

Why do mission “to the ends of the earth?” Charity begins at home, doesn’t it?

Every mission committee has heard this from someone in the congregation. It usually comes from those who are not “mission enthusiasts.” It becomes particularly infuriating when some of these folks even end up on mission committees. Then you feel like the “wolf is in the hen house!”

There are several questions or assumptions which might be behind these protests at giving money to mission.

1) How can we give money to mission when we can’t even pay our bills?

This is particularly common when the economy is struggling and local sessions are feeling the budget pinch. The “easiest” place to cut the budget is mission because we don’t “have” to do that, but we must pay the pastor and the utility bills. Mission is seen by some folks as “optional.”

On a more fundamental basis we are dealing here with a difference in understanding about the church. (See the essays on “What is mission?” and “What is a missional church?”) The church does not exist simply to take care of its members. It is a fellowship of believers called by God to be sent into the world.

Mission is not something that we do if there is money or time left over. It is at the heart of the definition of a church. We probably should say, “After we worship and do mission, if we have any money left over we will call a pastor!”

Furthermore, the church engaged in mission will be transformed through the doing of mission. The church that builds a wall around itself to keep out the world will collapse on itself.

2) Isn’t it arrogant to try to convince other people to convert to Christianity?

There are many people in the American church (not often is this a problem in the non-western world) who recoil at the idea of “forcing religion down someone else’s throat.” Of course, that description of Christian mission is a caricature because we would be hard pressed to find examples of mission that are carried out at the point of the sword.

However, it is important to be sensitive to the criticism because there are other ways to manipulate people into embracing our commitment to Jesus Christ. (See the essay “Don’t we impose our culture on others by doing missionary work?”) Our money and political power gives us a lot of leverage and we have to face up to that. But if we leave this second question there we would never be able to live out our missionary vocation as Christ commands.

When we really dig deeply to get under the assumptions behind this second reason for resisting mission work, we ultimately find that no one lives an entirely “libertarian” life. That is, everyone has certain fundamental convictions on which they will not compromise, and rightly so! These are the foundational matters for which we contend in our culture.

Christians have a distinct worldview that can be identified through the last two thousand years of history. Obviously there are a lot of variations on the tradition as evidenced in the number of Christian denominations that exist. Some are rightfully considered “orthodox” (consistent with the tradition) and some are not. (Mormons, Christian Scientists, the Klu Klux Klan and others would clearly be in this latter category.)

Christianity has historically been a missionary religion. It has a point of view (Jesus is Lord) which, by its very statement challenges all other points of view (Caesar is not Lord...money is not Lord...power is not Lord). To say that Jesus is Lord is to take an exclusivist position. It does not allow for other lords. Christians have for two thousand years taken this position.

It might be helpful to ask (gently) the question of someone struggling with this, “When was your tribe converted?” Unless you are an Aramaic-speaking Christian in the mountains of Syria (and there are precious few left), then you are a Christian today because of some cross-cultural missionary somewhere who brought the Gospel to your tribe. There are still thousands of tribes, cultural groups, and peoples who have not heard the Gospel in their language. Engaging in that work would seem to not only be appropriate but required of Christians (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).

This work of mission must be done with cultural sensitivity and respect for the beliefs of others, but it would be far more arrogant to neglect it than to do it, for it would mean that we are saying that the Triune God is a god of our tribe but not yours.

3) Shouldn't we be more concerned about mission locally?

Jesus spoke to this in his final instructions to the disciples recorded in Acts 1:8, “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Being witnesses to Jesus is not optional and it will happen moving out from Jerusalem (home).

“John and Sylvia Ronsvale discovered that giving for benevolent causes (anything beyond the inner life of the congregation) decreased by more than one third between 1969 and 1993.” (Engel and Dryness, 19) We are spending more and more money on ourselves and less and less on mission.

Russell Shubin (“Where Your Treasure Is...”) reminds us that the typical American church distributes its financial resources as following:

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| Home Pastoral Ministry | 82.6 % |
| Home Missions | 12.0 % |
| Mono-cultural (within our culture) | 9.0 % |
| Cross-cultural (to other cultures) | 3.0 % |
| Foreign Missions | 5.4 % |
| Pastoral (supporting established churches) | 5.2 % |
| Evangelistic (into established churches) | 0.18 % |
| Unreached (to cultures without a church) | 0.02 % |

(These numbers are high for the Presbyterian Church (USA). In 2002, using the categories above, the average Presbyterian Church spent 88% on “Home Pastoral Ministry;” 10% on “Home Missions;” and 2% on “Foreign Missions.”)

That last group (unreached), which gets approximately two cents out of every ten dollars put into the offering plate on Sunday morning, consists of thousands of cultural groups around the world who have never heard the Gospel in their language and in a way that they can understand it. They have no church where worship is conducted in their language with hymns sung in a way that will touch their hearts. We give a pittance to address their spiritual and physical needs in the name of Christ.

Shubin points out that the research by the Ronsvales also shows that in 1968, on average, individual American Christians gave 3.1 % of their income to the church, but by 1998 they gave only 2.52 %. But for most folks their income is rising faster than inflation.

American Christians give a lot of money and time for mission...more than any other part of the world Christian community. But, we also give very little in comparison to what we have. And most of what we give is spent on ourselves to pay for church buildings, staff, and programs for our families.

The issues explored above will be challenges for any church. We should not be surprised at the resistance to spending more on mission and we cannot be discouraged. These are opportunities for deeper discipleship. Everyone is at a different place in their journey and mission committees have an opportunity to dealt with these pastorally.