

A
SHORT
GUIDE
TO

EVANGELISM AND MISSIONS



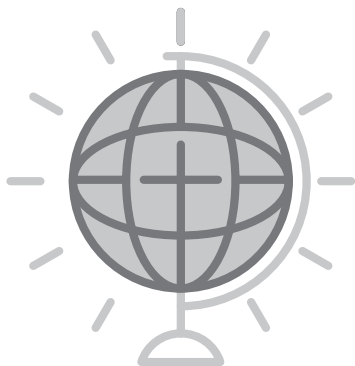
D. SCOTT HILDRETH

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This book is for Lesley.
I told you we'd see the world together.

Acknowledgments

The lessons and content of this book are only possible because of those who have walked with me through the years as I have sought to explore the depth and breadth of God's grand mission.

From Christians around the world I have gained a deeper insight into the joy and cost of faith in Jesus.

For my students at Southeastern Seminary and Judson College: your patience, probing questions, and enthusiasm from the classroom has made me a better thinker and missiologist.

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To my Summit family, elders, and small group, it is always challenging to learn with you what it means to live out the commission: "You are Sent."

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Introduction

IN 1792, WILLIAM CAREY stood before a room of Baptist pastors and preached one of the most famous mission sermons ever: “An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen.” The sermon was an impassioned plea for British Baptist pastors to rally their churches for the cause of global missions. Most historians point to this sermon as the beginning of the modern missionary movement.

The backstory begins with Carey reading the travel journals of Captain James Cook, the famous British explorer. His stories and descriptions of faraway places stirred Carey’s imagination. While most readers must have been swept up in the tales of adventure in exotic places, Carey’s heart was consumed by the vast lostness of the world. The more he learned, the more convinced he became that God’s will for all Christians included the responsibility of seeking the salvation

of those who had never heard the gospel and, as a result, lived in spiritual darkness.

Carey's sermon text that day was the Great Commission found at the end of the Gospel of Matthew: "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18–20).

With reference to this text, he preached:

This commission was as extensive as possible, and laid them under obligation to disperse themselves into every country to the habitable globe, and preach to all inhabitants, without exception or limitation. . . . But the work has not been taken up, or prosecuted of late years (except by a few individuals). . . . It is thus that multitudes sit at ease, and give themselves no concern about the far greater parts of their fellow sinners, who to this day, are lost in ignorance and idolatry.¹

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At the end of this sermon, one of the more senior and respected pastors in the area, John Ryland Sr., stood and rebuked Carey for being presumptuous. “Young man, sit down.” His voice thundered in the room. “When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine.”

What was Carey’s error? Why did this missionary sermon elicit such a strong reaction? The answer lies in his inclusion of one simple phrase in the sermon title, “*to use means*.” You see, in Carey’s day, a prevailing theological belief was that God’s sovereign control of the universe meant he had predestined some souls for heaven and others for hell. It was a waste of time (if not an outright insult to God’s plan) for Christians to make extraordinary efforts to win others to Christ. If it were God’s will for them to be saved, he would do it on his own.

Carey’s sermon challenged this belief. In fact, his message pushed forward the conviction that Jesus’s command at the end of Matthew created an obligation for Christians to do something, to be intentional, focused, and creative in seeking to win those to Jesus who had never heard. As he drew his message to a close, Carey said:

We must not be contented, however with
praying, without exerting ourselves in the use

of means for the obtaining of those things we pray for. Were the children of the light as wise as children of this world they would stretch every nerve to gain so glorious a prize, nor ever imagine that it was to be obtained in any other way. . . .

What a heaven it will be to see the many myriads of poor heathens, of Britons, amongst the rest, who by their labors have been brought to the knowledge of God. Surely a crown of rejoicing like this is worth aspiring to. Surely it is worthwhile to lay ourselves with all our might in promoting the cause and the kingdom of Christ.²

Despite John Ryland's objection, Carey's *Enquiry* sermon generated such movement among British Baptists that the entire story of evangelical/Protestant missions is written from this point forward. Carey is known as the Father of Modern Missions because of his influence in helping develop the Baptist Mission Society and then serving as a missionary in India. Because of his leadership, the missionary team

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translated the Bible into several South Asian languages, established schools and pastor training facilities, and even played a significant role in overturning the custom of widow burning.

