought Jesus on the scene. The worldview of the Old Testament is essential to understanding the biblical gospel. In this context, and in the oral cultures that make up so much of the unreached world, chronological Bible storying is a wonderful tool.

We can and should use a variety of learning styles, communication genres, and media to communicate the message of the gospel. We must find out what learning styles our host people use to communicate worldview truth, and use those to communicate the gospel.

We can use whatever name for God is most appropriate in any given language, including words such as Allah.[2] (The English word "God," after all, originally referred to pagan deities.) We must import biblical content and correct past understandings with any word we use for God. We should stress that we are calling people to a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and not to ethnic treason and the abandonment of their cultural identity.

At the same time, we can never downplay central doctrines of the gospel—particularly those that contradict the local religion or cause offense to non-Christians. We need to take

We can and should use a variety of learning styles, communication genres, and media to communicate the message of the gospel.

[2] This statement is affirmed by the IMB trustee-approved statement on acceptable contextualization.

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special care that we never de-emphasize the biblical understanding of the one true God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the deity of Christ, the reality of His death and resurrection, the necessity of His substitutionary sacrifice, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, the integrity, inerrancy, and finality of the Bible, and the radical nature of conversion, which is so extreme that it can only be described in terms of death and new life. We must remember that the purpose of contextualization is not to make the gospel comfortable, but to make it clear.

The Church

Missionaries should encourage new believers in Jesus to remain in their cultural community as much as possible. We should encourage them to maintain ethnic and cultural identities as much as they can without compromising obedience to Scripture. Their churches should reflect their indigenous culture in expressions of faith and worship, without compromising Scripture. This is particularly true in matters of style. The church should look, sound, and feel local, not foreign. New believers and churches should be directed to the Bible, and not to the foreign "expert" to answer questions about Christian belief and Christian living (2 Timothy 3:16). Missionaries should encourage them to apply Scripture to issues they face in their cultural setting, and to express their faith in ways that engage their culture. Their teaching and confessions of faith should respond to the specific issues they face in their culture. These new churches can use local cultural practices that are consistent with Scripture. Additionally, a church can meet anywhere. Neither the presence nor the absence of a building belongs to the biblical essence of church.

At the same time, there are biblical parameters that must be applied to the contextualization of churches anywhere:

- These new churches must have a clear identity as belonging to Jesus. They should not present themselves as being still essentially part of any non-Christian religion, and they should not teach or believe that any other religion, its prophets, or its books are of divine origin. (1 Corinthians 8:4–6, 10:19-22)
- Church teaching, and church confessions of faith, should maintain as central that which is central in the teaching of the Bible. It is true that each culture and each generation raises different issues, which the people of God must address from the Word of God. However, there are also core doctrines in the Bible, which are central to the faith in every age and every place.

These churches should pursue all of the aspects of a biblical church, as laid out in the "Church" definition and guidelines and "Twelve Characteristics of a Healthy Church" in Key Terms.

Indigeneity

Universal missionary experience has shown that dependence on foreign leadership and foreign funds is deadly to the health, growth, and multiplication of churches. For this reason, we are committed to the classical missiological principles of indigeneity. New churches should be self-governing, self-financing, self-propagating, and self-theologizing as quickly as possible.

Churches should be self-governing and self-led (Acts 14:23). For this reason, the normal role of a cross-cultural missionary is not to plant a church and then pastor it, but rather to plant a church and seek to raise up, nurture, and train local leaders, after the model of the apostle Paul. In keeping with our convictions about the autonomy of each local church, these new churches are not under the authority of the missionary, the mission agency, or any denominational structure, but rather are fully able to govern themselves.

The church should look, sound, and feel local, not foreign.

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Churches should be self-financed (1 Timothy 5:17–18, 1 Corinthians 9:8–11). We strongly encourage the use of local resources to meet local church needs in order that those churches might learn good stewardship, experience the joy of sacrificial giving, and present a more credible witness in their locations. Many missionaries and local leaders have witnessed the harmful effects of dependency on planting and multiplying churches. Dependency occurs when a local church requires resources from outside of its own members in order to carry out the core biblical functions of a church under normal conditions. Funding from foreign sources often comes from the best of motives and from generous hearts, but the unintended consequences can be harmful to church health and multiplication. Therefore, the IMB will not use funds to pay the salaries of pastors or to build church buildings, and we will not be conduits of funds from well-meaning churches and Christians in North America.

Churches should be self-propagating (Ephesians 4:11–14). It is too easy to live out a model in which the foreign missionary is the one who does all of the evangelism and church planting, while new national believers are passive recipients. This is both profoundly unbiblical and extremely detrimental to the advance of the gospel. Rather, missionaries should teach new believers their responsibility for the Great Commission from the very beginning of their new life in Christ, and should train and hold them accountable for evangelism and healthy church multiplication as part of their basic discipleship. Newly planted churches should be Great Commission churches from the start.

Churches should be self-theologizing (1 Timothy 1:3–5). This does not mean that biblical truth changes from one context to another, but rather that churches in different cultural contexts should express the core themes of biblical doctrine (which we confess in the Baptist Faith and Message 2000) in their own language, while also addressing the unique issues of their own context from Scripture.

OUR PRIORITY: REACHING UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS AND PLACES WITH THE GOSPEL

The theme of God's heart for people groups and nations runs from Genesis to Revelation. God has made it clear in His Word that He intends to bring the blessings of His salvation to every people group on earth (Genesis 12:1–3, Psalm 66, Isaiah 49:6, Matthew 28:16–20, Luke 24:45–47, Acts 1:8, Romans 15:20–21, Revelation 5:9, and Revelation 7:9–10, among many others). Along with this pervasive theme of God's plan for people groups, the book of Acts and the clear ambition of Paul also stress taking the gospel to places where Christ is not yet known. In both cases, the priority is on getting the gospel to those who have no access to it. There is a distinction between missions, with a focus on those who have no access to the gospel, and local church evangelism, which is expected to carry on gospel work where churches already exist. This is the reason Paul could say in Romans 15 that he had fulfilled the ministry of the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and that there was no more work for Him in the eastern Mediterranean world. It was not that everyone had heard the gospel in that area. Historical sources indicate that these areas were still majority-pagan for centuries after the missionary journeys of Paul. Rather, Paul and his teams had planted churches in those areas, and they could leave the ongoing work of evangelism to those churches while they went on to new areas.

Following these biblical themes, our priority as an organization is reaching unreached people groups and places with the gospel. We want to encourage local churches in other countries in their evangelism and church planting efforts, and avoid doing for them that which God has assigned and empowered them to do. At the same time, we recognize that the missionary task includes leadership training, so in those people groups and places where churches are not yet able to train their own leaders, the missionary task is not yet finished.

We want to encourage local churches in other countries in their evangelism and church planting efforts, and avoid doing for them that which God has assigned and empowered them to do.

OUR GOALS: SETTING THEM FOR OURSELVES, NOT FOR GOD

We should set goals for our own activities in entry, evangelism, disciplemaking, healthy church formation, leadership development and exit.

We plant and water, but God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:1–7). Just as the apostle Paul saw differing levels of response in different locations (Acts 17:32–34), we do not know before we begin our work how many people will believe or how many churches we may plant. We cannot set goals for God, so it is inappropriate for us to set numerical goals for things that only He can do. However, it is completely appropriate for us to set goals for what we intend to do. We should set goals for our own activities in entry, evangelism, disciple-making, healthy church formation, leadership development, and exit. We need to be intentional and accountable for our labors. In all our work, we yearn to see abundant fruit from the gospel, and we labor in prayer, boldly and expectantly, for this fruit that only God can bring about (James 4:13–15).

KEY TERMS

Key Terms

Before jumping into the specifics of the missionary task, it is important to define and discuss our most important terms so that we have a common understanding and vocabulary.

GOSPEL

The gospel is the good news that the only true God, the just and gracious Creator of the universe, has looked upon hopelessly sinful men and women and has sent His Son, God in the flesh, to bear His wrath against sin through His substitutionary death on the cross and to show His power over sin and death in the resurrection from the grave so that all who turn from their sin and themselves and trust in Jesus alone as Savior and Lord will be reconciled to God forever. (Isaiah 5:16, 6:1–7; Mark 1:14–15; John 3:1–21; Romans 3:1–31; 1 Corinthians 15:1–8; Ephesians 2:1–10; 1 Timothy 1:15; Titus 3:4–7)

The gospel is good news about God. It presupposes everything the Bible teaches about the only true God, and it is therefore unintelligible apart from biblical testimony to the character and activity of God. In particular, the gospel is rooted in the holiness of God and His righteous hatred against sin, and the love of God and His grace and mercy toward undeserving sinners. To be faithful to Scripture, gospel presentations must be God-centered, with His nature and His actions at the heart of the message.

Bottom line / The gospel is about God, first and foremost, and must be explained in terms of His holiness and His gracious love. Our gospel presentations should be God-centered, not man-centered.

- **GOSPEL**
- EVANGELISM
- CONVERSION
- DISCIPLE
- DISCIPLE-MAKING
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The gospel addresses humanity's sinful rebellion against God. Because God is holy and just, human rebellion rightly provokes His wrath and necessarily deserves eternal condemnation. While it is true that the gospel ministers to the consequences of sin in human life, gospel presentations must identify the guilty rebellion of human sin as the root of our problem in order to be faithful to Scripture. Further, the gospel reveals the severity of our problem, for an everlasting hell awaits every sinner who dies in this state of guilty rebellion against God.

Bottom line / The gospel is the answer to the problem of sin. It addresses the issues of shame and fear because it fundamentally addresses our deepest problem, which is guilt before a holy God. The gospel is not about earthly prosperity or health.

The gospel centers around Jesus Christ. It is the good news that in Jesus, God the Son took on full humanity and became one of us while remaining fully God. It is the good news that in Jesus, the kingly rule of God has broken into human history. It is the good news that Jesus lived a life of perfect, sinless obedience—the life we should have lived—and then died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and to bear the wrath we deserve for our rebellion. Both in His life and in His death, Jesus served as our substitute. Further, the gospel is the good news that Jesus triumphed over sin and death in His glorious resurrection. It is the good news that He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father, and that even now He intercedes for His people. The gospel is the good news that Jesus will come again in glory, and that His kingdom will have no end. To be faithful to Scripture, gospel presentations must be explicit about the identity of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah and Son of God, and about His sinless life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection as the only hope of salvation for sinners.

Bottom line / The gospel cannot be presented faithfully without including who Jesus is in His full divinity and humanity; what Jesus did in living a sinless life in our place, dying in our place as our substitute to pay the penalty for our sins, rising again from the dead, and ascending to heaven; what Jesus is doing as our intercessor and king; and what He will do when He comes again in glory and makes all things new.

The gospel is a call to repentance and faith. It is not just news; it is also a royal summons for traitors against God to lay down their rebellion and return to Him through faith in Jesus. The gospel declares that there is no other way for sinners to be saved, and it categorically denies that sinners can earn salvation by anything they do themselves. Consequently, to be faithful to Scripture, gospel presentations must challenge hearers to repent and believe the good news of Jesus, confessing Him as Lord.

Bottom line / Because the gospel calls for repentance and faith, our presentations of the gospel must call for this same response with urgency and clarity.

God grants amazing treasures to those who embrace the gospel. God has forgiven their sins and they stand before God not only completely justified in His sight, but also clothed in the very righteousness of Christ. They have been reconciled to God. He has adopted them and they are alive in Christ, having been born again by the Holy Spirit. They now possess the Holy Spirit as a down payment and foretaste of their inheritance in Christ. They are a part of the body of Christ, the church. They are kept by the power of God in salvation until they see Him face to face. They will one day be free from sin as they live forever with God in infinite joy and glory. These treasures, and not earthly health or prosperity, are the true gifts of the gospel, and gospel presentations must be clear about this if they are to be faithful to Scripture.

Bottom line / We must be clear on what the gospel does and does not promise. It promises amazing eternal treasures, but it does not promise prosperity or physical health and safety.

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EVANGELISM

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Evangelism is the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit with the aim of persuading people to repent and believe in Christ (Luke 24:47, John 16:8–11, Acts 1:8, 2 Corinthians 5:11).

Evangelism always means proclamation. Evangelism always involves communicating the message of the gospel using language the lost can understand.

Bottom line / The example of our lives is important, but never enough. Communicating the gospel always involves words, and it must involve words that the hearer can understand. We must speak, write, or sign the gospel, and we must know the language of those we are trying to reach.

Evangelism proclaims the gospel. In order to be biblical evangelism, missionaries must present the full message of the holiness and love of God, the sinfulness of every human being, the atoning sacrifice and victorious resurrection of Jesus for our sins, and the necessity of repentance and faith.

Bottom line / We cannot dilute or change the message. We cannot ignore or soften those parts that offend people. Every element of the gospel is essential.

Evangelism proclaims the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. We present the gospel message, but only the Holy Spirit can turn a person's heart and mind toward Christ.

Bottom line / We don't convert anyone. Only God can make a dead person alive. To be effective evangelists, we must walk in step with the Holy Spirit, we must pray fervently for Him to do what only He can do, and we must never rely on our own cleverness or resources.

Evangelism aims to persuade people to repent and believe in Christ. Evangelism is more than mere presentation of the gospel; it is persuasion with the gospel. Evangelism necessarily includes a call for the hearer to repent of sin and believe in Christ.

Bottom line / There is such a thing as persuasion without manipulation. We must challenge people to respond to the message we proclaim.

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CONVERSION

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Conversion is the divinely enabled personal response of individuals to the gospel in which they turn from their sin and themselves (repent) and trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord (believe). (John 3:1–21, 6:44, 10:27–30; Romans 3:10–20, 8:38–39; Galatians 5:19–24; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 John 2:5–6, 19, 3:9–10, 14–15, 24, 4:20)

Conversion is a divinely enabled response to the gospel. It is not something that sinners can accomplish on their own. According to Scripture, unregenerate people are slaves to sin. They are unable to understand the things of God, to obey God, or to please God, and are justly under His wrath. Rather than seeking God, they are running away from Him. They are dead in their sin. Apart from the gracious initiative of God, no one can be saved. Therefore, God-dependent prayer is an essential component of evangelism.

Bottom line / Our responsibility is to proclaim the good news and urge people to repent and believe. God, and God alone, saves people who are dead, blind slaves to sin. This reality should encourage us to expect fruit even among the most seemingly resistant people groups. It should purify our methods and keep us faithful to the message. It should also keep us on our knees in prayer for the lost.

Conversion is a *divinely enabled* response of repentance and faith. The gracious work of God in conversion in no way minimizes or eliminates the necessity and responsibility of sinners to respond to the gospel call. Repentance involves turning away from sin and self. It marks a radical break from a life of rebellion against God. Faith involves not only believing that what the Bible teaches about Jesus is true, but also trusting Him alone for salvation while entrusting one's life to Him. Repentance and faith are not disconnected actions, but rather two sides of the same response: turning away from a life of rebellion against God in repentance, and in the same act turning toward God through faith in Christ. Neither is complete nor adequate without the other.

Bottom line / Saving faith is repenting faith, and we must call people to turn from their rebellion against God in the same act as turning to Jesus in faith. Cheap grace is unbiblical and saves no one.

Conversion is a divinely enabled response to *the gospel*. Two implications of this reality are significant. First, missionaries must proclaim the gospel for anyone to be converted. No one can be saved apart from receiving, understanding, and believing the gospel. This makes the task of evangelism urgent. Second, the content of the message matters. It is essential that missionaries get the message right, especially in light of distortions of the gospel around the world. Any message that denies or dilutes the full deity and humanity of Jesus, identifies the human problem as anything less than our sinful rebellion against God, does not major on the substitutionary death of Jesus and the reality of His bodily resurrection, or does not teach that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, is an unbiblical message that does not lead to biblical conversion.

