

The Western Church and Global Missions Giving: A Case for Discernment

God is a missionary. A missionary is someone sent by God with the goal of redeeming the lost. The Father sent both the Son and Spirit to that major purpose. The Father modeled this when He sought out Adam and Eve after they sinned (Gen. 3:9). God chose Israel not to enjoy unique blessings, but to be a light to the Gentiles (Is. 42:6; 49:6). Jesus went first to the lost of Israel (Matt. 15:24), in deference to the chosen, but trained and commanded His disciples to go into all the world with the gospel upon His death (Matt. 28:18-20). "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:10, NIV). As the Father sent Jesus on that mission, Jesus now sends us to the remotest places—jungles, villages, slums, apartments and trailer parks, cities, and to gated-communities (John 20:21).

So important is reconciling the lost that Christ was slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). God laid plans to redeem us before our creation. So important is reconciliation that the return of Christ hangs upon all people having the opportunity to turn away from sin and toward God (Matt. 24:14). None should be denied hearing the message of salvation through faith in Christ and His payment for sin on the cross, because God wants none to perish (2 Pet. 3:9). God is a missionary.

Churches are to be a missionary communities. The first missionaries were sent by interruption of the Holy Spirit at a prayer meeting in Antioch (Acts 13:2). Discipleship is important—learning to be like Christ. But we will become like Christ when we go to heaven. Fellowship is precious, but we will fellowship in heaven. Helping to feed and clothe the poor, finding jobs for the unemployed and working for a more just world are all the work of the church. But in the new heavens and new earth, such issues will vanish. Worship and praise are due to God, but Christians will have endless opportunity to perfect praise. What is uniquely ours to do while time remains is to be agents of reconciliation to God¹. Missions encompass more than evangelism, but evangelism is the heart of missions.

Programs, buildings, new organs and more staff aren't misplaced if there are higher priorities with proportionate budgets. But program, plant and ritual can hijack an otherwise missionary church. Churches can become like tired corporations—having lost their sense of purpose and accompanying zeal, they focus upon form, risk-avoidance and status-quo bureaucracy².

The Spirit came upon Christ at the beginning of His ministry (Luke 4:1; Mark 1:12). The Spirit was breathed upon the Twelve at the start of their commission to go beyond the Jews (John 20:22). The Eleven were commanded to wait until they were filled with the Spirit, so that they could begin turning the world upside down (Acts 1:8; 17:6). A church that is not sending and supporting missionaries is seriously quenching the Spirit of God, who is the Lord of the harvest. It is a costly and finely appointed vehicle without an engine. Various church communities have their distinctive—liturgy, evangelism, community, worship, emotional freedom, social action, missions, "miracles," etc. A local

church of whatever personality, without significant outreach, should question whether or not she should continue to exist.

If missions is a priority for God, how is it reflected in local churches? A George Barna survey of senior Protestant pastors taken in December 2004 found that only 15% had missions as any one of their top three priorities for the coming year³. One-tenth of one percent (ten cents per hundred dollars) of all Christian income went to global foreign missions, estimates David Barrett in his annual “Status of Global Mission” report for 2005. Seven-tenths of 1% went to churches and another 1.2% went to parachurch organizations globally⁴. Fundamentally the issue is stinginess among Christians (at least nominal ones)—churches being composed of Christians—and even more fundamentally, the issue is failing to avail ourselves of the grace of God⁵.

In twenty-nine American denominations, benevolence giving as a part of total church income declined from 21% in 1968 to 15% in 2002⁶. Giving to “benevolences” is defined as funds given to the local church for local, national and international missions, as well as for denominational support. Benevolence giving declined from .66% of personal disposable income to .38% of disposable income in that same time span, remembering again that probably not more than half of even this tiny income did not go to global missions. In real numbers, this means an average of \$101.00 per member was designated in those denominations for all church benevolences in 2002. This does not include giving directly to missions, apart from giving through the church, but overall, giving to missions was minimal. Denominations vary considerably in the amount given per member for missions. Giving by Christian Evangelicals is considerably higher (14% of them tithe, compared to 5% of the general population⁷), but they represent only 7% of the US population⁸.

Eighty-five percent of giving in the 29 denominations went to maintain the local church program. The situation is similar when it comes to human resources. Ninety-five percent of graduates of evangelical seminaries, Bible colleges and similar institutions stay in the US, which has 5% of the world’s population⁹. Where does local church income go and does it reflect an ethnocentric and insular mindset, or a global and missionary mindset? Some churches give 50% and more of church income to missions. Giving is not an end in itself, but a means to glorify God. The Spirit can turn blasphemers, materialists, hedonists, sardonic post-moderns, the indifferent, the vile and the merely religious into joyfully worshippers of God.

David Barrett estimated that 34.3 million die without Christ annually, and of those, 13.2 million were never evangelized. In all, sixty-five percent of those dying annually aren’t Christians¹⁰. This should motivate us to spread the Gospel as quickly as possible. “Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter” (Prov. 24:11, NIV). Do we believe that apart from Christ a person will go to hell, and if so, do we really care, as reflected by our giving?

