

How Big is Our Bible?
Confidence in the Bible for Missional Leadership

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I remember a scene from our family story during our early days of missionary service. As a young family in our first term, my wife and I were determined that we would involve our two-year old toddler in family Bible reading and prayer every night before bedtime. "Little Man" was my designated nickname for him, used most everywhere we went. Seeking to involve him in family worship one evening, I sent him with the commission, "Little Man, bring Daddy the Bible."

"The Bible" in question was one of the larger, family style, illustrated versions, prominently placed on the coffee table in the living room. Understandably, it was quite a load for a young child (Hey, it was heavy for me!). Struggling under the weight of it, yet determined to be involved, his declaration was, "Here comes the Little Man with the Big Bible!"

That incident, though 35 years past, has often been a personal reminder that God's Word must be big in me, with a heavy bearing on my discipleship and mission as a Christ-follower. John the Baptist's cry, "He [Jesus] must become greater; I must become less" (John 3.30 NIV), was a prior way of proclaiming what a two-year old MK realized, "I'm little and this heavy Bible is big!" This child-like confession is our template for humble and fruitful missional leadership.

Someone as highly effective and respected as the Apostle Paul was not interested in a personal public relations campaign or self-promotion but realized his source of leadership confidence. "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves," he openly confessed, "to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; Who has made us able ministers of the new testament...(2 Corinthians 3.5-6a KJV). Revivalist Vance Havner flatly declared, "Our efficiency without God's sufficiency is only a deficiency!" (Havner 1958, 106). Paul and Vance had big Bibles!

World Christians believe in God's global mission because we believe His Word. The Bible is our source, our textbook, our meaning--message--method book for world evangelization. Therefore, we resonate strongly with the strong affirmations of John Stott:

Without the Bible world evangelization would not only be impossible but actually inconceivable. It is the Bible that lays upon us the responsibility to evangelize the world, gives us a gospel to proclaim, tells us how to proclaim it and promises us that it is God's power for salvation to every believer. It is, moreover, an observable fact of history, both past and contemporary, that the degree of the Church's commitment to world evangelization is commensurate with the degree of its conviction about the authority of the Bible. *Whenever Christians lose their confidence in the Bible, they also lose their zeal for evangelism. Conversely, whenever they are convinced about the Bible, then they are determined about evangelism* [italics mine] (Stott 2009, 21).

One of the complimentary observations about Majority World Pentecostals (and Great Commission Evangelicals in general), is their *confidence in the Bible* and their *zeal for evangelism*. Noted missions linguist/anthropologist Eugene Nida once called Latin American Pentecostals, “The Church of the Dirty Bibles.” There, he observed, the Bible is used frequently in worship services, being read by the working poor with their soiled fingers as a reading guide (McClung 1996, 61).

Contrast this with “The State of the Bible 2013 Survey,” conducted by the Barna Group on behalf of the American Bible Society. The report, released in March 2013, found that more than three-fourths of Americans (77 percent) believe morals and values are declining in the United States, with a lack of Bible reading cited as the most cited cause. One of the troubling trends is that those in the ages 18 – 28 are the least likely age group to read the Bible (*Pentecostal Evangel News Report*. June 2, 2013, 25). What could this imply for the future of our missions theology?

Evangelicals in any region or country must not take it for granted that Biblical illiteracy and non-engagement with scripture would not be considered one of their deficiencies. At the turn of the 21st century, David Tai-Woong Lee warned the entire international missions community that, “Unless we come again to the Bible and define what mission is, in the new millennium we will increasingly widen the agenda for mission just as ecumenical missiology did. More conservative Evangelicals of the Two-Thirds World will not agree with this trend” (Lee 2000, 145).

The story of the Old Testament revival under Ezra and Nehemiah presents a working model for missions leaders as we seek to recover, restore, and maintain Biblical centrality in mission. From the context of Nehemiah 8 – 10 (NIV), here are seven practical guidelines emerging from the actions of those in spiritual leadership toward the Word of God. As you read them and consider their missional outcomes, imagine a discussion of these as action/renewal/restart steps with your colleagues and family during your next staff or board meeting, leadership retreat, missions committee conversation, and family worship gathering.