Bottom line / We have to get the gospel to those who have never heard it for them to have any hope of salvation, and we have to get the message right, no matter how unpopular parts of it may be in any given cultural setting.

Conversion is radical. The Bible uses extreme language to describe conversion. Those who have been converted have died to everything they used to be and received new life in Christ. They have, in fact, been crucified with Christ. They have been created all over again. They have been born again. Conversion to Christ is neither casual nor superficial.

Bottom line / We have to present the gospel message in such a way that a life of radical discipleship seems like the natural consequence of salvation, and not an option, a surprising twist, or an unexpected bit of fine print.

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Conversion is noticeable. While no believer attains perfection in this life, a new believer in Christ is a changed person. This is particularly evident in a Christian's belief in the gospel, love for God's people, and growth in holiness.

Bottom line / If change can't be seen, it is safest to conclude that conversion never happened.

Conversion is permanent. God never lets go of or loses anyone who has truly come to faith in Christ. While it is true that some may profess faith for a time and then fall away, their very departure from faith indicates that they never truly believed. While God alone knows the condition of a person's heart, it is neither biblical nor safe to assume that anyone who has denied the faith, whose life shows no evidence of regeneration, or who has voluntarily abandoned the fellowship of the body of Christ, has converted, whatever they may have said or done in the past.

Bottom line / Temporary commitment is not genuine conversion. Those whom God saves, He saves permanently. We must make it clear when we share the gospel that this is a lifelong (actually eternal) commitment. We must exhort believers to perseverance. For those whose lives give no evidence of true conversion, the local church must withdraw the assurance of salvation through the exercise of church discipline.

DISCIPLE

Disciples are followers of Jesus. They have turned from their sin and trusted in Jesus as their Savior. They have died to themselves and surrendered their lives to Him as Lord. Christ now lives in them, transforming everything about them from the inside out. There are several marks of this transformation. The first, a transformed heart, occurs when a disciple places initial faith in Jesus. The rest are found in increasing measure as a disciple grows through faith in Jesus as a member of his body, the church. (Matthew 28:16–20, Mark 1:17, Luke 6:40, Romans 8:29).

There are six primary marks of a disciple of Jesus:

Transformed Heart / Disciples are spiritually regenerate; God has forgiven their sin and God's Spirit now indwells them. By supernatural grace through saving faith in Christ, disciples have been acquitted before God the Judge and adopted by God the Father. Such gracious regeneration has triggered a transformation in every disciple of Jesus. Having been brought from death to life, disciples are new creations who now live as servants of the King and heirs of his kingdom. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they grow in holiness as God gradually transforms them into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another. Disciples hold fast to the sure hope of full and final future glorification with Christ. (John 3:1–8; Titus 3:4–8; 1 Peter 1:3–9, 22–25)

Bottom line / To be a disciple you must first be born again. Evangelism resulting in biblical conversion is the essential first step in biblical discipleship.

Transformed Mind / Disciples are biblically grounded; they believe what Jesus says. Disciples of Jesus trust the truth of Jesus, and view the world around them through the lens of God's Word. As disciples abide in Jesus, reading, hearing, studying, understanding, memorizing, and meditating on God's Word daily, He molds their minds to become like his. They are continually renewed in knowledge after the image of their Creator. (Joshua 1:8, Psalm 119, Mark 12:30, Luke 24:44–45, Romans 12:1–21, 1 Corinthians 2:14–16, Ephesians 4:17–24, Colossians 3:1–17)

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Bottom line / Disciples of Jesus are passionate about the Bible. It completely reshapes the way they think, as the worldview of the Bible becomes their worldview. They approach the Bible with a pre-commitment to believe, understand, and obey everything it teaches. They learn the big picture of the Bible, and they interpret individual parts in the context of the whole.

Transformed Affections / Disciples are deeply satisfied; they desire what Jesus desires. Their spiritual pursuit has led them to Jesus, who has not only saved them from their sin but also satisfied their souls. Disciples, therefore, grow to participate in spiritual disciplines not out of a sense of duty, but out of a sense of delight: enjoying the exaltation of God in worship, craving communion with God in prayer, hungering for God's Word more than daily food, confessing sins with grateful contrition, and loving God's glory more than their own lives. Such love for God continually pushes out love for the things of this world. Disciples daily crucify the desires of the flesh as they bear the fruit of the Spirit and long for the return of the Son. (Matthew 10:34–39, 22:35–40; Luke 16:13; John 12:25; Philippians 4:8; 1 Timothy 3:3, 6:9–10; 2 Timothy 2:22, 4:10; Titus 1:8; Hebrews 13:5; 1 John 2:15–17)

Bottom line / Disciples of Jesus grow to love what He loves, value what He values, and hate what He hates. Their affections are set on the things of God, and those affections grow to supersede the attractions of sin and the things of this world. They grow to obey God out of desire, not simply out of duty.

Transformed Will / Disciples are humbly obedient; they do what Jesus commands. Disciples of Jesus do not merely hear the Word and so deceive themselves; they do what it says. Disciples see imperatives in the Scriptures as invitations from the Savior to experience the joy of active submission to Him. The more they walk according to God's Word, the more Jesus conforms their ways to his will. (Matthew 28:18–20, John 14:15, Romans 1:5, 1 Peter 1:2, James 1:22–25, 1 John 5:3)

Bottom line / Disciples of Jesus obey God by obeying everything his Word teaches. They do not obey in order to make themselves right with God, or to add anything at all to the work of Christ, but out of the faith, hope, and love that flow from the gospel.

Transformed Relationships / Disciples love sacrificially; they serve as Jesus serves. Having been reconciled to God through Christ, disciples continually work toward reconciliation with others in Christ: forgiving one another freely and serving one another selflessly. Disciples of Jesus join together as members of local churches where they love one another by laying down their lives for each other. Such sacrificial compassion extends beyond the local church as disciples care for their families, the global church, the lost, and the poor. (Matthew 5:43–48, 22:37–40; Luke 6:27–36; John 13:34–35, 15:12–17; Romans 13:8–10; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13; Galatians 5:13–26; Ephesians 4:1–6, 5:1–2; 1 John 3:11–18, 4:7–21)

Bottom line / Disciples of Jesus love one another as Christ has loved them and love their neighbors as themselves. This love expresses itself practically in forgiveness and service, even to their enemies. Their love includes their church, their families, the global body of Christ, the lost, and the poor.

Transformed Purpose / Disciples are missionally engaged; they make disciples who make disciples of all nations. Compelled by God's grace, disciples are captivated by the Great Commission. Jesus has not only transformed their way of life; He has revolutionized their reason for living. Disciples live—and die—to share the gospel of Christ, to reproduce the life of Christ, to teach the Word of Christ, and to serve the world for Christ by praying for, giving to, and going to people around them and peoples around the world for the sake of God's fame. (Matthew 28:16–20, Luke 24:44–49, John 20:21, Acts 1:8, Romans 15:18–24)

Bottom line / Disciples of Jesus share the gospel, disciple other believers, and engage in the global spread of the gospel to all peoples.

6 MARKS OF A DISCIPLE

1 / Transformed heart

2 / Transformed mind

3 / Transformed affections

4 / Transformed will

5 / Transformed relationships

6 / Transformed purpose

DISCIPLE-MAKING

- GOSPEL
- EVANGELISM
- CONVERSION
- DISCIPLE
- **DISCIPLE-MAKING**
- CHURCH
- CALLING
- IMB MISSIONARY
- MISSIONARY TEAM
- UNREACHED PEOPLES & PLACES

Disciple-making is the Christ-commanded, Spirit-empowered duty of every disciple of Jesus to evangelize unbelievers, baptize believers, teach them the Word of Christ, and train them to obey Christ as members of His church who make disciples on mission to all nations.

The command to make disciples extends to every believer and is not reserved for a small spiritual elite. Everyone in the body of Christ is necessary for any disciple to grow to maturity in Christ.

+ The power to make disciples comes from the Holy Spirit. No one should shy away from this task because they fear their own inadequacy.
+ Disciple-making includes sharing the gospel, baptizing new believers, teaching believers to understand the content of the Bible, and training them to obey all that the Bible teaches.
+ Disciple-making needs to aim at a fully biblical understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, as outlined in "Disciple."
+ While discipleship happens in a variety of settings, God provides the local church as the necessary setting and the primary relationships for the full measure of biblical discipleship this side of Pentecost. If there is no local church, it necessarily requires church planting.
+ Disciple-making should result in disciples who make disciples who make disciples, in an ongoing process of reproduction.

CHURCH

The definition of a local church from the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.[3]

We believe that every local church is autonomous under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of His inerrant Word. This is as true overseas as it is in the United States. Some churches to which we relate overseas may make decisions in doctrine and practice that we would not choose. Nevertheless, we are accountable to God and to Southern Baptists for the foundation that we lay when we plant churches, for the teaching that we give when we train church leaders, and for the criteria that we use when we count churches. In our church planting and teaching ministries, we will seek to lay a foundation of beliefs and practices that are consistent with the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, although local churches overseas may express those beliefs and practices in different ways according to the needs of their cultural settings. Flowing from the definition of a church given above and from the Scriptures from which this definition is derived, we will observe the following guidelines in church planting, leadership training, and statistical reporting:

- GOSPEL
- EVANGELISM
- CONVERSION
- DISCIPLE
- DISCIPLE-MAKING
- **CHURCH**
- CALLING
- IMB MISSIONARY
- MISSIONARY TEAM
- UNREACHED PEOPLES & PLACES

[3] *This definition is a direct quotation from the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, and the definition and guidelines are taken verbatim from IMB trustee-approved policy.*

KEY TERMS

We believe that every local church is autonomous under the lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of His inerrant Word. This is as true overseas as it is in the United States.

1 / A church is intentional about being a church. Members think of themselves as a church. They are committed to one another and to God (associated by covenant in pursuing all that Scripture requires of a church).

2 / A church has an identifiable membership of baptized believers in Jesus Christ.

3 / A church practices the baptism of believers only by immersing them in water.

4 / A church observes the Lord's Supper on a regular basis.

5 / Under the authority of the local church and its leadership, members may be assigned to carry out the ordinances.

6 / A church submits to the inerrant Word of God as the ultimate authority for all that it believes and does.

7 / A church meets regularly for worship, prayer, the study of God's Word, and fellowship. Members of the church minister to one another's needs, hold each other accountable, and exercise church discipline as needed. Members encourage one another and build each other up in holiness, maturity in Christ, and love.

8 / A church embraces its responsibility to fulfill the Great Commission, both locally and globally, from the beginning of its existence as a church.

9 / A church is autonomous and self-governing under the lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of His Word.

10 / A church has identifiable leaders, who are scrutinized and set apart according to the qualifications set forth in Scripture. A church recognizes two biblical offices of church leadership: pastors/elders/overseers and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

VERSES REFERENCED

Matthew 28:18–20; John 14:15; Romans 1:5; 1 Peter 1:2; James 1:22–25; 1 John 5:3; Matthew 5:43–48, 22:37–40; Luke 6:27–36; John 13:34–35, 15:12–17; Romans 13:8–10; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13; Galatians 5:13–26; Ephesians 4:1–6, 5:1–2; 1 John 3:11–18, 4:7–21

12 CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY CHURCH

The following characteristics summarize this definition, and are provided as a tool to help us describe and move toward healthy churches.

Biblical evangelism

People come into the church because they have heard the full biblical message of the gospel and have responded in repentance and faith. They then continue to share the gospel with the lost in a lifestyle of evangelism.

Biblical discipleship

Members of the church intentionally invest in one another's lives to grow to maturity in Jesus Christ. This discipleship is characterized by transformed hearts, minds, affections, wills, relationships, and purpose, all in keeping with the Word of God.

Biblical membership

The members consist only of people who give credible evidence of repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and who have been baptized as believers. Biblical church members are committed to one another, to assemble faithfully together with one another, and to be the body of Christ to one another.

KEY TERMS

Biblical leadership

The Bible recognizes two types of leaders in the church: pastors/elders/overseers and deacons. In the New Testament, the words pastor, elder, and overseer are used interchangeably and refer to the same office (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5–7; 1 Peter 5:1–4; note that pastor = shepherd). The qualifications for these leaders are given in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. They must be examples of faithful discipleship, and they must hold firmly to sound doctrine. They must be gifted by God to teach. According to Scripture, pastors/elders/overseers must be men. Scripture is clear that not everyone is gifted and called to teach and lead in the church, but all gifts are equally honorable and necessary to the church. The consistent pattern in the New Testament is for churches to have a plurality of pastors/elders/overseers. Deacons are servants of the church whose qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. They are chosen as needed to perform tasks, which free the pastors/elders/overseers to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Biblical preaching and teaching

Such teaching is central to the weekly gatherings of the church, and consists of the exposition and application of Scripture. The church regards the Bible as the supreme, controlling authority over all it believes and does, and faithful Bible teaching saturates the life of a healthy church. A healthy church holds to the inspiration, inerrancy, authority, sufficiency, and clarity of Scripture, and interprets each text of the Bible responsibly in context, according to the norms of grammatical/historical interpretation.

Biblical ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper

Baptism is immersion in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and it is only administered to those who give credible evidence that they are born-again believers in Jesus Christ. All believers are expected to be baptized. A healthy church regularly celebrates the Lord's Supper in remembrance of the death of Jesus, as a visible sermon of the gospel, and in anticipation of His return.

Biblical worship

A healthy church offers to God worship that is acceptable to Him according to His Word, with reverence, awe, and joy. It sings psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs whose content is saturated with biblical truth. Its worship includes the public reading of Scripture, the testimonies of God's people, and prayer. As appropriate, it may also include corporate fasting. All of its worship aims to glorify God and edify His people.

Biblical fellowship

Members of the church love each other, encourage one another, and build each other up. They care for one another, serve one another, and bear each other's burdens. They are kind to one another and forgive each other. They teach, admonish, and exhort one another with the Word of God. They stir one another up to love and good works. They are involved in one another's lives and know each other well enough to be fruitfully involved in one another's discipleship.

Biblical prayer

Members of the church pray both privately and corporately. In their prayers, they worship God, confess their sins, thank God for His blessings, intercede for others, and ask God to meet their own needs. A healthy church prays fervently and frequently.

KEY TERMS

Biblical accountability and discipline

Members of the church hold one another accountable for their obedience to the Word of God, and leaders of the church watch over the flock that has been entrusted to them. When necessary, the church exercises church discipline according to Scriptural instructions, always praying and laboring for restoration of the erring brother or sister.

Biblical giving

Members of the church give freely of their resources for the support of those who teach the Word, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the advance of the gospel around the world. Healthy churches are financially self-sustaining or moving toward being financially self-sustaining. Experience has consistently shown that foreign financial subsidy damages the health of a church.

Biblical mission

Not only is the church organized to share the gospel and make disciples locally, but it is also organized and actively involved in taking the gospel to the nations. Members of a healthy church demonstrate the goodness of God in their works of mercy while declaring the gospel of Christ to the lost.

It does not matter where a church meets. Churches may meet in homes, factories, rented spaces, dedicated buildings, under the shade of trees, or anywhere that is available and convenient for them. Every follower of Christ, including cross-cultural workers, needs the teaching, worship, fellowship, and accountability of a local church. All of our team members need to engage faithfully in a local church where they live.

