

Response

by

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I like Bryan Stone’s call to the church to be an agent for radical change. That was a theme I thought about a lot during our decade in Italy where “church” and “entrenched power” have been synonymous for centuries. It was a theme I considered in Haiti while witnessing the overthrow of the despotic Duvalier regime and its awful aftermath.

So, while I like what Bryan said, some questions did bubble up as I read his paper.

1. Does the paper need a stronger sense of the “ends of the earth” burden from Psalm 22 — that “all the families of the nations” should bow down before the Lord? Does it give the misimpression that we’re in good shape quantity-wise, and all we need to work on is quality?
2. In “being” the church, how much accountability / stewardship should we accept to carry out the Abrahamic mandate/covenant to “bless all peoples”? Or, can we, as some assert, simply “leave the results to God”?
3. Does “strategy” have to be a four-letter word?
4. Isn’t a key element of “kerygma” the reconciliation God offers to all? If we do not keep humanity’s need for reconciliation with God central, won’t we easily fall prey to believing that our mere presence is evangelism enough?

As I read Bryan’s article, I wondered if he saw “missional” as primarily meaning living out our faith more adequately in the places where the church already is. True, he does say that “evangelism is the heart of missions.” But his statement, “The most missional thing the church can do is to be the church,” echoes a Jonah-like “let-them-come-to-us” attitude.

The hero of the “Field of Dreams” responds to the voice whispering, “If you build it, they will come,” by building a major-league size baseball stadium in an Iowa cornfield. In the final scene of the movie, a long line of headlights is seen winding up the road to the well-lit field.

I agree that the church must be the church. But I also remember a bit of church history: Luther and other Reformers thought that believers simply living out their faith where they lived could fulfill the missionary mandate of Matthew 28. As a result, there was no Protestant evangelistic push beyond Western Europe and North America until 1800. Even today, we’re at least 7 million churches away from having a Christian congregation within access of every person on earth. If we don’t keep “go” at the core of “missional,” we will not fulfill our priestly mission of seeking to bring all of sinful humanity into God’s presence (Exodus 19:6). I am commending the model of the Antioch church, which sent out Paul and Barnabas; or that of Paul, when he urged the Roman church to become a

supporting partner in his planned missionary trip to Spain.

What startled me most in Bryan's paper was the comment that "the church does not need a 'mission strategy.'" Isn't "strategy" a way of saying *doing things purposefully*? Doesn't the word "missional" itself imply purposeful action? Wasn't the Apostle Paul intentional in his ministry? Isn't strategy what we do when we say, "Where will I search for the lost sheep? How can I make my search the most productive for the Kingdom?"

Some people dismiss "strategy" as a convenient excuse for their reluctance to move out of their comfort zones. This is not the case with Bryan. So, I'm puzzled as to why being intentional (as, for instance, Wesley certainly was) is to be avoided. To toss out strategizing may land us in an ethnocentric trap, in which we believe that the way we do things in our backyard can be replicated without change in every other corner of the world. To fall into that trap would be to become the "judaizers" of the 21st century.

Hudson Taylor got some people to re-think their *modus operandus* ("strategy") for evangelizing China. As a result, the church made a momentous leap into the interior of China. Adoniram Judson's strategy in Burma succeeded in planting the church there. And on and on we could go.

God is a seeking God, who has sought us out. He asks us to go and seek for others. We seek them, not only to be compassionate and bring justice (as important as these are). Our seeking is ultimately to point human beings to the cross and the reconciliation God offers.

If we deal only with the symptoms of lost humanity, rather than with the disease that causes those symptoms, we may find ourselves mirroring those who said to William Carey, "Young man, sit down. When God chooses to save the heathen, He'll do so without your help or mine."

Carey didn't listen. He organized a mission board and went off to India where he planted the church and, among other things, was instrumental in outlawing the practice of burning widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands. I'm glad Carey did not agree with his English church leaders that the church didn't need a mission strategy.

Though they read Jonah's story every year, many Jews never got it. They never saw it as a missionary call to "go" purposefully. We too may miss Jonah's call to get our hearts in tune with God's heart. We must not turn that little story into just another a lesson on obedience — "Obey God, or you'll end up as whale vomit."

I've probably misread and overreacted to Bryan's paper at points. Perhaps, I've even displayed too strongly the agenda I carry as a result of my call to cross-cultural missions. So, forgive me, Bryan, where I've misunderstood or misrepresented what you said.