

THE MISSIONAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH AND THE FUTURE OF SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION CHURCHES

Ed Stetzer, Ph.D.

Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches and other evangelical churches *are failing* to impact the lostness of North America. New statistics from the Leavell Center at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary tell a disconcerting story—89 percent of churches in the Convention are not effectively reaching the lost. According to the study, only 11 percent of the churches are experiencing healthy growth.

The Leavell Center's method of measuring church growth health was based on the following simple criteria:

- 10 percent total membership growth over five years
- at least one person baptized during the two years of the study
- a member-to-baptism ratio of 35 or less in the final year of the study (these churches need 35 or fewer members each year to baptize one new convert)
- for the final year of the study, the percentage of growth that was conversion growth must be at least 25 percent

Based on those criteria, only 11 percent of all SBC churches are experiencing healthy growth. The vast majority of our churches are not experiencing healthy evangelistic growth and, thus, are not impacting the lostness of North America.

New statistics also revealed a growing inability of North American churches to penetrate their cultural context and reach people with the gospel. For example, the American Religious Identification Survey revealed that every two years an average of 1 percent more Americans identify themselves as having no religion. "One of the most striking 1990–2001 comparisons is the more than doubling of the adult population identifying with no religion, from 14.3 million (8%) in 1990 to the current 29.4 million (14.1%)."¹

In addition, the number of unchurched people continues to increase, even with Barna's charitable definition of the unchurched. A Barna Group study explained, "Since 1991, the adult population in the United States has grown by 15 percent. During that same period the number of adults who do not attend church has nearly doubled, rising from 39 million to 75 million—a 92 percent increase!"²

Our churches struggle with being evangelistically effective because they are locked into a self-affirming subculture while the larger culture continues to move in other directions. The cultural distance between our churches and the culture continues to widen. This chasm of cultural understanding makes it increasingly difficult for our "church culture" to relate to "prevailing culture." Without intentionality, churches become less contextual, less indigenous, and less evangelistically effective over time.

Ironically, Baptists on the American frontier were often accused of being too "close" to the culture. They wanted to be "of the people;" they were accused of being (in today's terms) too "culturally relevant."

¹<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/100/33.0.html>.

²<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=163>.

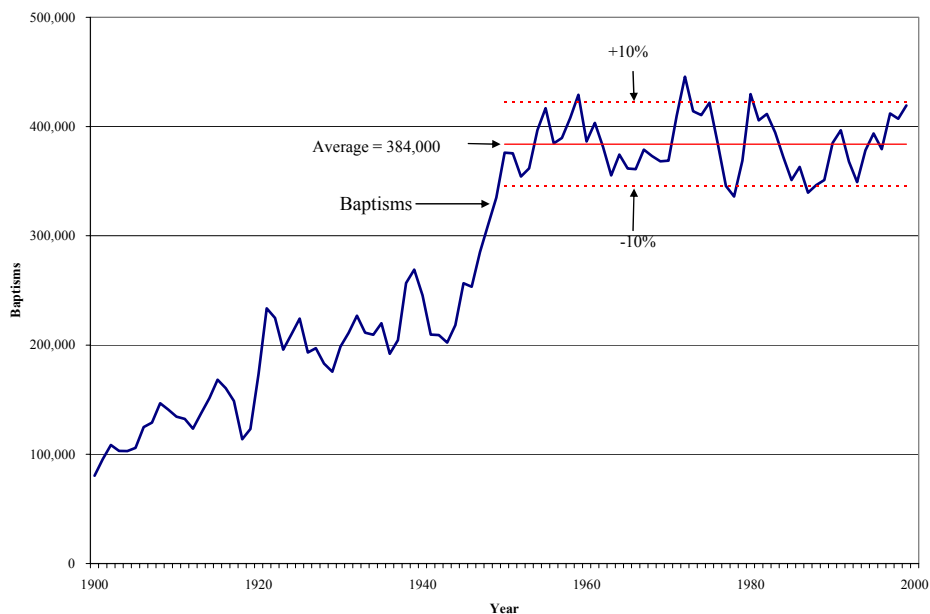
Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians were scandalized by the earthiness and even worldliness of Baptists on the western frontier in the early 1800s. Over time, we (Southern Baptists) have become the *scandalized* while others have been more effective at penetrating the culture.

Fewer emerging leaders look to Southern Baptists as the source for missionally effective strategies. Instead, they will often compromise or downplay their theological convictions to learn and implement the strategies of those who do not hold our biblical distinctives. They do so because they see the need for new indigenous expressions but have not yet seen us engage in the necessary missiological thinking to develop such strategies. Why has this shift taken place?

Perhaps one reason is that those who are most effective in one culture are unable to contextualize in the new. Those who were most successful in the last paradigm often have the most difficulty in the next. Such one-time innovators have seen certain cultural expressions of effective Christianity and are unable to consider methods and models different from their own. They “know” what works. They have seen it work before. If they just try, pray, and go as fervently as they did back then, it will work that way again.

For example, Southern Baptist baptisms peaked in the 1950s, perhaps with “A Million More in '54.” Churches were evangelistically successful because the church structure, programs, and worship connected with the culture of the day. Since peaking in the 1950s, baptisms have remained generally flat, not moving more than 10 percent one direction or the other, over four decades (see graph below).

