

Missions Analysis

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My intention for writing this missions analysis is to open the eyes of Christians in America to see the Church with a biblical perspective. The comforts of America have long put the Church in a deep slumber, but the time is now for the body of Christ to be awoken to its calling. What is our calling? Jesus said it very clearly in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel; "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 24:18-20 NLT). To be followers of Christ, really means to follow Him and obey what He says, especially when it comes to the last commands before the Son of God ascended into heaven.

Believe it or not, being a Christian isn't defined by attending a church service once a week. But the majority of Christians in America when asked if they are a Christian will say something like, "Yes! I go to church every Sunday." Can you imagine the answer the Apostle Paul or James or Peter would give? Would it resemble anything close to us Americans? Of course not. There is so much more to life for the Christian and we must only look at the Scriptures and the promises presented. Ultimately the Christian life is to be marked by being led by the Holy Spirit, to carry out God's mission each day by advancing God's kingdom with love and truth.

I have had the honor to come across one of these mission-oriented Christians this past year, who has given me great insight into the life of a missionary. His name is Joseph Saleeby and we first met in February, 2023 when he came to our community to train and equip us on evangelism. Our friendship developed from that two-day seminar with further conversations about how to effectively share the gospel with the lost. When the assignment for interviewing a missionary came about, I had an easy choice.

Joseph, his wife and three daughters currently live in upstate South Carolina which is about four hours from my home, so we decided to conduct the interview through zoom. On March 23, we began the video chat and beforehand I sent Joseph ten questions that I intended to ask in the interview.

Joseph and his family moved to Guatemala in August 2017, obeying the call of God and sent by Him through their home church in North Carolina, Faith Baptist Church. They are passionate about making disciples and training others to do the same, seeking no place left where the gospel has not been heard in Guatemala. There are 22 departments of Guatemala, so his ministry is named “Guate22” because of their desire to reach all the tribes, tongues, and languages of the country. Because of some health issues that have hit the family, they are currently living back in the States, but by God’s will they desire to be at home in Guatemala soon.

My first question to Joseph was to define a missionary which he responded with, “One who is sent out to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God and the Gospel in places where Jesus is not being worshipped.” He then went on to say that Jesus is our first and best example of a missionary, so by closely examining the life of Jesus we can better understand how to follow Him.

Joseph then described the series of events that led him and his family to be on the mission field full time. While he and his wife were serving faithfully at their local church in North Carolina and raising three daughters, Joseph left the country for the first time to visit West Africa. There he spent time with his parents who were serving with the IMD as missionaries. His realization was that the same gospel that America needed was the same needed in Africa. The darkness, spiritual depravity, idol worship, witchcraft and demonization among the people were rampant. While preaching the gospel in Niger, the animals and kids would go crazy to disrupt the

truth being proclaimed. Imam's would start yelling and run them out of the neighborhood.

Instead of fear, his experience sparked an interest to explore other parts of the world to see if the same gospel would heed similar results.

Joseph then traveled to Costa Rica for a short terms mission trip with his church, then to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. While working a regular job back in North Carolina as an industrial paint salesman, he kept traveling back and forth between Guatemala for weeks at a time. Over the years, he and his wife would abide in the Lord just asking Him what was His plan and desire for their family. Joseph felt strongly to move to Guatemala and live amongst the people but for a while his wife didn't have that same peace. During this season of waiting for the Lord to work on his wife's heart, he approached God with the simple prayer of what to do in the meantime. It was clear that he needed to continue to seek the Kingdom of God with the 122 homes in his rural area. He intentionally started to invite people who didn't know Jesus over for cookouts to build relationships. During this process, the Lord made it obvious to his entire family the importance of being all about God's kingdom instead of building and preserving their own kingdom on earth.

Joseph continued to trust that God, in His perfect timing, would bring his wife into alignment with the fire in his heart for the Guatemalans. After abundant prayer, abiding in His Word, and obedience, that day came when his wife was ready to follow God's calling on Joseph's life to move to Guatemala. Their family have been serving there for six years now and those ten years in NC were the necessary training ground to be effective as a family on God's mission in new territory.

Joseph gives all the glory to God for this season of being a missionary family in Guatemala, but he does give credit to his amazing parents who were inspiring to him. After he turned 24, his parents moved to West Africa for 15 years as full-time missionaries. Watching

them lay aside the comforts of America and their willingness to let Jesus lead them across the ocean to a new culture had a major impact on him.