CALLING

Call to salvation / First and foremost, calling is the gracious act of God by which He draws people to become disciples of Jesus and members of His church. The call to salvation comes through the proclamation of God's Word in the power of God's Spirit. Accompanying the call to salvation in Christ is a call to freedom, holiness, and suffering in Christ. The call to salvation forms the unshakeable foundation of a disciple's primary identity now and forever. (Matthew 9:13; Acts 2:39; Romans 1:6, 8:28–30, 9:22–26; 1 Corinthians 1:9, 24; Galatians 1:6, 5:13; Ephesians 1:18, 4:1–4; 1 Thessalonians 2:12, 4:7, 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:14; 1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 1:15–16, 2:9, 20–21, 5:10; 2 Peter 1:3, 10; Jude 1:1)

Call to mission / The call to salvation includes a call to mission, for every person who responds to God's call receives Christ's command to make disciples of Jesus. Disciple-making is thus the God-given, Christ-enabled, Spirit-empowered duty of every disciple whatever his or her station, location, or vocation. In this way, every disciple plays an integral part in the eternal purpose of God to glorify His name through disciples made in every nation. (Matthew 28:16–20, Luke 24:44–49, Acts 1:8)

Call to station / Christ calls disciples to specific stations in and through which they exalt Him on mission. One such station is within the family, where Christians are called to be faithful sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, and mothers and fathers for the spread of God's gospel and the display of God's glory. Scripture also speaks of a divine call to singleness for the sake of mission, either for a period or for the entirety of one's life in this world. Other calls to specific stations include Christ's call to meaningful membership in His church, and responsible citizenship in one's community. (1 Corinthians 7:17–40)

- GOSPEL
- EVANGELISM
- CONVERSION
- DISCIPLE
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Call to service / Finally, calling is the gracious act of God by which He directs disciples to make disciples in a certain way, at a certain time, among a certain people, in a certain location, or through a certain vocation. Calls to service may be fluid, operating at varying levels and open to varying assignments from God. A disciple's life, however, must be constant in faithfulness to God's call, no matter the cost, until God calls the disciple to different service. Calls to service are discerned and affirmed in community as a member of the church on mission in the world through Spirit-led, Word-driven, prayer-focused examination of a disciple's desires, gifts, abilities, and opportunities. (Matthew 4:18–22, 9:9, 10:1–4; Acts 13:1–3, 16:10; Romans 1:1; Hebrews 5:4)

God's calls to salvation, mission, station, and service bring strength and comfort for disciples to persevere in times of trial and trouble, doubt and discouragement, pressure and persecution.

IMB MISSIONARY

An IMB missionary is a disciple of Jesus set apart by the Holy Spirit, sent out from the church, and affirmed by the IMB 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. (Matthew 28:16–20; Acts 1:8, 13:1–3)

Set apart by the Holy Spirit, sent out from the church / At the most basic level, a missionary is a "sent one" who goes out from the church in the power of the Spirit as a representative of Christ.

Affirmed by the IMB / IMB establishes strategies and processes for mobilizing, assessing, affirming, training, supporting, and leading missionaries who serve as its representatives.

Crossing geographic, cultural, and linguistic barriers / A missionary crosses one or more of these barriers for the spread of the gospel.

Part of a missionary team / IMB missionaries serve on teams in which team members have different roles and responsibilities in the missionary task. (See "Missionary Team.")

To make disciples and multiply churches / The work of the missionary team involves entry, evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and/or leadership training, all aimed at seeing disciples made and churches multiplied.

Among unreached peoples and places / Missionary teams plant churches and/or facilitate church planting among unreached peoples and places, entrusting leaders of these churches with the responsibility for mission (i.e., equipping them to shepherd the church and send out missionaries), and then move on to plant churches among other unreached peoples and places.

- GOSPEL
- EVANGELISM
- CONVERSION
- DISCIPLE
- DISCIPLE-MAKING
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- **IMB MISSIONARY**
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MISSIONARY TEAM

- GOSPEL
- EVANGELISM
- CONVERSION
- DISCIPLE
- DISCIPLE-MAKING
- CHURCH
- CALLING
- IMB MISSIONARY
- **MISSIONARY TEAM**
- UNREACHED PEOPLES & PLACES

A missionary team is an identifiable group of disciples who meet together regularly, care for each other selflessly, and partner with one another intentionally to make disciples and multiply churches among particular unreached peoples and/or places. In the New Testament, disciples on mission most often served on teams in which individuals had different roles and responsibilities. Scripture points to personal, practical, and pastoral reasons for disciples on mission not to serve in isolation. Even evangelistic reasons exist for disciples to exalt Christ in the context of Christian community. Consequently, IMB missionaries serve on teams in which individuals have different roles and responsibilities in the missionary task. Teams may be comprised of IMB missionaries, national believers, and/or other Great Commission partners. IMB provides multiple pathways through which missionaries may serve on one of these teams, each of which carries unique qualifications, involves various types of training, necessitates appropriate measures of accountability, and includes different levels of financial and/or other support from IMB. (Matthew 6:7; Luke 10:1; Acts 13:1–3, 15:36–40, 17:10–15, 18:1–5; Romans 16:1–16; Philippians 4:2–3)

1 / For biblical, personal, practical, and pastoral reasons, it is best for IMB personnel to serve on teams, and not serve as solitary units on the field.

2 / Although we may call a group of people who live in different locations a team for administrative purposes, for the purpose of this discussion, a team consists of people who can meet together regularly.

3 / The functions of a team are to meet together regularly, to care for each other selflessly, and to partner with one another intentionally in the work of the Great Commission.

4 / Teams ideally consist of people with different gifts and roles in the Great Commission task.

5 / Teams may be made up of people who are IMB workers, national believers, local church members, Great Commission Christian partners, or any combination thereof.

6 / We work as teams for the sake of spiritual health and for the sake of the task, not for the sake of "teaming." Care must be taken that the glory of God and the mission He has given us remain the team's focus, and not the team itself.

UNREACHED PEOPLE & PLACES

Unreached peoples and places are those among whom Christ is largely unknown and the church is relatively insufficient to make Christ known in its broader population without outside help. In contemporary missiology, a people group is considered unreached if the number of evangelical Christians is fewer than 2 percent. Though this definition is helpful in some ways, it is problematic in others.

It arbitrarily identifies a 2 percent threshold as the determinant between "reached" and "unreached." Missiologists have examined sociological data to determine the threshold at which a movement within a people group can continue to grow without outside assistance. However, sociologists (and consequently missiologists) have disagreed on what percentage of people constitutes that threshold. This reality, in addition to the absence of biblical prescription regarding such a threshold, renders attempts to identify a particular percentage of people as "unreached" or "reached" problematic, particularly if that percentage becomes the sole determinant in mission strategy. We believe it is valuable to identify the percentage of evangelicals among a particular people group or in a particular place, but we also combine that percentage with research regarding a number of other factors in order to accurately identify the state of the church and the access to the gospel among that people or in that place. Based upon all this information, we then determine which missionaries we deploy where and what those missionaries do when they get there, letting the state of the church determine our strategy for mission.

It unnecessarily limits the "unreached" label to a particular people group. Research regarding people groups is necessary in light of Christ's command to make disciples of all nations (of all the *ethne*), Christ's promise that the gospel will be proclaimed as a testimony to all nations (to all the *ethne*) before the end comes, and the Bible's guarantee that individuals

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from every tribe, language, people, and nation will one day be ransomed by God and represented in heaven. It is beneficial, then, to identify ethnolinguistic groups in the world and to track the spread of the gospel among them with the goal of reaching all of them. This kind of research must inform mission strategy. However, we do not ignore the reality that when the New Testament records the spread of the gospel through the early church, biblical authors strongly focus on places, not only peoples. In Luke's account of Paul's missionary journeys, he primarily records the spread of the gospel from city to city and region to region, not people group to people group. Moreover, in Paul's clear explanation of his passion to proclaim the gospel where Christ has not been named, he speaks in terms of distinct places, not of distinct people groups. This does not mean that biblical accounts neglect the mention (and even importance) of ethnic and cultural distinctions among Christian converts, but the earliest missionaries seem focused not just on spreading the gospel to unreached peoples, but also (and often even more so) to unreached places.

It is both biblical and helpful, then, to recognize the unreached in terms of both peoples and places, for both realities bear uniquely upon mission strategy.

+ **Recognizing the unreached in terms of particular people groups has a unique bearing on disciple making.** Ethnolinguistic barriers often hinder the spread of the gospel across people groups. Missionaries must consider such barriers in evangelism and discipleship as they contextualize the gospel for their listeners. Missionaries must often learn a language in order to share the gospel, and they should always consider the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious distinctions of their listeners when communicating the gospel to them and applying the gospel to their lives.

+ **Recognizing the unreached in terms of places has a unique bearing on church planting.** As previously noted, New Testament mission patterns put clear priority on planting churches in unreached places. As we do so, we must never reinforce racial, economic or social divisions in our strategy. We recognize that evangelistic effectiveness often requires a focus on a particular language and a particular people. We also acknowledge that believers should be able to worship God in their own language and culture. At the same time, we recognize that the gospel breaks down the dividing walls between different races and classes. We reject the notion that any church should ever exclude anyone based on race, class, or gender.

To be sure, getting to this point in church planting can be a process which demands much patience and wisdom in disciple-making. But it remains the end toward which we are working until the day when all the peoples gather as one people to give glory to God through Christ.

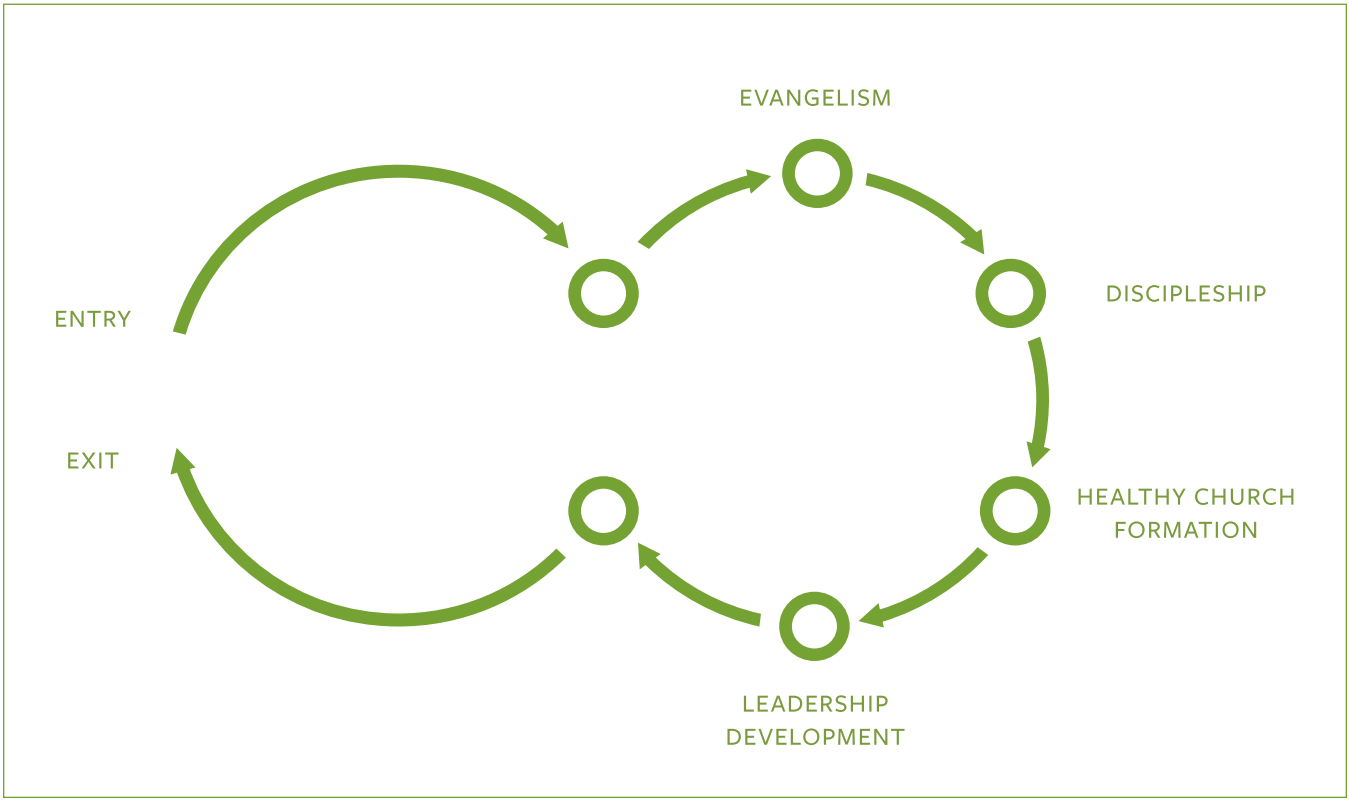
Our mission strategy, then, focuses on both unreached peoples and places. We deploy missionary teams to unreached places where Christ is largely unknown and the church is relatively insufficient to make Christ known in its broader population without outside help. We also deploy missionary teams to reached places with a significant population of unreached peoples. In addition, we deploy missionary teams to reached places with significant potential for reaching unreached peoples and places. Regardless of place, we proclaim the gospel to all people with an intentional focus on reaching different peoples and gathering them into churches together. In this way, we are resolutely focused on playing our part in seeing disciples made and churches multiplied in every place and among every people group in the world.

VERSES REFERENCED

(Genesis 12:1–3, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14; Psalm 67:1–7, 96:1–9, 117:1–2; Isaiah 49:5–6; Daniel 7:13–14; Habakkuk 2:14; Matthew 24:14, 28:16–20; Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:8, 6:1–6, 8:4–40, 10:34–35, 15:36, 16:6–10; Romans 15:18–24; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:11–22; Colossians 3:11; James 2:1–9; Revelation 5: 9, 7:9–10)

THE MISSIONARY TASK

The Missionary Task



In light of the full testimony of Scripture, we believe that the core missionary task has six components: entry, evangelism, disciple-making, healthy church formation, leadership development, and strategically planned exit. Because prayer is central to our strategy, it is not a separate component of the task, but rather is an essential element in every part. Prayer must permeate every aspect of the missionary task.

- ENTRY
- EVANGELISM
- DISCIPLESHIP
- HEALTHY CHURCH FORMATION
- LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
- EXIT

ENTRY

- ENTRY
- EVANGELISM
- DISCIPLESHIP
- HEALTHY CHURCH FORMATION
- LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
- EXIT

Missionaries should choose an access strategy that fits them, which means that they can perform it with credibility.

In order to carry out the missionary task, we must have access to people who need to hear the gospel. This part of the task includes four elements: **research**, **presence**, **identity**, and **communication ability**. (Matthew 28:16–20; Acts 1:8, 14:8–20, 17:16–31, 18:1–4; Romans 10:14–17, 15:18–24; 1 Corinthians 14:6–19; 2 Corinthians 2:17, 4:1–2)

Research

We need to know who the unreached people groups of the earth are and where unreached peoples and places are located. It is also helpful to know other factors that will impact our work with these peoples:

+ How many believers and churches are among them, if any
+ The status of Bible translation into their language
+ The existence of other evangelism and discipleship tools, if any
+ The identity of other evangelical groups engaged in reaching them with the gospel
+ The history of their interaction with Christianity and the impact that history may have on evangelistic efforts
+ Basic religious, cultural, economic, and political information that could impact the missionary task

Careful research is an important component of the missionary task, and we set up structures and processes to facilitate and coordinate that research.

