

# What We Should Look for in Those Who Teach Mission<sup>1</sup>

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The topic of this conference, “Teaching Mission in the Complex Public Arena: Developing Missiologically Informed Models of Engagement,” almost dares me to adopt the title I have chosen: “What We Should Look for in Those Who Teach Mission.” At the same time, it is a bit adventuresome on your part to invite someone like me, someone outside your discipline, to address you on the topic, and it is a bit of a cheek on my part to accept the invitation.

Doubtless all of us could easily check off a list of cultural developments that make the teaching of mission more problematic than it used to be. In no particular order of importance:

(1) Biblical illiteracy in the Western world is spreading quickly. The Bible is the best-selling un-read book in the Western world. As is well known, the researches of Christian Smith and others as to the beliefs of the nation’s young people, including the young people in the shrinking Bible belt, show that their God is better characterized by MTD (Moralistic Therapeutic Deism) than by the attributes of the God of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> When I speak at university missions, most of my unconverted hearers do not know the Bible has two Testaments; they have never heard of Abraham, and are likely to confuse Moses with Charleton Heston or with his more recent cartoon analog.

(2) Not only change, but the rate of change, is accelerating. Much of this is the inevitable fruit of the digital revolution. I am not a Luddite: much of the change brought to the world is wonderfully positive: new fields of learning, new ways of dispersing knowledge and accessing sources, new found abilities to communicate with people around the world, technologies scarcely imagined that open up entirely new fields of science and research, and much more. But pundits from all over the political spectrum are warning us that virtual communities that displace personal communities leave us emotionally crippled and relationally immature. Those who for reasons of poverty or inferior education that cannot make the leap into any technology more robust than an individualistic use of smartphones are often condemned to remain in the shadows, victims of the deepening divide between the haves and the have-nots. The same technology that circulates the gospel *gratis* to poor people who live behind totalitarian gates also delivers free porn, with God-only-knows what depredations on our families.

(3) Charles Taylor has powerfully contrasted the “default” cultural assumptions of, say, three hundred years ago with current default assumptions. Three centuries ago, anywhere in the Western world the default assumption was that God made us, that we must one day give an account to him, that fundamental differences between right and wrong are tied up with both God

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2 Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: OUP, 2005).

and human flourishing, and that we are wise to lean upon God's power and providence. This is not to say that there were no atheists, and no philosophical materialists; rather, it is to say that this theistic universe, somewhat Christianized, was the atmosphere in which we lived and moved and had our being. Today, Taylor rightly observes, this is not the case. Even among those in the West who profess Christian faith, such Christian faith is often maintained in highly privatized forms, while at the broader level of public cultural discourse we are practical atheists. It is not difficult to see that such developments make the task of teaching mission more than a little difficult.

(4) Not only is virtually every culture in the world showing signs of rapid urbanization, but the combination of digital exposure to the rest of the world, relatively cheap travel, plus endless regional strife, natural disasters, and famines, means that massive migrations of various sorts have taken place—are still taking place. That means that many (especially Western) countries have become a good deal less monochrome than they once were. Especially is this so in our great urban centers. On the one hand, we can make the claim that New York and London are more like the New Jerusalem today than they were two centuries ago: they have people from every tongue and tribe and race and nation. Some of us thoroughly enjoy the cultural enrichment, the diversity of foods and smells and accents and kinds of humor and dress. On the other hand, some, inevitably, are threatened by these changes, and even the most charitable observer acknowledges that the political and religious stresses that these changes generate are not being accommodated very smoothly. So while it is easier today than it used to be for a professor of mission to take his students down to a nearby mosque and enjoy a chat with the local *imam*, the culture-wide challenges aroused by a resurgent Islam cannot be ignored.

(5) A relatively small but articulate and vociferous minority still continues to think about contextualization in rather old-fashioned and un-self-critical ways. They can talk fluently about how the Bible is itself enmeshed in culture (true enough) and must be interpreted by people who are themselves inevitably enmeshed in culture (true enough) that they become very hesitant to talk about the truthfulness of the gospel (rather worrying) and, so far as content is concerned, commonly get no farther than the affirmation that the Bible has many diverse ways of speaking to power. What they gain in epistemological sophistication they lose in clarity as to what the gospel is, this gospel that was (Jude tells us) once for all delivered to God's people (Jude 3). The result is a generation of would-be missionaries who are either side-tracked away from the gospel in favor of perennial discourse on culture, or who, rather discouraged, give up on the missionary enterprise.