Earlier in the last century, Southern Baptists rallied to more effective ministry and outreach. In the 1920s, the “75 Million Campaign” united Southern Baptists not only to the cause of cooperative missions, but also to the task of effective evangelism. Church growth and evangelism were positively impacted in the 1920s and 1950s because the methods and strategies connected with the cultures of the day. The graph below helps to illustrate the momentum of the 1920s (Cooperation and “The 75 Million Campaign”) and the 1950s (Sunday School and “A Million More in '54”) and the subsequent plateau after each:



Today, that connection with culture and subsequent evangelistic impact is not occurring—at least not at most SBC churches.

Churches and denominations that have connected with a particular cultural expression often lock themselves into that culture. Churches that connect with the culture in one era often remain in that era's music, methods, and strategies. Here stand many Southern Baptists—trying to reach the new millennium with the formerly successful methods of the 1950s (or 1890s or 1810s). What's the alternative?

The alternative is for Southern Baptist churches to become “on mission” in their settings. Churches need to think of themselves as missionary churches in a missionary setting. In fact, many already speak of the United States and Canada as “mission fields.” Churches must reconnect with their missional heritage and connect with the current culture without compromising their gospel message. That will require the development of a biblical North American missiology.

A Missiology for North America

The development of a *North American* missiology has caught the attention of evangelicals, particularly many emerging leaders. New models of church have forced the larger Christian community to address issues not considered in prior decades—issues regarding how the church can relate to contemporary culture and contextualize the gospel in its setting. Southern Baptists are struggling with the challenge of cultural relevance and biblical fidelity. Many are finding the answers (or at least discerning questions) through missiological thinking.

Missiological thinking is not the same as missionary support. Many churches that support cross-cultural missions do not carefully apply strategic missiological thinking within their own context. Unfortunately, mission support often reduces missiological thinking to simply paying someone else to do evangelism and church planting, albeit on a foreign field. But this thinking precludes obedience to our Lord's commission in our local context. Church members are unable to experience fruitful service through participation in *missional* work within their own community.

This approach to missional work is perhaps the unfortunate outcome of a separation between missions and evangelism in popular Southern Baptist (and evangelical) thinking. To most, missions is something done “elsewhere” by “someone.” Thus, some churches that are “far-thinking” and “far-reaching” in terms of international missions are failing to reach the people in the shadows of their steeples. North America is not viewed as a mission field, or is believed to be a “reached” field only in need of an evangelism strategy, not a true missional engagement.

What is needed is not merely an understanding of missiological thinking, but a commitment to “missional” thinking as well. While missiology concerns itself with study *about* missions and its methodologies, missional thinking focuses on *doing* missions in every geographical location. An understanding of basic missiological thinking should prepare Christian leaders to be missional in their approach. As Southern Baptists, we must consider an important issue: how will we teach our leaders to move beyond reproducing church culture models and move toward biblical and missional engagements of their unique mission setting?

A church becomes missional when it remains faithful to the gospel and simultaneously seeks to contextualize the gospel (to the degree it can) in the worldview container of its hearers. The most obvious

example is Paul and his encounter with the Greeks at Mars Hill. Paul attempted to connect with the worldview of his hearers.³

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way *you are [already]* very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22–23, emphasis added).

Functioning as a missionary (in a missional manner), Paul did four things in his effort to be missional and culturally relevant:⁴

he understood the Athenian position on reality,

he understood an underlying spiritual interest,

he looked for positive points within their worldview, and

he encouraged them to find true fulfillment in Christ.

Throughout the book of Acts, Paul approached Jews and Gentiles differently—based upon their culture and level of understanding gospel truths. With the Jews, Paul reasoned about the saving role of the Messiah and his resurrection (Acts 17:1–4). To the Gentiles, Paul’s reasoning was more foundational, addressing issues such as the resurrection, morality, and judgment.⁵ In all cases, the culture of the hearer impacted his missional methods. While Paul was the premier theologian of his time, he was also the premier missionary. Theology and missiology seem disconnected, however, in this modern era.

Theology and Missiology

Martin Kähler stated ninety years ago, “Mission is the mother of theology.”⁶ That is, theology was the product of the mission of the church. Paul’s letters were instructions for churches he had helped start, churches struggling with the issues that all new churches face. The text defines the mission, and the church must live that mission. A “nonmissional” church misrepresents the true nature of the church.⁷ In order to live out a missional mandate, the church must rediscover that part of its nature. Martinson astutely observes that the church will not play its proper role in the new missional movement until it understands the biblical and theological basis for such.⁸

³Some have proposed that Paul’s actions here are descriptive and not a good strategy. Since the Athenians “sneered,” they reason that it proved to be an ill-advised strategy anyway. This is a minority position. By connecting with the Athenian culture, Paul was able to connect with a resistant people.

⁴Richard J. Mouw, “The Missionary Location of the North American Churches,” in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 8.

⁵William J. Larkin, “Mission in Acts,” in *Mission in the New Testament*, ed. William J. Larkin Jr., and Joel F. Williams (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 180.

⁶Martin Kähler as quoted in McKaughan, O’Brien, and O’Brien, *Choosing a Future for U.S. Missions*, 21.

⁷James A. Scherer, “Key Issues to Be Considered in Global Mission Today: Crucial Questions about Mission Theology, Context, and Expectations,” in *Mission at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, ed. Paul Varo Martinson (Minneapolis, Minn.: Kirk House Publishers, 1999), 12.

⁸Ibid.