1. They *brought out* the Book – “They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel” (8.1). Think of the new awakening awaiting the Great Commission community as the *assemblies* (local churches, denominations, associations), the *agencies* (missions agencies and networks), the *academies* (missiologists, missions trainers and mobilizers), and the *agora* (marketplace missions leaders) “bring out the Book,” coming together in quadrilogue around the central authority of the Bible (I am indebted – through personal conversation - to Gary Corwin for the language of “assembly, agency, and academy,” and to Monroe Brewer for the fourth designator “agora”).
2. They *read* the Book - “He read it aloud from daybreak till noon...And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law” (8.3). Samuel Escobar claims that we must carefully insure that scriptural foundations remain at the heart of who we are and what we do. He has called for a revisitation of scripture and claims that, “Evangelicals must acknowledge: they themselves have a long way to go in terms of deepening their understanding of the biblical basis of mission, in order to establish its validity not on isolated sayings but on *the general thrust of biblical teaching* [italics mine],” (Escobar 2000, 114). A “deepened understanding” requires a reading of the Book – all of it.

3. They *opened* the Book – “Ezra opened the book; and as he opened it, the people all stood up” (8.5). There will always be a continuing call for the missions community to “open the Book” and stand together on their journey toward Biblical mission. David Platt says when this happens, “The Word does the work. Make sure the Word’s the foundation... I love seeing the Word take root in different people’s hearts and begin to grow in different ways” (Platt 2013, 11). For this to happen in our ministries, the Word has to remain open, constantly at hand, leading in every decision and new initiative.
4. They *explained* the Book – “The Levites...instructed the people in the Law...They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (8.7-8). There was a communal reading and reflection upon God’s Word for a new generation yet untrained. As the gospel advances into new territories and among new peoples, we will constantly need a *missiology* that “... is a critical reflection on praxis, in light of God’s Word” (Escobar 2000, 101). Simply stated: Exegesis + Exposition + Explanation = Evangelization.
5. They *celebrated* the Book – “...all the people went away...to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them” (8.12). As God’s Word is brought out, opened, read, and explained in missional leadership, let us pray for a refreshed love for God’s Word as stated in *The Cape Town Commitment*, “We love God’s Word in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, echoing the joyful delight of the Psalmist in the Torah, ‘I love your commands more than gold...Oh how I love your law’” (*The Cape Town Commitment* 2011, 17).
6. They *confessed and worshipped* from the Book – “They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God” (9.3). The major documents of the three international Lausanne congresses, as well as many concluding statements from additional consultations, gatherings, and forums are seasoned with the language of confession and repentance. Consider this on a local, individual scale with your agency, church, missions committee, etc. What would it look like in terms of change in our ministries when conviction from God’s Word required a new direction, a change of policy, or restitution for past errors (to name a few)?
7. They *obeyed and followed* the Book – “In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement... (9.38);” “...to follow the Law of God...and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our Lord” (10.29b). In the midst of a welcomed, global resurgence in Biblical mission, let us pray that missional leaders will reconnect with the fact that, “Our point of departure should not be the contemporary enterprise we seek to justify, but the biblical sense of what being sent into the world signifies” (Bosch 1993, 177). Let us make “a binding agreement” to obey and follow.

The Great Commission enterprise/community is constantly tempted toward potentially increased dependencies upon human expertise, the traditional wisdom of mature missions executives, the perceived “sharpness” of emerging missions leaders, and a plethora of successful business models from secular leadership. While we can appreciate and learn from every arena of life and leadership, let us not forget to pause and ask, “How big is our Bible?” as we renew and maintain

our confidence in the Bible for missional leadership. “Without the Bible,” John Stott told us, “world evangelization would not only be impossible but actually inconceivable.” Therefore, let the world missions community bring it out, open it, read it, explain it, celebrate it, confess and worship from it, and obey/follow it in every dimension of world evangelization.

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