(6) Whatever the causes—and they are highly disputed—the emphasis on tolerance today is not only sharper than it used to be, it has changed its meaning somewhat. When my book *The Intolerance of Tolerance* was published in 2012 (a bare five years ago), I was one of only a handful of people talking about these things. Nowadays most of the observations I made at the time are taken as commonplace; indeed, some of them have been eclipsed by more recent developments.

It is still worth pointing out that tolerance, in the old or traditional sense, operates at some level or other in *every* culture. *Every* culture adopts certain widely espoused beliefs and customs, and some deviations from such beliefs and customs are tolerated. If the deviations become too extreme or obnoxious, social and/or legal pressures may be brought to bear. Obviously, then, all instances of this old or traditional tolerance are essentially parasitic: that is, they feed off the accepted norms, practices, and convictions of the broader culture. By contrast, the new tolerance sets itself up as the supreme good, commonly claiming a high ground above culture.

Moreover, the old, traditional tolerance presupposes that what is tolerated is not liked. You hold that those who deviate from the cultural norm are wrong, but decide to tolerate them rather than oppress them. The new tolerance, however, commonly dictates that it is wrong to say that the other party is wrong, even to think that they are wrong. That is to be intolerant. Suddenly one glimpses what a massive shift in the very meaning of “tolerance” has taken place. It becomes difficult to engage ideas with which one disagrees if the entire discussion is side-tracked with the charge of intolerance.

In reality, of course, Western culture’s adoption of the new tolerance is highly selective. Some issues evoke the demand for a display of the new tolerance; some don’t. The heaving culture displays a thin crust of venomous hostility against all things Christian, covering a vast sea of dogmatic apathy. Realistically, the new tolerance can be credited with diminishing a significant number of abusive and demeaning labels, even while it displays gargantuan intolerance toward those who do not buy in to the new tolerance. In the name of this new tolerance, many would be prepared to ride roughshod over the First Amendment, which in fact upholds the old tolerance.

The major impact of these developments on the teaching of mission is their bearing on the exclusiveness of the gospel. The God of the Bible brooks no idols and no rivals (e.g., Isaiah 40-45). Jesus insists that no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6), and the apostle Peter dogmatically concurs (Acts 4:12). The apostle Paul insists that those who teach some other gospel are *anathema* (Galatians 1:8-9). In the views of most people in our culture, that stance is intrinsically intolerant, so it is easy to dismiss the gospel without

even trying to understand it in its own terms. It is beyond the pale. The new tolerance functions as a powerful “defeater belief” (to use the expression amply treated by Tim Keller). Teachers of mission face the challenge of faithfully getting across to their students the non-negotiables of the gospel, including its claims to exclusivity, while gently but persistently and winsomely undermining this particular defeater belief.

(7) Probably the most important book by Charles Taylor is his *A Secular Age*,<sup>3</sup> nicely summarized and reflected on by James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*.<sup>4</sup> One of the astute observations that Taylor makes is that we live in the age of authenticity. A genuinely authentic person is widely admired. Authentic people are those who live out their chosen identities. They choose what and who they want to be, and determinedly press toward living out those choices. Even when observers do not like the choices themselves, in an age when authenticity is much admired we are inclined to applaud such people for their authenticity rather than bemoan the foolishness of their self-chosen courses. As a result of this value system, we harbor deep suspicion of all voices of authority, except those that reinforce our right to our own personal values. Our culture broadly holds suspect the authoritative claims of family, tradition, and government. Individualism runs rampant in the Western world, apart from two exceptions: (a) those that form enclaves of like-minded “individuals” who identify themselves in the same way as others belonging to a well-identified group;<sup>5</sup> and (b) counter-cultural groups that are trying to fight the larger trends, whether they understand themselves to be following the Benedict option or not.

