

No Shortcut to Success

A Manifesto for Modern Missions

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Foreword by Mark Dever

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New Testament Missionary Communication

MISSIONARIES ARE SENT to communicate on Christ's behalf as his ambassadors. But once they get there, how can they complete their task? This chapter will explore this question by examining how New Testament missionaries communicated Christ's message. In the next two chapters, we'll explore what missionaries today can learn from their example.

First, New Testament Missionaries Communicate Clearly

New Testament missionaries explain the gospel message *clearly* so that it may be understood. This insistence on clarity dates back to the Old Testament. When God's Word is reintroduced to the people after the exile, Ezra and the priests "helped the people understand the Law. . . . They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (Neh. 8:7–8).

This emphasis on clarity is reflected in New Testament missionary work. Take the apostle Paul, for example. In Thessalonica, he spends three Sabbath days "*explaining* . . . that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead" (Acts 17:3). He asks the Colossians to "pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to

declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—*that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak*” (Col. 4:3–4). In letter after letter, Paul explains theological truths in an orderly fashion so that his meaning will be clear.

Clear communication marks nearly every New Testament teacher and missionary.¹ Luke, a member of Paul’s missionary band, is concerned to write “an orderly account” of the life of Christ (Luke 1:3) so that it may be clear to Theophilus. Luke tells us in Acts, the sequel to his Gospel, that when Peter shared the gospel with the Gentiles for the first time, he “explained it to them in order” (Acts 11:4). Acts is full of such examples: Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos aside and “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). The Spirit sends Philip on the road to Gaza to find an Ethiopian eunuch who is confused by the Scriptures. Here’s what happens next: “Philip ran to him . . . and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’” (Acts 8:30–31). Philip then clarifies for the eunuch what the passage means.

Over and over again in Scripture, we see that God does not bypass the ordinary rules of communication. He expects us to understand what is communicated clearly, not what is unclear and indistinct. And God works through ordinary human communicators to make his gospel clear. As we saw earlier, God sends an angel to Cornelius, but it’s not the angel who explains the gospel to him directly. Instead, the angel tells Cornelius to go and find Peter (Acts 10:22).

1 I say “nearly every” because an apparent exception to this trend is the fact that Jesus himself conceals his message during part of his ministry by teaching in parables. However, it is important to note that Jesus is not concealing his message in order to evangelize. Quite the opposite! Jesus speaks in parables in order to *stop* hard-hearted people from understanding his message (Matt. 13:13–15; Mark 4:11–12). Jesus may be attempting to conceal his message and identity from hard-hearted people because he knows some want to use him for their own political purposes (John 6:10–15), and also because by this point in his ministry, many who do not believe are attempting to antagonize him and drive his followers away (Matt. 12:22–45; Mark 3:22–30). At times, we may need to be less clear in order to avoid provoking our enemies, but we should not expect our unclarity to lead them to Christ!

A reader unfamiliar with the present state of missions might be forgiven for asking why I'm emphasizing the New Testament's call to communicate clearly. It might seem too obvious to mention. But today's wider missions community has largely neglected the call to clear gospel communication. In the next chapter, we'll explore in more detail how this has happened, particularly as missionaries have downplayed the importance of language acquisition. We'll also explore what a healthier approach might look like and what it might take for missionaries to master the languages in which they minister.

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Second, New Testament Missionaries Communicate Credibly

Missionaries strive to communicate *clearly* so that the message can be understood. They also strive to communicate *credibly* so that the message can be believed. The message becomes credible to people as missionaries present it persuasively. Paul tells the Corinthians that he wants to “persuade others” (2 Cor. 5:11). And we see him laboring to demonstrate the credibility of the gospel throughout the book of Acts:

- Paul's preaching “confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 9:22).
- In Thessalonica, Paul enters the synagogue “as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead. And some of them were persuaded” (Acts 17:2–4). They believe Paul's message at least in part because he makes a credible case from Scripture.

- In Corinth, Paul “reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4).
- Demetrius says of Paul that “not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia [he] has persuaded . . . a great many people . . . that gods made with hands are not gods” (Acts 19:26).
- Agrippa realizes that the purpose of Paul’s speech is to “persuade me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28).

Every sermon, every spiritual conversation, and every instance of evangelism is at least in part a battle of ideas. This is what Paul means when he writes, “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:4–5). So, to quote J. I. Packer, “When Paul preached the gospel, . . . what he did was to teach—engaging attention, capturing interest, setting out the facts, explaining their significance, solving difficulties, answering objections, and showing how the message bears on life.”²

Paul isn’t the only New Testament missionary who uses persuasive teaching to convince people that his message is credible. Other missionaries and New Testament evangelists also sought to persuade:

- Apollos “powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:28).
- Luke appeals to the testimony of eyewitnesses (Luke 1:2; Acts 1:3) and “many proofs” (Acts 1:3) to show the credibility of his message.
- Stephen’s opponents cannot “withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (Acts 6:10).

Of course, in order for the message to be credible, the messenger must also be credible. In his letters, Paul gives evidence for his own

2 J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 51.

credibility: he has seen the resurrected Lord (1 Cor. 9:1); he has done “signs and wonders and mighty works” like a “true apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12); and his character is above reproach (2 Cor. 11:7–10). Paul isn’t afraid to trot out his credentials when they’re called into question: “Whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that” (2 Cor. 11:21). He builds strong relationships where people know they can trust him (1 Thess. 2:11–12). His entire lifestyle—whether he eats or doesn’t eat, whether he observes special days or doesn’t observe special days—is carefully calculated to increase the credibility of his message. When seeking to reach Jews, Paul becomes “as a Jew” (1 Cor. 9:20). When seeking to reach Gentiles, he becomes “as one outside the law. . . . I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (vv. 21–22). Paul not only works to persuade people that his message is credible; his lifestyle choices and social identity are strategically and proactively crafted to help his credibility. This ought to be true of all ambassadors.

It bears repeating: it’s the Spirit, not our persuasive rhetoric or upright living, that brings people to faith. And yet, rather than working *apart* from Paul’s and other New Testament evangelists’ efforts to persuade, the Spirit inhabits their words (Eph. 6:17). Luke tells us that Stephen’s opponents “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (Acts 6:10). The Spirit doesn’t bypass Stephen’s wisdom. Quite the opposite—the Spirit *works through* Stephen’s wisdom and quickens his listeners’ reasoning to recognize it until his opponents are overcome with jealousy. People who haven’t heard the gospel message before will naturally have questions. But like the Bereans in Acts 17, those who earnestly seek answers are commended. As they seek, the Spirit works through ordinary, human reasoning and persuasion to convict them of the truth of the gospel.

Again, readers might be wondering why I emphasize the need for a credible witness. Is this really worth mentioning? In fact, today’s missions community has largely dismissed the need to present the gospel credibly. Most missionaries are diligent enough in their efforts to tell

stories about Jesus, but make little effort to address the sincere questions and objections that stop their listeners from believing. They're often unaware of what these questions are, and may not even imagine that wise, persuasive answers to these questions are necessary. We'll discuss why this is, and how missionaries can begin providing a more credible witness, in chapter 7.