Joseph also talked about how his thinking of being a missionary changed over the years. Initially, the physical needs of the people in other countries can seem like the most important problem to address. Many missionaries define themselves as someone who is sent to provide medical, food, water and other provisions with the gospel message becoming secondary. It started to become very clear to Joseph that the core task of a missionary is to reach the unreached people who aren't worshipping Jesus. It was God's mission to go to them and proclaim the good news of the gospel. Joseph continued by saying, "Many missionaries join these organizations with great intentions, but when they get boots on the ground they easily get swallowed up by the culture and language learning and trying to minister good things that people really need. But the one thing that will last for eternity, that will not spoil or fade away, is the gospel."

One of the facts that Joseph struggled with was that people would send all kinds of money and support when the promotion was focused on the provisional needs of the people. But when you simply say that you want to reach the unreached people with the gospel and see small discovery bible groups develop and disciples who make disciples, people don't want to get behind that vision as much. Another issue that missionaries like himself faced was the pressure to produce results. People want to know and see that their money is making a difference. However, Joseph began to realize the truth that God is the one who produces results and "apart from Him, I can do nothing" (John 15:5). A major piece of wisdom Joseph would give his younger self as a missionary would be, "Don't get caught up in the numbers and the reporting. Just stay focused on the great commission and be about that business. Trust the Lord with the results. Work hard towards advancing the kingdom of God and no other kingdom. Keep it simple and stay focused on making disciples who make disciples, just like Jesus and the Apostle Paul."

Another struggle Joseph faced in Guatemala was when he would share the gospel, he would hear all kinds of perspectives on what the gospel is and most of it was, “Hey I prayed the sinner’s prayer so I’m good.” There was a majority catholic presence in Guatemala, so the evangelicals came in hot and heavy in years past setting up churches all over the country. Joseph was surprised to talk to these protestant pastors and learn that they didn’t even understand the gospel, let alone how to share it with an individual. He wrestled with the idea of having to formulate doctrine and have written statements because of all the confusion over the simplicity of the gospel. He took some time to pray and search the scriptures concluding that he needed to continue to preach the kingdom of God and not get caught up with trying to reform churches. He was to lead with the gospel to the unreached and any time doctrinal issues or questions arose, he would spend time with that person by opening the Word and having a conversation. The main conviction that Joseph has in his heart, is that the Spirit of God and the Word of God are the authority and not the church leaders. In his conversations he would point to the scriptures talking about the priesthood of the believer and to help the lay people understand their role as royal priests in the kingdom of God.

The great commission of Jesus is a great place to define missions but to get a deeper understanding of the heart of God its best to look at all of Scripture. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, God’s mission was to reconcile all people to himself. Sin was passed down from generation to generation which caused death and separation from God. When God first called Abraham to be his chosen instrument, He gave the first great commission to him, “Leave your native country... and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation... you will be a blessing to others... All the families on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3 NLT). God chose this man of faith to birth a people that would eventually make way for the Messiah to come. Before Jesus would be made man, the chosen people of God were to be an

example to the surrounding nations of God's goodness and justice. In Isaiah 42:1-7 and 49:1-7 we see further support of Israel being called to, "reveal God's justice to the nations (Isaiah 42:1) and to serve as a light to the Gentiles (42:6 and 49:6) so that this salvation offered to Israel might reach to the ends of the earth" (The Great Commission in the Old Testament, 1996). The Israelites were called to be witnesses to all the peoples of the earth, just like Christians are called to that same standard by Jesus himself.

It's important to understand that God doesn't change but his desire is for all people to change their hearts from their wicked ways and turn to Him, "This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time" (1 Timothy 2:3-6 CSB). And how does God want people to be saved? Through his message of reconciliation that is now given to all believers in His Son Jesus Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf, 'Be reconciled to God.'" (2 Corinthians 5:17-20 CSB).

Believers need to understand and hold on to their new identity as Christ ambassadors otherwise they won't know what they are supposed to do. When we learn that our purpose as a new creation is to be a part of God's mission of restoring people to a right relationship with Him, it opens a new perspective of who Christians are supposed to be. They are not to warm seats in a

church building and live like the rest of the world. No. They are to carry the kingdom of God to the lost and allow the Holy Spirit to convict sinners with the message of the gospel.

The potential weakness in Joseph's approach to missions is that he seems to sway heavily on the side of presenting the gospel message and making disciples. Now, I would agree that he is correct in making that the focus but if we overlook the humanitarian and social efforts, that can create a hole in the gospel message. To complete the gospel presentation is to combine the message of reconciliation with serving the needs of the poor and oppressed. I didn't ask him about how his ministry addresses the physical needs of the Guatemalans but to carry out the full gospel is to care for those in need spiritually and physically. Jesus said, "Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn't do anything to help you?' Then he will answer, 'I assure you that when you haven't done it for one of the least of these, you haven't done it for me'" (Matthew 25:44-45). Or what about the other warning that Jesus gives to believers, "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?' Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers'" (Matthew 7:22-23 CSB). So even if you are doing all these miraculous things in Jesus' name but don't actually know Jesus, there is no guarantee for heaven. When we overlook the physical needs of our neighbor we are standing on dangerous ground. Caring for the sick and proclaiming the gospel fulfills the mission of the church.

