

A Baptist understanding of sharing in God's mission

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Introduction

This morning I consider it a great honor to lead this time of reflection on A Baptist Understanding of Sharing in God's Mission. If something resonates with you, then I am thankful that we can learn together.

I am tempted to share about the historical and theological background of what is meant by the phrase Mission of God (*Missio Dei*). And perhaps point out that mission is not an act of any church, committee, organization or person. The source of mission is the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The reason and goal of mission: the Father sending the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is a strong allure to remind you about how it is not appropriate to say that a church has a mission, but more correct to say that God's Mission has a church – God's mission has your church. It is also tempting to remind you of Johanne Verkuyl's assessment that "There is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission." (Verkuyl, Johannes. 1978. *Contemporary missiology : an introduction*. 3) Or, as Baptist missiologist Samuel Escobar puts it, "the church exists for mission and ... a church that is only inwards looking is not truly the church." (Escobar, Samuel, 2003. *The New Global Mission*. 12)

But you know these things already, of course. This is not the secret knowledge of a special class of missionaries. After all, we are Baptists; which, according to the father of Continental Baptists, Johann Oncken's motto, means we are all missionaries.

I begin with the confession that God's mission did not begin with Baptists, is not dependent only upon Baptists, and is a greater task than Baptists can accomplish. My apologies if that comes as a surprise to you. It may come as a disturbing truth I am springing on you first thing in the morning. But I suspect that somewhere in the deep quiet place of your heart, each of you also knows that God's mission is, perhaps if only slightly, greater than we might imagine. Actually, I am confident that most of you know this already. God's mission is bigger than Baptists.

Here I want to insert a caveat. My thesis is: we Baptists should consider context as the primary variable as we share in the mission of God. When we speak of post-modern, post-denominational, or whatever other post-reality we want to entertain, context will define how much these new world views shape our identity and praxis. I live in Eastern Slovakia. For years now I have been reminded by our local friends that we live behind the times. As prophecies of the end of the world come and go, we are comforted in knowing that we can live blissfully in eastern Slovakia for years after the eschaton before the end finally catches up to us. Some of you live in the same already-not yet places though our geography may differ.

The realization that God's mission is bigger than Baptists has led some Baptists to engage with other churches in their area to work together upon common goals. In this way, many have found balance between maintaining our own identity as Baptists and life in a post-denominational world. In fact, engaging with other churches in a post-denominational

world, leads many to a deeper appreciation of their own identity as Baptists. I suppose there is also room for a bit of humble pride that the development trends of the Global Church are along a baptistic path.

So let us continue by examining Scripture and see what we can discover about healthy models of partnership and cooperation as we share in God's mission.

I draw your attention to 1 Samuel chapter 17 to the first part of chapter 18. Yes, I am aware that is in the Old Testament and that I am supposed to speak about mission. Let me suggest that in the familiar story of David's confrontation with Goliath continuing to the first part of the following chapter, we can distill a framework of healthy and unhealthy ways, of dependency and interdependency, in mission. Beyond the militaristic, triumphalism of the specific event, we still can see that the intended lesson from the confrontation between David and the Philistine was that "the whole world will know that there is a God on Israel's side." (17.46) This is a missional story.

Recognizing our Context

The first lesson I want us to consider as we look at Baptists involvement in God's mission is the importance of Context.

Look at how Saul's armor was placed on David. The armor did not fit; David was unable to walk; and David needed to discard the miss-fitting armor in order to complete his mission. We Baptists have sometimes been slow in recognizing and appreciating context when participating in God's mission. Instead, in our zeal to see the Gospel spread, we have often been guilty of putting Saul's armor on David because if it is good enough for Saul, then it should be good enough for David. A more contextual translation might be: if a method is good enough for Atlanta then it should be good enough for Tallinn. If a program is good enough for Bristol, then it should be good enough for Bucharest. David teaches us that this is simply not always the case. Trying to fit Saul's armor on David reminds us of the importance of contextualizing the message and methods of how we Baptists are involved in God's mission.

