



Using Mission Support Strategically for Greatest Impact

By Steven and Christy Shepard

I. Truths to remember

Our lives are very brief on this earth. The only treasures that we will continue to have beyond our deaths are our souls, our relationship with Jesus Christ, and the souls of those who have been converted. God gives us money as a temporary tool for the furtherance of His Kingdom and for earthly needs, both for our own and others. We are stewards of His resources and therefore are accountable to Him for what we do with them. Because of this, it is crucial that we seek His guidance through prayer, reading His Word and godly counsel in order to have the wisdom to faithfully disperse what we are given. God alone has the understanding how to best distribute His resources.

Apart from Christ, apart from the Holy Spirit, our own efforts will be in vain. Only God's work will stand. For this reason, in our missionary efforts we must always seek to be guided by the Holy Spirit. We recognize that God Himself has a plan. God calls us to the work and takes the initiative. Where we work and how is not determined by ourselves but by the Holy Spirit's guidance. We measure His guidance through the principles and priorities found in His Holy Word. We also find His guidance confirmed through God's providence when great needs, great opportunities, and our ability to help intersect.

1. The Message

The Gospel message of Jesus Christ rightly proclaimed is God's solution to mankind's deepest needs (Gal 1:11-12) and, because of this, it must have preeminence in any ministry outreach (1 Cor 15:1-4). In Great Commission work, the message is itself the method. It is the means that God has chosen for the conversion of the world and the transformation of His children. Doctrine is often dismissed as unimportant, or even as destructive or divisive. But genuine unity in Christ is never attained at the expense of truth. Though Jesus Christ is proclaimed by many, there are almost as many conflicting descriptions of Who He is. Whatever other missionary activities we may accomplish, if we get God's message wrong we have failed at our task. Planting new churches is not enough. It is often better not to plant churches at all rather than to plant ones not deeply founded in the true, biblical, and historic faith "...which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3b).

If we do not understand the Gospel, we will be unable to proclaim it clearly to others. We will also lack the discernment needed in choosing the ministries most faithful to God's message. While we must exercise forbearance with our differences on secondary issues, the essentials of the faith must be preserved and taught. These include: the inerrancy of Scripture, the attributes and holiness of the

triune God, the sinful nature of mankind, the complete sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for our sins, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the new birth, salvation through grace alone by faith alone, the necessity of repentance, holiness in the life of the believer, the love of the brethren, and the eternal life of all true believers.

The greatest need of each person in the world is first and foremost spiritual. Without Christ, each person is separated from God and is under His righteous judgment. All other social and humanitarian problems pale in comparison. Without the Gospel, other solutions to these temporal problems are superficial and stop gap. Priority must be given first to the evangelistic mandate and second to the cultural mandate (which concerns social and humanitarian needs). Lasting change will come to all areas of life only through the inward change of heart produced by the Gospel. (James 1:18, 21; Rom 1:16; 10:13-17; 1 Cor 1:18-21; 1 Pet 1:23)

2. Compassion

Faith in the Gospel is the catalyst from which godly works flow, demonstrating the power of its truth. For this reason, acts of compassion and care toward those in need must always accompany genuine Christianity. They can never be separated. God is concerned with the whole person, both his spiritual and physical well being, and so will we if we have His Spirit. Jesus Christ, through His Gospel, is the source of restoration for both the individual and the community. Even a cup of cold water will not lose its reward. But for it to be powerfully used by God, that cup must be given by His disciple (Matt 10:42).

Good works without the Gospel (e.g. Mother Theresa in India) have a benefit. But we must understand that it is limited and temporal. The poverty, sickness, and violence that people suffer should move us to compassion and action, yet we should never lose sight of the eternal conditions and needs of people. When we see from God's perspective, whatever worldly condition that draws people away from Christ is a curse, whether wealth or poverty, health or sickness, peace or violence. God creates trials in order to draw people to Himself. We must be careful in how we try to help others. Too much help, too much money, or too much bodily comforts can sometimes ruin those who might otherwise turn to God. People living in struggling third world countries are favored and blessed by God if they have Jesus Christ. Likewise, people living in wealthy countries who do not have Christ are to be most pitied. What benefit is it to gain the whole world and yet lose one's soul (Mk 8:35-37)?