The Lausanne Covenant, a product of global evangelistic reflection in 1974, and ratified by 2,300 people from 150 nations says in paragraph 9:

The goal should be, by all available means and at the earliest possible time, that every person will have the opportunity to hear, understand, and to receive the good news. We cannot hope to attain this goal without sacrifice. All of us are shocked by the poverty of millions and disturbed by the injustices which cause it. Those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a simple life-style in order to contribute more generously to both relief and evangelism.¹¹

We need revival. South American missiologist Samuel Escobar writes:

Missionary vision and drive have always been connected in history to movements of spiritual revival. Missionary attitudes mark young churches where the memory of their origin is still fresh, but also old churches when they are shaken and revitalized. The spiritual vitality of people, churches and denominations in times of revival has nourished the vision and the willingness to obey Christ, and so has made possible great advances in mission. Revival has been the cradle of missionary vocations and the kind of environment in which new structures for mission have been imagined.¹²

In light of the neglect of the church's core mission, as judged by percentage of giving to missions, it's time to call Christian stewardship to new standards. Western Christians are the wealthy of this world. A person earning \$10,000 annually is among the upper 9% on earth by income¹³. Rich Christians are commanded "to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life." (1 Tim. 6:18-19).

Generosity, however, must be coupled with discernment, otherwise it can be wasted. If we trust that each Christian will naturally give where it is best to give, does current giving to missions support that assumption? Simply giving more isn't enough. Consider giving to the local church. Christians are to support those who serve them as pastor/teachers (1 Cor. 9:7-14; 1 Tim. 5:17-18; Gal. 6:6). They are to support the truly needy among them (James 2:15-17; Gal. 6:10). They are to maintain the church property (Haggai 1:7-9). Equipping believers for ministry and Christian education will require program funds. Beyond this, we should ask what percentage of church income goes to spread the message of salvation locally and globally. Should the US church, probably the wealthiest on the planet in aggregate income, give just a tithe to the world? Is that being "rich in good deeds?" The apostle Paul admonished an entire church to "excel in the grace of giving" (2 Cor. 8:7). A tithe is minimal, not excelling.

Money isn't sufficient—Jesus told us to pray for workers (Luke 10:2). But without funding, missionaries can't go, or take years longer to reach the field. Good stewardship criteria should also be applied to mission giving, as well as to churches. Some missionaries and agencies are simply bad investments¹⁴. We need to give to humble, loving and Spirit-filled persons of excellent character who are contributing to the work of

the Kingdom as God has gifted them, and at the place on the line of battle the Lord has directed. Some mission agencies fix support levels extremely high (\$100,000+/year in Africa) or take an inordinate amount for administrative overhead (15%+). We are to send missionaries out “in a manner worthy of God” (3 John 1:6), but not at princely support levels, which tend to separate missionaries from the nationals. At the other extreme, some African-American missionaries in Africa live on less than \$20,000 per year.

If local church leaders lack the faith and commitment to fund local and global missions, prayerfully ask the leaders to reconsider their priorities. If they still lack vision, rebalance your personal giving to include giving to reach those who really are perishing. You (or indeed a church) may have to decide not to go into debt, to be able to continue to support missions at current levels. We may sacrifice an expensive vacation and the lifestyle we owe to ourselves, for the lifestyle we owe to Christ. He gave us richly all things to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17), and it's right to enjoy those gifts. But He also commanded that we be “rich in good deeds.” “You will be made rich in every way so *that* you can be generous on every occasion...” (2 Cor 9:11). God, by the Spirit, can teach us the balance point between enjoying and conveying of the blessings of God, and how to make discerning generosity a lifestyle.

¹ This general argument of what we can do in heaven versus upon earth was articulated by D. James Kennedy, I believe.

² Adizes, Ichak. 1988. *Corporate lifecycles: How and why corporations grow and die and what to do about it*. ISBN:0131744267, pp. 87-89.

³ “Church Priorities for 2005 Vary Considerably,” 2/14/05, accessed at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=182> on 3/22/05.

⁴ Barrett, David B., Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing. 2005. Missiometrics 2005: A global survey of world mission. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29 (January): 29. This includes nominal Christians.

⁵ Note how God's grace can make even the very poor generous in 2 Cor. 8:1-5.

⁶ Empty Tomb, Inc. www.emptytomb.org/research.php, accessed 1/21/05.

⁷ Barna, George. “Stewardship” <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topic&TopicID=36> accessed 3/23/05

⁸ Barna, George. 2004. “Religious beliefs remain constant but subgroups are quite different” <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=160> accessed 3/23/05.

⁹ Guthrie, Stan. 2000. *Missions in the third millennium: 21 key trends for the 21st century*. ISBN: 1842270427, p. 22.

¹⁰ Barrett and Johnson, *World Christian Trends, AD 30-AD 2200*, c. 2001, p. 59.

¹¹ Paragraph 9, <http://www.gospelcom.net/lcwe/statements/covenant.html> accessed 3/23/05.

¹² Escobar, Samuel. 2003. *The new global mission: The Gospel from everywhere to everyone*. ISBN: 0830833013, p. 166.

¹³ Barrett, David, George Kurian, and Todd Johnson, Eds. 2001. *World Christian Encyclopedia*. ISBN:0195079639, p. 1:6

¹⁴ I investigated a “ministry” that claimed as missionaries people actively serving in other agencies.

Jim Sutherland