

## Don't Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities

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A missionary to a Muslim nation recently wrote me that a great deal of the discussion within his missionary organization is devoted to the concept of "insider movements." The term means that new believers should remain within the cultural and religious tradition of Islam while at the same time professing saving faith in Christ. "The whole thing," wrote the missionary, "is predicated on the idea that Christianity is not a religion."

The missionary himself—a long-time reader of Rushdoony's books—disagreed with the approach and said that it is going about the issue of community the wrong way. He lamented the fact that missionaries "are generally resistant to the idea that we are advancing a new culture, and one that will conquer the existing cultures of this world." Apparently, his coworkers in the missionary organization believe that the cultural practices of a convert don't need to change according to the requirements of his new faith. Christianity, in their view, requires no change of behavior, and therefore it requires no change of culture. If it is "not a religion," then it doesn't address the whole of man, and therefore the whole of man can remain unchanged; *ideas do not have consequences*.

It is worthy to note that Christianity is the only religion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that has such discussions within itself. Muslims do not believe that a man can be a Muslim and remain faithful to his non-Muslim cultural practices. Neither do Communists believe that a conversion to Communism can leave a person unchanged in his cultural ways. Every other faith looks at itself in a comprehensive way and has comprehensive requirements for its adherents. It is only Christians who willingly abandon the comprehensive demands of their own faith and surrender the new converts to the cultural traps of their old faiths. Christianity cannot and should not build a culture, they believe. A culture, in their view, is something given and fixed; we shouldn't try to change it. All that is necessary is individual salvation; that individual salvation is not supposed to nor expected to produce cultural changes.

The majority of modern missions—and the seminaries that train the missionaries—are based on this approach to the relationship between the Christian faith and the culture. Missionaries are never instructed in a comprehensive worldview that builds a new Christian culture within the old pagan culture. They leave their churches illiterate about the Biblical answers to the multitude of questions other cultures are asking. Mission organizations insist that their goal is nothing more than "planting churches." Some even boast that they are working "within the context of the local cultures," which translated means the same thing as the term "insider movement" mentioned above. Seminaries never offer courses about the broader applications of the Christian faith in areas like family, business and economics, history, education, civil government, welfare, etc. A

missionary seldom has any answers beyond the elementary level of personal salvation and church worship.

Ironically, while this approach to missions and culture is predicated on the idea that Christianity is not a religion, its result is exactly a religion-and that in the limited pagan sense of the word. The truncated view of the missionaries drives them to focus on "planting churches" with little else to do. Since these churches are not there to change the culture, their mission becomes very limited-only to "dispense religion" on Sunday morning. In a very real way, such a church is no different from a pagan temple in antiquity, a specialized institution that provides for a specific need of the worshippers, the need for religious experience.

People go to the grocery store when they need groceries, to the auto repair shop when they need their car repaired, to the theater when they need entertainment, and, when they need some religion, they go to church on Sunday morning. The grocery store, the auto repair, the theater do not claim to change the culture; they only provide a specific service for a specific need. The church, by refusing to address the whole culture, becomes like them, simply another outlet for services in the community. That was the use of the temples in pagan antiquity: people went to the temples to get their daily portion of religion and religious experience, or to tell the gods what they needed so that the gods knew better how to serve the humans, or to perform rituals designed to manipulate the gods to act in favor of the worshipper.

By default, modern missionaries act as if the culture without Christ contains everything it needs and is good per se, or at least morally neutral. All it needs is individual salvation and an institution for dispensing religious experience, and the missionary is there to provide it with the least repercussions on the culture itself. History thus is independent of the gospel; it runs its course no matter what the religious faith and commitments of the people in the culture. Culture becomes a product of historical forces, or material forces, or chance; faith-and specifically faith in Christ-has no bearing on it: it is only an external addendum to the culture. This is exactly the view of materialistic determinism, and specifically Marxism. Thus modern missions are in essence Marxist and materialist in their philosophical outlook.

In a previous article for *Faith for All of Life*, "The True Origin of Foreign Missions,"<sup>1</sup> I made the case that foreign missions did not originate with Paul; they were part of the very culture and life of the Jewish nation. Foreign missions were a program for conquest, for converting the world to the Word of God in its entirety. Proselytizing was part of the very culture of the Diaspora; Jews outside of the Holy Land had a mission: bring the nations to God by offering them the law of God, superior to all laws of men. That law of God was not only meant to convert the life of the individual; its scope of work was to bring all of life under the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

I am not the first to make the connection between Christian and Jewish missions. In his book *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, J. H. Bavinck also traces the origin of foreign missions to the Old Testament. He then devotes a half chapter to the Jewish

missions in the Roman Empire before and in the time of Christ. In it, he makes a very important observation about the nature of the Jewish missions and what he calls its "power of attraction." Quoting from Axenfeld, "As a philosophical religion, Judaism indeed touched the isolated educated individual. But as a religious and social fellowship, with a unique way of life, it appealed to the masses of people," Bavinck comments:

By entering into the Jewish communion a convert was brought into union with a world fellowship, and he thereby enjoyed all sorts of political and social privileges ... A Jew enjoyed many civic advantages. The Jews who lived in the cities had a sort of government of their own and were states within the state. To a certain extent they even had their own administration of justice, so that to belong to such community was desirable for many.<sup>2</sup>