Presence

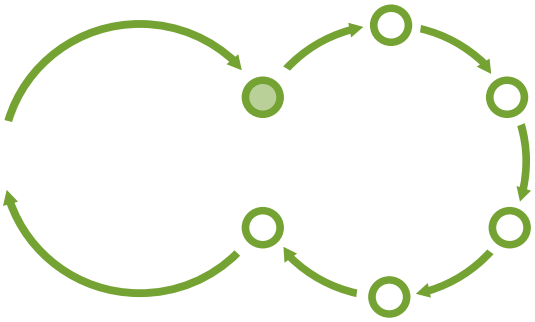
The era when gospel workers could access most of the world through an open missionary identity is now over. Most unreached people groups and places are found in countries that either do not grant missionary visas, or that severely restrict missionary activity. For this reason, creative-access strategies are necessary to establish presence among those who need to hear the gospel. The access mechanism should have the following characteristics:

Integrity / Our missionaries should actually do what they say they are in the country to do, and they should do so with an integrity that reflects the character of God and that adorns the gospel.

Fit / Missionaries should choose an access strategy that fits them, which means that they can perform it with credibility.

Access to people, not merely access to residence / The access strategy should maximize access to the people we are trying to evangelize. Jobs that primarily involve interaction with expats, or jobs that primarily involve interaction with a computer, are less advantageous than jobs that involve interaction with the focus people group.

If we are to have an appropriate creative-access strategy, we need a robust theology of work as a good gift from God and as part of what He created us to do before sin marred the world. We need an attitude that views creative-access work as a calling from God, not as a distraction or a nuisance.



Missionaries need a ready, clear, and honest answer to the question, "What do you do?"

Evangelism needs to be incorporated into language learning.

Identity

In addition to needing a visa to live among the people we are trying to reach, missionaries need an identity that lowers suspicion and allows local national friends and neighbors to feel comfortable with them. Missionaries need a ready, clear, and honest answer to the question, "What do you do?" It needs to fit what people observe them do with their time. It needs to be consistent with their skills, training, and interests. They need to be comfortable and confident saying it. It needs to fit categories that seem natural and normal to the people they are trying to reach. It needs to open doors to evangelism and discipleship.

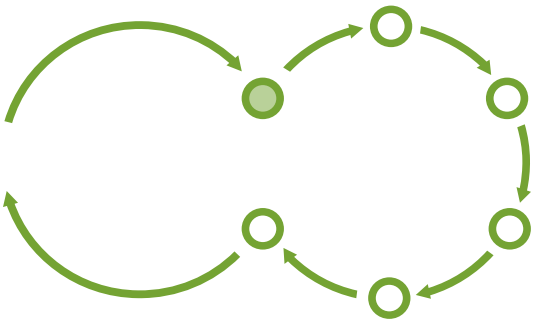
Communication Ability

Missionary teams need to be able to engage people they are trying to reach with an appropriate level of language competency and cultural awareness. In order to accomplish the missionary task, we need missionaries who speak the heart language of the people they are trying to reach. They need to understand the local language and culture well enough to be able to have deep conversations about heart issues if they are to share the gospel, teach the Bible, and disciple believers effectively. Most national partners on a missionary team obviously have a high level of language competency and cultural awareness. For others on a team who are new to a particular context, acquiring such communication ability requires a serious investment of time and energy. Any language learning strategy needs to take the following into account:

Language is learned best in a context of full immersion.

Different people have different learning styles, including spouses. Language learning strategies need to have flexibility to take this into account.

Evangelism needs to be incorporated into language learning. It is unproductive to postpone gospel sharing in the new language until the language learner is relatively proficient. If the language learner gets out of the habit of sharing the gospel, the sudden introduction of the gospel into relationships where it hasn't been previously mentioned is awkward and difficult. It is better for the missionary to learn how to share the gospel in ways appropriate to their level of language ability throughout the process, and to be given training in using appropriate evangelistic tools.



According to their assignment, many IMB missionaries have language competency requirements, and they are expected to report regularly and be accountable for language learning until they have met their minimum language learning level. After that they are encouraged to press on in language acquisition, and teams are urged to continue an accountability process for ongoing language learning. With married couples, language learning is necessary for both spouses. Both serve as missionaries, and both need to share the gospel and disciple believers. Even in situations in which the wife is primarily caring for children at home, she still needs to learn language to adapt well and build deep relationships in her new cultural setting.

Not every missionary on a team will have the same language learning requirements. For example, a professional working for a corporation overseas while serving on a missionary team may not have as much time to devote to language learning. All IMB missionaries, though, work to grow in language competency and cultural awareness to fulfill their role on the missionary team.

EVANGELISM

- ENTRY
- **EVANGELISM**
- DISCIPLESHIP
- HEALTHY CHURCH FORMATION
- LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
- EXIT

Evangelism is the responsibility of every follower of Jesus. Evangelism is an element in the job description of every IMB missionary, regardless of assignment of job title. Even in areas where the focus of the work is on leadership training, and local believers and churches are actively sharing the gospel, IMB missionaries must engage in evangelism as a model of what is expected of every believer. (Matthew 28:16–20; Luke 24:44–49; Acts 1:8, 2:36–41, 3:11–26, 4:5–12, 4:31, 5:17–32, 8:4–8, 8:26–40, 9:10–22, 11:20–21, 13:4–5, 13:16–41, 13:44–52, 14:1, 16:25–34, 17:1–4, 17:22–31, 18:1–11, 19:8–10, 28:23–31; Ephesians 4:11–14; 2 Timothy 1:8–14, 4:5; 1 Peter 3:13–17)

Evangelism strategies should take the following points into account:

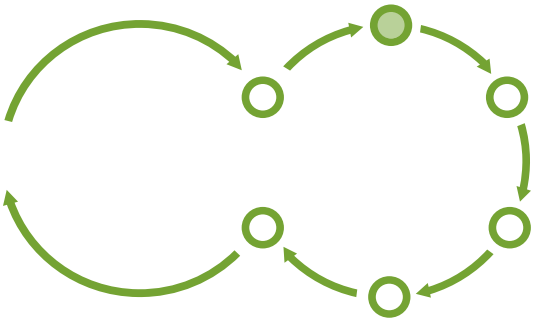
Evangelism strategies are essential. Given the central nature of this task, intentionality, planning, and accountability for evangelism are expected of every IMB missionary team.

Only the Holy Spirit can change a person's heart. He must empower our witness, or it will accomplish nothing. Therefore, fervent prayer and deep reliance on the Holy Spirit must be built into all of our evangelistic strategies and activities.

Evangelism must contain the full content of the gospel message as outlined in Key Terms. It is true that any given conversation may only include parts of the message, but evangelism is incomplete until we have communicated all components of the gospel and connected them in the mind of the hearer.

The evangelistic task is urgent, and our lives and work should be characterized by a strong sense of that urgency.

We contextualize the gospel message to make it clear, not to make it comfortable or acceptable in a non-Christian context. We may make use of bridges to the gospel from within the culture and religion of those we are trying to reach. It is necessary for us to explain components of the message that are likely to be misunderstood in another cultural context (such as explaining to Hindus what we mean by being born again, or to Muslims what we mean when we call Jesus the Son of God). It is essential that we mitigate the offense of unnecessary foreignness. However, we cannot leave out or change elements of the gospel message simply because they offend non-Christian hearers. The message of the cross seems offensive to the lost, and conversion comes from the power of God's Spirit, not from our packaging of the message.



There are numerous worldview elements that must be understood if the gospel is to be accepted: the reality and nature of God, the biblical picture of humanity as created in the image of God yet now fallen, personal moral accountability to God, the standard of the holiness of God, the personal and conscious immortality of every human being, and the realities of judgment, heaven, and hell. Many worldviews have very different perspectives on these elements. To confuse matters further, many worldviews use similar language to refer to these worldview elements, but they define those words differently. Effective communication of the gospel requires an effective communication of the biblical worldview that lies behind the gospel. It also requires sensitivity to the learning and communication styles of the host culture. This is where the role of the Old Testament (which sets the worldview behind the gospel) and the grand narrative of Scripture are highly useful. Research the worldview and learning styles of the people you are trying to reach, and craft evangelistic presentations in such a way that they will understand what you are trying to communicate.

Evangelism is the responsibility of every follower of Jesus.

Unless we challenge our hearers to respond to the message with repentance and faith, evangelism is incomplete.

Those who believe in the gospel should immediately receive training and encouragement to share the gospel with others. They should be taught to do the same with anyone they lead to faith in Jesus.

There are a variety of evangelistic tools available for use in various worldview settings. It can be valuable for each missionary and team to identify a default tool to use that they know well. Every tool must be evaluated in terms of faithfulness and effectiveness. It should contain all the elements of the biblical gospel. It should also communicate the content of the gospel and the worldview that lies behind it in such a way that hearers understand. Every IMB missionary should be prepared to present the message of the gospel at all times without hesitation.

Evangelism strategies should be sensitive to social structures. How does information spread, through whom, and to whom? In this culture, if you share the gospel with this person, who will hear it next, and who will never hear it at all? Among what groupings of people should you plant the gospel in order to make sure that no one is left out? With whom will it be most natural to share the gospel? Neighbors? Work colleagues? Recreational teammates? With whom should you encourage new believers to share their faith? How should you hold them accountable?

Make sure that evangelism is tied to discipleship. Present the gospel in a way that makes a life of discipleship seem like a natural consequence of salvation, and develop plans to incorporate new believers into discipleship automatically and immediately.

Teams should encourage and hold each other accountable for consistency and faithfulness in evangelism. One of the responsibilities of supervisors and field leaders is to maintain accountability for evangelism.

Sow as much gospel seed as possible in your setting. This includes personal evangelism, and it also includes other broad seed sowing methods. Determine media use among those you are trying to reach, and use those resources to get the gospel to as many people as possible.

Mercy ministries provide a unique facet to the work of evangelization and arise from a greater motivation than just the needs themselves. Mercy ministries are compassionate actions flowing from the indwelling Spirit in Christ's followers and are ultimately about God's grace for God's glory. Additionally, mercy ministries provide pathways for enabling IMB partners and churches to assist missionary teams who are evangelizing, discipling, planting, and multiplying healthy churches, and training leaders among unreached peoples and places, while showing compassion for those in need and suffering.

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DISCIPLESHIP

ENTRY
EVANGELISM
DISCIPLESHIP
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LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
EXIT

The central command of the Great Commission is to make disciples. A disciple is more than a person who has mastered a set of information, or practices a set of spiritual disciplines and shares the gospel. Discipleship involves the intentional transformation of the heart, mind, affections, will, relationships, and purpose, without pitting the importance of one against another. The essential tools for discipleship are the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the people of God. (Matthew 16:24–26, 28:16–20; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 6:40, 14:25–33; John 8:31–32, 13:34–35, 14:15–26, 15:1–17, 16:7–15; Romans 12:1–21; Galatians 5:16–26; Ephesians 4:1–16; Philippians 2:1–18; Colossians 1:28–29, 3:1–4:6; Hebrews 4:12)

The Word of God

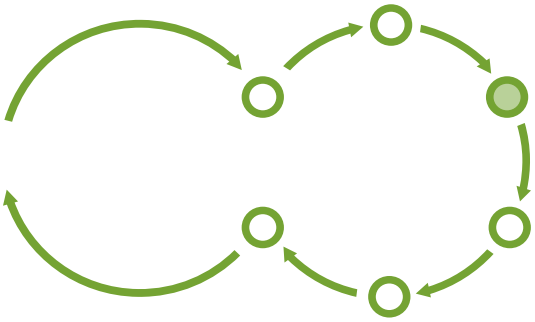
The Word of God is essential to discipleship. If an appropriate translation of the Bible is not available, which is often the case among unreached people groups, Scripture translation becomes an urgent priority. Carefully-crafted and community-tested Bible stories are useful resources and can be developed far more quickly than a Bible translation. They often lay a foundation for Bible translation. While Bible story sets are useful tools, they do not replace the Bible.

All disciples of Jesus need a thorough knowledge of Scripture. To that end, new disciples need three things: (1) an understanding of the big picture of the Bible (the grand narrative of Scripture, the two testaments, and the types of books in the Bible), (2) the ability to study the Bible effectively and responsibly, and (3) knowledge of the major themes of the Bible (see next page).

Discipleship is more than the transmission of information. It is the transformation of every area of life. Discipleship that does not lead to the obedience of faith is not biblical discipleship.

The apostles linked Christian life, ministry, and obedience to Christian theology. We should never separate what God has joined. The apostles always applied their theology to the lives of their hearers/readers. Therefore, we should always teach doctrine from within a life of loving obedience. Knowledge without humble, loving obedience is the kind of knowledge that puffs up and does not build up. The letters of Paul represent the kind of deep Bible doctrine that the apostles thought necessary for new believers coming out of pagan backgrounds. Obedience not rooted in gospel doctrine easily becomes legalism. As with the apostles, we must teach the obedience of the Christian life in the light of the great themes of Scripture: who God is, what His Word is, what the world is as His creation, who we are as humans created in His image but now fallen into sin, who Jesus is and what He does for us, who the Holy Spirit is and what He does for us, how we are saved and all the glorious consequences of that salvation, what the church is and what it does, what the Christian life is to be about, and where history is going under the ruling hand of God. Each of these truths needs to be built into the follow-up discipleship that new believers receive.

Discipleship must also penetrate and transform a new believer's worldview. Changes in belief and behavior without transformation in the underlying worldview leads to syncretism. Because every culture has worldview issues that must be addressed from Scripture, those who disciple new believers should do their homework to understand the worldview of those they are discipling. Missionaries should identify areas where the new believer's worldview is different from the biblical worldview, and should bring the teaching of the Bible to bear on those areas.



THEMES OF THE BIBLE

- **Who God is**
- **What His Word is**
- **What the world is as His creation**
- **Who we are as humans created in His image but now fallen into sin**
- **Who Jesus is**
- **What He does for us**
- **Who the Holy Spirit is**
- **What He does for us**
- **How we are saved and all the glorious consequences of that salvation**
- **What the church is**
- **What the church does**
- **What the Christian life is to be about**
- **Where history is going under the ruling hand of God**

NOTES

They should look at things such as:

- The nature of God
- The spirit world and its relationship with the material world
- The nature of creation
- The nature of humanity
- Where a person's identity lies—and where a believer's identity should lie
- Understanding of gender, marriage, and family
- What is good and what is bad in the eyes of God
- The meaning and nature of time and history
- The purpose of life and the significance of death

To get at this, it is important to explore how the host culture defines key religious words, and to make sure that biblical content is imported into each of these words.

The Spirit of God

Only the Holy Spirit can take the Word of God and use it to transform every area of a disciple's life. Discipleship must be done in conscious dependence on the power and work of the Holy Spirit.

The new disciple must learn to live and walk in the power of the Spirit of God, both by cultivating the habit of praying without ceasing, and by putting to death everything that might quench or grieve the Spirit. Intimacy with God and holiness of life are essential elements in the life of a disciple of Jesus.

Those who disciple others likewise must walk in the Spirit, keeping a close watch over their own lives and praying fervently for God to do what only He can do in the life of the new disciple. Discipleship methods and tools must include intentional, faithful prayer for those being discipled.

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The People of God

Scripture makes it clear that discipleship ordinarily happens in the context of the local church. One-on-one discipleship has a useful role, but it is not enough. Biblical discipleship requires the gifts and input of everyone in the body of Christ, so the new believer must be integrated into the life of a local church to grow properly as a disciple.

Baptism and incorporation into a local church should be presented as automatic and necessary consequences of conversion.

Where there are no churches, church planting becomes a non-negotiable component of making disciples.