Third, New Testament Missionaries Communicate Boldly

New Testament missionaries preach *clearly*, so that their message may be understood, and *credibly*, so that their message may be believed. They also preach *boldly*, so that as many as possible may hear. Hostile authorities try to stop the gospel message from circulating, but the apostles “continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). Paul asks the Ephesians to pray for him “boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains” (Eph. 6:19–20). Paul’s preaching is described as bold on seven different occasions.³ Twice he reminds the Ephesians that he “did not shrink” from declaring the whole message to them (Acts 20:20, 27). Even Barnabas, whom we typically think of as a soft-spoken cheerleader due to his moniker (“son of encouragement”), engages in vigorous debate and speaks “boldly” alongside Paul (Acts 13:46; 14:3).

This boldness has casualties. Stephen is martyred when he denounces the Sanhedrin. Accused of speaking against the temple and the law (Acts 6:13), Stephen responds with an accusation himself: the men of the Sanhedrin have forgotten that the temple is too small for God (Acts 7:48–50), and that they themselves don’t keep the law (Acts 7:53). Understandably, the Sanhedrin are enraged by this. Years later, Paul also boldly denounces the Sanhedrin, which leads to prolonged imprisonment and plots on his life.

Of course, New Testament ministers aren’t just looking for trouble. Paul is generally happy, when persecuted in one place, to “flee to the next” (Matt. 10:23; see Paul follow this pattern, for example, in Acts

³ Acts 9:27–28; 13:46; 14:3; 19:8; 26:26; 28:31.

14:19–20; 20:1), but he never stops preaching, and when the time for confrontation arrives, he speaks boldly (Acts 22:30–23:11).

New Testament Christians are bold because they no longer have anything to fear. The greatest weapon their opponents had was the power to put people to death. Simply put, after the execution and resurrection of Jesus, this no longer terrified Christians because it *didn't work*. Jesus didn't stay dead, and the Word spread further. In the same way, when Christians are martyred in Acts, the Word only gathers momentum. When Stephen is executed, for example, we read, “And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of his execution” (Acts 7:60–8:1). Luke mentions Saul after Stephen's prayer because he wants us to see that Saul's conversion was the answer to Stephen's prayer. Stephen gained everything—he was beckoned into glory by Christ himself. His persecutors, on the other hand, gained nothing. Executing Stephen was intended to stop the spread of the early church. Words cannot describe how colossally this failed. Saul became the greatest missionary in history. Bold preaching of the gospel is a win-win situation for Stephen; the worst that can happen to him after he is executed is to “be with Christ”—and that, as we know, is “far better” (Phil. 1:23). And nothing can stop his message.

It is with this unshakable hope that Peter and John answer the Sanhedrin's threat: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19–20).

One can imagine them wondering: *Do you really expect to intimidate us? Death no longer has any power over us. What are you going to do anyway? Kill us? That doesn't seem to work so well anymore.* To be sure, New Testament believers feel fear at times—the church prays for boldness when the chief priests and elders threaten Peter and John (Acts 4:29–31)—but they're not driven by it. In the same way, we need not be driven by fear that harm will come to us or to new believers on account of bold truth-telling at appropriate times. New believers may be persecuted or expelled from their communities. We certainly don't

seek such outcomes, but we must remember that even this will not hinder the work of the Spirit.⁴

Conclusion

Proclamation plays a central and necessary role for any missionary. Clarity, credibility, and boldness worked together to move the gospel message forward in the ministry of New Testament missionaries. Because the message was taught clearly, it could be understood. Because the message was taught credibly, it could be believed. Because the message was taught boldly, many people could hear. Missionaries who neglect any of these aspects will only hinder their own work.

New Testament missionaries communicated as wisely and capably as they could because they knew they played a central and necessary role. The Holy Spirit is pleased to work through missionary efforts and to use human tools—wise communication, persuasive reasoning, bold proclamation—to propel the message forward. We too must embrace the centrality of our task: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works in me” (Col. 1:28–29).

That our role is central is no reason to boast. Our labor is necessary because God has chosen to work through us, not because of any particular strengths we bring to the table. We’re weak, and it’s only through God’s blessing that our labor bears fruit: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (1 Cor. 3:6). Or, as Paul says elsewhere, “the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7).

Here’s why that’s great news: once we have communicated the gospel message clearly, credibly, and boldly, we can happily leave the outcome

4 It is important not to romanticize or downplay the challenges persecution causes. It’s largely because of past persecution that the church *isn’t* spreading quickly in many countries around the world. But sometimes, persecution is inevitable. When we’re living wisely and maturely and persecution comes, we have to trust God that even if it slows down our work in one area, his kingdom will benefit in other ways. In Acts, when the church was persecuted, the spread of the gospel slowed in Jerusalem, but it sped up elsewhere (Acts 8:1–5).

of our work in God's hands. We must remember this, so that we don't become overwhelmed. Our message comes "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5).

We see an example of how this works in Acts 13. After Paul spoke "boldly" (Acts 13:46) in Pisidian Antioch and reasoned carefully from Scripture, Luke concludes that "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Paul proclaimed the gospel faithfully and left the rest up to God. God's Word is sufficient on its own to sort out the saved from the perishing. Isaiah describes its efficacy in this way:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10-11)

Communicating Clearly Today

IN MOST VOCATIONS, some degree of preparation or training is necessary. But for some reason, we tend to think of missions as requiring far less training than other vocations. Sure, doctors and dentists and mechanics need to formally prepare. But missionaries? Not so much.

On one level, this makes sense. Much of our training will occur “on the job.” You can’t replicate it until you get there. But if we want to be capable missionaries, we need to master a substantial skill set. Remember: we’ve been sent out as ambassadors. In the secular world, ambassadors are usually highly intelligent people. Their preparation includes developing a detailed knowledge of their own nation’s interests, the interests of the nations to which they are sent, and how—in a language and culture not native to them—they can communicate their nation’s message in the most persuasive and winsome way possible.

As we saw in the previous chapter, New Testament missionaries strove to communicate with clarity, credibility, and boldness. In this chapter, we’ll look at how we can prepare ourselves to communicate *clearly* today. Then in the next chapter, we’ll look at what it means for us to communicate *credibly* and *boldly*.

The Challenge of Clear Communication

When my great-grandfather first came to the United States from Italy, he didn’t know a lick of English. Not long after arriving, he got very

sick and had to be hospitalized. He didn't know what was happening, and was terrified that the doctors might operate on him, so he decided to simply answer "No" to everything he was asked.

This plan would have worked quite well, except . . . there was a friendly nurse who came into his room every morning and asked him a series of questions. "No . . . no . . . no," he would respond, over and over again. He had no idea what she was saying. Each morning, she seemed more concerned, and he soon learned why—after several days marking "Still no bowel movement" in his chart, she brought in a doctor to give him an enema!