As I said earlier, everyone in this room could have created this list, or something like it, and certainly added to it. Those who teach mission are certainly aware of the challenges they face. But there is another dimension to these challenges that we must not overlook. Unless I am reading it wrongly, the three paragraphs describing the goals of this conference focus primarily on the “Complex Public Arena” in *North America*: after all, that is, I imagine, where most of the professors of mission in this room teach. So most of our students, similarly, are North Americans, with all the strengths and weaknesses, all the current cultural biases and reactions against them, attached thereto. Most have become aware that North American Christians who opt to evangelize and engage in church planting in North America, especially along the coasts, in the New England states, in New York City, in the Pacific Northwest, need some

3 Cambridge: Belknap, 2007.

4 Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014. Cf. also Collin Hansen, ed., *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* (Deerfield: TGC, 2017).

5 See, for example, the amusing send-up of Cambridge, MA, in Dominic Green, “City of the Chosen,” *First Things* 282 (April, 2018): 11-12: “02138: The World’s Most Opinionated Zip Code,’ but all our opinions are the same.”

help with cross-cultural communication, precisely because Western culture has been changing so quickly. Whether we are teaching our students to preach and teach the gospel to Buddhists or Muslims who happen to live in Thailand or Turkey respectively, or in NYC, makes relatively little difference. What we easily overlook, however, is that we are culturally located; *our students* are culturally located. For example, when I am speaking to university students in North Africa or the Middle East, very few are wrestling with whether or not there is such a thing as public truth, or arguing that it is intolerant to say that any religion is wrong. *Of course* there is public truth; the only questions are, Who has it? and What is it? *Of course* tolerance is a parasitic virtue, not the supreme good. Thus, by preparing students to “read” and respond to Western culture (a needed cross-cultural venture), we may sometimes make them insensitive to the very different cultures one finds elsewhere. And even the word “elsewhere” I utter with my tongue firmly planted in my cheek, for nowadays there are small enclaves of, say, typically Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu cultures within our cities.

So who is sufficient for these things? What should we look for in those who teach mission?

(1) *A rich, biblically faithful, grasp of the gospel.*

It is a mistake to assume that those who teach mission—or any other faculty member, for that matter—enjoy a rich, biblically faithful, grasp of the gospel. For a start, many of those brought up in a Christian home have no more than a formulaic grasp of the gospel, what I call a shibboleth gospel: e.g., “The gospel is accepting Jesus as your personal Savior.” Quite apart from the fact that this formula is not found in Scripture, in substance it stipulates how to respond to the gospel without actually identifying, still less explaining, the gospel.

There are many shibboleth gospels. A very common one is to confuse the great commission and the great commandments. A fine example of this is found in the influential book by Richard Stearns, *The Hole in Our Gospel*.<sup>6</sup> Stearns argues that, on the basis of the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves and other elements of Jesus’ teaching, we should stir up much more concern for the poor, for otherwise we are left with “a hole in our gospel,” even while we evangelize and plant churches. Doubtless he is right that we can and should do more than we do, and his own example is stirring. Nevertheless, those who keep track of the monies we spend tell us that Christians contribute about six times more mission dollars toward meeting the physical needs of people than we do toward evangelism and church planting. Judging by such figures,

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6 Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014.

the hole in our gospel, as one wag has put it, is the gospel. More importantly, in such discussions we are in danger of confusing, once again, the gospel with the entailments of the gospel.

More serious yet is the danger of assuming the gospel. Both pastors and missionaries easily fall into this trap, especially if the people to whom we are speaking are primarily professing Christians: they already know the gospel, we tell ourselves, so we should go on to other topics. Pretty soon the gospel is rarely talked about; it is merely assumed. The reasoning is poor in any case: when we examine how the “gospel” functions in the New Testament, we discover that it is to be applied not only to unbelievers but to believers. Moreover, experienced teachers and preachers know that our students and other hearers do not learn all that we teach them; rather, they learn what we are excited about. If we assume the gospel while remaining excited about, say, cultural analysis and the challenges of contextualization, we will produce a generation of mission teachers for whom cultural analysis and contextualization are at the center of the enterprise, while retaining only the fuzziest and most amateur understandings of what the gospel is—even though, at the end of the day, it is the gospel that saves and sanctifies. That’s why we must have professors of mission who are excited about the gospel: only in that way will their students maintain the gospel at the center of their priorities.

