

Exit

Training and Trusting

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Alex served among the Z people. He trained many to use his evangelistic and discipleship materials, and many churches were planted. Some of them did not see the relevance of some of his material; but he was the teacher, so they learned his material, passed it on, and continued to see churches multiply. Unfortunately, after some time passed Alex was deported. Though he was sad about leaving, Alex felt like the work was in good enough shape since so many churches had been planted. In time, however, doctrinal questions arose which the churches were not equipped to answer. The confusion over these questions led to dissension and division, and the movement stalled.

The scenario above reflects realistic field situations yet we are left with a number of questions. Where, if any place, did Alex go wrong? Assuming he couldn't change the deportation, what could he have done differently? Why was it that his methods led to expansion but at the same time left the church unable to respond to critical issues in their context?

Foundations describes the goal of our labors as “to complete the missionary task in each people group or place and then to exit, with the new churches from that place or people as our partners in the ongoing task of

global evangelism.”¹ What is meant by “exit,” and how does this affect the other parts of the task? And how do missionaries exit in a healthy way?

Many if not most missionaries understand that, as *Foundations* explains,² exit is not abandonment. At the same time, it seems that many see exit simply as the missionary leaving a location or people. In this article I hope to show that a more helpful understanding of exit sees it as training and trusting national believers throughout the missionary task.

More Than Leaving

Exit has become a key part of strategy planning in recent years. For a first example, the Team Leader training with which I was involved in the past understood exit as leaving: the missionary leaves, having seen at least the beginnings of a CPM, ideally to engage another people group or field. Participants identified statistical markers that might indicate the appropriate time to exit.³ And while the most recent statistics indicate that 100% of missionaries eventually leave, in reality a significantly lower percentage of those exits are related to the status of the work. Many exits are involuntary (deportations, health, family issues, etc.), while some are voluntary (missionaries who feel led elsewhere, move into leadership, etc.); thus, the timing may not be related to the status of the work. In many cases, exit did not seem to be a concern until the missionary realized he was leaving. There must be a better way to understand exit.

Another example is “Model-Assist-Watch-Leave” (MAWL), which is often considered a core concept in multiplication. If one does an internet search

¹ *Foundations*, 102.

² *Foundations*, 104.

³ David Sills critiqued the trend among missions agencies toward exiting too soon in *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody, 2010). Roland Allen lamented the practice of Anglican missions to exit too late in *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

for this expression, he might find that most of the initial hits have little more to say about “Leave” (i.e., exit) than a brief mention that Jesus, after modeling, assisting, and watching, left to go to heaven.⁴ This may leave one wondering if there is a way to think of exit that has more relevance to our strategic planning than simply “leave like Jesus.”

Tom Steffen in *Passing the Baton* emphasizes that exit is much more than simply leaving. It is a mindset that should be present from entry and includes all the adjustments the missionary makes in his own efforts as the work progresses. In this sense, every such adjustment is in some way a form of exit: from multiple changes of focus while remaining on site to a change of location while remaining accessible, to eventually making a complete withdrawal. Steffen describes it as moving “from learner to evangelist, to teacher, to resident adviser, to itinerant adviser, and finally to absent adviser.”⁵⁶

Understanding exit this way allows exit to affect the other parts of the task all along. It also means that missionaries can and should be practicing healthy exit from the beginning, regardless of how long they remain where they are. As one missionary, who has served over 10 years with the same people group remarked, “We are always exiting somewhere and entering somewhere.” They adjust what they do with different groups in various places who are at different stages in the task. With some, they are evangelists and equippers. With others, they help their national partners with broad seed sowing projects. With others, they and national partners are doing leadership

⁴ E.g., “MAWL,” <https://noplacelleft.net/mawl/>; C. Anderson, “What is M.A.W.L.?” <https://www.dmmsfrontiermissions.com/m-a-w-l/>; and “The Kingdom of Who?... Model, Assist, Watch, & Leave,” <https://asianroughrider.com/2015/09/30/the-kingdom-of-who-model-assist-watch-leave/>, accessed 28 July 2021.

⁵ Tom Steffen, *Passing the Baton: Church Planting That Empowers* (LaHabra, CA: Center for Organizational and Ministry Development, 1997), 21–24.

⁶ Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 104–5.

development and coaching the next generation; with still others, they and their national partners are exploring other towns and peoples to engage.

Does this understanding of exit find any support in Paul's practice? In Acts, Paul and his team left places for a variety of reasons.⁷ Interestingly, Paul's exit from a place on his initial visit was often involuntary due to persecution. Sometimes he left a teammate when he fled. Luke usually notes the presence of disciples. His subsequent visits were marked by less opposition, which might be explained by his desire primarily to encourage and strengthen the disciples and churches in those places (Acts 14:21–23, 15:36). He trusted those disciples and churches to continue in what they had believed, and he regarded his work in those places as complete (Rom 15:19–22). This might at least suggest the kind of adjustments in role that Steffen describes.

Training and Trusting

If the missionary sees exit only as “leaving,” this may affect his approach to partnership. He may think, “one day I will turn all this over to qualified national partners.” That is exit “to” partnership. But, if exit influences the entire task, partnership begins at entry. The result is that exit is not “to” partnership but “in” partnership. This requires intentionality on the part of the missionary.

Ian Buntain was recently named director of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's World Missions Center. His comments about the spiritual trajectory of his home country (Canada) are insightful on this point:

Canada... in my lifetime has gone from being a “Christian nation”... to a post- and now pre-Christian nation. I have concluded that the deficit in my discipleship heritage was a lack of faithfully

⁷ Steffen, 3.

training and *trusting* a next generation of restless, gospel-centered leaders....⁸ [emphasis added]

Buntain's comments highlight two essential activities of healthy exit: training and trusting local believers. Both are essential.

