

# Missions and Development

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Reflecting on how God's people engage with the broader world likely evokes as much compassion as confusion. To many, Christian missions are a relic of centuries past, and international development a failed endeavour. There is certainly no consensus on what these terms mean, much less on how they should be carried out. But we miss an important part of our calling as a church if we don't share our gifts far beyond our walls. Today, I want to focus on three themes that have shaped missions and development over the last few decades: the *integration*, *impact*, and *intent* of missions and development work.

## **Integration**

The first comes from my own story. I grew up in Tokyo, Japan, where my parents worked as missionaries. In Japan, being a missionary meant introducing people to the message of Jesus, and my parents did house-church style church planting. Missions was exclusively spiritual endeavour. But during my last year of high school, a massive earthquake and tsunami desolated much of Northeastern Japan. A tsunami brings a particular kind of devastation: the rushing water takes everything along with it, and so amidst the rubble of wrecked building were children's toys and family photos—people's treasures. Over the next months, I spent a bunch of time volunteering, often literally just shovelling up this wreckage. In the organizations where I worked, this was often framed as showing God's love. Faced with immediate and pressing need of physical devastation, the evangelism I was familiar with suddenly rang hollow. At 18, I didn't have any deep theological reflection on why this mattered, it was just self-evidently important.

This is where I want to start. We are designed in God's image to love our neighbour, a label that stretches to the end of the earth. I was reading through the Bible on my own for the first time during this time, and I found this everywhere: from *whatever you did for the least of these to I hate your sacrifices*. Scripture is full of explicit imperatives for God's people to meet the needs of their neighbours.

This was a personal experience, but the North American church was on a similar journey throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. [NT Wright](#) and many others wrote on the fullness of the kingdom God. They foreground an eschatology in which Jesus' return is not *escape* but *restoration*. I have been moved by the work of [Bryant Myers](#), whose theology of development rests on the example of Jesus' ministry: marked by word, deed, and sign. I could go on, but this perspective should be familiar to most of you, and broadly aligned with what we hear from the pulpit each week.

This move to engage more deeply with development wasn't just in the church, but also broadly in society. The end of the Cold War brought massive optimism about global development and the "end of poverty". Initiatives like the UN's Millennium Development Goals extended education and healthcare to hundreds of millions around the world. And

Christians were very involved—I think especially of the "drop the debt" [campaign](#) that helped free developing countries from debt payments to rich ones.

### **Impact**

However, this optimism has been tempered in both the missions and development communities. The first critique focusses on impact. It asks, "Is all this stuff really working?", "Is this the best way to spend our money?" *Is packing twenty teenagers on a flight to Honduras for a week to mix concrete for an orphanage an especially effective way to support Honduran children?*

In the North American church, the book [When Helping Hurts](#), was particularly important in highlighting the ways in which many well-meaning Christians reinforced dependency rather than promoting autonomy. It highlighted the need to understand that poverty was not simply a material phenomenon, but the symptom of broken relationships with neighbour, earth, and God. The authors advocated for interventions which were financially and organizationally sustainable.

But again, this wasn't just the church. Globally, billions of dollars in aid have failed to bring about the kind of transformation that donors hoped for. This sparked re-evaluation of the impact and sustainability of development interventions (This was when when micro-finance was the coolest thing ever). Re-evaluation forced a bunch of questions that are still important to consider in our giving today: Are overheads reasonable, and audits regular? Are programs regularly evaluated and adjusted? Are organizations merely reporting activities (literacy training) or outcomes (school graduations)?

These questions help focus our attention on using our resources wisely in a world of need. They can certainly be taken too far—creating false certainty of control over the inherently complex process of changing lives and systems—but assessing impact is now an almost universal requirement for entry into the sector.

