



OUR JOURNEY *of* LEARNING

By Matt Knapp

I remember a Sunday afternoon as a young father, with a child sitting quietly on my lap, thinking about what a great parent I was at that moment. You see, I had determined as a young man that I would dedicate myself to my family and fatherhood and had been studying God's perspective on parenting. I was sure that I knew a lot. The minister began to tell a story of a brother he knew that had four children and the fourth child had just repented. All his children were converted, and someone asked him, "How did you do it? What did you do to make this happen?" The brother looked at them and with tears in his eyes stated, "In spite of me!" I sat there that Sunday frustrated and mused, "Our children do not turn out in spite of us. They turn out because of the effort we put into teaching them about God and the gospel."

Years later, I had teenagers. One of them was struggling and I was fearful about their relationship with God. My wife and I realized that we did not know what to do, how to respond, how to communicate, or how to encourage. With no other options left, we began to fast and pray and ask God to turn our child's heart. In a miraculous way, God transformed our child's heart and today they are walking in a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ. Recently in a discussion with a dear friend who has a child struggling, I told him about our situation. My comment to him was, "In spite of me, God did an amazing work in the heart of my child."

God had taken me on a journey of learning, and he still has me on this journey. I believe we all must humbly admit that we need to continue to learn and grow individually, as local congregations, and as a denomination.

God's Perspective about Growth and Learning

God desires his people to be always learning but recognize that we will never have perfect knowledge on this earth. Peter states that we are to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ..." (2 Peter 3:18). Paul states in Philippians 3 that he has not yet attained unto perfection but is pressing forward toward it.

However, we cannot grow unless we recognize the great need that we have. If we think that we have the answers, we will not be able to grow. God states in Isaiah 66:1 that the heaven is his throne, and the earth is his footstool. In verse 2, this great and glorious God declares that the man he will look to (esteem, regard) is him that is of a poor (humble) and contrite spirit and trembles at his word. God desires for us to see our need rather than declare our wisdom. Jesus, after telling the parable about sitting in the lower rooms at the feast, states, "whoever exalts himself shall be humbled and he that humbles himself shall be exalted (Luke 14:11).

Finally, James says, “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (James 4:6)

God also wants us to have a willingness to enter service recognizing that we may not be fully ready. We should not resist God’s work for that reason. We also cannot say, “we have it all figured out.” We must be both willing to serve and willing to grow.

Our Reality

As it relates to missions and church planting, we must admit that as a denomination, we have room to grow. For instance, since 2000 we have established very few churches. In the book of Acts, church establishment and growth were a result of evangelism and discipleship. This indicates that we have a need to focus further in these areas.

We have learned a great deal from people who have served in other countries over the past 50 years. Their feedback makes us realize we are still relatively “new” at overseas missions and at times we have unintentionally created dependency in those that we serve. We have struggled with how to have cultural awareness and how a lack of this hinders the clarity of the gospel. Along with this, it has been easy for us to look at poverty only from a material standpoint and not as broken relationship with God, man, self, and creation. It has been much easier for us to bring physical help rather than seeing the need of the whole person.

Our reality as a denomination is that even though we are now supportive of evangelism, discipleship, church planting, cultural awareness and helping without hurting, we are not experts in these areas. We have a need to overcome our strong tendency to make the materially poor people in other cultures “just like us.” It can be easy to confuse the “American Dream” with the Kingdom of God we desire to represent.

What we Should be Doing going Forward

As the church agency tasked with cross-cultural missions, HarvestCall leadership humbly recognizes that God wants us to grow and change. To allow for growth, we are focusing on:

- Beginning local church outreach teaching and training to begin implementation of these concepts in our churches.
- Developing relationships with those of other cultures with the desire to learn and grow in understanding.
- Studying and learning how to help without hurting.
- Looking for ways to allow missionaries and indigenous believers to be a resource to others by teaching on their areas of learning.
- Recognizing areas that we have sinned in our attitudes, actions, and relationships and repenting for this.

Our Future

What could it look like in three to five years if we as a denomination focused on growing in our understand of missions? Ideally, it would like something like the following:

- Evangelism and discipleship would be happening consistently at local churches with a desire to expand to global outreach.
- Missionaries and past missionaries are actively engaged in teaching concepts about intercultural engagement, material poverty, and the dangers of paternalism and dependency.
- We have a common understanding that poverty is about broken relationships with God, others, self, and creation and lasting change only occurs through reconciliation.
- We will be walking side by side as Brothers and Sisters with those that we are serving on mission field.
- We will have a posture of humility and repentance as we continue to grow and change.

God calls us to be on a journey of learning. He longs for us to “tremble at his word,” “grow in grace” and turn to him in humility as we seek to learn and grow. By his grace we desire that in 20 years we can look back as a church and say, “Praise God for what he has done in spite of us!”

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