

## THE LOST BALANCE IN MISSIONS TODAY

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### ***Abstract***

Many evangelical Christian missiologists emphasize search-only theology (i.e., search theology that is not balanced by harvest theology). When the Great Commission is reexamined, search-only theology deficiencies are revealed. When search-only proponents attempt to sow seed speedily in all UPGs at the same time without regard for receptivity, poor stewardship of gospel seed is evident. A lack of thorough discipleship results in UdPGs. Such speedy search-only theology is not the pattern set by Jesus or Paul. The dangers of search-only theology's emphasis on speed include placing unqualified people in leadership positions and getting involved in the deceptive insider movement.

Donald McGavran distinguished between search theology and harvest theology. He defined search theology as “seed sowing” and said that this theology maintains that “the essential thing is not the finding, but going everywhere and preaching the gospel.”<sup>1</sup> McGavran advocated harvest theology, which goes beyond searching and involves “a vast and purposeful finding.”<sup>2</sup> He admitted, however, that some type of balance is needed between search and harvest theologies: “Is then a theology of search false? By no means; but it is partial. It is true for some populations. It is false only insofar as it claims

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<sup>1</sup> Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

to be the sole theology of evangelism and applicable to all.”<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, in recent decades, search theology has become the sole theology of evangelism and missions utilized by many evangelical groups. Harvest theology has been all but ignored by these groups. A healthy balance between the two theologies is missing.

Our organization is known as the Great Commission Research Network. Thus, it behooves us to reexamine the Great Commission to see what it actually commands us to do. Let’s research these verses again with fresh eyes and open minds.

Matthew 28:19–20 states, “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.”<sup>4</sup> A number of questions may spring to mind when a Christian examines this passage.

#### **WHERE TO GO AND HOW LONG TO STAY**

Did Jesus intend for his original disciples to go to every people group in the world during their lifetimes and make disciples? We must conclude that such a task was impossible at that time. On the Day of Pentecost, “there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). These Jews heard the gospel, and we can assume that some of them carried it to other nations. We cannot assume, however, that the Great Commission was fulfilled shortly after Jesus gave it. The intention of Jesus was to issue marching orders that would be applicable to all Christians for the next two thousand years. Many search theology advocates argue that our focus should be solely on reaching the unreached people groups (UPGs, currently defined as less than 2 percent evangelical Christian), regardless of how receptive they are to the gospel. I will refer to this school of thought as the “search-only” perspective. In this paper, I will not quote any search-only advocates; rather, I will speak in general terms about the search-only perspective based on my observations overseas and in missiological literature. To see specific quotes from search-only advocates, see my article in the fall, 2014 edition of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture quoted in this paper is from the Holman Christian Standard Bible, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> John Michael Morris, “Contrasting Missiological Positions in Regard to Matthew 28:20,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 57, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 97–101, accessed September 30, 2015, <http://www.swbts.edu/academics/schools-programs/theology/journal/volume-57/57-1>.

Paul's words in Romans 15:20 are sometimes used by search-only proponents: "So my aim is to evangelize where Christ has not been named, in order that I will not be building on someone else's foundation." Obviously, Christ was not known in many places at that time, so virtually every people group was a UPG. Paul followed Christ's admonition (Luke 10:10–11) to shake off the dust and leave resistant groups after adequate work was done in those contexts (Acts 13:51, 18:6). Paul did not move around quickly in a "willy-nilly," random fashion to share the gospel with every UPG; rather, he was sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit. For example, Paul and Timothy tried to go to Bithynia, but "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (Acts 16:7). Instead, Paul received a vision indicating that they should go to the district of Macedonia (Acts 16:10), and he found receptive people in the Macedonian city of Philippi.