In today's world, we face increasing challenges as we try to communicate clearly. The nurse had studied to become a specialist. She needed to ask important questions and relay important information. She *knew* what she needed to communicate—this is key before clear communication can occur! But a language barrier stood in her way. The same thing happens to missionaries. In our increasingly multicultural world, we must handle these challenges effectively if we want to communicate our message.

Knowing the Message

Before we can share Jesus's message clearly, we must know what his message actually is. As we saw in the first chapter, Christians today tend to see Jesus's message as a fairly simple message of love and the forgiveness of sins through Christ's death and resurrection. Indeed, the fundamental parts of the gospel message are simple. However, this doesn't mean it comes without nuance or complexity, nor does it mean that people's objections are simple or easily addressed.

In the Gospels, Jesus doesn't speak only of love and forgiveness. He also engages in extensive, nuanced teaching. He answers difficult questions that arise from his listeners' culture. He helps them through the complexities of learning how the gospel relates to the law. Similarly, Paul's letters have "things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16). Did you catch that? Ignorance of the complexities of the Scriptures can

lead not only to wayward teaching, hurt, and syncretism but even to destruction. We have no choice but to strive for a careful understanding of the Word.

We should expect that disentangling people's lives and beliefs from sin and deception may be a complicated process. At each step, then, we need answers that are profound—not glib. For example, people in the West often object to Christianity with questions like,

- Why does God forbid sexual activity in some situations when people are in love?
- How could a loving God send people to hell?
- How can there be only one true religion?
- How could a good God allow suffering? How could he have allowed the specific suffering I've endured?
- Does the Bible contradict clear scientific evidence?

Those who do come to faith may also have to sort out complicated questions about what following Jesus looks like:

- How do I now relate to my unbelieving significant other, spouse, or family member?
- How do I change deeply ingrained patterns in my speech, spending, sexuality, or use of substances?
- If I'm not saved by works, what role does obedience play in my walk with Christ?
- How do I turn the other cheek without enabling people to be abusive?

In other cultural contexts, the questions will be different. In the part of North Africa where I work, people considering the claims of Christ may struggle with questions like,

- Isn't it a sin to doubt Islamic teaching? Should I be even considering the Christ of the New Testament at all?

- If God is one, then why should I worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
- Why do Christians deny the prophethood of Muhammad when Muslims acknowledge all the prophets—even Jesus?

People from such a culture who put their faith in Christ may ask,

- How does Christ want me to relate to my multiple wives?
- What will I do if the wider community takes my family away from me?
- How do I share with my family and community what has happened? How do I handle rejection and violent mistreatment?

Wherever you live, you'll come face-to-face with difficult questions that require careful answers. Both seekers and new believers will struggle—and simplistic, flippant answers will not be helpful. We must deeply understand Jesus's teaching in order to answer people's questions in wise, Scriptural ways. We are ambassadors, and ambassadors need to understand their nations' terms of peace fully enough to clarify how exactly they're meant to play out in the complexities of life.

This includes understanding that the *good news* as defined in the Gospels is a message of reconciliation with God. But this reconciliation is more than God simply agreeing not to hold our sins against us. Rather, the Gospels define the *good news* as “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). What does this mean? Among other things, it means that God's kingdom—his generous sovereign reign—has come near and is available to us through Christ.

Of course, if we're still under the weight of our sins, then it could hardly be *good news* that God's power is at hand. This explains why Jesus's atonement for our sins is a key part of the Christian gospel. He makes salvation possible. But the good news isn't merely that Jesus shows up, and we're simply forgiven and left to fend for ourselves until one day we die and find ourselves in heaven. Rather, our salvation also includes being rescued from the power of sin in our everyday lives. Starting now, we can enter a new life in which we know God (John

17:3) and live as he created us to live. This will bring freedom and transformation to all areas of our lives: our finances, our family lives, our sexuality, our friendships, and even our sufferings.

Indeed, Jesus's plan to save the nations includes our "teaching [disciples] to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). We must teach people how Jesus wants them to live, and how good this way of life has always been for those who follow him. We must help them see that, though following Jesus is sometimes painful, it will never make our lives more anemic, fragile, or empty. Instead, following Jesus is *deeply good for us, is best for us* in all areas of our lives—in the real lives in which we work, conduct relationships, marry, raise children, engage in conflict, and pay taxes.

Life is messy. How do we learn to trust that Jesus will be with us in the messiness, and that his way will always be good for us? By reading and understanding his Word more deeply. Missionaries must have a deep knowledge of the Scriptures in order to "rightly [handle] the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15), correctly applying it amid thorny issues of doctrine and discipleship that inevitably surface. For many missionaries, this will involve formal Bible school or seminary training on the way to the field. These steps slow us down, but the investment is worth it—both for the sake of the lost and for the sake of the message we hope to proclaim.

Knowing the Language

On July 26, 1945, as World War II was drawing to a close, the Allies met in Potsdam, Germany, and issued an ultimatum. The now-famous Potsdam Declaration promised Japan's "prompt and utter destruction" if Japan did not surrender immediately. This threat had teeth: the United States had recently finished constructing operational nuclear weapons. Some historians, like Kazuo Kawai, argue that Japan took the ultimatum seriously.^{1,2} So why, merely two weeks later, did the United States destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear weapons?

1 Kazuo Kawai, "Mokusatsu, Japan's Response to the Potsdam Declaration," *Pacific Historical Review* 19/4 (1950): 409–14.

2 David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 343.

Because American ambassadorial staff mistranslated a single word in Japan's response. The Allies believed the word *mokusatsu* meant that the Japanese government planned "to ignore" the Potsdam Declaration; in reality, Kawai tells us, a better translation would have told the Allies that Japan planned "to refrain from comment" while deliberating over it.

As ambassadors, we also cross language barriers with an ultimatum, and we should be haunted by the danger of miscommunication. If we're not, we might mistakenly assume that people have rejected Christ. Or we might mistakenly assume that others have accepted Christ. What if it isn't Christ's message that they've either accepted or rejected, but only our badly stammered version of it? It can be hard enough to explain the gospel to our friends at home. In unreached places where our ability to communicate is hampered by linguistic and cultural differences, the task of communication only gets more difficult.

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Shared languages have always been necessary for communication (see 2 Kings 18:26ff.; Ezra 4:7). In Nehemiah's day, the scribes translated the law from Hebrew into Aramaic to help the people understand (Neh. 8:8). In Jesus's day, rabbis provided *targums*, translations of the Hebrew Old Testament into Aramaic.³ After Jesus's resurrection, it is significant

3 Philip S. Alexander, "Targum, Targumim," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:320–21.

that the Spirit empowers the apostles to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8), and the first miracle he performs is enabling the disciples to preach in other languages (Acts 2). Though Paul and other New Testament missionaries are fluent Greek speakers who don’t struggle with language barriers in their ministries, they do reach across other cultural barriers to communicate clearly and to meet people on their own terms as much as possible (see 1 Cor. 9:19–23). And Paul recognizes the futility of speaking to people in languages they don’t understand:

. . . if with your tongue you utter speech that is unintelligible, how will anyone know what is said? . . . if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. (1 Cor. 14:9, 11)

It shouldn’t surprise us, then, when we encounter language barriers in our ministries, that we must reach across those barriers to communicate the gospel clearly.