When we give, we must do so unconditionally. Physical help is not a carrot to be used for conversions. The Gospel must be freely given and so must our compassionate help. It is God, through His Holy Spirit, who changes hearts. When physical rewards are offered for certain outward behaviors, the temptation to fake conversion is great. We must preach to all and expect the Holy Spirit to convict and draw those who are His. In a similar way, we are to help all in need and let the Holy Spirit use our kindness to deal with individual hearts.

3. Maturity in Christ

Jesus commands His followers to go into the entire world and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them all He has commanded (Matt 28:18-20). God expects His people to grow in maturity, to know Him better, and to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. Every true Christian will experience this process of sanctification. Even the giftings and the callings in the Church are for the purpose of edification of its members, that each becomes equipped to serve (Eph 4:11-16). Those in leadership are not to be like the world, as ones lording over others, but rather as humble servant leaders guiding others to greater maturity. We must remember that each person is equal before the Lord, equal in worth and equal in sin. Therefore, there is no place for pride or boasting in whatever position He assigns us. We should rejoice when our students surpass us.

The most effective programs/ministries, whether operating in the U.S. or in foreign countries, are those which promote the maturity of the recipients. They do not foster long-term dependence on the giver as provider and source of spiritual wisdom. Rather, these programs/ministries encourage increasing dependence on God as the true source of all provision and wisdom. Temporary strategic help, whether physical, financial, or spiritual, should encourage spiritual maturity, dependence on God, and independence from outside support.

II. Missionary Work

1. Working through the Church

Ministry is unfruitful and superficial when it does not involve the Church. The Church is God's instrument for the fulfillment of the Great Commission. God's plan is to manifest His life and to minister to the physical and spiritual needs of the world through His many-membered Body. Each local church is a beachhead of God's Kingdom. Priority should be given to planting and strengthening churches. As such, our work should be connected to an established church or a church planting effort whenever possible.

2. Using indigenous methods

Effective missionary organizations help equip Christians in other countries to take the initiative in evangelizing their own people and in leading their own churches. Whenever possible, they encourage the nationals to take the leadership positions in ministry outreaches. When missionary organizations do take the lead, it should be for the purpose of training, teaching, and modeling how the nationals can grow in their leadership. Their aim should be to plant fully indigenous churches. The word indigenous means native, and when applied to churches, it means churches which are self-sufficient. This means that the churches are viable or not dependent on outsiders for their continuance. Indigenous churches are strong churches. They are self-governing, self-financing, and self-propagating.

Much missionary work today creates an unhealthy dependency. The people look to the outsiders to hold the services, provide the funds, build the buildings, and make the decisions. This dependency robs native leaders of initiative and stifles all sense of responsibility and ownership for the work. Wonderful things may appear to happen in the short-term, while the long-term work among the people is actually being hindered. Such a work is not able to keep going on its own and will fall apart without continued outside help.

3. One solution in fighting poverty – Small Businesses

Poverty is hindering the work of churches and the proclamation of the Gospel. With little money among the people, tithes are often insufficient to cover the cash needed to pay expenses. Faced with a depressed economy and little support from their churches, pastors struggle to provide for their families while continuing to minister. Spiritual growth and evangelistic outreach become stymied by the pressing needs of survival.

Many mission agencies have responded to this dilemma by providing long-term support to native pastors and missionaries. They reason that nationals know the language and can be supported at a fraction of the cost in sending foreign missionaries. However, this approach creates an unhealthy long-term dependency, resentment and jealousy among the people not receiving support, and discourages responsibility, initiative, and dependence upon God for their provision. Such conditions undermine the establishment of self-sufficient indigenous churches.

One better solution is to help the people start small businesses. A business can be started for as little as \$500-\$2,000. As modest as these loans are, they are generally not available through traditional lending agencies. That is why a special fund is needed to provide loans to enable the people to start small businesses. Successful small businesses benefit the communities, the churches, and the pastors. As church members become entrepreneurs, they will be able to support their families, give jobs to others, and tithe to their churches. Pastors with small businesses will have the economic means to persevere in their callings and provide for their families. As pastors work within the same economic conditions as the people, church members will identify with them and be more motivated to support their ministries. On the other hand, foreign support actually discourages national support. Foreign missionaries are a good investment if they are used to train the nationals to learn financial stability. Missionaries who are skilled in business can have a tremendous effect in God's Kingdom if they can teach Christian nationals how to budget, start small businesses and maintain them.