The gospel is first and foremost news. It is good news, massive news—the news of what God has done in Christ, supremely on the cross and in his resurrection, to rescue us from sin and death, reconcile us to God, providing the gift of the Spirit, the corporate life of the church, the transformation begun in the new birth that enables us to see and enter the kingdom, the promise of resurrection existence in the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. It follows that we must also include instruction on how to respond to this good news, beginning with repentance and faith, but we ought not displace the news about what *God* has done in Christ with what *we* must do by way of response. Indeed, precisely because the gospel is news, the awesome news of what God has done in Jesus Christ, the most fundamental thing Christians must do with it, apart from believing it, is to proclaim it. That’s what you do with news. The old adage, frequently but mistakenly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the gospel; if necessary, use words,” makes as much sense as telling a newscaster, “Tonight, give people the news; if necessary, use words.”

If you want to flesh out the content of the news that needs to be believed and proclaimed, there are several excellent ways of going about the project. For example, one could begin by focusing on passages that purport to summarize the gospel, e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:1-19. There the apostle tells his readers, “I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you have received

and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain” (15:1-2). From this anchor, Paul lays out the matters “of first importance” (15:3)—that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures,”—and so forth. In brief, Paul makes clear in what ways the gospel is theological, christological, historical, biblical, transformative, and more.<sup>7</sup> Or one could focus on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, reminding ourselves that in the first century they were not regarded as four “gospels” but as cumulative witnesses to the *one* gospel, the gospel according to Matthew, the gospel according to Mark, and so forth. Only in the second century were the individual books called “gospels.”<sup>8</sup> Or one could focus study on individual books that confront some particularly pernicious error, enabling us to discern what the New Testament writers saw as utterly non-negotiable (e.g., Galatians). Or again, one could follow the course of a pastor I know who, when he takes on a new set of half a dozen interns, promptly sets them to the task of summarizing the gospel in one word, one phrase, one sentence, one paragraph, one page, ten pages. The results are predictable, but instructive. The demand for one word inevitably produces “Jesus” or “grace” or “atonement” or the like—answers that are not wrong, but not particularly insightful, precise, or disciplined. Something like “Jesus and his death and resurrection” is a little better, but there is no mention of the Spirit, the Trinity, justification, new birth, the church, the consummation, and much more. One quickly learns that although a child may identify the gospel in brief order, mature Christians will want to flesh out as much as possible of the good news, never satisfied with the reductionisms and potential inaccuracies of a mere bare bones approach. We want our professors of mission to display a rich, biblically faithful, grasp of the gospel.

Do I need to add that no responsible grasp of the gospel will pit one part of the canon against another part? I’m thinking of claims such as “I prefer the gospel Jesus preached to the gospel Paul preached.” One must work toward gospel summaries that try to reflect the whole counsel of God.

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7 Cf. D. A. Carson, *Prophetic from the Center: The Gospel of Jesus Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:1-19* (Deerfield: TGC, 2016).

8 Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are unique in mutually supporting one another with one storyline of the life of Jesus, beginning with Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist and ending with Jesus’ death and resurrection. The many apocryphal gospels from the second, third, and fourth centuries are derivative documents, and not one preserves the same storyline: see Markus Bockmuehl, *Ancient Apocryphal Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).



*(2) A love for people that hungers to win them to Christ more than it hungers to win arguments*

The most sophisticated courses on apologetics, the most mature understanding of the gospel, the best-designed material on cross-cultural communication, are all virtually worthless if we do not love the people we seek to evangelize. That is why Christians with little or no training may be more effective in sharing their faith than well-trained scholars, for no other reason than that their message becomes winsome in proportion to the love they display as a matter of course. Since professors of mission are usually attempting more than the passing on of mission theory to their students, but are trying to recruit new missionaries from among their students, they need to be Christians whose love for the lost shines forth transparently.