McGavran, in contrast to the search-only perspective, believed that priority should be given to receptive groups: "Evangelism can be and ought to be directed to responsive persons, groups, and segments of society."<sup>6</sup> He also said that "correct policy is to occupy fields of low receptivity lightly."<sup>7</sup> To prioritize receptive groups is to be a good steward of the gospel. McGavran in no way diminished the importance of reaching the unreached groups. Some unreached groups are resistant, and some of them are receptive. The receptive UPGs should be designated as top priority groups by missionary-sending organizations and churches. Large people movements are possible in such receptive, unreached groups. McGavran reiterated his emphasis on receptive UPGs: "The rule which guided missionary societies during the nineteenth century—'Go where no one has been before'—is currently not a good rule. Today's rule, specially for beginning societies, is 'Find populations in which many want to become Christians, but are not being evangelized. Go there.'"<sup>8</sup>

Many search-only advocates are also speed advocates. They want to quickly create a beachhead and move on to a different battlefield so that they can reach all people groups in one generation. This is not the pattern set by Jesus or Paul. Jesus spent approximately three years with his original disciples, and Paul also spent extended periods of time with new disciples. Paul stayed three years at Ephesus (Acts 20:31) and at least a year and a half at Corinth (Acts 18:11). Sometimes Paul was quickly forced out of particular places, but he was often able to return or send other teachers. Microwave Christianity has had harmful effects both in America and abroad.

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<sup>6</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 187.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>8</sup> McGavran, "Basics of Effective Missions Anywhere," *Church Growth Bulletin* 11, no. 4 (March 1975): 431.

## THE TYPE OF DISCIPLES WE SHOULD MAKE

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Notice that Jesus did not say, “Go therefore and *try* to make disciples”; rather, He commanded us to do more than merely try. We are commanded to go beyond searching and actually find them by making disciples. Search-only advocates, however, tend to emphasize the speedy sowing of the gospel seed, not necessarily the purposeful making of disciples. McGavran advocated thoroughly reaping a receptive group, not merely seeding it: “The world is full of receptive and resistant populations. While all must hear the gospel (Mark 16:14), we must make sure that the ripe fields are the ones that are reaped to the last sheaf.”<sup>9</sup> McGavran also advocated thorough discipleship so that nominal Christianity can be avoided:

Most objections to people movements come from those who have seen them starved and neglected. . . . God sometimes gives the precious beginnings of a people movement to his servants working ahead in the exploratory phase of missions. If they miss the early signals there is a danger that the new churches will be confirmed, not in the faith, but in ignorance and nominalism. This is not the fault of the way non-Christians turn to Christ, but a failure of shepherding. . . . J. T. Seamands (1968) credits the healthy expansion of the Methodist Church in South India . . . to a thorough system of training lay leaders. . . . During the first months after conversion, Christians are highly teachable. . . . If neglected for the first few years, they become accustomed to a mere nominal Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

Exactly what does the Great Commission mean when it commands us to make disciples? Does it simply mean to make Christian converts, or does it mean more than that? To find the answer, we must first look at the meaning of the Greek noun translated as “disciple.” Depending on its context, “disciple” can have five different meanings in the New Testament.

First, “disciple” can refer to someone who temporarily and loosely identifies with Christ but is not and never was a true convert because of a failure to completely surrender to Christ in repentance and faith. For example, Judas Iscariot is listed as one of Christ’s twelve disciples (Luke 6:12–16, John 12:4). Many temporary disciples of Christ left Him at one point because of their lack of faith (John 6:64–66): “But there are some among you who don’t believe.’ (For Jesus knew from the beginning those who would not believe and the one who would betray Him.) He said, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to Me unless it is granted to him by the Father.’ From that moment many of His disciples turned back and no longer accompanied

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<sup>9</sup> McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1988), 48–9.

<sup>10</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 235–236.

Him.” Many such disciples, counterfeit converts, exist in churches today. They are not Christians and never were Christians.