A proper understanding of the biblical and theological basis of being on mission begins with an understanding of the nature of God. He is a missionary God—in this and every culture. His nature does not change based on location. The missionary posture is the normal expression of the church in all times and places.⁹ The theological concept of *Missio Dei*, the mission of God, recognizes that God is a sending God and the church is sent. It is the most important mission in the Scriptures.¹⁰ Jesus Christ is the embodiment of that mission; the Holy Spirit is the power of that mission; the church is the instrument of that mission; and the culture is the context in which that mission occurs.¹¹ The context colors the style and strategy used to accomplish that mission.

The source of missionary identity is located in the nature of the triune and sending God, and is connected ontologically with the very existence of the church. The triune God is the sending one, enabling and guiding faithful witnesses through resistance, crossing cultural thresholds and confronting any other impediment to the progress of the gospel to the ends of the earth.¹² Furthermore, the fact that Jesus was the “sent one” is the most fundamental identification of Jesus.¹³ Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21 NIV). Because of our identity in Christ, we continue the mission of Jesus.¹⁴ The International Missionary Council described it this way: “There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world mission.”¹⁵

The church needs to realize that mission is its “fundamental identity.”¹⁶ The Great Commission institutionalizes mission as the *raison d’être*, the controlling norm, of the church. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of his body is to live a missionary experience in the world. There is no doubt that this was how the earliest Christians understood their calling.¹⁷

Scripture identifies God’s people as being chosen for the purpose of “declaring the praises,” a missional task carried over from the unfulfilled (and underappreciated) missionary task of Israel. Peter explained, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9 NIV). That call helps us to see that “just as God is a missionary God, so the church is to be a missionary church.”¹⁸

⁹Wilburt Shenk, “The Culture of Modernity as a Missionary Challenge,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 69–78.

¹⁰Köstenberger and O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 269.

¹¹Wilbert R. Shenk, “Mission Strategies,” in *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, ed. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 221–23.

¹²Larkin, “Mission in Acts,” 175.

¹³Martin Erdmann, “Mission in John’s Gospel and Letters,” in *Mission in the New Testament*, ed. William J. Larkin Jr. and Joel F. Williams (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 212.

¹⁴Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 269.

¹⁵International Missionary Council, as quoted in James A. Scherer, “Mission Theology,” in *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, ed. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 194–95.

¹⁶Shenk, *Write the Vision*, 86.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁸Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 98.

For too long, theology has had philosophy as its only partner in discourse.¹⁹ Instead, theology and theological institutions need to reengage in mission by asking questions such as “How can the gospel be incarnated best in this setting?” and “What cultural values and symbols can be used to illustrate gospel truth?” “Solid, disciplined, and prolonged intellectual work in the context of missionary encounter between the gospel and contemporary cultures is an essential part of the mission of theology.”²⁰ “True theology is the attempt on the part of the church to explain and interpret the meaning of the gospel for its own life and to answer questions raised by the Christian faith, using the thought, values, and categories of truth which are authentic to that place and time.”²¹

For some, it is easier to say, “We must not take our cues from culture.” Entire ministries exist to polemicize any cultural influence on the church. It preaches well (as evidenced by many pastors’ gatherings), but it is ultimately both unbiblical and untenable. It is unbiblical because God calls us to our culture and context and, to some degree, the church must reflect its culture. It is untenable because no one lives in an acultural Christian environment. Many just choose their preferred culture and assume/proclaim that it is God’s preference as well. As Southern Baptists we must be willing to engage in the hard questions because the mandate of Scripture and the lostness of culture require nothing less.

Theology of Missions

What is needed in the present-day church is a renewed understanding of the theology of missions and an emphasis upon that theology being universal to all churches, wherever they are located. Again, there is no basis, biblically or theologically, for the territorial distinction of missions and evangelism.²² Though this has been assumed since Gustav Warneck, there is no evidence in the biblical text to separate the two.

On the contrary, their separation has caused harm to the church. While missions became the task of reaching those outside of Christendom, evangelism became the task of reaching those within its boundaries.²³ In an attempt to promote the importance of missions, missionaries have often undermined the church in a changing culture by removing missional thinking from its rightful place and focusing it only on the international scene.

Instead, the church must learn to exegete its culture and reflect on its own culture from a biblical perspective.²⁴ Culturally appropriate evangelism answers the actual questions that are being asked rather than those that the church believes the culture should ask. The world’s questions, then, help determine the evangelistic methodologies and even the expressions of the indigenous church. The *sine qua non* is

¹⁹David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 495.

²⁰J. Andrew Kirk, *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997), 39.

²¹Dean S. Gilliland, “Contextual Theology as Incarnational Mission,” in *The Word Among Us*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), 10–11.

²²Shenk, *Write the Vision*, 48.

²³Shenk, “The Culture of Modernity as a Missionary Challenge,” 74.

²⁴John R. “Pete” Hendrick, “Congregations with Missions vs. Missionary Congregations,” in *The Church Between Gospel & Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 304.

found in 1 Peter: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15 NIV). The questions determine the starting point of the explanation. The culture is the context in which we do missional ministry. If we take seriously the theology of mission, the Word must become flesh in every new context.²⁵

What Went Wrong?

We have discussed the biblical foundations and theology of missions. However, if the church began with a missional focus but no longer has it, what happened? What went wrong? Why is it necessary at this time to argue in the SBC (or for that matter, in evangelicalism) for a return to a focused methodology and theology of missions that was basic to the early church? The history of missions—a critical aspect of church history—can provide some answers to these questions.