Missionary statesmen of previous generations understood this. They placed a high value on language acquisition, believing fluency was a professional skill without which one could not effectively minister. Here are a few examples:

- For **William Carey**, one of the great “impediments in the way of carrying the gospel” to the unreached was “the unintelligibility of their languages.”⁴ Carey is still known today in Kolkata and the surrounding area for his work in the Bengali language, including literacy promotion and the publication of a Bengali dictionary.
- Upon their arrival to Burma, **Adoniram and Ann Judson** spent twelve hours a day studying Burmese.⁵ Ann also learned Siamese

4 William Carey, *An Inquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (Leicester, UK: Ann Ireland, 1792), 67.

5 Vance Christie, *Adoniram Judson: Devoted for Life* (Fearn, Scotland, UK: Christian Focus, 2013), ch. 10.

while Adoniram learned Pali and Talaing.⁶ His Burmese reached such a level that more than fifty years later, another missionary would write of his tract “the Golden Balance” that it “has probably more powerfully influenced the thinking of the Burmese people, and caused them to see the insufficiency of Buddhism, than anything else ever written by a foreigner.”⁷ His Burmese translation of the Bible was “free from all obscurity to the Burmese mind. It is read and understood perfectly. Its style and diction are as choice and elegant as the language itself . . . and [it] conveys . . . the mind of the Spirit effortlessly.”⁸ It wasn’t surprising that Judson bemoaned the limited effectiveness of medium-term missionaries who served for only a few years: “As usual, they could not be of much real use until they became fluent in the language; and that would be a matter of years.”⁹ When Judson returned to the United States, he had worked in Burmese for so long that he no longer felt articulate in English and asked to be excused from preaching.¹⁰

- **John Paton** operated in the Aniwan language for so long that when he returned home, like Judson, he sometimes struggled with English. He recalls one visit to Dundee: “I was asked to close the forenoon meeting with prayer. . . . I offered prayer, and then began— ‘May the love of God the Father’ but not another word would come in English; everything was blank except the words in Aniwan, for I had long begun to think in the Native tongue, and after a dead pause, and a painful silence, I had to wind up with a simple ‘Amen!’”¹¹

6 Christie, *Adoniram Judson: Devoted for Life*, chs. 12, 26.

7 Stacy Warburton, *Eastward! The Story of Adoniram Judson* (Warwick, NY: Round Table Press, 1937), 158.

8 Edward Judson, *The Life of Adoniram Judson*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1883), 416.

9 Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* (King of Prussia, PA: Judson Press, 1987), 409.

10 “Having devoted himself exclusively to the Burmese language for over thirty years, his facility in English had been greatly diminished. He considered himself incapable of adequately carrying out public speaking in America” (Christie, *Adoniram Judson: Devoted for Life*, ch. 34).

11 John G. Paton and James Paton, *John G. Paton: Missionary to the Hebrides: An Autobiography* (New York: Revell, 1907), 360.

- **Hudson Taylor** advised newcomers to “consider six or eight hours a day sacred to the Lord and His work and let nothing hinder your giving this time (to language study and practice) till you can preach fluently and intelligibly.”¹² He turned down Henry Guinness’s application to China Inland Mission because Guinness had a wife and three children and there was “little likelihood of his being able to learn the language sufficiently well as to be as useful in China as he was at home.”¹³ Taylor rebuked C. T. Studd and Arthur and Cecil Polhills for praying for the gift of tongues so that they could skip language study: “How many and subtle are the devices of Satan . . . to keep the Chinese ignorant of the gospel. If I could put the Chinese language into your brains by one wave of the hand, I would not do it.”¹⁴ In what may have been a nod to Carey’s “obligation to use means,” Taylor referred to language study as “a necessary means.”¹⁵
- **Jim Elliot** asked Elisabeth to marry him under one condition: “not until you learn Quichua.” He didn’t want their marriage to distract them from studying their new language and culture.¹⁶

These men and women experienced success in their missionary work at least in part because of their remarkable devotion to language acquisition. We might do well to note that Hudson Taylor pursued fluency in a way that his contemporaries did not.¹⁷

12 A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor and China’s Open Century, Book Five: Refiner’s Fire* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 230.

13 Alwyn Austin, *China’s Millions: The China Inland Mission and Late Qing Society, 1832–1905* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 96.

14 Austin, *China’s Millions*, 222.

15 Austin, *China’s Millions*, 222.

16 Elisabeth Elliot, *Love Has a Price Tag* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1979).

17 Taylor began getting up at 5 a.m. to study Mandarin even before leaving for China. Upon arriving, he was happy to live in a dangerous neighborhood—rather than among other missionaries and expatriates—so that he could be surrounded by the Chinese language (Howard Taylor and Geraldine Taylor (Mrs. Howard Taylor), *Hudson Taylor’s Spiritual Secret* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008], 9, 37). His attitude contrasted with that of other missionaries who feared “that the Chinese would ‘lose respect’ if foreigners ‘descended to their level’” (Austin, *China’s Millions*, 2).

But language acquisition isn't easy. In fact, its drudgery is so overwhelming that those who have not endured it have trouble understanding or even imagining what it's like. Missiologist and church historian Gary McGee describes the difficulty of language learning:

One missionary to China said, "It is dull work to pass the day saying Ting, Tang, in a hundred different tones." Indeed, "to thoroughly master the Chinese language would require a head of oak, lungs of brass, nerves of steel, a constitution of iron, the patience of Job, and the lifetime of Methuselah." Another missionary . . . groaned, "No white man could ever get his tongue round the long Indian words which seemed to have been growing since the [flood of Noah] itself, so long and so immense are they in size."¹⁸

I've lived through this. Having learned two dialects of Arabic and a tribal language, I can tell you that—as bad as they sound—the quotes above don't even come close to conveying the mind-numbing grind of my many years of language study. J. C. R. Ewing, a prominent nineteenth-century missions leader in what is now Pakistan, cautioned new missionaries that learning Asian languages would be "a lifetime's work. No person with less than five years of hard study can speak to the peoples of oriental lands as he should."¹⁹ If Ewing is correct, then English speakers learning Asian languages should imagine that mastering these languages may take more hours of study than finishing medical school.