The concept of contextualization developed as a method for evangelism from within ecumenical Protestantism in the early 1970's; inculturation was a similar term utilized by the Roman Catholic Church soon after. The aim of contextualization is to ensure that the Good News of Jesus Christ is communicated in a way that can be understood within a given place among a given people. This process begins with language, but it is more than ensuring that Scripture is simply translated into a local language. The goal is to ensure that the Gospel becomes incarnate in the new language and culture. Contextualization seeks to ensure that the method and message fits. Sometimes in our past, we Baptists have forgotten that those from the local context are best suited to evaluate whether the Gospel is properly understood. This has resulted in some frustration in missions.

Let me offer two brief illustrations from my own experience in God's mission. My wife and I serve among the Romani peoples in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Several years ago, in cooperation with our colleague from the Netherlands and an ecumenical group of amateur voice-actors, we produced a children's video of the story of Ruth. We had the script translated and dubbed into Slovak, Czech, and the then-new officially recognized Roma dialect in Slovakia. We asked another missionary, Pierre, who also ministers among the Roma in eastern Slovakia if he could test the video out with his congregation and give us feedback.

Pierre showed the video to the church's youth and children and asked them to share what they learned. In Pierre's church, preaching and reading Scripture during worship is in Slovak. Songs are sung in Romanes as well as Slovak. But when the video was shown in the Roma language, the following discussion, including a re-enactment of the story by the children in order for them to demonstrate what they had learned, was for the first time done in Romanes. Pierre describes an excitement among the children as they discussed the message of acceptance and God's provision from the story. Slovak is good enough for the Baptist church we attend in Slovakia; but it did not fit as well as in the Romany church in the same country.

A group of Baptist Americans came to town several years ago to establish a mission among the Slovaks in the region. When the Americans arrived they were surprised to find that a Baptist church already existed. They were eager to engage their new-found Slovak co-laborers in a tried and true mission strategy from home: they had a religious survey they needed translated and volunteers of youth to go to the streets of town to ask complete strangers whether they knew Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. They knew this to be a method that was effective outreach tool back home. It took our friends from the United States several days before they reached out to us to ask us why the Slovaks continued to promise to translate the document but never completed it. Simply put, Saul's armor did not fit.

Contextualization is how we Baptists best engage in God's mission. Though tempting to claim that our way is always the best way, we Baptists appreciate that the best fit for how local missions are done is discovered locally. Of course there are similarities and things we can learn from each other, but discovering what fits best in our context is the goal.

Resources in Context

The second rule for us Baptists as we participate in God's mission is that we prioritize resources in context. Once David threw off the ill-fitting armor of Saul, he took up his own supplies, reached down for the five smooth stones, and went off to vanquish the Philistine. This is the part of the mission enterprise where the sending countries of, generally speaking, the West and North rejoice!

One model from the past saw Baptist missionaries come in, quickly and clumsily begin a ministry, and then spend the rest of their time on the mission field recruiting and training locals who could take over the ministry so the missionary could retire back in the West. We are slow learners. There are many examples of how God has, in spite of us, blessed this model of missions. There are just as many testimonies of frustration, hurt, and broken relationships from both the receiving country and the missionary who was sent.

I was at a conference recently with representatives from 31 countries who either were Roma or are involved in ministry among the Roma. The question before us was "What are some of the barriers to unity in our ministries?" One Roma Baptist brother from Hungary spoke up and asked, "When you," and he was talking about traditional West-to-the-rest missionaries, "when you come to our community and say you want to help us, but you only stay for a short time and then you leave, then how can we find unity?"

A west-to-the-rest missionary responded, "We are not here to help you. We want to teach you to help yourself" and he went on to say how the local can learn to fulfil the objectives of the missionary. While this answer was satisfactory to the missionary, it was evident that the paternalism inherent in the approach was offensive to objects of the mission.

Samuel Escobar writes about “managerial missiology” where short-term goals of evangelism and church growth turn Christian mission into “managed missions.” This is done at the expense of the seeing people as bearers of the image of God. The re-introduction of subtle colonialism abuses the concepts of community development and asset-based approaches when the objects of our mission involvement are turned into consumers or producers, numbers we can count, or raw resources we can develop and perhaps even exploit. When we do not see others as competent and co-equal, we diminish what God has created and pervert the Good News for our own ends.