That brings up two more reflections to round out the important role of love. *First*, one of the ways you can test the sincerity of a Christian's love for lost people is to inquire into how much they are trying to save them from hell. It is good to dig wells in the Sahel, fight malaria in equatorial jungles, introduce better farming techniques, and teach the skill sets of micro economics so as to start some small businesses. These and many similar things may all be an index of one's love and compassion for needy people. But where such salutary activities are not accompanied by the articulation of the gospel in a winsome and persuasive fashion so as to save people from eternal judgment, one may reasonably ask how deep and insightful is our love for these people. *Second*, another overlooked dimension in the love we must show in our missionary endeavors is the recognition that not everyone raises the same hurdles, or experiences the same roadblocks to saving faith. Some are just plain ignorant, and primarily need the gospel explained; others operate out of an alien frame of reference, so need some worldview transformation; others have bought into a deeply-held alternative religion, such that there are identifiable points that will have to be challenged; others have been offended by Christians, and in consequence have erected large-scale personal barriers; and still others are loaded with a sense of guilt, and are frankly hungry to meet a guilt-bearing Savior. A one-size-fits-all apologetic is likely to get in the way. One crucial element intrinsic to loving people is good listening coupled with humble spiritual diagnosis.

In short, to be effective, professors of mission must have a love for people that hungers to win them for Christ more than it hungers to win arguments.

*(3) A recognition that we are in a cosmic struggle, and that it is a privilege to carry the cross and fill up the sufferings of Christ*

Not only in the Apocalypse, where the church is portrayed as in an epochal struggle with Satan and his beasts (Revelation 12-14), but elsewhere in the New Testament, Christians understand themselves to be in a cosmic struggle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). The struggle against “the world, the flesh, and the devil” means that Christians are to expect opposition and persecution. Did not the Lord Jesus teach his followers, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also” (John 15:20)? All of his followers are commissioned to take up their cross and follow him (Matthew 16:24-28), which in context sounds massively threatening. Just as the exalted Lord Jesus identifies with his followers (e.g., Acts 9:4), so his followers identify with him—with him in both his power and his suffering (Philippians 3:10), since after all “it has been granted to [us] on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him” (Philippians 1:29). Christ Jesus not only “bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness:” (1 Peter 2:24), but in that same death left us “an example that [we] should follow in his steps” (2:21). When the apostles first faced physical battering, they rejoiced “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41). Small wonder that when Paul suffers for Jesus’ sake, he can testify, “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church” (Colossians 1:24).

The history of world mission must not be passed on as a narrative of almost unbroken expansion and gospel triumphs. It is important to learn of those triumphs, of course, but it is no less urgent to learn of the martyrs, and of the faithful but lonely servants of Christ who have persevered in dark and discouraging times and places. We must raise up a generation of missionaries—indeed, of Christian witnesses everywhere—who know they are called not only to make disciples everywhere, but also to suffer for Jesus’ sake.

*(4) A deepening knowledge of the culture where we serve*

The initial warrant for such competence is displayed in the ministry of the apostle Paul. There are good reasons why his sermon in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) sounds rather different than his sermon in Athens (Acts 17). The audience in Acts 13 shares with Paul many common theological commitments: e.g., monotheism, understanding that sin is first of all offense against God, a linear view of history, the prospect of the consummation as the home of righteousness and a new heaven and a new earth, the authority of

the revealed Word of God written down in books, a shared participation in salvation history, the importance of faith, the ties between theology and ethics. Because Paul and his audience in Acts 13 share so many things, Paul does not have to dwell on those points; he can proceed pretty promptly to the identity of the Messiah, and especially to his death and resurrection, events grounded in Scripture. The audience in Acts 17 shares none of these stances with Paul, so it is unsurprising that he feels he must start farther back and establish a biblically-shaped framework in which alone the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah make sense.

It may be useful to offer five reflections on this point. *First*, teaching cross-cultural communication, or, more broadly, contextualization, is complex and challenging work. It is difficult to know one culture (even one's own) well; it is much more difficult to know two or three, and still more difficult to develop mental frameworks for moving from one to another. Inevitably, such work churns up not only the challenges of cross-cultural communication, but cross-cultural leadership, meaning-systems, sense of humor, personal identity, linguistic and tribal identity, and much more. Throw in graduate-level reading in epistemology and postmodernism, and there is plenty to keep a student (and a professor) busy.

*Second*, this aspect of the life and teaching of a professor of mission can be usefully divided into two parts. One part is general and theoretical; the other part is specific to particular cultures and peoples—e.g., Muslim Arabs, Thai Buddhists, Hindus in northern India, Japanese secularists, and so forth. Clearly it is helpful for a student who is hoping to serve in, say, Japan, to be able to sit under a specialist in Japanese language and culture. Some specialists know remarkably little theory; some general theorists have remarkably little experience of specific cultures other than their own. Students gain from being exposed to both sorts of professors of mission.