It can be argued that the worst thing to happen to the missional focus of the early church was the conversion of Constantine. Constantine laid the foundation for the institutionalization of the church into the official religion of Rome through his adoption of the faith and legitimization of the church. It might be argued that this transition was inevitable due to the expansion of the Christian faith during its first three centuries. But it can certainly be argued that this official acceptance changed the perceived nature of the church—and inevitably its mission.

Ralph Winter explains, “Once Christianity became locked into a specific cultural tradition and political loyalty, it tended automatically to alienate all who were anti-Roman.”²⁶ Not only did this political baggage interfere with the outward spread of Christianity into non-Roman areas, it tended to focus the attention of Christians inward. It could even be argued that Constantine’s presiding over the Council of Nicea moved discussion away from the missionary purpose of the church and toward a focus on theological orthodoxy alone—thereby isolating theology from mission.

Although there were some effective missionaries during the next ten centuries, the expansion of the faith had become largely a side issue to the expansion of the political power of the established church. The pattern of “Christendom” had been established.²⁷

The church of western European Christendom was a church without true mission.²⁸ The “Christendom” model of church inhibited the church from interacting in a missional manner with changing culture.²⁹ The church was handicapped because it did not *need* to be missional. It was, after all, Christendom, and it was commonly understood within its territory that Christianity was the preferred spiritual path. The loss of an understanding of grace and the need for personal conversion was not effectively addressed until the Reformation.

²⁵Bosch, 21.

²⁶Ralph D Winter, “The Kingdom Strikes Back: Ten Epochs in Redemptive History,” *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 3rd ed. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 202.

²⁷Christendom, for the sake of this chapter, represents the realm/time where Christianity was the assumed religion of the West.

²⁸Shenk, “The Culture of Modernity as a Missionary Challenge,” 71.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 72.

There has been substantial debate regarding the nature of the Reformation church—was it a missionary church, did it value missions, etc.? Some have questioned whether the Reformation church even engaged in the task of missions. These are, unfortunately, the wrong questions. The Reformers were trapped within geographic Christendom while their Catholic counterparts were engaged in colonial expansion.

Protestant “mission” became missions to Catholics.³⁰ While Protestants focused on Catholics, Catholic missions flourished and were energized by “new lands” to reach—albeit primarily through political means. Protestants did not demonstrate this same missionary zeal. This loss did not go without notice. Counter Reformation Catholics pointed to the lack of missionary participation as evidence of a defective Protestant church. This failure to restore the missionary focus of the early church was reflected both confessionally and practically—even to this day.

Pre-Reformation confessions referred to the church as “one holy, apostolic church.” Such is not found in the confessions of the Reformation. Instead, the Reformation confessions reacted to the errors of apostolic succession. By deemphasizing the “apostolic” nature of church, the Reformer’s also diminished the apostolic/sending nature of the church. Van Gelder explains: “Lost in this deletion was an emphasis on the church’s ‘being authoritatively sent’ by God into the world to participate fully in God’s mission. The Reformer’s downplaying of the apostolic attribute and their shifting of authority from the Pope to the Bible were reinforced by . . . the establishment of state churches within their various nations.”³¹

Though the Reformation had restored much of primitive Christianity, it had failed to restore all. The “God who sends” met the “church that reformed” and much was lost. The repercussions of this failure reverberate to this day because nonmissional churches do not consider it important to relate missionally to their context. They see no need to become “indigenous” churches in new cultures. Beyerhaus explains in the *Concise History of Christian World Mission*:

This loss of missional focus also led to a loss of missional thinking. Acts chapter fifteen reflects how difficult the Jewish church in Jerusalem found the process of relating to the predominant Hellenistic world culture. Only after these cultural adaptations were made was the Gentile church able to expand and grow effectively. It should be clear that churches in every age must reflect, in some ways, their host cultures. This process is called “indigenization.” To be indigenous means that a church, in obedience to the apostolic message that has been entrusted to it and to the living guidance of the Holy Spirit, is able in its own particular historical situation, to make the gospel intelligible and relevant in word and deed to the eyes and ears of men.³²

Indigenization was not the standard practice of the church from the fourth century until the seventeenth. The imperial church of Christendom was accustomed to conquest by the sword and by territory, not by mission and evangelism. It was not until the beginning of the modern missionary movement, launched by the Moravians and popularized by William Carey, that Protestant Christians

³⁰This was a legitimate mission, but it was an incomplete mission view.

³¹Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 55.

³²Peter Beyerhaus, “Indigenous Churches,” in *Concise Dictionary of Christian World Mission*, ed. Stephen Neil, Gerald H. Anderson, and John Goodwin (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 278.

began to realize anew the imperative of the Great Commission. Many of these early mission movements were not indigenous. The concept of Christendom still held sway in the minds of the missionaries, and their understanding of their role included “civilizing the natives.” This meant planting “patches” of Western culture wherever they planted a mission.

Those who converted to Christianity were often expected to don Western garments and sing Western hymns. This concept of missions became known as the “colonial model” (since missionaries often represented the interests of the colonial rulers of the area), the “institutional model” (since missionaries planted institutions such as schools and hospitals alongside the mission church), or—once a wind of change began to sweep through the pages of mission journals—simply the “old model.”

It is remarkable how long this old model of missions persisted among many missionaries, lasting in some cases even into the 1950s and 1960s in international settings (and, perhaps, more fully in North American missions even now). The “new” model of missions being touted by such mission leaders as Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn, and expanded by missionaries in the field such as John Nevius and Roland Allen, was largely a restatement of the first-century indigenous methodology.