I have no delusions of being another Carey; however, this book is my attempt to strike a similar note of encouragement and inspiration. Christians in the West too often seem content to allow the rest of the world to live a Christless existence and die, facing a Christless eternity. We prioritize politics, economics, personal comfort, and even petty theological squabbles to distract us from the Great Commission. Whether those in need of Christ include our neighbor across the street, our coworker down the hall, or the unreached people group on the other side of the world, far too many of us live out the words of John Ryland: “If God wants to reach them, he can do it without my help.”³ While most of us would never utter these words aloud, too often our lives reflect the sentiment.

MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM

In the middle of the twentieth century, the global church faced a crisis of mission. Countries that had previously served as missionary-sending nations had spent the better part of the

previous two decades destroying the world through a series of wars. To make matters worse, in many instances, pulpits served as mouthpieces of war efforts on both sides of the conflicts. In the shadow of this backdrop, the pressing question before Christian leaders was: What is missions? If one defined it as any ministry the church undertakes in the name of God, then the previous decades created a serious confusion.

One corrective idea emerged from these discussions: following the writings of several theologians, church leaders embraced the idea of “mission of God.” (The common Latin phrase for this phrase is *missio Dei*.) This theological concept advanced the idea that missions should not be reduced to the activities of the local church. Rather, mission is a movement rooted in the character of God himself. It is his mission, and he has called his people to join him in fulfilling his goals and agenda. Missiologist David Bosch notes, “In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. . . . Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that Mission.”⁴

This idea of the *mission of God* provided helpful correction in the aftermath of the world wars; however, it also introduced

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some confusion into the conversation. When missiologists advanced a new understanding of the origin of missions and it was disconnected from the church's work, some began to advocate a more secular or social understanding of *mission*. As Bosch observed, with the unhitching of mission from the activity of the church, many took the teaching to mean that mission "excluded the church's involvement"⁵ altogether. Lesslie Newbigin described this situation with stunning clarity:

If God is indeed the true missionary, it was said, our business is not to promote the mission of the church, but to get out into the world, find out "what God is doing in the world," and join forces with him. And "what God is doing" was generally thought to be in the secular rather than in the religious sectors of human life. The effect of course, was to look for what seemed to be the rising powers and to identify Christian missionary responsibility with support for a range of political and cultural developments.⁶

This divergence in the understanding of missions eventually caused a split in the global Protestant church. One stream (the “mainline”) advocated the understanding of mission as a movement that takes place primarily outside the church, measured more by social, political, and/or economic agendas. The newer stream (which eventually became known as *evangelicals*) rejected this broad understanding in favor of keeping missions rooted in the evangelistic work of the gospel. While never rejecting the significance of social activity and benevolent care, evangelicals maintained an understanding of missions that emphasized the proclamation of the Christian gospel with the anticipation of personal conversion, spiritual sanctification, and church growth. This book is not only built on this evangelical understanding of missions, but it also serves as a call for evangelicals to embrace our origins, being reminded that Jesus best summarizes God’s mission when he said: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

With this strong emphasis on evangelism and proclamation, some rightfully ask about the relationship between evangelical activities and social engagement. Should we simply preach the gospel and leave the more immediate needs

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to governments, aid agencies, or special interest groups? Of course not; this would be an insult to the nature of humanity and the basic command of Jesus to love our neighbors.

Over the years, I have found it helpful to illustrate this relationship by pointing to a bicycle. More specifically, to the contrasting functions of the bicycle wheels when we imagine the front wheel representing compassion or holistic ministries and the back wheel representing proclamation ministries. While it is possible to move on just the front wheel, eventually the bicycle will lose momentum and fall. At the same time, it is possible to bicycle using the back wheel alone, and with a strong pedal and careful balance, one might even travel further. But this is not the design of the bicycle. If we only use the back wheel, the bike will be out of balance and will struggle to stay on course. Both wheels are necessary for the bicycle to function properly. The front wheel (the holistic ministries) provides direction and support while the back wheel (the proclamation ministry) supplies the power and energy to keep everything moving. When asked to prioritize effort, the rider will always focus on the back wheel. But, if she neglects the front wheel, things quickly veer off course.

The goal of this book is to provide motivation as well as practical tools for you to embrace God's mission as your framework for life. First, we will meditate on the different themes found in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). This journey will help you understand God's heart and vision for the world and for your life. Alongside this biblical study, we will take time to learn about the world and the desperate needs of those who live in spiritual darkness. We will learn about different religions as well as learn to see the globe through God's eyes. Along the way, we will learn some practical guidelines that will help you be more involved in God's work of saving the lost and redeeming a fallen world through Jesus.