All disciples should learn to regard themselves as responsible for one another's spiritual health and growth in their local church. All believers should be trained and encouraged to involve themselves in one another's lives in their local church, and to exercise their gifts in service to one another, in order to make church-based discipleship effective.

The preaching, teaching, worship, fellowship, and ministry of the church are all necessary components of the discipleship of each believer.

All missionary teams should have a discipleship plan for new believers that includes certain elements in every setting:

- The necessity and urgency of baptism and incorporation into a local church
- The big picture of the Bible and the ability to study the Bible well
- The spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, including prayer, Bible study, fasting, and worship, both private and corporate
- Basic Christian beliefs
- How to share the gospel and how to teach others to share the gospel
- Biblical teaching on holiness of life
- The biblical understanding of marriage, parenting, and family life
- A biblical understanding of work
- The nature and importance of church
- A biblical understanding of suffering and persecution
- Honoring family while maintaining biblical integrity and the exclusive claim of the gospel
- New identity in Christ and in His global body as superseding old identities of nationality, race, tribe, and family

In addition, other elements may need to be incorporated to address specific cultural settings and worldview issues. For example, in some settings, it will be particularly helpful to address the biblical view of the spirit world, charms and fetishes, and the supernatural in general. The purpose of discipleship is to make disciples—to present every man and woman complete in Christ. Not every disciple is called and gifted by God to start, lead, or teach a church, and we must not discourage those who are not. Only some will become pastors or missionaries. Disciples include strong believers and weak saints, dynamic leaders and quiet servants alike. While our missionaries may focus their attention on those whom God has gifted to be leaders, we must not neglect others or relegate them to second-class status in the church. We must establish discipleship patterns and practices that value all members of the body of Christ.

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HEALTHY CHURCH FORMATION

- ENTRY
- EVANGELISM
- DISCIPLESHIP
- **HEALTHY CHURCH FORMATION**
- LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
- EXIT

A church is a group of baptized believers in Jesus Christ who are committed to each other to be the body of Christ to one another and who meet together regularly to carry out the functions of a biblical church.[4] IMB is committed to planting healthy churches that multiply. We will follow the "Church" definition and guidelines in church planting, in the way we report on our work, and in teaching national believers and other partners. As we plant churches, our doctrinal foundation will align with the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. (Matthew 16:13–20, 18:15–20, 28:16–20; Acts 2:42–47, 5:1–11, 9:31, 13:1–3, 14:21–28, 15:1–6, 41, 16:5, 20:17–35; Romans 16:1–23; 1 Corinthians 3:1–17, 5:1–13, 6:1–11, 10:14–22, 31–33, 11:17–34, 12:1–31, 13:1–13, 14:1–40, 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8:1–15; Ephesians 1:15–23, 2:11–22, 4:1–32, 5:22–32; Colossians 1:15–20, 24–29, 3:1–17; 1 Timothy 3:15, 5:1–25; 2 Timothy 4:1–5; James 5:13–20)

The Twelve Characteristics of a Healthy Church are not a checklist for exit but rather a summary that describes what a sustainable church should be. We will teach and encourage church leaders to regard these characteristics as essential for church health. For this reason, in addition to planting new churches, the missionary task also can include strengthening and even revitalizing existing churches, helping them to grow into greater health.

We believe the best way to spread the gospel is through multiplying churches. Therefore, our tools and methods will seek to build engagement in the Great Commission into each new church from the very start of its existence, not simply in terms of growing the local church through evangelism, but through starting new churches that start new churches.

The need for the gospel among the lost is urgent, and we desire to see churches multiply as rapidly as God chooses to favor. At the same time, we recognize God's Word gives us no promise that our faithfulness to the missionary task will be rewarded with a certain rate of reproduction. Rapid multiplication is biblically possible, but is not biblically promised. The gospel will spread at different rates in our work around the

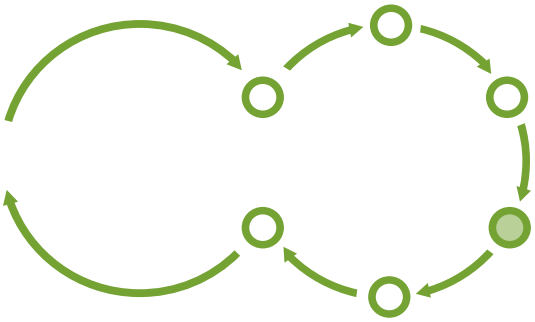
[4] For detailed description and discussion, see "The Church," under Core Missiological Convictions and "Church," under Key Terms.

world. Like Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:1, we pray and long for the gospel to spread rapidly, and we expect the church to multiply. As mentioned earlier, our primary aim in church planting is healthy churches that multiply, and we do not sacrifice or delay introducing any characteristics of a healthy church for the sake of rapid reproduction. In all of this, we believe that each local church is more than simply a means to the end of reproduction. Each local church is the bride of Christ, precious in the sight of God, and we will treat each church accordingly.

In our work, our role is not normally to start a church and then settle in as the long-term pastor of that church. Rather, our role is to share the gospel, disciple believers in the context of healthy, reproducing churches, and train indigenous pastors/elders/overseers to lead those churches. Therefore, we will foster local leadership and walk alongside them as needed, but we will not seek to establish ourselves as the long-term leaders of indigenous churches we plant overseas.

When working in places where there already exist international churches, we recognize and affirm the strategic value of these churches that are actively engaged in evangelism and missions. We believe that these churches should pursue all of the characteristics of healthy churches, which includes supporting themselves financially as soon as possible.

We do not regard buildings as necessary for new churches on the mission field. When churches are taught that they need buildings they cannot afford, there is a danger of dependence, especially when foreign funds are used to build those buildings. If a new church on the mission field chooses to build or buy a building for church functions, for the health of the church, the members need to do so with local and not foreign resources, and they need to be able to sustain the building with local resources.



The Twelve Characteristics of a Healthy Church are not a checklist for exit but rather a summary that describes what a sustainable church should be.

No contextualization efforts should ever violate Scripture or compromise the integrity of the gospel.

Our role is to share the gospel, disciple believers in the context of healthy, reproducing churches, and train indigenous pastors/elders/overseers to lead those churches.

Contextualization

The churches we plant should be contextualized to their local culture, just as churches are in North America. We also believe that Scripture sets boundaries and that no contextualization efforts should ever violate Scripture or compromise the integrity of the gospel. We commend what is popularly known as C3 contextualization, in which the church worships and teaches in the local language and adapts to the local culture in matters generally regarded as not having religious significance. We are cautiously comfortable with C4 contextualization, in which elements of the local religious culture are incorporated into church practice with new Christian content (such as celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25). Because all practices carry their own cultural and emotional baggage, we urge caution in C4 efforts, and we urge that the thoughts and feelings of local converts from the majority religion be taken fully into account in adopting such practices. We reject C5 contextualization, or what is commonly called Insider Movement approaches, as profoundly unbiblical. We will not ever seek to establish the church inside any other religious system, nor teach that any other religion, its founders or prophets, or its books, are in any way from God. (Old Testament Judaism is the obvious exception here, although post-New Testament rabbinic developments are problematic.) We will never teach or encourage any believer in Jesus to remain inside any other religion or continue its religious practices after conversion to Christ.

We are not constrained to reproduce our own exact denominational structures for churches overseas. However, we will seek to foster cooperation among churches in a given place or among a given people group for the sake of mission. We will encourage and facilitate the development of structures for cooperation that are appropriate for each setting.

No one should ever be required to learn another language or adopt another culture in order to follow Jesus. At the same time, we recognize that the gospel breaks down dividing walls between people, and the gospel is adorned when this power to unite people across lines of race or class is displayed. We must live inside the tension between these two statements. We must never reinforce any form of racism or other ungodly forms of human division. We must never separate people who could worship together simply because they are from different races, classes, or castes. At the same time, we must be sensitive to the needs of ethnic and linguistic minorities to be able to worship and learn in their heart language and to express their own culture as disciples of Jesus.

NOTES

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- ENTRY
- EVANGELISM
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- HEALTHY CHURCH FORMATION
- **LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**
- EXIT

Churches must be encouraged and trained to embrace the Great Commission both locally and globally from the start of their existence as a church.

Biblical leadership is essential to the well-being of every local church, and God calls different people to lead in different ways. As already discussed, the New Testament specifically identifies two offices of church leadership: pastors/elders/overseers, and deacons. We see in the New Testament that the apostles appointed elders in every church, while deacons (servants) seem to be chosen on an as-needed basis. As we develop leaders in local churches, we prioritize training pastors/elders/overseers. Healthy churches require faithful, well-trained pastors, and we must have healthy churches led by such pastors to fulfill the Great Commission. (Acts 6:1–7, 13:1–3, 14:21–23, 20:17–35; Ephesians 4:11–16; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1–13, 4:11–16, 5:17–22; Titus 1:5–9; James 5:13–20; 1 Peter 5:1–5)

One of the characteristics of a healthy church is biblical mission. As we develop leaders in local churches, we also prioritize training missionaries. Churches must be encouraged and trained to embrace the Great Commission both locally and globally from the start of their existence as a church. For that reason, we also need to work with churches and their pastors to identify and develop church planters and cross-cultural missionaries, so that they can engage in mission as quickly and as effectively as possible. (Acts 11:19–26, 15:36–40, 16:1–3, 18:24–28; Romans 15:14–29; Titus 1:1–5)

The qualifications for offices of church leadership are found in 1 Timothy 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9. The most obvious characteristics of these qualifications have to do with character and family life. In essence, a church leader is to be an exemplary disciple of Jesus. Leadership training therefore flows out of basic discipleship.

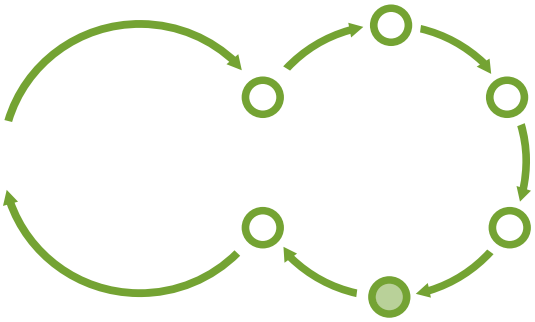
Specific pastoral qualifications may be broken down into three categories: what the leader must **BE**, what the leader must **KNOW**, and what the leader must **DO**.

Be

The pastor/elder/overseer should model the character of Christ. "Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money" (1 Timothy 3:2–3). "For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined" (Titus 1:7–8). Because these traits are so essential to healthy church leadership, and because these fruits of discipleship are best developed and assessed in the context of a local church, leadership development should have a strong connection to the life of a local church. It is never enough to give a man academic training and then regard Him as qualified to be a pastor/elder/overseer. He must be discipled, tested, and affirmed by the church, and we must regard this process as a non-negotiable component of leadership training.

Know

"He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also able to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). The pastor/elder/overseer must know the Bible and he must know doctrine. He must know both well enough to teach them accurately and to discern and refute false teaching. This indicates a high level of biblical and theological knowledge. Men in this role should be thoroughly trained in the content of basic biblical hermeneutics, Old Testament, New Testament, biblical theology, and systematic theology. Although not essential, familiarity with church history is helpful to recognize old heresies when they inevitably re-emerge. In order to shepherd the people of God well, acquaintance with the basics of biblical counseling is also helpful, and in order to lead the people of God on mission, knowledge of biblical missions and evangelism is useful.



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Scripture teaches us that not everyone has the same gifts or the same roles in the church, but that every gift is vital, including those that are less public or less noticeable.

/ 1 CORINTHIANS 12

Do

As indicated above, the pastor/elder/overseer must be able to teach the content of the Bible and sound biblical doctrine well. He must also be able to detect and refute false teaching. He must be able to manage and care for God's church (1 Timothy 3:5), and to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). As preparation for this, he must be able to lead His own household well. These are skills that need to be developed, not simply through the sharing of information, but through mentored practice as well.

Scripture teaches us that not everyone has the same gifts or the same roles in the church, but that every gift is vital, including those that are less public or less noticeable (1 Corinthians 12). It also teaches us that not many should be teachers (James 3:1). Therefore, we do not believe that every faithful disciple of Jesus should start and/or lead a church, and not every faithful disciple of Jesus should teach in the church. We should never create such an expectation. We will disciple every believer, but leadership in the church is assigned by God to certain individuals within the church for the benefit of all (Ephesians 4:11–16).

We believe both men and women have vital roles in the ministry of the church. However, the role of pastor/elder/overseer is exclusively assigned to men in the church, and not to women (1 Timothy 2:11–12). This is not a Western cultural practice, but a biblical command, and we are not at liberty to change it. Nor can we step around this requirement by calling women by a different title but then assigning them the leadership and teaching functions of a pastor/elder/overseer. Regardless of local cultural norms, we must consistently teach and model that the role of pastor/elder/overseer is only to be held by men, and we must never affirm or encourage women in that role. However, we strongly affirm that women must be evangelized, discipled, fully incorporated into the church, and developed appropriately as leaders.

The Bible never mentions academic credentials as necessary for service in church leadership. Therefore, we must be careful that we never state, imply, or contribute to the impression that a man must possess a certain academic degree to serve as a pastor/elder/overseer.

It is appropriate for a church to set a person apart for specific roles and offices of ministry through prayer and the laying on of hands. However, care must be taken lest extrabiblical ideas about ordination take root, such as the notion that ordination conveys supernatural power, or the tradition that ordination requires a set of extrabiblical requirements and processes.

Experience has shown that it is often unwise to uproot a man and his family and move them to another location for theological training. This is especially true when the man comes from a place that is poor and/or from a high-persecution environment, and the place of training is an easier environment in which to live. In such cases, the newly trained leader all too often fails to return to his harder home environment. Establishing some form of extension training is frequently better, as it keeps the man and his family living in their original setting and preserves the connection between leadership training and the life of the local church.

Theological training should be geared to the educational level of those being trained. Uneducated, or undereducated, does not mean unable to lead. Additionally, the teaching approach used in graduate education in North America is not going to be useful in the majority of places for those who need to be trained for church leadership globally. Where that approach is applicable, it should certainly be used, and every language and culture will need its theologians and biblical scholars. However, for the majority of cases, other levels and teaching styles of theological training should be provided.

Theological training should be geared to the educational level of those being trained.

One of the measures of completion of the missionary task is the development of those who can train other leaders, and even systems for training those trainers, within the churches in a given people group or place.

Seminaries exert significant influence in existing churches and denominations. Where seminaries exist, we need to invest in their theological and spiritual health. This investment includes both fostering partnerships between overseas seminaries and our Southern Baptist seminaries in North America, and also assigning teachers to teach in overseas seminaries.

It is not our goal to remain forever in any role, including the role of theological education. One of the measures of completion of the missionary task is the development of those who can train other leaders, and even systems for training those trainers, within the churches in a given people group or place. This includes everything from basic training for village pastors to high-level theologians and biblical scholars. When we exit, we must leave behind a self-sustaining system of theological and pastoral training.

EXIT

Our goal is to complete the missionary task in each people group or place and then to exit, with the new churches from that place or people as our partners in the ongoing task of global evangelism. We begin our work with this end in mind, and then continually evaluate toward this end as we go. (Acts 1:8, Romans 15:14–29)

There is a subjective nature to the decision to exit a work, whether it be a church, a network of churches, a people group, or a place. We look at the overall picture of the state of the church, not just a percentage of believers in a particular place or people group. We make decisions concerning when to exit with deep reliance on the leadership of the Holy Spirit, in much prayer, and in close cooperation with local church leaders.