The strengths are many in Joseph's approach to missions. He has seen first-hand the issues in how the American church predominately views missions and is determined to expose it and utilize a more effective approach by using simple church movement principles. The old view of missions was all about taking our model of what we do in the West and put it in another culture, expecting it to run, function and thrive. However, this creates a dependency that cannot

reproduce. The locals start to believe that to be an effective church you need enough money to have a large church building with worship bands and flashing lights. Accompanied by a great seminary doctorate preacher who leads the church. Joseph continued by saying, “We have projected the professionalism of the church on to the surrounding cultures and that’s wrong. Beset thing we can do is go back to the original church that we find in Acts 2:36-47. If we would go back to that and simply stick to presenting the gospel, seeing people repent and believe, baptizing them, acting on the gifts of the Spirit, relying on the guidance of the Spirit, teaching and reading of the Word faithfully, loving one another, giving to one another’s needs, praying for one another... I believe what we will see is the Lord doing mighty works and miracles.” By reaching back to our biblical roots, the local church would begin to meet the needs of the community around them and serve one another in love, without a dependency on outside help.

Joseph also talked about the comparison between church movement in other parts of the world compared to the U.S. and how we can change our approach to evangelism. Too long has the American church been too concerned about growing church attendance. So, evangelism efforts are all about inviting people to the church service so the preacher can share the gospel. Joseph concludes, “Reality is the church exists for the believer to have fellowship and to love, care, and encourage one another to do the good works the Lord has told us to do.” We need to stop celebrating how many people are sitting in our church services while not supporting the work that needs to be done outside the doors by the body of Christ, the people of God.

To get the America to drastically change their Old Testament paradigm of church will take a lot of time and effort. However, Joseph suggested that for the U.S. to see movement, “it would be best for the government to pull the plug on non-profit statuses for the churches and try to stamp out the church.” This sudden change would bring us back to Acts or the underground church we see in China. When the Chinese government persecuted the church and drove out all

the church pastors and professional leaders, multiplication of believers occurred. Why? Everyone relied on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit instead of the professional.

Joseph's hope in Guatemala is for the professionals to turn over the authority of the church to the laypeople and allow the five-fold ministry, the Holy Spirit and the Word of God to advance the kingdom of God through the priesthood of believers. Same thing for the U.S., unification in purpose for the bride of Christ so that we can all come together in knowledge and understanding of who Jesus is and why the church exists. Joseph said, "We need to stop putting great theologians and preachers up on a pedestal by paying them as professionals, thus creating a divide in the five-fold ministry. The equipping of the church is so that the members of the church would grow to the full measure of Christ, who is the standard. Professionals should not be the standard."

Listening to Joseph's passion and knowing that his words are backed up by doing the hard work in Guatemala is inspirational. He will continue to be a sounding board for me as I work closely with my pastor to begin a new church in South Carolina. I don't want to be a part of a traditional Western model for building a church and marketing it for people to come and fill seats. Applying church movement principles, listening to the Holy Spirit and always looking to Scriptures is the path forward. I want the real thing and I want to truly invest in relationships so that disciples are made to make disciples. I want to see multiplication like we see in China. Why wait for persecution to come? We can do this even with the freedom we currently have but it will mean to change our perspectives and to hold each other accountable. "Lord, make us willing to build your kingdom your way, in Jesus' name."

I have been applying what I've been learning from this class by having constructive discussions with my pastor and team. We are in the midst of praying and talking through what Jesus wants to do with our community in South Carolina. People are hungry for more than just

cold, dead religion and we want to join in on what God is already doing. By keeping it simple and always looking back to Scripture on how the early church grew is going to be key. I've always known that I wasn't going to be some traditional church pastor and this class has been confirmation on that feeling. I have been exposed to the Word of God in such a fresh and exhilarating way that brings excitement for the journey ahead. I know my biggest barrier will be caring what others think. I have to lay down the idol of approval of others and only care about where God is leading me. I'm sure feathers will be ruffled but I'm willing to be sent to do so if it's God's will.

Ultimately, we are all called to be missionaries no matter where we live. God has given us a mission as the body of Christ to bring all people to himself. What a privilege to be a part of God's divine plan for humanity. One of my goals is to awaken Christians around me to the revelation of who they are and what they are called to do. It is time for the church in America to die to their old ways and unify to advance God's kingdom. Let revival break out where faithful, obedient disciples are being made and equipped to make other disciples.

References:

1. Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. The Great Commission in the Old Testament, Vol 13:1 Jan-Mar, (1996)