Training with an exit mentality involves more than training local disciples to use materials the missionary has developed. It means equipping disciples and churches to handle the Scriptures faithfully and communicate it clearly to produce their own content, not just consume or pass on the missionary's content.⁹ It means working with them to develop ways to equip their own people effectively, or give them access to effective training, including theological education, so they are prepared for long-term leadership and influence. It means grounding them in sound hermeneutics and biblical theology so they understand how to use Scripture to carry on the task and to face issues which inevitably surface after the missionary's departure. Paul was in Thessalonica only a short time, but his letters to the church there indicate he grounded them in biblical theology, from election to eschatology (Acts 17:1–9, 1Thess 1:4, 4:13–5:11, 2Thess 2:1–14)—doctrines it seems missionaries instinctively avoid because they are difficult, divisive, complex, or seem peripheral.

Trusting means treating local believers not as projects but as genuine partners in the task. It means learning from them as well as releasing and empowering them to do what they have been equipped and empowered by the Spirit to do. Paul modeled this beautifully with his multicultural team. It is striking that as he traveled from Corinth to Troas he was accompanied by seven men from four different places (Acts 20:4–6). As Will Brooks points out:

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/swbts/> post June 27, 2021. Accessed July 19, 2021.

⁹ Will Brooks and Sunny Tan, "Theological Education as Integral Component of World Mission Strategy" in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, ed. Scott Callahan and Will Brooks (2019), kindle edition, loc 3067.

Acts and the Pauline Epistles mention a hundred different people associated with Paul, and at least thirty-eight are considered coworkers. Many of those were people won to Christ and disciplined as a direct result of Paul's church-planting efforts. Moreover, the backgrounds of those partners are quite diverse.¹⁰

Brooks mentions some examples. Titus, a Gentile, traveled with Paul, then on behalf of Paul; Priscilla and Aquila led a house church and traveled with Paul; Tychicus delivered Paul's letters to Ephesus, Colossae, and Philemon, yet was obviously more than a courier; Epaphras was likely converted while Paul was in Ephesus, then started the church in Colossae. Timothy traveled with Paul, and on Paul's behalf, and did much more.¹¹ Paul trusted these collaborators deeply.

In his classic *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* Roland Allen laments the lack of indigeneity, the unhealthy dependence, and the poor contextualization of Anglican missions in the early 20th century. Allen saw these not as the fruit of poor strategy but of sinful hearts: racial and religious pride that caused the missionaries to approach the "poor heathen" with an attitude of superiority in virtually everything, in addition to underlying unbelief that prevented them from trusting the Holy Spirit's work in their converts.¹²

In contrast, Allen asserted that Paul's ministry was gospel-centered (that is, aimed at leading locals to life) rather than law-centered, to improve their morals. But more importantly for our purposes here, Paul "retired" (Allen's term for "exit"). Allen said of Paul:

He was always glad when his converts could progress without his aid. He welcomed their liberty. He withheld no gift from

¹⁰ Will Brooks, "Paul as a Model for the Practice of World Mission", in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, ed. Scott Callahan and Will Brooks (2019), kindle edition, loc 5015.

¹¹ Brooks, "Paul as a Model", loc 5015–5038.

¹² Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 141–44.

them which might enable them to dispense with his presence. . . . He gave freely, and then he retired [exited] from them that they might learn to exercise the powers which they possessed in Christ. He believed in the Holy Ghost. . . . He believed therefore in his converts. . . . He believed that [Christ] would stablish, strengthen, settle his converts. He believed, and acted as if he believed.¹³

Missionaries might do well to ask themselves a couple questions to discern to what extent they are “in” partnership: “Am I training my national partners to think rigorously and biblically, or am I merely training them to pass on my material?” “Am I trusting my national partners, treating them as equals, and working from the beginning to put the work in their hands?”

Exit and the Other Components of the Missionary Task

Foundations reminds us that we should in fact begin our work with exit in mind.¹⁴ A colleague recently remarked, “To exit well we must enter well.” He meant that partnership begins at entry, not at exit.

We should also continue our work with exit in mind. Exit affects evangelism and discipleship. Equipped local believers will always be better evangelists, disciplinarians, and church planters than foreigners; they understand the barriers to conversion and growth better than the outsider and are more credible models. So, the missionary pivots to equipping local leaders sooner rather than later, lest in the locals’ minds the task remains “the missionary’s job.”

Exit influences church planting and leadership development as well. The missionary with a healthy exit mentality recognizes that the church belongs to the local believers under Christ, and the “shape” of the church needs to

¹³ Allen, 148–49.

¹⁴ *Foundations*, 101.

reflect a kingdom community in that context.¹⁵ The same is true by extension of leadership development and theological education. Western models of education may not be effective in some contexts, but the missionary needs to work with the national partners to see that the things they have heard from their leaders, in the presence of many witnesses, can be passed on effectively to other faithful believers who can teach others (2 Tim 2:2).

Conclusion

Let's revisit the opening scenario and see an alternate ending: Alex eventually realized the churches were facing issues he had no idea existed. He also had no idea how to address them, but he knew they needed to be equipped to address those and other issues biblically. So, he spent some more time with a few local leaders, teaching them hermeneutics and biblical theology. He then persuaded them to meet with others to develop their own discipleship and leadership development processes apart from him, so they would feel less constrained to do things "his way." Though Alex was deported, churches continued to grow and multiply.

Exit is more than leaving. It should be a mindset that allows the missionary to enter as a learner and pivot to modeling, training, and trusting so that when the actual departure happens, things are in place—disciplemaking, church planting, and rigorous leadership development—that position believers and churches to face their own unique challenges and continue to grow and multiply.

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¹⁵ Ott and Wilson, 112.

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