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EDITORIAL

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Editorial

Missiology: Reclaiming First Principles

The churches that embrace the Great Commission of Jesus Christ must repeatedly return to the source of their message and power in order to reclaim their first principles. The tendency is to drift away from the biblical foundation upon which missionary efforts have been and must be built. When the modern missions movement began in the late eighteenth century in the Northamptonshire Baptist Association, whence it spread to many Christian denominations, these pioneers were faced with vehement opposition, theological and practical, on many fronts, internal and external. Opposition to the fulfillment of the Great Commission has reappeared through the years, in ways hauntingly familiar to those earlier missionaries, including from within the movement itself.

Andrew Fuller, the theologian behind the rise of the modern missions movement, was adamant that propagating orthodox theology must remain a foremost concern and that Scripture is the only source for that theology. In a sermon before the association in 1796, appealing to Hebrews 5:12–14, he delineated three necessary presuppositions: First, “*all Divine knowledge is to be derived from the oracles of God.*”¹ Fuller denied the idea that divine truth could be found anywhere other than in the Word of God. As Keith E. Eitel and Dietmar W. Schulze demonstrate in their respective essays in this volume, Fuller’s first axiom must be reclaimed at this critical juncture in missionary history. Eitel, dean of the school of evangelism and missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, warns against “evangelical agnosticism,” a hermeneutic that subtly undermines the clarity of biblical revelation. In a creative essay suffused with Scripture, Schulze, a German missiologist now serving with Eitel, demonstrates that the divinely inspired Bible rather than human culture must be the authoritative source for identifying principles of church planting.

In his second necessary presupposition, Fuller—who presided over the Particular Baptist missionary society that sent the famous William Carey—taught that, “*the oracles of God include a system of Divine truth.*” The biblical system distinguishes “first principles” from the “deep things

¹Andrew Fuller, “The Nature and Importance of an Intimate Knowledge of Divine Truth” (1596), in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller: With a Memoir of His Life*, ed. Joseph Belcher, 3 vols. (1845; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 160.

of God.” The deep things of God are “beyond the reach of a slight and cursory observation” and thus require “close and repeated attention.”² David J. Hesselgrave, a highly esteemed missiologist from the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, issues what may be the most important call to missionaries since Fuller wrote. Hesselgrave’s essay, “Will We Correct the Edinburgh Error?” challenges missionaries and strategists to refocus their attention upon orthodox doctrine. A biblically based doctrinal seriousness once distinguished evangelicals, but in the rush to embrace ecumenism, it is being lost. Like Fuller, Hesselgrave believes that evangelical Christians should pay “close and repeated attention” to biblical theology and its practical implications.

In his third and final presupposition, Reverend Fuller, our premiere missionary theologian and missionary strategist, argued that, “*Christians should not rest satisfied in having attained to a knowledge of the first principles of the doctrine of Christ, but should go on unto perfection; not only so as to obtain satisfaction for themselves, but that they may be able to teach others.*”³ In 1796, Fuller wrote that Christian teachers should resort only to Scripture for their knowledge, perfect that doctrinal knowledge, and then teach it to others. In 2008, Michael A.G. Haykin and Malcolm B. Yarnell III drive home this third and final necessary presupposition for properly fulfilling the Great Commission. A consummate historian and prolific author, Haykin, professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, discusses the hymns of Charles Wesley. He demonstrates that the Trinity is integral to Christian missionary efforts in reaching those deceived by Islam. Yarnell, a systematic theologian at Southwestern Seminary, contends that the Bible is the *sine qua non* of missionary preaching and teaching. Expositing the oft-misinterpreted Mars Hills Sermon of the Apostle Paul, he identifies dangerous tendencies set loose by certain missiologists who have been influential both internationally and in the emergent and emerging movements in the United States.

It is the prayer of the President and Faculty at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary that this issue will help foster a desire among church-planting missionaries, missiologists, and missionary strategists to fulfill the Great Commission according to the inspired, inerrant, sufficient, and perspicuous Word of God, rather than according to non-biblical ideals garnered from fallible, fallen human culture.

²Ibid., 161.

³Ibid.