Non-Christians who merely give intellectual assent to the facts of the Bible must be distinguished from Christians who have true saving faith in Christ. For example, some people were impressed with the miraculous signs of Jesus, but they did not fully commit themselves to Him (John 2:23–24): “While He was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many trusted in His name when they saw the signs He was doing. Jesus, however, would not entrust Himself to them, since He knew them all.” Another example of a non-saving type of belief is mentioned in James 2:19: “You believe that God is one; you do well. The demons also believe—and they shudder.” The rich, young ruler is an example of a person who wanted eternal life but was unwilling to surrender all and follow Christ (Mark 10:17–22). As He spoke to “great crowds” (Luke 14:25) Jesus reiterated this truth in Luke 14:33: “In the same way, therefore, every one of you who does not say good-bye to all his possessions cannot be My disciple.”

Second, “disciple” can refer to any Christian (Acts 21:4), including recent converts who surrendered their lives to Christ in repentance and faith but have not yet received much teaching (Acts 6:7): “So the preaching about God flourished, the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.” These disciples were genuine Christians.

A one-time commitment to trust Jesus with our lives and to do whatever He asks us to do for the rest of our lives is necessary for receiving the gift of eternal life. Only those people who have surrendered every part of their lives to Christ in repentance and faith are truly Christians.

Third, “disciple” can refer to a mature Christian who is fully trained and has become Christlike (Matthew 10:24–25a): “A disciple is not above his teacher, or a slave above his master. It is enough for a disciple to become like his teacher and a slave like his master.” A similar verse is Luke 6:40: “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.” The Greek verb translated as “fully trained” has the same root as the Greek noun that is translated as “training” in Ephesians 4:11–12: “And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ.” The mature Christian, whether an officer in the church or not, should teach less mature Christians. The contrast between mature and immature Christians is clear in Hebrews 5:12–14:

Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of God’s revelation again. You need milk, not solid food. Now everyone who lives on milk is inexperienced with the message about righteousness, because he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil.

Notice that the mature Christian's senses "have been trained."

Fourth, "disciple" can refer to one of the original twelve disciples (Matt 10:1). Fifth, "disciple" can mean a person who follows someone besides Jesus, such as the disciples who followed the Pharisees (Matt 22:16).

Which type of disciple is a Christian commanded to make in Matthew 28:19? The answer is clear from the type of participles that follow the main Greek verb translated as "make disciples." "Baptizing" and "teaching" are participles of means. They indicate the means by which disciples are to be made. Christians are to baptize new converts and teach them to observe *everything* He commanded. They should indeed teach new converts *everything* that Jesus commanded, not just a *few things* that He commanded. Thus, God's command for Christians is to go and make *mature Christians*, not mere converts. Of course, we must first make new converts in order to eventually make mature Christians; thus, the Great Commission includes both, but the main goal is to make mature Christians.

If every Christian is commanded to make mature Christians, how can immature Christians obey this command? They can teach new converts what they already know while they are continuing to learn. Different levels of mentoring exist. Christians who have been saved for a period of time should have received some basic discipleship training. They can mentor new converts even though they do not yet know all the things that more mature Christians know. These Christians are immature but beyond the initial convert stage. They need mentoring but can still be mentors themselves. Thus, they can be part of the disciple-making process even though they cannot do all of it alone.

### THE DANGERS OF THE SEARCH-ONLY PERSPECTIVE

Because search-only advocates typically want to quickly plant churches in UPGs and quickly move to other UPGs, they often are willing to place new converts in leadership positions. They do not want to slow down long enough to thoroughly disciple leaders. They admit that 1 Timothy 3:6 says that a pastor/elder/overseer "must not be a new convert," but they say that this admonition is for established churches, not for churches in pioneer areas where there are only new converts.

They often mention that the list of qualifications for the pastor/elder/overseer in Titus 1 leaves out the prohibition against new converts, and this context (Crete) supposedly only had new converts. Titus 1:9, however, states that the pastor/elder/overseer must be "holding to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it." Notice that he has been taught correct doctrine, and he is able to refute false doctrine. In regard to Crete, there were Cretans present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:11), and probably some of these Cretans became Christians and carried the gospel to Crete.