*Third*, one of the key evidences that one is becoming ready to communicate cross-culturally is the ability to observe and listen to another person's "take" on something and then explain it or defend it with no less empathy and credibility than that demonstrated by that other person. This is simply an expanded version of what might be called the Tim Keller school of apologetics: before refuting an opponent's position, show that you can articulate it better than he or she. Such discipline will eschew argument by stereotyping. The same principle easily extends to assessing cultural differences.

*Fourth*, however challenging this aspect of the task of the professor of mission, that professor must never see himself or herself as *primarily* a cultural commentator or a professor of intercultural studies. Relying on a rather old-fashioned form of postmodernism, some teachers of contextualization are so

caught up in the epistemological challenges of confessing truth that they drift toward the relativizing of all values and truth claims, save only the truth of the supremacy of radical contextualization. They may speak of meaningful interpretations, and talk fluently of diverse ways in which the biblical texts may confront power, but they cannot speak of the truth of the gospel in the same way that the New Testament does. We are all caught up in the hermeneutical circle, they say, so we cannot truly know anything (save that we cannot truly *know* anything) because we are finite and culture-bound by an unavoidably limiting horizon.

The initial responses to such cynicism are well known: (a) To argue that we cannot know anything truly unless we know something exhaustively is to erect an impossible standard. It is to claim that knowledge belongs exclusively to Omniscience. In the most absolute sense, of course, that is true—yet transparently the Bible speaks of finite human beings knowing many things. In other words, it is entirely appropriate to speak of human knowing within the limitations of non-omniscient cognitive powers. Human knowing is possible, even though it is not divine knowing. To dismiss human knowing as knowledge because it is not divine omniscient knowing is not humility, but hubris. (b) Anyone who has begun the study of a new discipline, whether Attic Greek, theoretical physics, or the reproductive system of sea turtles knows (that word again) that growth in knowledge is possible, which demonstrates that knowledge is possible. (c) Nowadays we are not confined to the hermeneutical spiral. Much more convincing models have been set forth: the hermeneutical spiral, or asymptotic approaches to true knowledge.<sup>9</sup> (d) For the Christian with a high view of Scripture (which is what Jesus espoused), there is considerable reassurance in the fact that Omniscience has condescended to disclose true things to us in words that we humans can study, learn, and reflect on. In itself that cannot guarantee faultless interpretation, but it does suggest a goal worth striving after when this omniscient God has taken the trouble to make truth known to us.

All this is to say that although one of the most important tasks of professors of mission is the teaching of cross-cultural communication, both in theory and in specific practice, that task must be undertaken not as an end in itself, but with the goal of training Christian missionaries to be faithful and empathetic communicators of the glorious gospel once for all delivered to the the Lord's people.

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9 Cf. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd edition (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006); D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

And *fifth*, as indicated earlier, this task similarly rests on the shoulders of many pastors who discharge their ministry within North America, not least in our cities where we may come across numerous competing and conflicting cultures. Indeed, the task of cross-cultural communication now falls on the shoulders of most ordinary Christians who desire to bear faithful and fruitful witness to increasingly diverse neighbors. As a result, we need more professors of mission, not fewer.

*(5) A growing ability to bridge the gap between the dominant categories in our target cultures, and the dominant biblical-theological categories*

Many have observed that the dominant trajectories of the Bible, the strands that hold the Bible's storyline together, have little resonance with much of Western culture. Covenant, temple, kingdom, blood sacrifice, priesthood, creation/new creation, Jerusalem/new Jerusalem, shepherd/sheep, shame, sin, justification, eschatology, consummation—all have this in common: they spark little excitement to the person on the street. Where they do resonate with the culture, they usually mean something different from the emphases in the Bible. But if we focus instead on the dominant interests of our culture, it is easy to transmute the biblical message into false gold. So one of the things we must do is teach pastors and missionaries how to bridge the gap between the dominant categories in our target cultures, and the dominant biblical-theological categories.