The work of exit must be accomplished in stages. With churches, our involvement may progress along the continuum of the missionary task from a primary focus on evangelism to discipleship in the context of church formation to leadership training. Also with churches, following the example of the apostles, we continue to watch and advise after we have physically moved on to another work. With networks of churches, people groups, and places, we similarly may stage our work along this same continuum.

Our criteria for exit from a people group or place correlate to the components of the missionary task.

Evangelism / Are indigenous believers and churches carrying out faithfully and effectively the work of sharing the gospel within this people group or place?

Discipleship / Are the churches within this place or people group faithfully and effectively discipling the believers whom God has entrusted to them?

- ENTRY
- EVANGELISM
- DISCIPLESHIP
- HEALTHY CHURCH FORMATION
- LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
- **EXIT**

Our goal is to complete the missionary task in each people group or place and then to exit, with the new churches from that place or people as our partners in the ongoing task of global evangelism.

Exit does not imply abandonment.

Church planting / Are the churches within this people group or place displaying the Twelve Characteristics of a Healthy Church? Are these churches faithfully planting other healthy churches? Are they able to sustain church planting on their own?

Leadership training / Do these churches have trained leaders, and do they have systems in place to continue to train leaders in an effective and biblically faithful way?

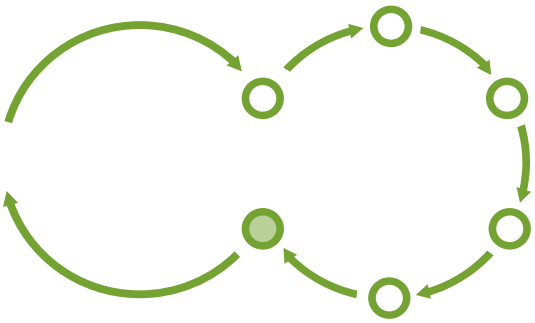
Missionary involvement / Another criterion for exit is the missionary involvement of the churches in the people group or place. Are they effectively training and sending cross-cultural missionaries to other people groups or places?

In addition, we must ask the dependency question: Would our continued presence foster dependency on the part of local churches who are capable of fulfilling all of the tasks of a healthy church movement but who are reluctant to do so out of habit or out of deference to us?

In summary, we have the freedom to move on from a mission field only when there are healthy local churches that are self-led and self-financed, that are aggressively sharing the gospel and planting new churches among their own people, that are fully able to train their own leaders well, and that have joined the global body of Christ in taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Exit does not imply abandonment. We do not lose our commitment to walk alongside the churches we have planted simply because our full-time presence is no longer needed. Rather, we enter into a new phase of partnership with these churches as together we press on to complete the Great Commission.

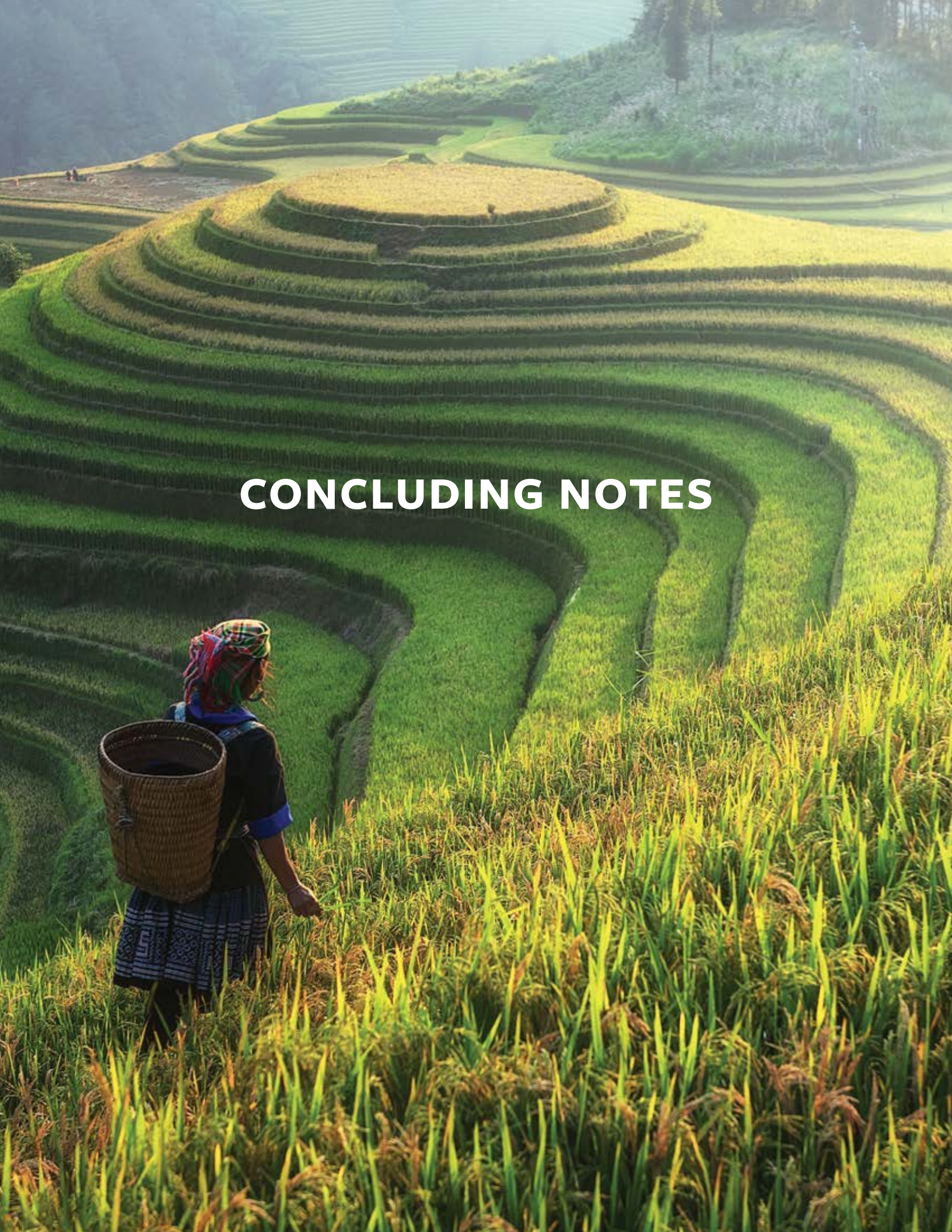
Prayer



Throughout every aspect of the missionary task, from even before entry, **prayer must suffuse every part of the missionary effort to make an eternal impact on a people group or place** through the missionary team's entry, evangelism, discipleship, healthy church formation, leadership development, and exit. (Matthew 9:38; Mark 9:14–29; Luke 5:15–16, 10:1–2, 18:1–8, 21:34–36; Acts 2:42, 4:23–31, 6:1–6, 12:1–5, 13:1–3, 14:21–23; Romans 8:26–27, 12:12; Ephesians 6:18–20; Philippians 4:4–7; Colossians 4:2–4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18; 1 Timothy 2:1–8; James 5:13–18; 1 Peter 4:7–8)

Success

We define success as faithfulness to the missionary task. We cannot define success by the results of our work, which are in the hands of God. We must define success by the faithful, hard work that He has called us to do. Faithfulness means that we work hard, investing our time, energy, and resources in the missionary task. We work smart, not engaging in activity for activity's sake, but thoughtfully and biblically doing that which best accomplishes what God has called us to do. Working smart includes evaluating the fruit God gives, being open to learning and adjusting our strategies to be more fruitful as we ask God to bear fruit through our lives. Faithfulness then rests in the gracious power of God and trusts Him for the results. Defining success as faithfulness is never an excuse for laziness, nor is it a justification for avoiding accountability. We will work hard, work smart, and trust God with the results. (Matthew 24:45–51; Acts 20:33–35; 1 Corinthians 3:5–15, 4:1–2, 15:9–10, 58; Colossians 3:17, 23; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Timothy 2:1–7; James 4:13–17)



CONCLUDING NOTES

Concluding Notes

The nature of our involvement in any given mission field is determined by the state of the church in that field. Hence, if there are few to no believers and churches, we will be heavily involved in initial evangelism. Where there are believers but few healthy churches we will invest more in discipleship and healthy church formation. Where the church exists and is multiplying, but well-trained leaders are in short supply, we will engage in theological training. Where all of the above are present, we will probably limit our involvement to mobilization for missions. This means that different types of teams with different types of workers and giftings will be needed at different stages of the work.

We recognize that this sequence is not strictly chronological in nature. For example, discipleship and healthy church formation go hand in hand. However, we will always work toward progress along this continuum until we reach the point of responsible exit.

The components of this continuum, along with the earlier statements in this document about who we are as IMB missionaries, will constitute the core of the training that we give to our missionaries. We will evaluate our fruitfulness in terms of the elements in this continuum.

This document intentionally leaves room for a variety of tools and methods to be used. We recognize that different contexts require different approaches. Within the boundaries of consistency with Scripture and alignment with the foundations established herein, IMB missionaries are encouraged to explore or develop the tools that work best in their environment.

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ADDENDA

Addendum One

PARTNERSHIP WITH OTHER CHURCHES AND MINISTRIES

IMB missionary teams pursue partnership with individuals, churches, ministries, and other organizations on different levels depending on the different parts of the missionary task.

Entry / In order for our teams to partner with other individuals or organizations in entry, practical alignment with our entry goals of establishing presence, identity, and communication ability is necessary. It is also necessary that these partners not inhibit or prohibit any other aspect of the missionary task, and that our association with them not harm gospel witness.

Evangelism / (including Scripture distribution) This level of partnership requires alignment with primary theological issues (i.e., those things that we regard as necessary for salvation). Partners must share the same understanding and presentation of the gospel as we do. This also requires missiological commitment to evangelism.

Discipleship, Healthy Church Formation, and Leadership Development / This level of partnership requires substantive theological alignment with the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, ecclesiological alignment with the Twelve Characteristics of a Healthy Church, and missiological commitment to the six parts of the missionary task.

NOTES

Addendum Two

HOW WE INTERPRET THE BIBLE

We need to interpret the Bible soberly and carefully, and submit our minds, our affections, and our wills to everything the Bible teaches.

We believe that the Bible is the very Word of God. We have a fundamental commitment to believe what it says and to obey what it commands. We must never surrender our vigilance over the truthfulness of Scripture. Satan's first attack on the human race was over the integrity of God's word (Genesis 3:1–5), and he has continued that attack in every age since that day. In addition, we need to exercise diligence and care over how we treat the Bible. It does us no good to affirm the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture if we then ignore it, add to it, subtract from it, misinterpret it, or disobey it. We need to understatnd the implications of verbal inspiration. We need to interpret the Bible soberly and carefully, and submit our minds, our affections, and our wills to everything the Bible teaches. Only then will the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible have the effect on our lives that God intends.

The Bible is the Word of God. God is the ultimate author. Second Timothy 3:16–17 makes it plain for us, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Note Scripture's origin in the words, "breathed out by God." Second Peter 1:21 says the same thing in different words, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

It is profitable for

- **Teaching /** The Bible is the source of truth about everything God knows we need to know.
- **Reproof /** The Bible shows us when we stray in our thinking, our affections, or our actions.
- **Correction /** The Bible gets us back on track when we have gone off course.
- **Training in righteousness /** The Bible reshapes us in the image of Jesus.
- **Equipping for ministry /** The Bible trains us in the things God wants us to do in His service.

Because the Bible is "breathed out [inspired] by God," it also has four other characteristics:

The Bible is inerrant. It is without error in everything it teaches on every subject it touches. Our understanding of inerrancy takes into account approximations, hyperbole, and figurative speech. Within the normal rules of interpretation for each kind of text in the Bible, we can have absolute confidence in the truthfulness of everything it tells us.

The Bible is authoritative. It rules and judges us. We do not judge it. Because the Bible is the very Word of the Sovereign King of the universe, it has absolute authority over everything we believe and do.

The Bible is clear in everything that God knows we need to know. Our omnipotent God is capable of making His meaning known. With careful, responsible interpretation, and with the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to read out of the text all God knows we need to know.

The Bible is sufficient for life and ministry. We do not need another book, person, or institution to interpret the Bible for us or to make up for anything lacking in it. We can learn from other sources of knowledge, but we do not need them. Furthermore, we must judge all other sources of knowledge by Scripture, and not the other way around. The Bible is enough.

NOTES

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The Bible is the word of God through the words of men. Though it was not dictated, God directed the men and women He used so that every word is what He wanted. The Bible retains the personality and style of the human authors. It reflects their cultural and historical context. However, it remains perfectly God's word.

The Bible is made up of two testaments: the Old Testament, which was written before Jesus was born, and the New Testament, which was written after Jesus returned to heaven. The Old Testament was preparation for Jesus, and everything pointed forward to Him. The New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old.

The Bible is made up of sixty-six books, thirty-nine in the Old Testament, and twenty-seven in the New Testament. Different human authors wrote these over a span of 1,400 years, from Moses (around 1400 BC) to John in the book of Revelation (written around AD 90). The Bible is made up of different kinds of literature, as well. This is part of the genius of God's plan, who is the master teacher and who communicated His truth through a variety of literary genres.

These genres include historical narrative, law (both straightforward command and case law), hymns of praise, prayers to God, proverbs and other wisdom literature, prophetic poetry, letters, and apocalypse.

WHAT IS THE BIG PICTURE OF THE BIBLE?

The Bible is not a random collection of stories and teachings, but a connected historical narrative, with an author, a beginning, a cast of historical characters, an overarching plotline, and a destination. It is first and foremost the Book of God. He is the author and the only real hero of the story, and He is sovereign over everything that happens in the Bible. This story is completely true, and it is the story that explains and defines everything. This story has four major plot movements: **Creation**, **Fall**, **Redemption**, and **Restoration**.

Creation

Before there was anything or anyone else, there has always been God. He is before creation, above it, and separate from it. He is infinitely powerful and wise, and He needed nothing. Out of the overflow of His fullness and His greatness, He created everything in the universe simply by speaking it into being. Everything He made was good. As the crown of His work of creation, God made man and woman in His image, to reflect His character and represent His rule in the world He had created. The man and woman had perfect fellowship with Him and with each other, and they were given a command to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it, ruling over everything that God had made. They had one, and only one, prohibition: they were forbidden from eating fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Out of the overflow of His fullness and His greatness, God created everything in the universe simply by speaking it into being.

Fall

Even though the first man and woman had no inclination to sin and no reason to doubt God's wisdom and goodness, they rebelled against God and disobeyed Him. The results were catastrophic for them and for the entire created order. They immediately became guilty before God. Sin corrupted every area of their nature. They became alienated from God and from one another. They died spiritually on the day that they rebelled against God, and physical death became their even-

They became alienated from God and from one another.

God created the different peoples and languages of the earth as an act of judgment, but He then proceeded to use that very mosaic of peoples as the framework for global redemption.

tual destiny. Their descendants inherited all of this from their first parents, so that all people everywhere are guilty sinners before God, spiritually dead with every area of human nature corrupted by sin. Creation itself was also subject to decay, so that natural disasters, sickness, and death became the normal experience of a world that had been perfectly good before the fall of humanity. The rebellion of our first parents against God is the source of all that is wrong in the world.

Redemption

God would have been perfectly just if He had simply wiped out the human race or had left us to the consequences of our own rebellion. Instead, God chose to redeem rebellious sinners, and His plan of redemption makes up all of the Bible from Genesis 3 to the book of Revelation. Even when God pronounced judgment on the first man and woman (and the serpent, who was the embodiment of Satan), He spoke a word of hope when He promised that a seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head even as His own heel would be bruised.