### **Intent**

If the first swathe of critique focusses on integration, the second on impact, the third focusses on intent. It asks whether our teenagers building orphanages are not just a waste of money, but actively harmful: perpetuating a cycle of dependency in the communities they visit while reinforcing their own sense of distance and superiority as they fly home. To understand the harm here, we have to go back a bit further. There's a lot of ways to periodize this, but I'd like to bring our attention to [October 27, 312 AD](#):

*Roman ruler Constantine is making a play to the title of emperor and is marching on Rome. He needs to cross the Milvian bridge to take the city, but his brother-in-law Maxentius stands on the other side of the river with an army. On the eve of a battle, Constantine reports a vision of a cross, and blazed across the sky, the words: "in this, conquer". Constantine emblazons crosses on his soldiers' shields, wins the battle, and becomes emperor. He dedicates his victory to the Christian God, decriminalizes Christianity, and starts building Basilicas. Within*

*a generation, Christianity is no longer a persecuted minority but the state religion.*

This is the start of *Christendom*, the marriage of Christian faith with political power. We can trace the impact of this through much of history: that same cross painted on the flags of the Crusaders, on the sails of the ships trading slaves across the Atlantic, and marking mass graves of indigenous peoples the world over. The rhetoric of civilization that accompanied Western expansion was almost always tied to Christianization. Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta famously declared, "*When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible*".

In the last five years there has been a critical reckoning around the historical legacies, especially with race in America and indigenous people here in Canada. These social movements—from both inside and outside the church—have highlighted how many of the problems we see around the world—poverty, hate, violence—are not happening *despite* the influence of Christians but rather *because* of us. In response, many churches have shifted their practice to *servicing and learning* opportunities. For example, volunteers might hear the story of a street-involved individual before going to serve at the soup kitchen, or travel to the site of a residential school to hear from a survivor. These steps help reverse the assumptions about who has expertise, responsibility, and autonomy in these situations.

Once again, I'm defining *Christendom* as the marriage of Christian faith and political power. Whether noble or cynical, it seeks to transform others' lives through force rather than through love. Though we reject this today, Christians' work around the world remains tangled up in this legacy. It is hard to separate the rubble from the treasure.

### **Close**

Where does that leave us? Are all attempts to merge development and missions—to integrate physical, social, and spiritual needs—irrevocably tainted by the legacy of Christendom? I'm not totally convinced.

First, neither missions nor development can be divided between *west vs rest* anymore. When we talk about Christians, we are simply not talking about Westerners. [Two-thirds of Christians live in the global South. Half of missionaries are from the South](#), many from Brazil, Korea, and the Philippines. At the same time, today's development challenges are no longer a question of *us vs them*. Climate change, migration, conflict, pandemics are not problems that belong somewhere else. Global growth has led to a whole continuum of poverty and prosperity that defies easy dichotomies.

There are a lot of implications of this, but one that our church is doing quite well on is shifting ownership to professionals and leaders in the countries in which we have supported. The medical schools in [Bunia](#) and [Lubango](#) are places where young Africans are trained to bring restoration to their own communities.

Second, despite everything, the work remains imperative. If you are just starting to learn about this now, then you'll encounter innumerable books, articles, and know-it-alls like me telling you everything wrong with missions and development. But despair would be a grave error. Disengagement misses the foundation upon which all this critique rests. We start from a deeply held belief in the equal dignity and boundless possibility of every person. This imbues us with a responsibility. To effectiveness, to critical reflection, but more than this, a responsibility to action.

Finally, we keep room for robust theological reflection: cultivating a deep understanding of *the Kingdom of God*, as a place where God's rule reigns in the lives of his people. Doing our homework theologically keeps us hopeful and generous. An openness to the Spirit attunes us to the scope and limit of our responsibilities in a deeply broken world.

Missions and development must be integrated, we must think shrewdly about impact and soberly about intent. This leads us away from the us-and-them dichotomy of political power and into a posture of humble solidarity with the global church.

**Further Reading:**

- **Integration:** [Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel \(Ronald Sider\)](#)
- **Impact:** [Shrewd Samaritan \(Bruce Wydick\)](#)
- **Intent:** [Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power \(Andy Crouch\)](#)

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