When David goes equipped with his own supplies and draws from local sources to find everything he needs to complete his task, he models a healthy approach of how Baptists can participate in the mission of God. The shift from wealthy donor-missions from the west and north to self-sustainable models of missions and ministry in the east and south presents an opportunity for Baptists: first, we get to affirm that missions is not about building up our own Kingdoms here where moth and rust destroy; it is about telling people the Good News of Jesus and inviting them into a new way of life under the Reign of God; it is also an opportunity to consider how blessed so many of us are with comparatively obscene storehouses of resources while our sisters and brothers struggle with a lack of resources. We who are so blessed seek to be open to the call of God who is Lord over our whole life and being.

Relationship in Context

Now we follow David’s story into chapter 18. Immediately after David’s victory over the Philistine, the story shifts to the beginning of the formative relationship between David and Jonathan. From the Common English Bible:

“As soon as David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan’s life became bound up with David’s life, and Jonathan cared about David as much as he cared about himself. From that point forward, Saul kept David in his service and wouldn’t allow him to return to his father’s household. And Jonathan and David made a covenant together because Jonathan cared about David as much as he cared about himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his armor, as well as his sword, his bow, and his belt.” (1 Samuel 18.1-4)

Mission in post-denominational world begins with context, is tied up in the middle with context, and ends with context. David and Jonathan’s relationship is a model for how we Baptists should relate to one another and to others as we share together in God’s mission.

At the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, England the slogan was “The Evangelization of the World in this Generation!” The lone delegate from India shared,

“You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love, give us Friends” (Walls, Andrew F. 2002. *The cross-cultural process in Christian history : studies in the transmission and appropriation of faith.* 70)

The highest mission service we Baptists can be about is when we allow our lives to be bound up in the lives of the other. Call it love. Call it friendship. Call it the Baptist way of being church. Call it Beloved Community. This higher way is the way of doing mission. This is not managed missions. It is the messy, covenantal relationship of being bound up with one another as witness to the mission of God.

In *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch suggests the key to living in a postmodern, pluralistic, anything goes world, is community. We survive uncertainty - we find clarity - by building relationships. Bosch described the core of all community, the center of clarity in this way: ***“In the midst of all diversity, there is a center: Jesus Christ.*** (Bosch, David Jacobus. 1991. *Transforming mission : paradigm shifts in theology of mission.* 465) Bosch’s final words to define mission is that it is “the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.” (519) Today’s interconnected world is an opportunity for how we Baptists can create community.

Snapshots of how this vision of Contextual Mission may look

It is to the task of considering how we can create community that I want to now shift as I seek a way forward from the context of post-denominational Europe.

A few weeks ago, I flew into Prague so I could be present for the installation ceremony of a Roma friend as pastor at a new Czech Apostolic Church in Decin. I was staying in Prague and had time to get lost in those beautiful streets, so I went towards Vaclavske plaza. I went into Starbucks. (Please do not judge me too harshly. I am well aware that much, much better coffee can be found, but it is hard to beat their free wifi.) I sat with my cup of coffee in a back area where no one else was seated. Shortly afterwards, a young woman came and sat at a table near me and began to take out her laptop. I was busy reading a book, but noticed out of the corner of my eye how it appeared that she was preparing to do some work online. What I did not imagine was exactly what she would be doing.

Using Skype, she made a telephone call. The person on the other line apologized, but she had to go to the toilet before they could continue. I knew I was in for an interesting experience. The woman in the Starbucks just off Vaclavske plaza was teaching French online to her student. The student lived in London. I learned during the conversation that, not only did the student not study much, but that she was from a town in China where her father serves as Mayor. She enjoyed her freedom in London, though her parents have tight control over her finances and the apartment they rent for her. She does not think much of Chinese men; but is quite fond of how elegant the first lady of China is.

Like in Tallinn, many of us have seen the evidence of historic walled cities where clear boundaries separated those who were inside from those who were outside the city. But these walls are of greater interest to UNESCO than they are to modern communities. More and more, the teacher and her student in Prague are more representative of contemporary community. It is truly amazing how closely interconnected and at the same time ephemeral created communities can be. This reality has already impacted the church. Fifty years ago, missiologists suggested that the model for how churches engage in mission in the world as “The Church Inside Out” (by J.C. Hoekendijk). Though it would be tempting to say that fifty years later we have witnessed how the church has moved outside of their walls, we are too often reminded that like too many of these buildings are of more interest to UNESCO just as the walls of the cities are. And still the church survives.