Of course, learning a language related to one's own mother tongue—an English speaker learning Spanish, for example; or an Arabic speaker learning Hebrew—is easier. But even this requires a substantial amount of study. Most missionaries today are plunged into linguistic contexts quite different from their own. Increasingly, they must master two languages in order to communicate. Not surprisingly, their language learning often plateaus long before they acquire even low levels of

18 Gary McGee, "Shortcut to Language Preparation? Radical Evangelicals, Missions, and the Gift of Tongues," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 25/3 (2001): 118.

19 McGee, "Shortcut to Language Preparation," 118.

proficiency. Few missionaries that I've encountered pursue language learning as if their ministries depended on it. The vast majority spend one to two years of part-time study before they're expected to move on to other, more "important" responsibilities.

Clearly, times have changed. In the first chapter, we saw how David Garrison describes "sequentialism": "Missionaries naturally think in sequential steps. First, you learn the language, then you develop relationships with people, then you share a witness, then you win and disciple converts, then you draw them into a congregation."²⁰

This approach, Garrison concludes, is "deadly" to church-planting efforts.²¹ In fact, Garrison's preferred approach is to send "nonresidential missionaries" who live at a distance from the people they hope to reach and therefore *cannot* learn their languages well:²² Garrison writes,

Early indications are that the "nonresidential" missionary is able to change an evangelistically stagnant situation with remarkable alacrity. . . . The healthier and more diverse the world of Christian resources becomes, the more vital the nonresidential missionary approach will be.²³

Of course, Garrison isn't *against* language learning. In fact, I've never met a missionary who doesn't at least nominally affirm its importance. All the same, in North Africa where I serve, the vast majority of missionaries fail to achieve the proficiency of a seven-year-old.

You might be wondering: But why? The answer is as simple as it is disheartening: most missionaries see language learning as "important," but not vital. Useful, sure, but nonessential. Few missionaries understand—as we saw in chapter 4—that as ambassadors, communication is their primary task. Previous generations of missionaries believed it would

²⁰ Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 243.

²¹ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Bangalore, India: WIGTake Resources, 2007), 243.

²² V. David Garrison, *The Nonresidential Missionary*, vol. 1 of *Innovations in Mission* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1990).

²³ David Garrison, "An Unexpected New Strategy: Using Nonresidential Missionaries to Finish the Task," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 7/4 (1990): 107.

be unrealistic and unprofessional to expect God to fill in the gaps of communication when they'd gained only a cursory familiarity with the languages they work in.²⁴

I experienced this firsthand. In my first term overseas, I served on a team that ran a center teaching English and computer courses. After several months there, my Arabic was functional but certainly not strong; I'd reached the proficiency of a six-year-old. At this point, however, I was asked to pull back from language study in order to help teach English. When I declined, a senior leader in my organization told me that devoting myself so fully to language study was morally wrong. He explained that his Arabic wasn't strong and God didn't need mine to be strong either. He then told me that it wasn't right for me to spend so much time learning Arabic when there were English learners at the team's center whom I might be able to evangelize. Such pressure to move on only grows more intense after a missionary learns enough language to "function" in daily life. Ultimately, I was allowed to continue in language study,²⁵ but many new missionaries aren't given that option. I've known more than one couple whose leaders refused to let them stay on the field unless they sharply reduced their language study. Choosing to enter ministry prematurely may result in short-term gains, but only at the cost of long-term effectiveness.

Again, the leaders in the stories above probably would acknowledge that language acquisition is important. But lip service is not enough. Because of the intense drudgery involved in learning language, nothing short of whole-hearted, sacrificial support for language learning—making concrete plans and expecting intense commitment until high-level mastery of the language is achieved—will enable new missionaries to master their languages of ministry.

As we saw in chapter 3, today's most popular missions methods seem to pursue speed at all costs. Thus, it isn't surprising that they

24 Tom Steffen, "Flawed Evangelism and Church Planting," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34/4 (1998): 428–35.

25 This was partly due to field leaders' deference to my sending church, which insisted that I continue with language study until achieving a high level of fluency.

have little patience for language learning. It is deeply concerning that they give language learning only halfhearted support at best. I'll list a few examples below. As I do, compare this list of missionaries to the one above:

- Steve Smith describes the birth of his *Training for Trainers* (T4T) methodology this way: “In my limited language, I poured out my heart about the Great Commission. . . . I helped them come to the realization that it was their responsibility to take the gospel to other Ina valleys.”²⁶ Smith never balances this story out by mentioning that mastering the local language could also be helpful, nor does he explain how—in the context of his “limited language” and a short-term relationship with the people he was addressing—he could know whether the realization the Ina had come to was deep or genuine, or whether they would even be able to “take the gospel” to others.
- A popular booklet discusses “best practices” in *Church Planting Movements* (CPM). The writer describes working with men “from each of the 4 major mother tongue languages in our region.”²⁷ This raises questions because it simply is not possible for missionaries to acquire high levels of proficiency in four languages. So we must assume that these missionaries worked through a *trade language*.²⁸ Statements such as these are not balanced anywhere by affirmations of the necessity of language acquisition.
- David Watson is the principal designer of *Disciple Making Movements* (DMM). In his book, he admits, “I didn’t have . . . the

26 Smith, *T4T*, ch. 5.

27 Wilson Geisler, *Rapidly Advancing Disciples: A Practical Implementation of Current Best Practices* (2011), 89, accessed August 12, 2018, [http://www.churchplantingmovements.com/images/stories/resources/Rapidily_Advancing_Disciples_\(RAD\)_Dec_2011.pdf](http://www.churchplantingmovements.com/images/stories/resources/Rapidily_Advancing_Disciples_(RAD)_Dec_2011.pdf).

28 A *trade language* is a “bridge language” which native speakers of different languages may use to communicate with each other, particularly in commercial situations. However, because it isn’t the speakers’ native language, they may have very limited proficiency in it. For example, Tok Pisin serves as a trade language between the tribes of Papua New Guinea.

inclination to keep the clothes new, and the language perfect. I had to learn another way.”²⁹ He reports spending only eighteen months living in India.³⁰ Furthermore, he lived in Delhi³¹—not among the Bhojpuri speakers his ministry focused on. We can reasonably conclude that he might have acquired limited conversational ability in Hindi, but he couldn’t have made much progress with Bhojpuri, and his study would have been further slowed down by the fact that he reports having simultaneously pursued a doctoral program in Sanskrit, while also learning Hindi and Bhojpuri!^{32,33}

- Another prominent DMM author, Jerry Trousdale, tells of a couple “handcuffed by language and cultural barriers” who saw more than a hundred people come to Christ in their first year on the field.³⁴ His two books never mention the importance of language learning.^{35,36} Such silence, as they say, is deafening.
- In a widely publicized DMM success story, David Hunt moved to Ethiopia in 2005 and almost immediately began overseeing church planting workshops.³⁷ Hunt didn’t see the need to study local languages because “it takes years for someone to learn to communicate in the heart language of another people.” This loss

29 David Watson, in David Watson and Paul Watson, *Contagious Disciple Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014), 11.