Foreign missions, in their original form, not only addressed the culture, they also *built an alternative culture* to the worldly culture. And that alternative culture of better justice and righteousness than what the world could offer was the "power of attraction" for the multitudes of people. The formal religion, the synagogue and the Sabbath services, had no attraction in themselves; the very essence of the life preached and *practiced by the covenant community* was what attracted many Gentiles to saving faith in God. While the pagan temples tried to attract worshippers with the majestic beauty of their buildings, statues, and altars, the Jewish missions had only the life of the Jewish community. In fact, so pronounced was the difference that Bavinck felt compelled to add the following:

Since the common people, the unthinking masses, could not think of a religion without idols, they might indeed say that the Jews were atheists. But those who came into a deeper understanding of Jewish worship were in one way or another influenced by it.<sup>3</sup>

The attraction of a new culture of justice and righteousness was much stronger than the visible trappings of the mystical religions that sought to escape time and matter. It was the invisible power of the comprehensive worldview of the law of God that drew the masses to God, not the visible worship of the temples. Foreign missions were meant to be cultural conquest, not an "insider movement" of converts who stayed in the cultural practices of their pagan religions. The Christian church after the Resurrection continued the same practice, as is known from the examples in Acts, and then from the examples of the early church. And people flocked to the Jewish synagogues, and later to the churches. When a religion has all the answers to the cultural questions, people are naturally drawn to it.

The approach of modern missions is exactly the opposite to this: visible trappings and no cultural alternative. And it has abundantly proven its inadequacy. It is a failure; in many places missionaries waste time and money and effort to produce only meager results. It is time to return to the Biblical model of missions, as exemplified by the synagogue, and then by the early church.

To do that, our missionaries must shift their focus from "planting churches" to a program of cultural conquest. This cultural conquest can't be anything less than the building of a

*covenant community*-an alternative culture within the broader culture, an alternative economy within the broader economy, and, by extension, a civil jurisdiction and government within the broader political and civil settings of a society. Our mission organizations and seminaries must abandon their truncated approach and teach and empower the missionaries to build *comprehensively*, to offer solutions to the destruction of the pagan religions and culture in a community built on the comprehensive demands and blueprints of the Word of God.

While the detailed breakdown of the work a missionary should do will require a book rather than an article, here we can at least sketch the necessary steps:

*First*, a missionary should work to build the *intellectual foundation* for a future Christian civilization. This means he must make available to his flock the richness of the Christian literature we have accumulated throughout the ages on the application of the gospel to every area of life. He may need to engage in or organize a long-term program for translation of Christian materials. He must start building libraries in the nation that is his field. No missionary effort can succeed long-term unless there is knowledge about Jesus Christ and His Kingdom; and no knowledge is possible without a constant connection with the rest of the Christian world through the books Christians have written. That might also mean that the missionary should spend time teaching whole populations to read; although a program for literacy shouldn't be independent from the effort of making Christian books available to the new converts.

*Second*, a missionary must build the *leadership* of the covenant community. This doesn't mean appointing "pastors" or deacons or any other ecclesiastical offices; in fact, the institutional ecclesiastical form must come only *after* there is an established community, out of that community. A missionary should work to raise and train *elders* and *judges* who will be the foundation for building the alternative economic and judicial life of the Christian community. When a missionary is appointing pastors and deacons without trained elders and judges, he is only building a baptized version of a pagan temple, an institution limited to dispensing religious experience.

*Third*, a missionary must work as a "legislator" who helps the newly formed Christian communities establish their own *covenant rules* for acceptable conduct and relationships. The law of the community must be based on the Bible and must reflect the justice and the righteousness of the law of God, taking into account the general rules (the Ten Commandments), the case laws (the Pentateuch), and the judicial and moral applications (in the rest of the Bible). Unbelievers clearly see the goodness and the majesty of God in His law (Deut. 4:5-8); without God's law applied in the community, there isn't much that can attract the masses of people to Christ.

*Fourth*, a missionary must preach and work to establish an ethics of rewards and charity in the new converts. A strong pro-business attitude and appreciation of the problem-solvers-that is, the entrepreneurs-is an integral part of a Christian community that plans to survive long-term in a hostile environment. At the other end of the spectrum, a missionary must be able to help form and establish a system within the covenant

community for helping the poor and the needy. Both must be based on a Biblical understanding of value-relational, economic, intellectual, moral, etc. No person should be rewarded for laziness, and those who work hard to solve problems must be given honor.

And *fifth*, a missionary must establish a system for *transferring* the faith, the commitment, and the wisdom of the covenant community *to the next generation*. No Christian community can survive and thrive and fight the good fight without specifically Christian education of its children. A missionary who leads his listeners to Christ but lets them send their children to pagan teachers and schools is undermining his own effort. Christian homeschooling or institutional Christian schools must become the focus of the missionary's effort from the very beginning of his work with the local converts. Only when the children are safely accommodated into a system of Christian education under the control of their Christian parents can there be hope for the survival of the covenant community through the generations.

Building a covenant community that is an alternative to the culture is the only way to evangelize the world. The "insider movements," just like the other piecemeal approaches we have seen in the last 200 years, are only a retreat before the enemy, an acceptance of the legitimacy of Satan's power over the earth. Preaching Christianity while legitimizing cultural traditions of pagan religions is only a denial of the Great Commission. It's time for us as Christians to change our approach to missions to the comprehensive, victorious approach of the early church missions-and redirect our mission financing accordingly.

1. <http://chalcedon.edu/faith-for-all-of-life/worldview-contamination/the-true-origins-of-foreign-missions/>

2. J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman (Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960), 28-29.

3. *Ibid.*, 29.

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