The post-modern gathered community connects in coffee shops and pubs, in the streets, and under the stars. They do not even need a building! It has been suggested that, in our attempts to help local believers begin churches that the only thing needed to start a Roma church is a good sound system and mixing board. Post-modern churches may only need an open wifi signal to create community. Imagine the cost savings of planting churches in the future! The manner in which community is created – by gathering students from across the

EBF in a certificate program for a year in a residential setting may not be feasible any longer (CAT program) – but what about creation of online communities which provides a way to connect with no geographic center is possible.

It is the loss of a center which causes us the most distress. Diana Butler Bass in *Christianity After Religion*, suggests that the impact of the internet is “profoundly spiritual.” (242) She suggests that “faith was a matter of community first, practices second, and belief as a result of the first two.” (203) The forming of local, contextual communities of faith can today be aided, not hindered by the lack of a traditional meeting space. It is not the walls or the edifices of our buildings which draws people into community and eventually belief. It is the center of our faith, Jesus Christ, who binds us together into community – not primarily the tenets of our particular church tradition.

What would happen if in your local context, your church nurtures locally-formed small groups of multi-cultural, multi-denominational young people whose sole purpose is to love and live together in order to sense what God is doing? What if Baptists help create a new monastic order of sorts? Task them with helping discover how to evangelize your community or how to revitalize your worship. However it is accomplished, the way Baptists share in God’s mission today is to by seeking community with Jesus at the center.

I will end with one additional snapshot from our common context in Europe which presents an opportunity for Baptists to share in God’s mission: the crisis of migration. I am using migration instead of refugees or immigrants because the tragic story of what is happening today in the Middle East is not new or unique in history. That is not to diminish today’s tragedy in the least nor to suggest that the crisis does not demand we do everything in our power to alleviate the suffering of and demand justice for the innocent. My intent is to try to see what God may be trying to teach us all in and through this situation.

In Genesis 11, we see an attempt to establish a settled, monocultural enclave in spite of God’s “cultural mandate” in Genesis 1.28. Instead of continuing the mandate to fill the earth, this group settled down and were comfortable with their lack of diversity. No more trying new food, no need to encounter new people and new languages. No more diversity. Commenting on this passage, Brenda Salter McNeil writes in *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, “God’s response to the people’s refusal to migrate in Genesis 11 was to confuse their language and scatter them in order to bring about the divine will and original purpose for humanity, which is the fill the earth with the glory of God.” (Kindle location 244) God’s purpose for humanity is diversity. Different cultures each contributing a glimpse of an increasingly fuller understanding of God; until, as seen in Pentecost, the various cultures come together in manifold witness and praise of God. The various cultures and their languages were not subsumed. They continued in and through Pentecost precisely so that the image of God was revealed to be carried through the cultural particularities of each group represented at Pentecost. It is an intriguing suggestion.

Lamin Sanneh, missiologist from Gambia, emphasizes the impact of translation of Scripture on the mission of God. In his 2009 work “*Translating the message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*,” Sanneh describes the theological and cultural ramifications of when Scripture is translated into a new language. I see in Sanneh a suggestion that our understanding of the identity of God is enhanced as Scripture, the Gospel, is translated into different languages.

Moving directly and quickly to the point I want to make and weaving the current migration crisis, the insights on God’s desire for multiculturalism, and Sanneh’s description of the movement of God through translation and what this can mean for our context as EBF

Baptists: refusing to accept the other because of their cultural differences is to reject one way God has chosen to reveal Godself to all of us. It is when we learn to appreciate the image of God in the person of the refugee, the migrant, the Roma, the Russian-speaker, the Polish, the Bulgarian, the Norwegian, and Brexit or not, even the British, that we get a glimpse at the wholeness of who God is. Until then, our knowledge of God remains incomplete.

May God continue to reveal Godself to us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. And may we never assume that any culture is incapable of carrying and reflecting the image of God.