30 David Watson, “David Watson: My Journey with Disciple Making Movements,” *Movements with Steve Addison*, podcast audio, August 29, 2016, accessed January 3, 2019, <http://www.movements.net/blog/2016/08/29/121-david-watson-my-journey-with-disciple-making-movements.html>.

31 Victor John and David Coles, *Bhojpuri Breakthrough: A Movement That Keeps Multiplying* (Monument, CO: WIGTake, 2019), 8.

32 “David Watson’s Testimony,” narrated by David Watson, *Accelerate Training*, accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.acceleratetraining.org/index.php/resources/61-david-watson-s-testimony-90-min-mp3/file>.

33 David Watson, “David Watson: My Journey with Disciple Making Movements.”

34 Jerry Trousdale, in Trousdale and Sunshine, *Kingdom Unleashed*, ch. 13.

35 Jerry Trousdale, *Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims Are Falling in Love with Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

36 Trousdale and Sunshine, *Kingdom Unleashed*.

37 David F. Hunt, “A Revolution in Church Multiplication in East Africa: Transformational Leaders Develop a Self-Sustainable Model of Rapid Church Multiplication” (DMin diss., Bakke Graduate University, 2009), 58.

of time can be avoided “if the church planter with significant language limitations disciples the insider and the insider takes the message to the people.”³⁸ Unfortunately, Hunt does not explain how the church planter will be able to successfully “disciple the insider” or verify the success of the insider’s ministry without knowing the insider’s language. Indeed, as we’ll see in chapter 8, working with national believers can be an extremely effective ministry strategy. But at other times, it can create illusions of success. After all, without knowing their language, it will be difficult to evaluate what’s happening.

- Mike Shipman, designer of the Any-3 method, doesn’t encourage language learning. In its place, he advocates using “a translator . . . to bridge language barriers.”³⁹ But working through translators is cumbersome, and usually far more error-prone than we might imagine. Translators in many parts of the unreached world have a limited familiarity with the missionary’s mother tongue, rendering nuanced communication mostly impossible. Indeed, unless the translator himself is a mature believer, he may not understand the concepts the missionary is trying to communicate and will be unable to explain them in his own tongue. In addition to all of that, communicating via a translator makes relationships difficult. It’s slow and unnatural. It can’t be done privately. This makes it hard to establish close relationships.

Something is awry when the most widely published missions thinkers happily tell stories of ministering with “limited language” and working through translators, but never stress the importance of language learning in normal situations. Language learning requires costly self-discipline, and missionaries who don’t understand its importance will have little motivation to persevere. The stories above are told as if we should *assume* that God works through missionaries who never learn the languages.

³⁸ Hunt, “Revolution in Church Multiplication in East Africa,” 129–30.

³⁹ Mike Shipman, *Any 3: Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2013), ch. 7.

But let's apply this assumption to other situations. Let's say you're going through some marriage or family problems. Wouldn't you want to see a counselor who spoke your language? After all, conversations about relationship problems are often complicated and confusing. Or, let's say you're investing in setting up a business overseas. If you had a lot of money on the line, wouldn't you hire customer service representatives who understood your customers' language and culture? After all, conversations about business problems are often complicated and confusing. Do you see what I'm getting at? I take it for granted that discipling new believers will be *at least* as complex as counseling struggling marriages or serving unhappy customers. After all, discipleship includes dealing with family problems and business practices . . . which are often complicated and confusing!

Of course God *can* work through our "limited language"—and God *can* work through translators. I'm not writing to condemn the authors above, or to imply that God did nothing through them. I'm merely suggesting that *we cannot actually know what God is doing in the lives of people we minister to* if we're unfamiliar with their language and culture.

We don't need to look far for illustrations of this. A friend who worked in Papua New Guinea for several years once told me of a Catholic priest who would occasionally travel up-river to minister the sacraments to tribes along the way. This priest knew only the people's trade language and was unaware that these tribal people had simply added the Catholic saints to the list of spirit beings in their animistic worldview. On many occasions, they hoped to steal objects from him because they believed the objects would grant them spiritual power or protection. In their worldview, the priest had spiritual power. His statues of Mary had spiritual power. But so did the trees, and so did the spirits who filled the surrounding jungle's sky, rivers, and animals. Don't get me wrong: the priest had communicated some new spiritual ideas to these people. But he lacked the linguistic ability to help them resolve the tension these ideas presented to their previously held belief systems. In this case, the priest's doctrine didn't subvert their pagan worldview; it became subsumed by it. Where linguistic depth is absent,

syncretism is often present.⁴⁰ People are capable of an enormous amount of doublethink, and it's not enough just to tell them to let go of old beliefs—we need the linguistic ability to learn and explain where those views differ from the Scriptures and why the Scriptures are more believable.

At this point, I often hear an objection: “Wait a second. Are you saying missionaries shouldn't *try* to share the good news about Jesus until they reach a high level of language ability?” No, I'm not saying that. In fact, I'm actually making a more startling claim: for all practical purposes, we simply *cannot* communicate the good news about Jesus until we reach a high level of language ability. It isn't a question of *should*, but *can*; not propriety, but ability. Similarly, the primary issue is not whether first-year medical students *should* be practicing medicine, but whether they *can* with any sort of effectiveness. Of course they can't. Because they don't yet know how.

At this point, I often hear an objection: “Wait a second. Are you saying missionaries shouldn't try to share the good news about Jesus until they reach a high level of language ability?” No, I'm not saying that. In fact, I'm actually making a more startling claim: for all practical purposes, we simply cannot communicate the good news about Jesus until we reach a high level of language ability.

40 One result of this that has a powerful effect on today's missions world is the common Muslim belief—alleged in the Qur'an (5:116)—that Christians worship God, Jesus, and Mary. As a young man growing up in a polytheistic culture, Muhammad had interacted with Christians and seems to have believed that this reflected trinitarianism. It is possible that local sects of Christians did actually include Mary as a member of the Trinity—if so, trinitarian doctrine had become syncretized with the polytheistic worldview of the day. However, no historical evidence can be found for such a claim. More likely, Muhammad simply misunderstood the teachings of local Christian communities. If so, then his culture's polytheistic worldview had clearly influenced his own perception of Christian teaching. In either case, the lack of clear Christian teaching and of available Christian Scriptures in Arabic allowed a syncretized understanding of Christianity to emerge. Islam rightly rejects this syncretized understanding, but does so only to replace it with a newer, fatally syncretized understanding of Jesus, in which Christian traditions about Jesus are combined with Muslim anti-trinitarian monotheism. The reinvented Jesus that emerges is a mere prophet who denies his own divinity.

I fear yet another misunderstanding. I'm not saying missionaries without language fluency should never speak of spiritual things in their first months and years. Generally, they should feel free to communicate whatever spiritual truths they can communicate clearly. But for those who haven't struggled to master a foreign language, it might be hard to imagine just how limited these missionaries will be in their early and intermediate stages. "God is big" and "Jesus is nice" might honestly be the best they can do. They likely won't be able to engage in any deep conversations at all.