The danger of having a new convert as pastor/elder/overseer should be obvious. David Sills commented on the present-day situation in China: “Missionaries report that evangelicals in China are losing ten thousand house churches every year to cults because their church leaders have no theological training. They cannot teach or defend what orthodox Christianity holds to be true.”<sup>11</sup> While Donald McGavran was arguably the greatest missiologist of the twentieth century, John Nevius was arguably the greatest missiologist of the nineteenth century. His thoughts on using new converts as pastors are still relevant today. Notice how he reacted to Titus 1:5:

Elders must be “appointed in every city.” . . . While elders should be ordained as soon as practicable, we should not forget that the qualifications of elders are minutely laid down in the Scriptures; and to choose and ordain men to this office without the requisite qualifications is in fact going contrary to, rather than obeying the Scriptures. If suitable elders are not to be found, we should wait for them, however long a waiting may be required.

The Apostolic usage of ordaining elders soon after their reception into the Church, under circumstances very different from ours in China, is apt to mislead us. The work of the Apostles in heathen lands commenced for the most part in the synagogues of the Jews resident in those lands. Even in such places as Lystra, where there seems to have been no synagogue, there were Jewish families and their influence had been felt by the native population. Among the first converts to Christianity were both Jews and Jewish proselytes who for generations had been freed from the thralldom of idolatry. They were sincere worshippers of Jehovah, familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures and waiting for the long promised Messiah. From such persons the first elders of the Christian Church were no doubt largely drawn. It is not strange that, as a rule, we in China have to wait for years before Christians of the same intelligence and stability of character can be had. Our experience in this matter in Shantung is worth relating.

Twenty years ago our mission in considering this subject reasoned on this wise: We are Presbyterians, and our churches should be organized from the first on Presbyterian principles. If we cannot get men for elders as well qualified as we should like, we must take the best men we can find. . . . It was found, however, in not a small proportion of cases that the elders did not, or could not, perform their official duties, and were an obstruction to anyone attempting

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<sup>11</sup> M. David Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 44.

to do so. They were placed in a false position, injurious to themselves and the churches of which they had nominal charge. Some were hardly able to sustain the character of an ordinary church member and others were in the course of a few years excommunicated. We then took action as a Presbytery, determining that elders should not be appointed unless their qualifications conformed in some good degree to those required in Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

Sadly, history has repeated itself in China as unqualified people have been placed into leadership positions into many of the house churches there. This search-only approach has adversely affected many people groups. Some of these groups are no longer considered to be UPGs, but they unfortunately must be classified as UdPGs (undisciplined people groups), a designation proposed by Daniel Kim.<sup>13</sup>

Another danger of the search-only emphasis on speed and lack of thorough discipleship is the insider movement. The insider movement promotes the idea that people can permanently maintain their Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu identities while secretly following Christ. Jesus, however, made it clear that He should be confessed before men and that following Him would cause division between people (Matthew 10:32–39):

Therefore, everyone who will acknowledge Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father in heaven. Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. The person who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; the person who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. Anyone finding his life will lose it, and anyone losing his life because of Me will find it.

Insider movement proponents believe that evangelism will be more rapid when the converts are allowed to permanently retain their former identities as Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists. This movement is unbiblical and grows out of the desire to increase speed. It is a deceptive practice and hurts the witness of genuine Christians.

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<sup>12</sup> John Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, 3d ed. (New York: Foreign Mission Library, 1899), 59–61.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel D. Kim, "An Urgent Plea Concerning Undisciplined People Groups: A Thai Perspective," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (January 2011): 71.

## CONCLUSION

The glaring missiological divide between missiologists who favor the search-only approach and missiologists who favor a balanced approach is readily apparent. Obviously, McGavran's teachings are still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unfortunately, the search-only proponents are in the majority at the present time. Our organization must introduce students to the teachings of McGavran so that a more balanced approach can again become a reality.

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