The story that follows is a sad depiction of the downward spiral of human depravity. The first family became the first dysfunctional family, as the first two brothers became the first murderer and murder victim. Wickedness grew so prevalent that God decided to bring judgment on the earth in the form of a flood that covered the entire planet. However, even as He displayed His holiness and justice in punishing sin, He also displayed His mercy and grace by rescuing Noah, his family, and a pair of every animal on the earth through the ark. When the rescued human race then refused to fill the earth and subdue it, but tried instead to build a tower to the heavens in order to stay together and make a name for themselves at Babel, God judged them by separating their languages. In this way, God created the different peoples and languages of the earth as an act of judgment, but He then proceeded to use that very mosaic of peoples as the framework for global redemption.

A Chosen People

God then chose one man, Abraham, and blessed him, and gave him the specific promise that through him all the families and

peoples of the earth would be blessed. God further narrowed His focus to one of Abraham's sons, Isaac, and then to one of Isaac's sons, Jacob, with the same promise that they would be blessed in order to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. Jacob had twelve sons, and God moved the entire family into Egypt during a time of famine. They were in Egypt for hundreds of years, during which time God multiplied them into a great nation.

One of the rulers of Egypt began to enslave and oppress the descendants of Jacob, now known as Israel, so God raised up a prophet named Moses. God used Moses to set His people free from their bondage. He judged the false gods of Egypt through a series of ten plagues. The last of these plagues was the death of the firstborn of every household in Egypt. God instructed His people to kill the Passover lamb and place its blood on their doorposts so that the angel of death would pass over their homes and spare their firstborn. God then led His people out of Egypt through the hand of Moses, parting the Red Sea so that they could pass safely through it, but then bringing the waters down in judgment on the Egyptian army pursuing them. He brought them to Mount Sinai, where He gave them His law (which was a reflection of His character) and made them His people through covenant. Because they were a sinful people, He gave them the tabernacle (later replaced by the temple in Jerusalem) as a symbol of His presence with them, and He gave them priests and sacrifices to show them that the wages of sin is death but that the penalty could be paid by a substitute. He also gave them special laws to mark their separation from the nations around them.

The people of God were unfaithful during their time in the wilderness after God rescued them from Egypt, and they wandered for forty years until Moses died. Finally, however, God brought them into the promised land under the leadership of Joshua, whose name means "The Lord Saves." Through Joshua and the armies of Israel, God judged the wicked, idolatrous nations who lived in the land, and He gave His people safety, peace, and rest. However, after Joshua died, the people of God followed a cycle of rebellion and repentance. They would rebel

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against God and break His covenant and He would allow their enemies to prevail over them. When they cried out to Him for deliverance, He would raise up a leader, known as a judge, who would deliver them from their oppressors. They would follow the Lord until the judge died, after which the cycle would begin all over again. As in the days after Adam, the period of the judges demonstrated the wickedness of the human heart and the inability of sinful people to save or rule themselves.

Kings and Prophets

After many generations of judges, and after an unfaithful king named Saul, God raised up a king named David. David was a man after God's own heart, who wrote many of the Psalms used for worship in Israel. He was the prototypical king, ruling his people according to God's law, protecting them from their enemies, and providing them with peace and prosperity. However, even David sinned quite spectacularly, and eventually died. His son, Solomon, ushered in a golden age of economic prosperity, but he also allowed foreign gods to be worshiped in Israel. After Solomon died, the kingdom split in two, and the old cycle of rebellion, repentance, and deliverance began all over again. Some of the kings in the southern kingdom of Judah were good rulers, but many were bad. All of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel were bad, and led their people into disobedience toward God. In response, God raised up prophets, who spoke for God and served as prosecuting attorneys against God's people for their violation of His covenant. Prophets warned the people and called them back to faithfulness to that covenant. They also spoke of the Day of the Lord, which was to come. That day would be the Day of Messiah, in which God Himself would step onto the stage of human history and set things right. It would be the Day of the Spirit, in which God would pour out His Spirit on all of His people. It would be the Day of the Ingathering of the Nations, when God's promise to Abraham (that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him) would finally be fulfilled.

God finally fulfilled His warnings to His people, and He judged them by sending foreign armies to conquer them and to scat-

The period of the judges demonstrated the wickedness of the human heart and the inability of sinful people to save or rule themselves.

ter them in exile among the nations. In doing so, He scattered outposts of the knowledge of Him and His law all over the ancient world, as the chastened people of God sought to follow Him more faithfully. He also brought some of the people back to their land after a period of exile, in a demonstration of His mercy. However, it was now clear to the people of God that they needed something more. They needed the Day of the Lord to come.

King of Kings

Finally, in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus (Joshua in Hebrew). He was God Himself in human flesh. He was the perfect prophet, who not only spoke the word of God but who also was the Word of God made flesh. He was the perfect priest and sacrifice, who lived the life we should have lived in perfect obedience to God, and who then in our place died the death we deserved to die, taking on Himself the wrath of God against our sins. He was the perfect king, the Son of David, who conquered death by rising again from the dead on the third day, who reigns now at the right hand of God the Father, and who will come again in glory at the end of the age to make all things new. He was the perfect fulfillment of everything that the Old Testament predicted and foreshadowed.

After His death and resurrection, Jesus commissioned His followers to take the good news of salvation in Him to all peoples to the ends of the earth, in fulfillment of the Day of the Ingathering of the Nations. After He ascended into heaven, He sent His Holy Spirit onto His followers to empower their witness, in fulfillment of the Day of the Spirit. When He did so, His people spoke in the languages of everyone who was assembled to hear them, in anticipation of the reversal of the judgment at Babel. The rest of the New Testament is the story of the gospel going out to the nations and languages of the earth, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Jesus was the perfect prophet, who not only spoke the word of God but who also was the Word of God made flesh.

ADDENDUM TWO

NOTES

Restoration

The story of the Bible ends with the story of the end of history. Jesus will come back at a time known only to God. He will separate those who have trusted in Him from those who have not. Those who have trusted in Jesus will be declared righteous based on His perfect record, accounted to them, and they will be with God in infinite joy and glory forever. Those who have not trusted in Jesus will be judged in righteousness and will be condemned for their sins. They will be cast from the presence of God into eternal hell. God will destroy the present heavens and earth by fire, and He will bring in the new heavens and the new earth, where righteousness will dwell. In that place there will be no more sickness, sorrow, sin, separation, or death. There will be a multitude there that no one can count, from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, worshiping and enjoying God forever.

This is the big picture of the Bible. Everything must be understood in the context of this big picture: (1) the Bible is from God and about God; (2) the basic plot of the story is Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration; and (3) the centerpiece of the story is Jesus, God Himself who became a man

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Approach the Bible in prayer.

- The Holy Spirit inspired it.
- You are a sinner, and sin clouds your thinking (Proverbs 14:12).
- The Holy Spirit has the job of leading you into the truth (John 16:13, 1 Corinthians 2:12–16).
- Therefore, pray for Him to open your mind to understand (Psalm 119:18).

Recognize that God is the only hero of the Bible.

- The human characters are shown honestly, with their flaws as well as their strengths.
- This is ultimately the Book of God.

Read the Bible as a book that points to Jesus (John 5:39).

- Jesus is God who became one of us to save us.
- The entire Bible points to Him.
- Do not interpret any part of it apart from Him.

Read each part in the context of the whole.

- Never take a verse out of context. Read verses in context of the paragraph, chapter, book, testament, and the Bible as a whole.
- Interpret each part in light of the grand narrative.
- Let Scripture interpret Scripture.
- Never interpret one part in a way that contradicts another part.

Approach the Bible in faith and obedience (James 1:22–25).

- Read it with confidence that what it tells you is true.
- Read it with confidence that what it requires of you is good—even when it goes against the wisdom of the world or your desires.
- Read it with the intention and commitment to obey.

NOTES

ADDENDUM TWO

With these things in mind, you should also:

+ **Choose a significant portion to interpret**, usually at least a paragraph in length.
+ **Always determine what the point of the text is in its context.**
+ **Examine what it says and what it means in its biblical context** before you ask, "What does it mean to me?"
+ **Take note of the kind of literature you are reading.** For example, the Bible contains narrative, law, poetry, hymns, prayers, wisdom sayings, prophecy, parables, and letters. Each of these has "rules" of interpretation.
+ **Be aware of the historical setting,** when a book was written, and what else was going on at the time. Understanding historical sections of the Bible is helpful.
+ **Be aware of cultural issues**. For example, it is helpful to know about the relationship between Jews and Samaritans, or the length of a Sabbath day's journey in rabbinic tradition.
+ Use outside resources wisely. They can be helpful, but don't let them become a crutch.
+ **Learn with humility.** Don't let knowledge puff you up.
+ Read the Bible in community: the community of your local church, and the wider community of the global church, which includes true believers from different places, cultures, and times.
+ **Remember that a completely novel and original interpretation of a passage is probably not a correct one.**
+ **Always read in the context of praise, prayer, and obedience.**

THE OLD TESTAMENT

How does the Old Testament function for New Testament believers?

The Old Testament establishes a basic worldview from God's perspective. Consider what we learn simply from the first three chapters of Genesis:

- God is separate from creation, and eternal in time.
- God created everything simply by speaking. He is infinite in power.
- The created world is not its own. It belongs to God.
- The created world is real, and it is good.
- History and time are linear, with a beginning and a destination.
- Humanity was created in the image of God, to reflect and represent Him on the earth He created.
- Humanity was created male and female, so complementary gender identity is fixed, innate, and good.
- Humanity was created with a job to do.
- Humanity rebelled against God.
- Death was not our intended destiny, but is a consequence of sin.
- Sin resulted in broken relationships between humanity and God, humanity and nature, and man and woman
- The rest of the Old Testament fleshes out those themes, especially the last.

The Old Testament establishes the basic themes of biblical truth: God (who He is, what He does, and what He requires), humanity and the consequences of our sin, redemption and grace, election, covenant, God's people, and the sacrifice required for sin, among others. The New Testament assumes and builds on the Old Testament understanding of these themes. **The Old Testament is a tutor to lead us to Christ.**

NOTES

TYPES OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE (GENRES)

Old Testament Narratives

Narrative is found in Genesis, in other parts of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), the historical books from Joshua to Esther, and in parts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. This is history, but has some distinct advantages over all other historical writing.

- **All history is selective.** God selected what to include to make the points He wanted to make.
- **All history has a perspective, dependent on the author.** God is the ultimate author of biblical history, so the perspective is His, and He alone has the full perspective.
- **All historical writing is trying to make some point.** God is the ultimate author, so the point being made is His.
- **The historical record of the Bible is a crucial component**, which comprises 60 percent of the text, and sets the framework for the grand narrative of the Bible. Biblical Christianity is a historical religion.

THINGS TO REMEMBER:

God is the only hero. Everyone else is a sinner. The historical reporting of the Bible is stunningly honest about even its most important characters.

Things are reported because they happened, not necessarily because they should have happened. Not everything is a positive example. Many parts of the Old Testament (e.g., most of the book of Judges) reveal negative examples. Evaluate examples by the commands of Scripture to see what is right and what is wrong. Recognize that much Old Testament narrative is disgusting precisely to make the point of the depth of our sin problem.

Always ask, "What is the point of this episode?" Evaluate it in the flow of the book in question and in the flow of the complete biblical narrative. Look for editorial comments that explain the point, or for thematic statements that shape an entire book (e.g., Judges 2:11–23, 21:25).

Be cautious about drawing conclusions or applications from incidental details of the story. Always seek to understand why a detail is included (e.g., Mary laying Jesus in the manger emphasized the humility of His birth rather than giving a binding example of where babies should sleep).

Beware of moralizing or allegorizing to find meaning in a text. Look for the way the passage fits in its context and the point the author was trying to make, and be content with that as the meaning.

Draw the text to Jesus. Don't teach or apply to yourself a message that a rabbi could teach. See how this fits into the flow of the Old Testament toward Jesus, and ground your understanding and application of the text in that.

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Old Testament Laws

There are 613 commandments in the Torah. Of them, 248 of them are positive (telling us what to do), and 365 of them are negative (telling us what not to do). It is clear from the testimony of Scripture that the Law of God plays an important role in biblical thought. (See, for example, Psalm 119.) It is also clear, from the testimony of the New Testament, that Christians are free from the Law based on Christ's life, death, and resurrection as our substitute—and yet are not free to sin. How then do we, as New Testament Christians, interpret and apply the Old Testament Law?

Historically, Christian theologians have identified three types of commands in the Law:

1 / **Ceremonial laws** govern things such as the temple rituals and the annual festivals of Israel.

2 / **Civil laws** governed the civil, judicial, and political life of the theocratic state of Israel.

3 / **Moral laws** reflect the binding will of God for the thoughts, affections, and actions of all people throughout time, in reflection of His character.

The first two of these types of laws could be grouped together as one category: the typological or teaching tool laws, which served to point forward to Jesus and to new covenant realities. Typological laws include separation ordinances such as Leviticus 19:19, which functioned to underscore Israel's separation from the world around it.

Basic principles for interpreting and applying Old Testament Law

- The entire law reflects the holy character of God. It is holy and good. It is not an arbitrary code (Romans 7:12).
- The law is a tutor to lead us to Christ (Galatians 3:24) by enabling us to see our sinful condition (Romans 7:7–12).
- Jesus fulfilled the entire law for us, in our place (Matthew 5:17).
- The typological parts, having been fulfilled perfectly in Christ, no longer have a function and pass from sight (Hebrews 8:13).
- The moral law reflects the moral character of God. We are not saved by obeying it but rather because Jesus obeyed it on our behalf.
- Now, however, the moral law spells out for us who we are to become, in the image of Christ. It is binding on us, not as a means of salvation but as a standard of sanctification.
- Most, if not all, moral law is affirmed and/or repeated in the New Testament.

How do we interpret and apply the Law of God as New Covenant Christians?

- Determine what kind of law something is, whether it is typological or moral.
- For typological laws (ceremonial laws, cleanliness laws, separation ordinances, and civil laws for political Israel), ask what truth about God and/or us it represented, and how it was fulfilled in Christ.
- For moral law, look in the New Testament for repetition, affirmation, or interpretation of the law.
- Pray for grace to be conformed to God's image in that area.

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TYPES OF PARALLELISM

1 / In **synonymous parallelism**, the second line repeats the first (e.g., Psalm 47:3), "He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet." Don't look for differences between the lines, but what they say together.

2 / In **antithetical parallelism**, the second line contrasts the first line with an opposing truth. This is the form of most of the proverbs (e.g., Proverbs 15:1), "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

3 / In **synthetic parallelism**, the second line carries the thought of the first line further (e.g., Luke 1:51 NIV), "He has performed mighty deeds with His arm, He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts."

4 / A special form of parallelism is the **"X, X+1" formula** for lists (e.g., Proverbs 30:18-19), "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a young woman."

Psalms and other Poetry

- Introduction to Hebrew Poetry
- The Book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible with 150 chapters, and it is entirely composed of poetry originally intended to be sung.
- In addition, Proverbs and the Song of Solomon are also poetry, as is most of Job, parts of Ecclesiastes, and large parts of the Major and Minor Prophets.
- Hebrew poetry works primarily on patterns of meter and meaning.
- Meter, the number of syllables per line, makes tunes interchangeable.
- Patterns of meaning usually come in various forms of parallelism. The basic unit of a Hebrew poem is a two-line couplet that displays one of the forms of parallelism.
- Poetry is sometimes organized as an acrostic, with successive lines or verses beginning with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Most famous is Psalm 119 (the longest chapter in the Bible), but other examples include Psalms 9 and 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145; Proverbs 31:10–31 (The Virtuous Woman), Lamentations 1–4, and Nahum 1:2–10.