Roland Allen (1868–1947) in particular provided helpful guidance. Allen was an Anglican priest and a missionary to China. His monograph *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* played a significant role in challenging paternalistic approaches to indigenization. Allen promoted the radical idea (at the time) that we must learn to trust the Spirit’s work in and through new believers. This concept requires a mutual trust between the parties and confidence in the Holy Spirit to guide both.³³ The need is no different today.

Allen’s basic theme was that missionaries needed to return to the methodology of Paul. Paul’s churches had been self-supporting from the beginning (even helping to support the church in Jerusalem through offerings), self-governing (since Paul appointed leaders in every church), and eventually self-propagating (the church at Ephesus planted the other six churches mentioned in the early chapters of Revelation). These “three-selves” became the foundation for the new model of missions, the indigenous model, which has been accepted by almost all missiologists of the present era (though not by all evangelicals in North America).

The Southern Baptist Convention

Southern Baptists, like all faith groups, are deeply influenced by, and partly captive to, their surrounding culture. In the South, Southern Baptists hold a religious majority and, in some cases, almost a religious monopoly. Southern Baptist churches, with a few exceptions, dominate the religious landscape of the rural South.

³³Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 98–99.



In a culture where we are predominant, we have functioned much like the Christendom model of medieval Roman Catholic Europe. We held the religious power and anyone who wanted to be a part could; they knew where we were and could always enter into our religious world.

We even launched our own “colonial missions” in North America. Judson Boyce Allen inadvertently illustrated the problem of such nonindigenous expressions of Southern Baptist life when he wrote in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*: “[A] Southern Baptist tends to remain a Southern Baptist, whether he lives in Virginia, Georgia, California, Ohio, or Montana. He needs not easily adjust to a church fellowship in which methods and practices are different from those to which he has been conditioned. Churches which are methodologically different are automatically suspect.”³⁴ Today, new models and methods remain suspect, and indigenization is hindered when we react with suspicion instead of theological reflection.

The Indigenization of the Church

In contrast to the colonial model and its modern expression in Southern Baptist life, indigenous churches look different from culture to culture. Thus, one would expect that a biblically faithful indigenous church would look different in Senegal and Singapore. However, one must also expect an indigenous Southern Baptist church to look different in Seattle and Savannah. Indigenous churches must look different from culture to culture. Furthermore, they look different from generation to generation. Faithful indigenous churches develop their teaching from the unchanging biblical text and the ever-changing cultural milieu. “An indigenous church, young or old, in the East or in the West, is a church which, rooted in obedience to Christ, spontaneously uses forms of thought and modes of action natural and familiar in its own environment. Such a church arises in response to Christ’s own call. The younger churches will not be unmindful of the experiences and teachings which the older churches have recorded in their

³⁴Judson Boyce Allen, “Westward Expansions, Southern Baptist,” in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (Nashville: Broadman, 1958), 1492.

confessions and liturgy. But every younger church will seek further to bear witness to the same Gospel with new tongues.”³⁵

In recent years the terminology of “indigenization” has shifted to that of “contextualization.” The conceptual shift is this: the definition of *indigenous* is “born within the culture.” Apart from Jewish culture, the Christian faith manifestly is *not* born within a culture and thus not indigenous. The faith cannot become genuinely indigenous to a culture from which it is not born. It can, however, move into sync with whatever cultural norms do not actively oppose the values of the gospel. This becoming a part of the culture—blooming where it is planted—is a process called “contextualization.” Modern missiologists, then, espouse the contextualization of the gospel within every culture on Earth.

Obstacles to Missiological Thinking

Southern Baptists are left with the unfinished task of sending the gospel to every people and culture, and of contextualizing the gospel in that place. This is a task for which we are often unprepared. Evangelicals continue to struggle with presenting the unchanging gospel in an ever-changing cultural setting. Thus, contextualization often feels to them like cultural compromise. In a Southern Baptist culture still recovering from a battle over truth and liberty, diverse expressions of church seem to lose biblical truth in an expression of methodological liberty. It just does not feel right.

Every culture is imperfect and thus at times hostile to the gospel. However, cultures remain the contexts wherein Jesus Christ meets persons by grace.³⁶ We must pay attention to the culture if we are to be truly missional.³⁷ Just as we exegete the biblical text, we must exegete the culture where we seek to proclaim that text. Van Gelder explains it this way:

We need to exegete . . . culture in the same way that missionaries have been so good at doing with diverse tribal cultures of previously unreached people. We need to exegete . . . the themes of the Rolling Stones . . . , Dennis Rodman, Madonna, [and] David Letterman. . . . We need to comprehend that the Spirit of the living God is at work in these cultural expressions, preparing the hearts of men and women to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have to find, in good missionary fashion, those motifs and themes that connect with the truths of the gospel. We need to learn how to proclaim, “That which you worship as unknown, I now proclaim to you.” This is the missionary vision at its best.³⁸

Two parallel problems keep many believers from truly engaging the unchurched culture. Christians tend to love or despise the culture too much.³⁹ Put another way, Christians tend to love either techniques or traditions to the detriment of missiology.

³⁵International Missionary Council, “The Growing Church: The Madras Series,” Papers Based upon the Meeting of the International Missionary Council, at Tambaram, Madras, India, December 12–29, 1938. Vol. 2, (New York, International Missionary Council), 276. Cited in Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson, eds. *Missiology* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 311.

³⁶Donald R. Jacobs, “Contextualization in Mission,” in *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, ed. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 236.

³⁷Hunsberger, “The Newbegin Gauntlet,” 24.

³⁸Van Gelder, *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 14–15.