Simply put, we need more than introductory language skills if we're going to explain the gospel in an understandable way. The sentence "Jesus died for your sins" won't help our listeners if we can't follow it up—in ways they understand—with answers to the following questions: Who is Jesus? What are sins? And why did this Jesus have to die for these sins?

In my early months and years of language study, I spoke often about God. I spoke of my gratitude to him. I spoke of his love and goodness. I like to think that my friends and neighbors knew I was a spiritual person. But saying "Thank you, Lord" when something wonderful happens to you is not the same as sharing the gospel. God may choose to use us in these early stages. Sometimes, we may meet people who are simply *ready*, like fruit waiting to be plucked. My friend "Ahmad" became a believer when two missionaries who spoke neither Arabic nor his tribal language gave him an Arabic Bible. But this happened only after Ahmad had already become deeply disillusioned with Islam and was searching for answers. Most people will need *significantly* more help than he did! And even in cases like this, our lack of fluency poses real dangers. Ahmad was left in a spiritually dangerous place. His spiritual growth was seriously hindered and he suffered as he wrestled, alone and sometimes unsuccessfully, with false teaching and temptations of the flesh that sought to destroy his soul.

If we hope to minister professionally and well, we must not use stories like Ahmad's as a pattern for ministry. Cutting corners and hoping for God to mop up the mess is a bad idea. Too many missionar-

ies never put in the effort to reach high levels of fluency because they overestimate how regularly God works apart from language fluency. They've heard one too many stories where Missionary A showed up to Unreached People B and—somehow, against all odds—God worked a miracle. I wish these stories weren't so alluring, because they paint an unrealistic picture and set unrealistic expectations.

Certainly, there are some niche roles on the mission field for those who never master the language. Missions efforts in various settings will depend on the work of pilots, aircraft mechanics, boarding school staff, doctors, and logistics coordinators. These roles are crucial to the success of the wider ministry, and we should honor those who fill them. But they're still *niche roles*. People who fill them are essential precisely because they enable others to concentrate on proclaiming the gospel. Other missionaries should take full advantage of this and focus on attaining high levels of proficiency in the languages they minister in. In much of today's mission field, we see the opposite trend; those who do acquire high levels of proficiency are the exception to the rule.

How Fluent Is "Fluent"?

Let's talk about fluency for a moment. How fluent should missionaries be before shifting their primary focus from language learning to ministry?

Fluency is a slippery concept. It's related to the word "fluid," meaning that speech *flows* without the speaker having to stop and think about each word. The truth is, however, that whether someone is *fluent* is something of a grey area. After a few months in a new language, a missionary may be able to fluently negotiate prices in the market. After a year, she may be comfortable navigating certain more complex topics with close friends.⁴¹ But it may take years before she can fluently

41 Language learners' fluency when speaking with close friends is usually stronger than it is when speaking with people they do not know. This is because spending extensive time together allows them to become far more familiar with their friends' *idiolects* (personal dialects, which are made up of an individual's personal speech patterns, preferred vocabulary, expressions, and grammar) than they are with the language in general.

negotiate humor, feelings, and spiritual concepts in less controlled situations—like in a group of friends where people speak quickly, colloquially, and with much emotion.

In order to dependably evangelize and disciple unreached peoples, we should be not only fluent but also adept in their languages. We may never have the facility of native speakers, but we should aim to routinely be able to handle a range of situations—from rapid, everyday banter to the thorniest and most personal of topics. Our language ability should never be the limiting factor in an important conversation. We need not only to know the meaning of words; we need to have a sense for their nuance. We need to be able to interact humorously. We need to understand body language and cultural symbols—what is and is not appropriate; what communicates disappointment, aggression, and respect. We need to be able to take control of a conversation when it's our turn to speak—and to know *when* it is in fact our turn to speak. We need to understand how stories are told. We need to be able to replicate the proper cadence of the language.

It is outside the scope of this book—indeed, it would take its own book—to explain how to learn a language efficiently and what an adequate level of fluency might look like. But for now, I want to make three critical points.

First, immersive language-learning strategies with a heavy focus on vocabulary enrichment and listening comprehension are ideal. Those unfamiliar with such strategies could begin by examining the *Growing Participant Approach*⁴² or *Becoming Equipped to Communicate*.⁴³ Well-designed, immersive language-learning approaches allow new missionaries to develop deep familiarity with the culture even as they study language.

Second, immersion on its own—even immersion with a trained tutor—won't be enough to bring most adults to a high level of proficiency. Most missionaries will also benefit from training in language

42 Growing Participant Approach, <https://www.growingparticipation.com>.

43 Mike Griffis and Linda Mac, *Becoming Equipped to Communicate: A Practical Guide for Learning a Language and Culture* (Baulkham Hills, New South Wales: AccessTruth, 2015).

acquisition before going to the field, or from detailed input in the grammar, speech patterns, and phonetics of the language they're learning.⁴⁴

Third, many missionaries will never reach native-speaker fluency. So I'm not counseling that we wait that long before withdrawing from full-time language learning focus to pursue ministry more fully. Instead, I'd advise that before pulling back from full-time language learning, missionaries should aim for a level of at least *Advanced Mid* proficiency according to ACTFL guidelines.⁴⁵ Focused language learning wouldn't cease at this point, and it's essential that language ability does not plateau here. However, pulling back from full-time study can be strategic

44 Contrary to popular belief, most adults will not automatically learn a language well simply from being surrounded by it. While adults are capable of learning other languages, their brains are less flexible than children's brains, and the environments they can immerse themselves in don't provide the same type of nurture or instruction that parents give to children. Missionaries may benefit from language-acquisition training, including training in grammar, discourse analysis, and phonetics. This is because we cling unknowingly to patterns we are familiar with. Training in these areas helps because:

- Other languages often have profoundly different grammatical patterns than our own, and simply immersing ourselves in a new language is not enough to help most adults master a new grammar. Grammatical help specific to the language being studied—or training in how to analyze grammar—is needed.
- It's also difficult to master new patterns of discourse: how do stories begin and end? What's the cadence of a language? How do I know when it's my turn to speak?
- See Christophe Pallier, Laura Bosch, and Nuria Sebastian-Galles, "A Limit on Behavioral Plasticity in Speech Perception," *Cognition* 64 (1997): B9–B17. Our perception of sounds hardens in childhood, and many adults struggle to perceive sounds that are not present in their native languages. For example, many Chinese immigrants to the West struggle to differentiate between "l" and "r" sounds, though they are entirely different sounds to a native English speaker. Similarly, native English speakers learning Arabic will struggle to distinguish between ﺕ and ﺚ.