For example: Most people in the Western world do not incorporate blood sacrifice into their thinking of what might be appropriate in approaching God (unlike Islam with its animal sacrifice during the *Hajj*). On the other hand, every culture reserves admiration for certain kinds of sacrifice: for instance, the mother who loses her life to save the life of her child from a raging house fire. Indeed, this might even be a wholly admirable substitutionary sacrifice. Or again, when helping students to understand both guilt and shame, it may be useful to draw lines of both continuity and discontinuity with the relevant cultures. In Western predominantly guilt-cultures, it is important to distinguish between subjective feelings of guilt and actual guilt before a holy God. Both must be dealt with, but one remains unprepared for the gospel until one perceives the awfulness of real guilt before God. In a shame culture, virtually all the shame that a person feels is loss of face before peers. By contrast, as early as Genesis 3 the Bible depicts both shame before peers (the covering of fig leaves) and shame before God (trying to hide from him in the garden)—and that must be grasped before we will become clear as to what expressions such as “Jesus bore our guilt *and shame*” really mean.

In short, one of the things we look for in a professor of mission is the ability to bridge the gap between the dominant categories in the target culture and the dominant biblical-theological categories.

*(6) People who are actually doing evangelism and church-planting, and not just talking about it*

Just because this point is obvious doesn't mean we should fail to articulate it. In exactly the same way that programs that train pastors need professors who love pastoral ministry, so also programs that train missionaries need professors who love cross-cultural evangelism, disciple-making, and church planting. Some things are better caught than taught. Professors of mission who love and engage in such work will inevitably bring anecdotes and personal experiences into the classroom in such a way that not a few students will hunger to emulate them.

That is a huge part of the importance of the short book by J. Mack Stiles, *Marks of the Messenger: Knowing, Loving and Speaking the Gospel*.<sup>10</sup> This is a book that makes Christians *want* to make disciples, without making them feel guilty because they are not very good at it. The professors who keep doing such work are the ones most likely to keep up to date in a practical sense. They are also the ones most likely to inflame the hearts and minds of the next generation.

*(7) A passion to identify ourselves as those who bear witness to Jesus*

To establish this point, I shall do nothing more than demonstrate the flow of thought in Matthew 11:2-19. The passage can usefully be divided into three parts, and the three parts need to be read together to establish the point that must be made. The crucial verse, as we shall see, is Matthew 11:11, but the run-up must be grasped.

*First*, a portrait of a discouraged Baptist (11:2-6). I am not, of course, speaking denominationally; rather, I am referring to John the Baptist, who, judging by his actions, is having second thoughts as to whether Jesus is the promised Messiah (11:2). Jesus does not seem to be the kind of Messiah John the Baptist had announced, one who would separate the wheat and the chaff, burning up the latter with unquenchable fire (3:12). Jesus' answer, passed back to John through John's disciples, is bathed in Scripture (esp. Isaiah 35:5-6; 61:1). The essence of Jesus' response is this: my words (chaps. 5-7) and deeds (chaps. 8-10) demonstrate that I am truly bringing in the blessings of the messianic age. And if the judgments are delayed—well, "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me" (11:6).

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<sup>10</sup> Downers Grove: IVP, 2010.

*Second*, a portrait of a defended Baptist (11:7-11a). Apparently the exchange between Jesus and the Baptist's emissaries took place in front of the crowd. So now, as John's disciples depart, Jesus talks to the crowd about John (11:7). The context suggests they've been muttering about how John the Baptist is turning out to be something of a disappointment, some kind of wimp—and Jesus comes to John's defense. He poses a series of rhetorical questions. When they went into the desert to take a look at John the Baptist, what were they expecting to see? “A reed swayed by the wind” (11:7)—some creature without backbone? Of course not! The reports to which they were responding pictured

the Baptist as a rugged prophet, not a wimp—so the crowd does not have the right to look askance at him now. So what else might they have been expecting? Eventually Jesus suggests, “A prophet?” (11:9). Yes, indeed, Jesus asserts, “and more than a prophet” (11:9). And how is John the Baptist “more than a prophet?” Jesus provides the answer: the Baptist is himself the subject of a prophecy, the prophecy about one who prepares the way for the Lord (Malachi 3:1; Matthew 11:10). And then comes the stunning conclusion: “Truly I tell you, among those born of women [a pretty comprehensive bracket] there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (11:11a). In other words, in Jesus' estimate, John the Baptist is greater than Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and everyone else. Why? What makes him so great? The preceding verse gives the answer: the Baptist is greater than all who came before him because it fell to him to introduce Jesus with greater immediacy and clarity than they could. In some ways, of course, Abraham pointed to Jesus, and so did Moses, David, Isaiah, and the rest. But it fell to John to say, in effect, “There! There's the man whose sandals I'm unworthy to loosen.” And that's what makes him great.