³⁹Mouw, “The Missionary Location of the North American Churches,” 5.

The gospel never fits properly within a culture.⁴⁰ As such, persons within the church will always find reasons to criticize or polemicize those who seek to contextualize the gospel. Thus, many sincere believers condemn new methods that innovative leaders use to become more indigenous in their culture. It is always easier for Christian leaders to adopt “church-culture” methods rather than “prevailing-culture” methods. Adopting church-culture methods requires less work, thought, and prayer than biblically and prayerfully discerning what is appropriate and what is not. To many, the things “we have always done” are appropriate and all innovations are inappropriate. Unfortunately, this approach has no biblical example or missional rationale. Instead, our challenge is to undertake the task of contextualization in this and every time and culture.

Lesslie Newbigin explains the difficulty:

Everyone with the experience of cross-cultural mission knows that there are always two opposite dangers, the Scylla and Charybdis, between which one must steer. On the one side there is the danger that one finds no point of contact for the message as the missionary preaches it, to the people of the local culture the message appears irrelevant and meaningless. On the other side is the danger that the point of contact determines entirely the way that the message is received, and the result is syncretism. Every missionary path has to find the way between these two dangers: irrelevance and syncretism. And if one is more afraid of one danger than the other, one will certainly fall into the opposite.⁴¹

There have always been those who viscerally opposed any contextualization of culture. This is to be expected. When one sees the religious symbols and traditions of the honored past recast in a manner that on the surface seems disrespectful, it is normal for one to respond negatively.

Even cross-cultural missionaries struggle with the task of contextualization. At their best, most cross-cultural evangelists are not noted for their contextual successes.⁴² Thus, it is no wonder that North Americans, with a genuine love for missions and the lost, find it difficult to contextualize in a changing culture. Many are unable to see that high scriptural content and high cultural engagement are not exclusive categories.

The gospel does not take place in a cultural vacuum, but it is always incarnated in a specific cultural context.⁴³ However, many conservative evangelicals have been unable to distinguish between culturally relevant, biblically focused churches, and those who are influenced more by their culture than Christ. Thus, for many conservative evangelicals any movement toward the culture must be deemed inappropriate.

Robert Don Hughes at Clear Creek Bible College explains that churches tend to polarize around two axes of the cultural scale: that is, there are “biblically faithful” churches and “culturally relevant” churches. These two types of churches have preached against each other for years. But are cultural relevance and biblical faith really opposites? Do they have to be mutually exclusive concepts? Or is there a relationship

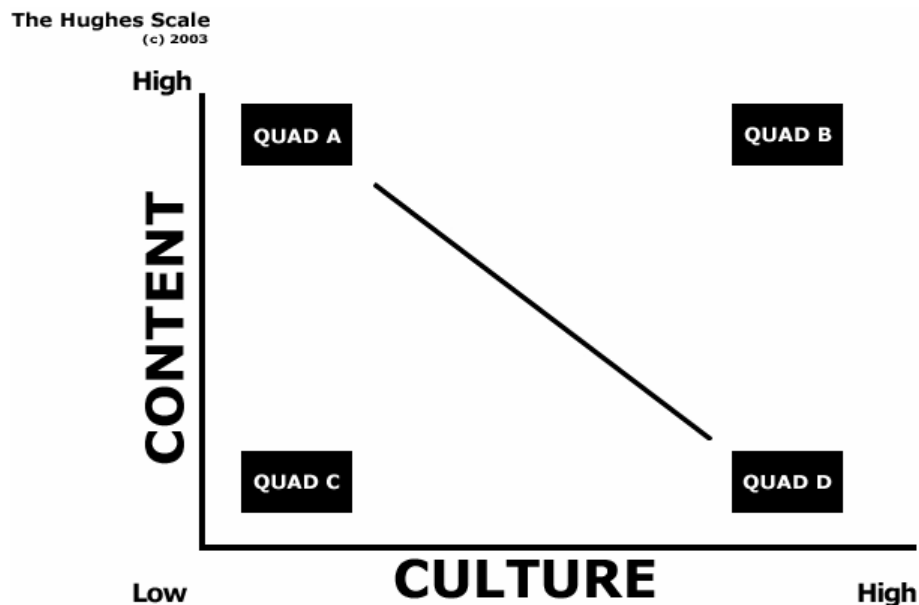
⁴⁰Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 71.

⁴¹Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 67.

⁴²Jacobs, 240.

⁴³Van Engen, 164.

between the two that is misinterpreted or misconstrued? To answer these questions, it is necessary to think in two dimensions, rather than one, and draw a bipolar scale.



It is easy to recognize the Quadrant C church. It sits on the corner of many downtown streets, looking largely abandoned because it has abandoned both the faith delivered to the saints *and* the directive to be in the world while not of the world. It is, simply, a dead church that has no cultural connection or biblical fidelity.

The Quadrant A church considers itself to be faithful to the orthodox understanding of the Scripture. It teaches and preaches the Word and seeks to reach out to its community, though it is culturally disconnected from that community because of strategies, dress, worship style, and countless other factors. In all likelihood, it was once a Quadrant B church—perhaps when it was first established. However, as the culture around it changed, it chose to remain as it once was—indigenous to the culture that existed fifty, two hundred, or five hundred years ago.

The missional church is the Quadrant B church. The true New Testament church recognizes that we are never permitted to stop thinking missiologically, and these churches make that their mission.⁴⁴ These churches tend to look different from like-minded churches, though they might be of the same denomination and hold the same doctrinal standards.