WHY A NEW BOOK ON MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM?

This is a fair question. In fact, the writer of Ecclesiastes once wrote, "Be warned: there is no end to the making of many books" (Eccles. 12:12). So, with this biblical warning in mind, why write a new book about missions? The plain answer is that the world is changing around us, and these changes bring with them a need to call the church back to our central task of making disciples in our neighborhoods and

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places where we live our regular lives, as well as taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The global upheaval that resulted from the COVID pandemic and social unrest has made the world a more dangerous place, but it has also exposed the desperate need for the Christian gospel. Many governments use health and safety to justify intense monitoring of their citizens. This use of technology has also exposed many Christians to deeper levels of persecution. Travel restrictions and global “finger pointing” have exaggerated the situation, even serving as justification for national prejudices and xenophobia. These changes make missionary work much more complicated.

In the United States, the Christian message has been tagged as hateful by many in the public square. We read stories (or watch YouTube testimonies) of so-called *Christian influencers* deconstructing their faith and walking away from the gospel. Evangelism is viewed as arrogant, if not unethical, by some. This pressure tempts many well-intentioned Christians to opt for silence rather than winsome sharing of their faith. The U.S. is a top migration destination. This means we are surrounded by people who need Jesus, many arriving in this free country from countries with significant

religious restrictions. However, some American Christians have reduced the migration phenomenon to a political issue rather than see it as a missions opportunity.

At the same time, as in every generation, Christians face the temptation to apply our faith as a social or political movement. The name *evangelical* loses its force when the movement becomes a voting block rather than a people who proclaim the life-changing message of Jesus. Like Esau, some are guilty of selling our birthright for momentary pressures. Rather than holding to the path that has been charted by our predecessors—keeping the proclamation of the message of salvation through Jesus as our missionary goal—some embrace a vision of God’s mission as a social, political, or cultural movement. While these decisions may differ from the more radical teachings of the Protestant liberals of the 1950s, the central emphasis is the same. The fulfillment of God’s mission has been relocated outside the church. I hope this book will serve as a challenge for Christians today to embrace this moment as our time to “shine like stars in the world” (Phil. 2:15).

As I think about our present moment, I’m reminded of the conversation between Frodo Baggins and Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*. After listening to Gandalf explain the

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desperation of the moment, Frodo replies: “I wish it need not have happened in my time.”

Gandalf answers, “So do I. . . . And so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”⁷

We face difficult days indeed. We don’t need to wonder if this is the most complicated moment in history. I am sure for some it is, and for others it isn’t. However, we can be sure it is our moment. The Lord of history has called us to his mission at this time. We dare not shrink back or let fear drive us into silence.

The rest of this book will be a meditation on Jesus’s final words to his disciples in the book of Matthew, the Great Commission: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20).

We will answer questions about our personal callings and our responsibility for the nations and our neighbors. We will also consider what it means for us to live on mission in

submission to Jesus as our ever-present King. Along the way, this book will help you understand the world around you as we explore world religions and other barriers against faith. The book also includes points of practical application designed to provide clear handles for you to live a life of evangelism and missions.

Thanks for reading. I pray that the Lord uses this book to awaken the missionary within you. And, as a result, many will hear the gospel and respond, moving from darkness to light as they embrace the life-changing message: “For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16–17).

DISCUSS AND REFLECT

1. What are you most excited to learn as you think about what is ahead in your reading? What are you most nervous about being challenged to do?

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2. How does the pace of everyday life or cultural pressure lead you to neglect God's mission?
3. Is there an area of your life you already know is out of step with God's mission? Are you willing to make adjustments to be more fully obedient?



In this concise and informative book, former missionary Scott Hildreth delves into the heart of Christian evangelism and missions, drawing inspiration from the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:16–20. With a focus on practical insights and biblical principles, this guide equips believers to actively participate in both local conversations about Jesus and the global mission of sharing the gospel. Readers discover that obedience to Jesus's command is not optional—it's our privilege and responsibility, knowing that his presence accompanies us to the very end of the age.

SCOTT HILDRETH is the director of the Lewis A. Drummond Center for Great Commission Studies and assistant professor of Global Studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Before coming to Southeastern, he and his family served in Western Europe and Central Asia. Scott has been in some type of Christian ministry for more than thirty years and has helped people from all around the world know the hope and joy that can be found in a relationship with Jesus. Scott is married to Lesley and they have two adult children and a grandson. He frequently speaks and writes on issues of missions, spiritual formation, missiology, and theology.

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