4. Discipling leaders

Other foreign missionaries can be strategic by promoting leadership training conferences, creating training institutions, and providing good Christian literature. The most efficient use of resources is to target pastors and leaders. As they grow in knowledge and maturity, they are preaching it to their congregations. Then each member of the congregations spreads the Word to the general community and beyond. If the policies of an individual country change to prohibit foreign missionaries, the national churches will not collapse because they will have their own leaders already in place. Financial support for ministries that educate the nationals (with the right message and in the right way of

training leaders) is very effective. Supporting national pastors and leaders can also be beneficial if it is done strategically short-term and does not promote dependence.

5. Working through relationships

Another important principle is to work through relationships. It is only through interdependence with others and the synergy of different gifts working together that we can truly be effective in God's work. Personal accountability is also strengthened when people know one another. Funds are often misused or spent unwisely when the character of the ones we are working with are unknown. Outward appearances and first impressions can often deceive. A priority should be placed on Christ-centered relationships over tasks. Ministry should first flow out of our relationship with God and secondly out of our relationships with one another.

III. Summary

- The Message IS the method. Study the Gospel to understand it clearly for yourself. Its truths are the catalyst for salvation and sanctification, God's only solution to mankind's greatest needs. By better understanding it, you will have greater discernment in deciding which ministries are faithfully proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ (Rom12:2). You will also grow in your own spiritual maturity and in your relationship with God.
- Faith in the Gospel will always produce compassion and good works. Good works without the Gospel can have only a limited and temporary benefit. For helps to be effective, we must try to examine the situation from an eternal perspective. What is best for that person's soul? The wrong kind of help can harm people. A spiritual response from those in need must not be a requirement for assistance. Helps must be unconditional.
- The most effective programs/ministries, whether operating in the U.S. or in foreign countries, are those which promote the maturity of the recipients. They do not foster long-term dependence on the giver as provider and source of spiritual wisdom. Rather, these programs/ministries encourage increasing dependence on God as the true source of all provision and wisdom. Temporary strategic help, whether physical, financial, or spiritual, should encourage spiritual maturity, dependence on God, and independence from outside support.
- Our aim should not be to go to the mission field to do random, short-term evangelism or other ministry, having no sense of continuance in the fields where we labor. Our priority should be to build works that will stand and keep functioning after we leave, even for generations. The true test of missionary work is not what happens when we are on the field, but what continues to happen after we leave.
- One of the most strategic uses of missionary funds is to target educating the national pastors and leaders in the truths of the Gospel. This can be done in such outreaches as promoting leadership training conferences, distributing excellent Christian literature in the native languages, and creating leadership training schools. Other outreaches that promote the same goals are also effective.

- Another strategic use of funds is to help Christian nationals, especially the pastors and leaders, start small businesses. Foreign missionaries who are able to train them in these skills are a good investment, as well as funding ministries that distribute small business loans to these people.
- It is almost impossible to be good stewards of the funds God gives us to distribute if we fail to research the programs/ministries that want our support. Such research requires some sacrifice of our time and efforts. We need to know what the philosophy or beliefs are that motivate these outreaches. Are they in harmony with the Gospel message? Are these organizations using their resources in an efficient manner, or is there too much extravagance? Check their financial reports. Get feedback from the recipients and the local community concerning the effectiveness of that work. Do they attempt to “work themselves out of a job” in the sense of encouraging the maturity and independence of those being helped? Are they encouraging the nationals to take leadership? You may even want to visit the ministry/program office or visit their outreaches on the mission field. It is common for mission organizations to describe the success of their efforts in glowing terms that do not accurately reflect the reality. Sometimes the distortion is unintentional, too much enthusiastic presumption. But some distort the facts deliberately because they know that sensational news will promote the most support from the people at home. We cannot afford to be fooled if it can be avoided. No program/ministry is perfect because it is made up of imperfect people. However, some are more on target than others.

“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

- Colossians 3:17