Quadrant D churches often demonstrate a lot of activity, but are rightly condemned as liberal, for they have compromised the faith. They have loved this present world and have been co-opted by the culture into being nothing more than a carrier of cultural religion.

The conservative evangelical church, and perhaps the average Southern Baptist church, (frequently in quadrant A) is often unable to distinguish between the Quadrant B (missional church) and Quadrant D churches (the trendy/faddish church). Often, they have both left some of the same traditions, and both have done so to be more contextual to their communities. But, *the missional church does not abandon scriptural commands, only cultural barriers*. Yet, because they look similar, the church that considers itself

⁴⁴Shenk, *Write the Vision*, 47.

committed to biblical authority and opposed to cultural compromise (represented in quadrant A), is often unable to accept and understand a biblically faithful, culturally relevant, missional church.

Thinking in only one dimension and regarding any participation in the culture as obvious compromise, the Quadrant A church can only conclude that the missional church is active in the culture and thus suspect. Such churches are unable to see that contextualization is not necessarily the slippery slope to compromise (though, to be fair, it often has been).

The False Hopes of Tradition and Technique

The Reformation provided the concept of the church where right things happen—correct preaching, correct administration of the sacraments, etc. A “correct” church understood and administered these things correctly. Contemporary methodologies provide the concept of the church as a vendor of religious goods and services. The church with the correct management structure to deliver said goods is judged to be most successful.⁴⁵ However, both of these methodologies ultimately are unsatisfactory as one appeals to tradition and the other to technique.

Tradition

The church that applies the traditional approach seeks correct orthodoxy through biblical commitment and orthopraxy. For most people, a vision for the future tends to involve a re-visioning of a more effective past experience. The difficulty seems obvious, but often it is not. To *which* preferred past do we return? Do we return to the Reformation and use it as the touchstone of revival? Some seem to think so. Why? Would not the early church be a better option?

The unmet challenge is to separate ourselves from our “cultural wrappings.”⁴⁶ For many in the evangelical church, Christians retreat to a preferred traditional past to find a sense of spiritual nostalgia. Yet the church must never feel at home in any culture,⁴⁷ whether it existed fifty, five hundred, or two thousand years ago. Thus, looking to restored tradition as the key to biblical fidelity fails to satisfy.

Technique

The church that applies the approach of technique seeks the correct public image, strategy, or methodology on the assumption that people are part of the “market share,” and an effective consumer approach is the equivalent of success. While this may appear practical, it is just as unbiblical as the traditionalist approach.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of the inadequacy of our current church growth approach is its lack of theological depth.⁴⁸ Malphurs explains that one of the “accurate criticisms of [the church growth]

⁴⁵George R. Hunsberger, “Sizing Up the Shape of the Church,” in *The Church Between Gospel & Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 338.

⁴⁶Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997), 55.

⁴⁷Shenk, *Write the Vision*, 47.

⁴⁸Hunsberger, “The Newbegin Gauntlet,” 5.

movement” is its overemphasis on the practical.⁴⁹ “The continued drift toward the development of large, independent community churches, with their focus on user-friendly, needs-oriented, market-driven models described by George Barna in *User Friendly Churches*, is in need of careful critique. While celebrating their contextual relevance, we need to be careful that we are committed in using these approaches to maintaining the integrity of both the gospel and the Christian community. These churches may just be the last version of the Christian success story within the collapsing paradigm of modernity and Christian-shaped culture.”⁵⁰

Denominations and churches are attracted to such methodologies. These techniques have proven to produce results, so they are often seen as the solution. Thus, denominations and churches flounder under the influence of “false myths” related to church growth and are unable to think missiologically in their setting.⁵¹

Overemphasis on technique can undermine solid missiological thinking. There is a great lack of theological depth in much of the contemporary church planting and church growth movement because these are movements of technique, paradigms, and methodologies without genuine biblical and missiological convictions. If we have no missional strategy driven by solid theological and ecclesiological principles, we simply perpetuate culture-driven models of church and mission.⁵²

Though not initially evident, technique may be the more dangerous of the extremes. The church bound by tradition often recognizes its problem. The tradition-bound church may even bemoan its condition. However, it is often powerless to change it. On the other hand, the church absorbed in technique is convinced that it is missional—that its techniques are actually expressions of mission, while they are in reality methods that *replace* missional thinking.

Overcoming these obstacles to missional thinking—such as tradition and technique—requires a teachability that is often absent among believers who are mired in cultural expressions of Christianity. The ability to develop missional thinking requires us to have our own cultural presuppositions challenged, regardless of the era from which they are derived. The missional church rejects the hubris of both tradition and technique, repositioning itself as a body of people sent on mission. Shenk explains, “Christians living in modern culture face a fundamental challenge. That challenge is to learn to think about their culture in missional terms”⁵³ and not become tied to technique in the process.

What is remarkable is how little of the changed international missionary methodology has permeated the approaches of North American churches. The principles of the three-self movement and contextual ministry are not unique to “primitive” missions areas. They are applicable worldwide. Why, then, have these same principles of indigenous and contextual ministry not been largely applied in North America? Instead, evangelicals have generally forbidden North American churches from doing the very thing we require international churches to do.

⁴⁹Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 27.

⁵⁰Craig Van Gelder, “Defining the Center—Finding the Boundaries,” in *The Church Between Gospel & Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 45.

⁵¹Hunsberger, “The Newbegin Gauntlet,” 5.