TYPES OF PSALMS IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Lament: The Largest Category of Psalms

- Structure: address to God, description of distress, plea for deliverance, statement of confidence in God, statement of praise or restatement of plea. These psalms also sometimes include confessions of sin, or a vow to be fulfilled after rescue.
- See, for example, Psalms 3, 22.

Thanksgiving (situational)

- Structure: invitation to give thanks, statement of former distress, recounting of God's deliverance, praise to God for deliverance, "temple worship" language of sacrifice, pilgrimage, processions, music, dancing, incense, blessing, final exhortation.
- See, for example, Psalms 18, 136.

Hymns of Praise (non-situational)

- Structure: summons to praise, reasons for praise, restatement of summons to praise.
- See, for example, Psalms 117, 148.

Wisdom

- These psalms explore wisdom themes in musical forms.
- See, for example, Psalms 1, 73.

Royal Psalms

- These psalms celebrate the king of Israel as God's representative.
- See, for example, Psalm 110.

Songs of Zion

- These psalms celebrate Jerusalem as God's chosen city.
- See, for example, Psalms 46, 48.

Penitential Psalms

- These psalms express repentance for sin.
- The best known is Psalm 51, but see also Psalms 32, 38, 130.

Imprecatory Psalms

- These psalms call on God to execute justice on oppressors.
- The best known is Psalm 137, but see also Psalms 35, 70, 109, 140.
- These are actually a subset of Lament psalms.
- These psalms reflect the reality that God alone executes judgment. They are not calls for private revenge.
- They are sometimes accompanied with pleas for mercy on enemies, as with Jesus on the cross.

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APPLYING THE PSALMS:

- These are prayers and hymns addressed to God. Use them in your own prayer and worship.
- Remember that they are highly emotive. God invites and encourages us to pour out our hearts to Him.
- Determine what type of psalm it is. What is the purpose of this psalm?
- Try to understand its structure. Break it down into its component parts.
- Locate figurative language, hyperbole, etc.
- Pray it back to God.

Proverbs

Proverbs are short statements of wisdom that describe the way things normally work. Every culture has proverbs. American culture certainly does, such as: "A stitch in time saves nine." It is important to remember that these are statements of general principle rather than promises. So, for example, when Scripture says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old, he will not depart from it," this is not an ironclad promise that good child rearing will always produce godly adults (or a guilt-inducing charge that rebellious adult children always mean that there was failure in parenting), but rather a general statement of what usually happens.

The Proverbs of the Bible reflect the character of God. They approve what God approves and condemn what God condemns. Proverbs that say something about God's qualities have no exceptions. For example, Proverbs 11:1 (NIV) says, "The Lord detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with Him." This is always true, regardless of circumstance.

Proverbs are short and poetic. They are not exhaustive statements covering every possibility, and were not written by lawyers. Therefore, they should be interpreted in light of the main point each is trying to make.

Proverbs must be applied with wisdom. Not all are equally applicable everywhere. For example, the two verses in Proverbs 26:4–5 (NIV) actually seem to contradict each other: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes."

We can safely assume that the compiler of the book of Proverbs knew what he was doing when he put these two next to one another. The key to interpretation and application is to determine which circumstances call for one of these statements, and which call for the other.

INTERPRETING AND APPLYING PROVERBS

+ Read them all in light of the extended introduction to the book, Proverbs 1–9.
+ This is one book of the Bible in which you can read individual verses by themselves.
+ Understand and apply the Proverbs as principles for wise living, not as promises from God.
+ Compare individual proverbs with others that speak to the same issue: use of words, wealth, laziness, integrity, teachability, anger, etc.

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Prophecy

Prophecy is a major component of the Old Testament. The Major Prophets make up four large books (five if Lamentations is included), and there are twelve Minor Prophets (so-called because they are shorter than the Major Prophets; not because they are any less important). In addition, Moses was a prophet, and prophets such as Elijah and Elisha played a significant role in the historical books of the Old Testament. In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings are included among the books of the Prophets.

What was a prophet? A prophet was a spokesperson for God. Prophets were men and women who delivered God's commands and promises to His people and to the world. They often served as prosecuting attorneys against the people of Israel for breaking their covenant with God. Prophets also predicted the future—both in terms of judgment and in terms of redemption.

Most prophetic books are also poetry and need to be read using the guidelines for reading Hebrew poetry when reading the prophets.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING PROPHECY:

Try to learn the historical setting. Who is speaking, when did he write, to whom did he write, and what was going on? Compare with historical reference books whenever possible. Bible dictionaries or surveys are helpful.

Interpret individual passages in context. Read the whole book before interpreting an individual part, and look carefully at what comes before and after.

Expect figurative language and other elements of poetry.

Distinguish conditional and unconditional prophecy. Unconditional prophecies happen no matter what. Conditional prophecies may or may not happen, depending on the conditions set by God. One example of conditional prophecy is the prediction of judgment that can be averted by repentance, as in the case of Nineveh in the book of Jonah.

Try to discern first what the prophecy would have meant to its original hearers.

Determine whether prophecy is fulfilled or unfulfilled in history.

Check cross-references to see where Old Testament prophecies are mentioned/interpreted in the New Testament.

Be aware, from the whole of the Bible, where multiple horizons of fulfillment may exist. An example of multiple horizons of fulfillment is the seeming merging of events from the first and second coming of the Messiah in the Old Testament, which was only evident after the first coming of Jesus was complete.

Look for the place of a particular prophecy in the grand narrative of Scripture and as it points to Jesus.

Distinguish between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament prophecy. Old Testament prophecy was authoritative revelation. In a sense, prophets wrote all of the Old Testament. The New Testament equivalent to a prophet is an apostle, and all of the New Testament is apostolic witness. New Testament prophets are not like Old Testament prophets, but rather they are people who speak insightfully to others and may predict the future. While the recorded words of Old Testament prophets were authoritative Scripture and must be accepted as such, the words of New Testament prophets are not authoritative Scripture, unless they have been recorded as Scripture.

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Gospel

The Gospels were written apostolic testimony to the life of Jesus. They are the authoritative account of who He was, what He said, and what He did. They are history, and as with the historical writings of the Old Testament, the perspective, selection, and interpretation of events all are from God. The Jesus of the Gospels, the Jesus of history, and the Jesus of faith are one and the same. There is no other Jesus.

The Gospels were written, "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). The first reason the Gospels were written was evangelistic—to provoke faith in Jesus so that people might be saved. For those who trust in Jesus, then as now, His teaching and example are binding on us. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, so we understand the Word by listening to Him and watching His life. We are to obey what He said (Matthew 7:21–27). We are also to be imitators of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1, Ephesians 5:1), so we need to know what He is like.

The three types of material in the Gospels include: **things Jesus did**, **things Jesus said**, and **the reactions of those around Him**.

Things Jesus Did

- As God in the flesh, He did some things that only God can do (e.g., died for the sins of others).
- As God in the flesh, He was also the standard we are to become as we are conformed to His image. In this sense, we are to be imitators of Christ.
- His miracles were to be a sign of who He is, and of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. They are signs for those with eyes to see, not proofs for the skeptical. The character of His miracles reveal the character of God and of God's kingdom.

Things Jesus Said

- His straightforward teaching is fairly easy for us to interpret, but remember that part of what He was doing was ramping up the law to its ultimate level.
- Parables were His most common form of teaching.
  - **1 /** The parables were not allegories in the ordinary sense of that word.
  - **2 /** If He gives an interpretation of a parable, that is what the parable means. We should not seek to read anything more into it.
  - **3 /** If He gives a somewhat allegorical interpretation of a parable, He has the right to do so. Stick with what He says.
  - **4 /** Otherwise, look for the point or points He is making in the context of the narrative of the Gospels, and do not press the details of the story. For example, in the story of the persistent widow in Luke 18:1–8, the clear correspondent to God in the parable is the unjust judge, but the point of the story is the value of persistence in prayer, and nothing more. The parable is not teaching that God is unjust.

Reactions of Those around Him

- Remember that Jesus (as God) is the only hero of the story.
- In the Gospels especially, most people around Him got it wrong.
- Only occasionally did those around Him, like Mary of Mary and Martha, get it right.
- When it comes to examples of everyone other than Jesus in the Gospels, do not assume we are meant to imitate them, unless the example matches with a clear point of teaching.

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INTERPRETING AND APPLYING THE GOSPELS

- Remember that the main point is to encourage and strengthen faith in Jesus. Interpret everything in that light.
- Always keep things in context, both what is before and after a given section, and the flow of the whole book.
- Where there are parallels in other Gospels, check them out, and never interpret one part of Scripture in conflict with another.
- Read the whole in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Ask these questions:
  1 / What does this teach me about Jesus?
  2 / What does this teach me about being a disciple of Jesus?

Acts of the Apostles

This book could be (and has been) called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." This is the historical narrative about the early church and its missionary expansion. It is, in fact, the story of what Jesus continued to do (Acts 1:1) in the person of His Holy Spirit through His apostles after His resurrection and ascension. It is a missionary book through and through.

The organization of the book is given in Acts 1:8, which is a description of the spread of the gospel from obscure origins in the Jewish capital to the very center of the greatest empire in the world. The book breaks down as follows: (1) Jerusalem: chapters 1–7; (2) Judea and Samaria: chapters 8–12; and (3) to the ends of the earth: chapters 9–28.

The first section of Acts, chapters 1–15, displays the gospel overcoming successive barriers in its global spread. The gospel goes first to Jews, then to Samaritans, and then to Gentiles. Finally, after a meeting in Jerusalem in Acts 15, Gentiles are acknowledged as full partners in the gospel without adopting

Jewish culture or submitting to the traditions of the rabbis.

How does the book of Acts function for Christians in our age?

- Acts gives us encouragement in our lives in a fallen world.
- Acts gives us encouragement in our mission to the ends of the earth.
- Acts gives us the context for the letters of the New Testament.
- Acts gives us examples for our church ministry and mission.

INTERPRETING AND APPLYING ACTS

+ Evaluate from the text whether an example is positive or negative.
+ Unless the example of the early Christians in Acts matches a command or teaching found elsewhere in Scripture, that example may be permissive and instructive, but not prescriptive.
+ The more frequent an exemplary pattern of behavior is found in the book of Acts, the more instructive weight it should carry with us.
+ Remember that the apostles and other early disciples were still just men and women, and they were not perfect. We are only to imitate them insofar as they imitated Christ.

Acts needs to be interpreted alongside the rest of the New Testament, and indeed alongside the rest of the entire Bible. It cannot stand alone, or even above other parts of Scripture, in forming our missionary strategies or our understanding of the life of the church or the life of a Christian. As with other types of biblical narrative, it must be interpreted hand in hand with other parts of Scripture and in light of clearly didactic teaching in other places.

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Letters of the New Testament

Ancient letters follow a predictable structure, and the letters of the New Testament are no exception. That structure is as follows:

1 / Name of the sender
2 / Name(s) of the recipient(s)
3 / A form of greeting/blessing/prayer
4 / Body of the letter

Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude, and the letter to the Hebrews used this format, but they enriched it considerably.

The letters of the New Testament were part of the missionary strategy of the apostles. They were written by missionaries to new churches on the mission field. These two foci, missions and the local church, are often missed in contemporary interpretations of the letters, but they are crucial to an accurate understanding and application of this part of Scripture.

INTERPRETING AND APPLYING THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

+ Remember that they are occasional documents. They were written in response to specific situations. They are somewhat like listening to one side of a phone conversation. From what is in the letter itself and in Acts, try to reconstruct the other side of the conversation but with humility and caution.
+ Always read the entire letter before interpreting any part of it.
+ Outline the flow of the letter to see where the writer is going and how each part fits into the whole.
+ For each paragraph, try to discern what point the writer is trying to make and how that point fits in the flow of his argument.
+ Always ask, "What did this mean to them?" before you ask, "What does this mean to me?"

Revelation

There are four main views on the meaning of the book of Revelation:

1 / **Preterist:** Everything in Revelation has already happened, especially in the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.

2 / **Historicist:** Revelation gives a blueprint for all of history. Hence, some of it refers to things that have already happened, and some of it to things still in the future.

3 / **Idealist:** Revelation describes spiritual realities that reoccur throughout history until the final consummation. It is a mistake to seek specific events or people to correspond with the symbols in Revelation.

4 / **Futurist:** Everything in Revelation is still to come, in the end of history.

Christians have disagreed throughout church history on the meaning of Revelation, so humility is appropriate in interpreting this book.

Despite differences in interpretation, there are a number of certainties:

- A spiritual war is raging, and God's people are suffering as special targets of the enemy's wrath.
- Evil often seems to win, and evil will get worse until the final climax.
- Jesus has triumphed, and He will win the battle against evil.
- Jesus is coming back, personally and visibly, and He will bring this present evil age to an end.
- All opposition to God will be judged and eternally punished.

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- There will be a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell. In that place there will be no sickness, sorrow, sin, or death, but only infinite and eternal joy. The people of God will be there with Him forever.
- The joy of heaven will be the presence of God.

INTERPRETING AND APPLYING REVELATION

+ Remember that Christians have disagreed for millennia about what Revelation means. That is not surprising, since most of it hasn't happened yet. Trust that it will ultimately all be made clear.
+ Hold your interpretations with humility, knowing that Christians have struggled with understanding this book throughout the ages.
+ Remember Jesus Himself said that it is not for us to know the times and seasons set by the authority of God the Father. If someone offers an interpretation that sets the date of the return of Jesus before it has actually happened, be skeptical.
+ Never accept any application of the book of Revelation, or of any of the last times teaching of the Bible, that leads you away from active engagement in life, active obedience to God, and active pursuit of the Great Commission. We are to be found doing the work of God when He comes.
+ Remember that the language of Revelation is highly symbolic and figurative.
+ Recognize that there seem to be repetitive cycles of seven in the book. This may represent different ways of saying the same thing (recapitulation), or this may be sequential. Be aware that even reliable, evangelical Bible interpreters disagree on this matter.
+ Remember the purpose of all biblical teaching about the end of the age and the return of Christ: to encourage and comfort the afflicted, and to warn the complacent. All applications from Revelation should come in one of these two categories. The book was not written to satisfy our curiosity, but to remind us of the realities listed as certainties, and to apply those to our lives now.

FINAL WORDS

Final Words

All of these interpretive principles are significant for how we use Scripture in our missions methods and tools. We want to model the clearest and most helpful hermeneutics possible in all of our work around the world.

Specifically, we should be careful not to develop missions methods and tools around over-interpretation of parables. We understand parables in light of Jesus the King teaching a variety of truths concerning His kingdom, and we work to make sure we do not stretch parables beyond the primary point (or points) they are intended to make.

Similarly, we should be cautious about interpreting details of narratives in the Gospels or Acts in a way that makes them prescriptive for missions work. We develop missions methods and tools first and foremost from commands and teaching in Scripture. Unless something is commanded in Scripture, we do not view it as prescriptive for us in our lives or on mission. At the same time, we give particular attention to patterns of disciples on mission in Scripture, starting in the Gospels, then even more so in the book of Acts. The more often we see a pattern in Scripture, the more paradigmatic it becomes for us in our work. Yet even when we see a consistent, unbroken pattern without a command, we view that pattern as normal, not necessarily normative. In conclusion, we obey the commands of Scripture as prescriptive for us while paying close attention to patterns in Scripture as instructive for us in our obedience.

Our aim in all of the above is to handle the Bible carefully in a way that honors Him by doing His work according to His Word.

We want to model the clearest and most helpful hermeneutics possible in all of our work around the world.

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