45 *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012* (Alexandria, VA: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012). To provide a basic idea of what *Advanced Mid* level language ability looks like, I quote below from descriptions of *Advanced Mid* level speaking abilities. For a fuller idea of *Advanced Mid* level—including descriptions of *Advanced Mid* level listening, reading, and writing—readers can consult ACTFL guidelines:

Speakers at the *Advanced Mid* sublevel are able to handle with ease and confidence a large number of communicative tasks. They participate actively in most informal and some formal exchanges on a variety of concrete topics relating to work, school, home, and leisure activities, as well as topics relating to events of current, public, and personal interest or individual relevance.

as a high enough level of language has been achieved to allow the missionary to minister freely. At this level, language development will naturally continue as the speaker uses the language in a wide variety of circumstances in everyday life.

If this level of fluency is the goal, then language study will likely last many years, and Hudson Taylor's estimation of the daily time commitment—six to eight hours per day in a well-designed immersive study program—is a good indication of the type of dedication that will be required. In my own experience, language study really begins to accelerate when a missionary spends more than eight hours per day immersed in the “growth-zone” level interaction with the language.⁴⁶

This is more difficult than it sounds. Many missionaries who have experienced field life will throw their hands up in despair. I'm not trying to criticize or to weigh missionaries down with impossible tasks. I'm trying to provide a reminder that, one way or another, we *must* attain a high level of linguistic proficiency if we want to share the gospel clearly. I know there are many obstacles. Steady language tutors can be hard

Advanced Mid speakers demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in the major time frames of past, present, and future by providing a full account, with good control of aspect. . . .

Advanced Mid speakers can handle successfully and with relative ease the linguistic challenges presented by a complication or unexpected turn of events that occurs within the context of a routine situation. . . . Communicative strategies such as circumlocution or rephrasing are often employed for this purpose. The speech of Advanced Mid speakers performing Advanced-level tasks is marked by substantial flow. Their vocabulary is fairly extensive although primarily generic in nature, except in the case of a particular area of specialization or interest. Their discourse may still reflect the oral paragraph structure of their own language rather than that of the target language.

Advanced Mid speakers contribute to conversations on a variety of familiar topics, dealt with concretely, with much accuracy, clarity and precision, and they convey their intended message without misrepresentation or confusion. . . . When called on to perform functions or handle topics associated with the Superior level, the quality and/or quantity of their speech will generally decline.

46 When we are in our “growth-zone,” we are using the language at or near the limits of our abilities. Thus, after a year of language study, greeting a store-keeper and purchasing sugar is not a growth zone activity. Sitting down with a friend and having a conversation over tea is likely to be.

to find. We may have to travel unexpectedly due to war or civil unrest, or to renew our visas, or to deal with family crises. Some of us face seasons of business development that force us to reduce our weekly hours of language-acquisition focus. We can address these obstacles when they arise, and we shouldn't feel guilty about doing so. Life is complicated, and even our best-laid plans can fall apart. At points, we'll have to content ourselves with what is possible, not what is ideal. But within the limits of reasonable flexibility, we must do what we can to keep our nose to the grindstone.

Full-time language study may be especially difficult or impractical for mothers, particularly when their children are young. We need to allow for special flexibility here. Mothers will sometimes take considerably more time to master the language, and in places where ministry would ideally be conducted in more than one language, mothers may need to focus most of their energy on whichever language is more important. Most mothers on the field will greatly appreciate whatever we can do to encourage them in these situations.

Because some countries don't give language study visas, full-time language study may not always be possible. So in some cases, it may be important for missionaries to make significant progress in their language learning before entering the country.

Motivation wanes as the years press on. It's highest in the first years of ministry. So those who don't make progress in language acquisition immediately will easily settle into a "slow-drip approach," where they learn only little by little. Additionally, few other ministry activities can be entered into as effectively before we acquire language as they can be afterward. So wherever possible, language study should be front-loaded and entered into aggressively at the beginning of ministry.

Few people—missionaries included—have the internal motivation to continue full-time language study for years on end. Some accountability may be necessary to cultivate growth. Team leaders will help their team members by asking them to log the hours they intend to study. This suggestion often grates on people; it feels overbearing to ask missionaries to "report their hours." Such objections

only heighten my concern. It isn't a matter of motivation but of discipline, and we have no reason to chafe against it. Some kind of accountability is normal in the professional world. Why would we imagine we're above this?

A missionary once complained to me that tracking her hours made her feel like “the number of hours I study per day is all that matters.” Well, it isn't *all* that matters. But when trying to learn a language, the number of hours spent studying matters a good deal—just as the number of miles run matters when training for a marathon! Hours spent studying language are not *the point*, of course. They're the discipline that carries us to our actual goal. We may have the best of motivations, but once we're overseas—a little sleep, a little slumber, a little surfing of the internet . . . and before we know it entire days will disappear into a vortex.

Translation

In addition to learning a language and culture well enough to share the gospel, it may be necessary, in many cases, to translate Scripture into that language. Translation itself is a task that requires months of technical training and years of slow, careful work. In some cases, doing so may require creating an alphabet and promoting literacy. There are still languages with tens of thousands of speakers that have no written alphabet.

Providing an accurate, readable translation of the Bible is of the utmost importance. We know from history that small mistranslations can cause enormous problems. Increasingly, missionaries are relying on mother tongue translation strategies in which a missionary who speaks only a trade language simultaneously manages several teams of local translation helpers who translate the Scriptures into their own languages.⁴⁷ But these translation helpers are rarely tested for bilingual proficiency in the trade language used for communication with the

⁴⁷ Karl J. Franklin, “Bible Translation and Small Languages in the Pacific: Ten Years Later,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 29/2 (Summer 2012): 82–89.

missionary; they're not always believers; and they often lack familiarity with crucial Christian concepts.

In such cases, they'll inevitably struggle to accurately translate ideas they don't fully understand. Of course, translators try to screen out major inaccuracies, but the potential for both error and opaqueness increases when the missionary can only use a trade language to check the final translation. Nuances will be missed, and strange ideas will often creep in. Even when a translation is grammatically correct, if its ideas and stories are not told smoothly, then native readers may lose interest and leave their Scriptures on the shelf. Quality matters more than quickness, and in any Bible translation—certainly in translations into languages that have never before had the Bible translated—we must value professionalism over productivity.

Conclusion

Clear communication matters. Ultimately, it's God's Spirit who convicts people of sin. And yet, in order to do so, he works through our very human abilities to communicate. Past generations of missionaries understood this and pursued mastery of the languages they worked in so that they could communicate the gospel clearly. Today's missionary force has largely forgotten this. We are happy, for the most part, to work through translators—who may not even understand the ideas they are translating!—and to stumble through the few stories about Jesus our limited language abilities will allow. Our neglect of language learning is intended to save time and energy, to maximize efficiency. But while our slapdash approach may be well-intended, it is ill-advised and unprofessional. Maximizing efficiency—communicating to as many people as we can, as quickly as possible—risks communicating unclearly and compromising the message itself. God has sent us as ambassadors to communicate his gospel to the lost. For their sake and for the sake of the gospel, we must communicate it as fluently and clearly as possible.