⁵²Paul McKaughan, Dellana O’Brien, and William O’Brien, *Choosing a Future for U.S. Missions* (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, 1998), 22.

North America as a Mission Field

Mouw explains that we are in a missionary “location”—that North America needs to be considered a mission field in the same way we once considered the underdeveloped world.⁵⁴ “Today North America needs to be treated as a mission field in the same way that we in the West have approached much of the rest of the world for the past several centuries.”⁵⁵

“Christendom” has come to an end. No longer is Christianity the “chaplain” to the broader culture. Christianity was universally assumed (although clearly not embraced) as the North American religion. It was once perceived as part of our national ethos. No longer can that claim be made. This “humiliation” of Christendom has been underway for two centuries.⁵⁶ It is no longer appropriate (if it ever was) to speak of “Christian America.”⁵⁷

The death of Christendom is not all bad news: “Our Lord’s metaphors for his community of witness were all of them modest ones: a little salt, a little yeast, a little light. Christendom tried to be great, large, and magnificent. It thought itself the object of God’s expansive grace; it forgot the meaning of its election to worldly responsibility.”⁵⁸

An increasing number of Christian leaders are beginning to understand that *the church must not rework its programs, it must rediscover its mission*—in short, it must become *missional*. The churches must embrace the missional nature of the church, recognizing that our culture has changed and continues to change. Thus, our biblical call must be to engage the culture where it is, not where we wish it might be.

The Reformation was rooted in the concept that the church would continuously reform (*ecclesia semper reformada*). It would never arrive. Such remains true today. As the culture changes, the church must change its approaches to meet the culture where it is. How can we then create churches that are faithful to biblical teaching and also indigenous? In other words, where can we find solid missiological strategies and promote missional churches?

There are dangers inherent in any movement toward missional thinking and contextualization.

Contextualization [is] a delicate enterprise if ever there was one . . . the evangelist and mission strategist stand on a razor’s edge, aware that to fall off on either side has terrible consequences. . . . Fall to the right and you end in obscurantism, so attached to your conventional ways of practicing and teaching the faith that you veil its truth and power from those who are trying to see it through very different eyes. Slip to the left and you tumble into

⁵³Shenk, *Write the Vision*, 43.

⁵⁴Richard J. Mouw, “The Missionary Location of the North American Churches,” 4.

⁵⁵Van Gelder, *Confident Witness—Changing World*, 1.

⁵⁶Douglas John Hall, “Metamorphosis: From Christendom to Diaspora,” in *Confident Witness—Changing World*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 69.

⁵⁷Wayne C. Stumme, “Interaction of Global and Local: A New Look at Mission Responsibility and Planning for Churches in the U.S.A. and Canada,” in *Mission at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, ed. Paul Varo Martinson (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 1999), 185.

⁵⁸Hall, *The End of Christendom*, 66.

syncretism, so vulnerable to the impact of paganism in its multiplicity of forms that you compromise the uniqueness of Christ and concoct “another gospel which is not a gospel.”⁵⁹

There is always risk in contextualization, and many churches are unwilling to take that risk. They choose not to risk the condemnation of those who are comfortable within the crumbling walls of Christendom. They cannot understand because they choose to equate contextualization and missional thought with compromise. They cannot understand because they love their “church” culture too much. They cannot understand because they are valuing the past more than people of the present age.

We see this emphasis in Southern Baptist life. Many voices call for a “return” to something to answer the problem of denominational decline. Voices call (and preach) that a return to certain cultural expressions of ministry, preaching, and evangelism will cause the church to reclaim its effectiveness. Some of these emphases are needed and helpful. Some are reactions to culture by reemphasizing the success and models of the past.

Misinformed and fearful persons will always resist what they do not understand or what does not blend with their preferences. However, if the church is willing to be missional and its theologians and thinkers are willing to assist it in being such, the kingdom will advance to new tongues, tribes, contexts, and cultures. As the church rediscovers its missional nature, it can receive a renewed passion to be a people on mission—taking the contextualized gospel into cultures and to people untouched by existing churches. Solid missional and theologically sound churches can be planted, revitalized, or grown.

These missional churches will engage the culture while remaining true to the “faith once delivered to the saints.” The result may look different to us, but not to God. From his perspective, the Word has become flesh in a new setting. These new churches express that missional mind-set—no less than if they were new indigenous churches in Africa or Asia.

If Southern Baptists are to be, once again, the vibrant body that they have been in the past, they need not return to the *methods* of the past. God has blessed three-week revivals, radio preaching, Sunday school enrollment campaigns, and bus ministry. God used these indigenous and contextual methods in their time. Yet our task is not to pine for methods. Instead, we must return not to the *methods* but to the *motives* of those times—reaching the lost with the best practices of the day.

Southern Baptists have always been deeply committed to reaching their communities. Such commitment requires a missional embrace of culture and, as such, churches that will proclaim the unchanging gospel in places and among peoples that will require new expressions, strategies, and systems.

This will be difficult to do over the noise of those opposing biblically faithful *and* culturally relevant ministry. However, our task is not to listen to those who love church culture more than they love Christ’s commands. Christ will build his church through pastors and churches that will engage the culture in a biblically discerning manner. The only real question will be if the Southern Baptist Convention and its entities will be seen as partners in the process of raising up new indigenous expressions of Southern Baptist Convention churches. If we can embrace diverse forms of scripturally sound church and ministry, we can again see the kingdom impact that I believe God wishes to renew in us again.

⁵⁹Dean S. Gilliland, ed., *The Word Among Us* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989),