*Third*, a portrait of an eclipsed Baptist. John the Baptist is the greatest man born of woman to this point in redemptive history—and now Jesus insists that the Baptist has himself been eclipsed: “yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (11:11b). That's because even the least in the kingdom can point out who Jesus is with greater clarity and immediacy than John the Baptist. In three more chapters, John the Baptist is going to lose his head. He would not live long enough to become a witness of the cross and resurrection, or a member of the post-resurrection community. But the least Christian, however ill-taught and immature, can say, “I don't understand very much yet, but I know that Jesus died on the cross for my sins, and that he lives today, and has forgiven me. I trust him.” All the rest of the passage, down to 11:19, contributes to solidifying this point. In other words, the least Christian is greater than John the Baptist, who is greater than Moses and David and Isaiah. If logic means anything, that means that the least Christian is greater than Moses and David and Isaiah. Transparently, that does not mean “greater in every respect.” Christians are unlikely to claim to be greater legislators than

Moses, greater military personnel than David, or greater prophets than Isaiah. But on the axis that controls this context—viz, the clarity and immediacy with which they point out who Jesus is—they are indeed greater than Moses and David and Isaiah.

And that's what establishes this eighth point. If bearing witness to Jesus is, according to Jesus, precisely what makes Christians "great," it is shocking beyond words to find Christians who never bear witness to him. And in particular, we want professors of mission as those who identify themselves as people who bear witness to Jesus. That is their heartbeat; that is their life's blood.

*(8) A vision for the centrality of the church*

After Pentecost, it is impossible to find in the pages of the New Testament a Christian who is not baptized, or a baptized Christian who is not a member of a local church. True, *individuals* come to faith—but when they come to faith, they become part of the body of Christ manifest in that locale. Jesus declared, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18), not "I will collect my individuals." The overwhelming preponderance of the New Testament uses of the word "church" refer to the local church. In the New Testament, one repents, believes, is baptized, and becomes a member of the local church, all in one package. That is why an expression such as "all who have been baptized" is more or less the equivalent of "all who have been converted" (cf. Galatians 3:27).

It would take quite a while to provide convincing evidence of these claims. But if they are right, they really ought to shape how we talk about conversion, becoming a Christian, discipleship, church membership, living in a counter-cultural community, even how we think about a number of pastoral challenges (such as combating big city isolation). Should not professors of mission be steeped in such a vision? Is it enough to talk about people movements and not about the church?

*(9) A sense of the glory and sheer transcendence of God*

Although I'd be happy to defend everything I've said so far in this address, I draw it to a close vaguely dissatisfied. There is a perennial danger of sounding too mechanical, too procedural, too much like a list-maker who creates points to check off but who loses sight of the mission. What we must have, not just among professors of mission, and not just among Christian leaders, but among all Christians, is a growing sense of the utter transcendence and glory of God. It is very rare for that to develop without leaders pointing the way under the authority of holy Scripture. And professors of mission constitute part of this strategic leadership in the church.



## Conclusion

So these things, I submit, are among the things we should look for in those who teach mission. There are other things that could have been brought up. For example, some professors of mission devote themselves to the specialization of mission history, which so far I have not mentioned. They become a specialized subset of the band of church historians. Like church historians, ideally they will display exemplary scholarship, great care with research and sources and judgment, while at the same time thinking and writing in such a way as to commend the gospel of our blessed Redeemer.<sup>11</sup>

What is obvious from this list, however, is that most of the entries apply equally to pastors who discharge their ministry in North America within the culture with which they are most familiar. Indeed, most of these points apply to Christians everywhere, who remember their responsibility to evangelize, make disciples, plant churches, and live out their lives in passionate hunger for the glory of God and concomitant death to self and service to others. And the specialty bits that belong peculiarly to professors of mission (e.g., explaining other religions and cultures), as vitally important as they are, must never be discharged at the expense of the biblical sweep of what it means to be a Christian.

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11 One thinks, for example, of the book by Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536-1609*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University, 2013).

