

Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

September 29 2012: Missions and Evangelism Strategies

Apparently, my daughter has told her mother (who told me) of her submitting her application for short-term missions next year. Now, I have been in Southern Baptist churches all my life, pretty much, and therefore I am very used to groups going out on



evangelistic forays, including mission tours to other countries, but I was always utterly uninterested and disinclined to participate myself, so I never really reflected on the evangelical tradition (recently, it seems, since the '40s or '50s) of short-term mission trips. I am now confronted with the situation close to home. Actually, I can't say I *never* participated, since I was coerced as a Sunday School teacher and Youth Worker to take part in some church-wide outreach programs in the past, and I once went with a team of men to put up a church building in an impoverished area of Nogales, Sonora - in that case, two teams, actually; one to do the building, and one to go around the community "witnessing". In any event, what I observed among the people who were involved in these activities, some were like me, doing it because they had been "guilted" or required per their church position, and others out of a religious drive. Either way, when the groups returned to the church, they proudly announced how many people they had "saved" (induced to repeat the "magic prayer" and fill out some form) to the delight of the rest of the church, and basked in the conviction that they had "served God".

(The short-term mission team pictured here is the 2012 First Southern College group to the Czech Republic. The photo was actually taken in Prague.)

My problem with evangelism as thus traditionally performed is this: Actually, NO, we are not commanded to make converts in other nations, but rather, we are commanded to make *DISCIPLES* in whatever place *we find ourselves*. That is, the Great Commission isn't (as is commonly misquoted) "Go into all the world and make disciples" (and here, substituting the evangelical connotation "disciple = convert"), but

rather "As you go, make disciples of all nations". Now, I have no objection and nothing but admiration for men and women who are committed to God (intellectually and spiritually, not just emotionally) and are actually called (rather than "feel like they are called") to foreign missions. I gather that when Paul listed the offices in the church in I Corinthians 12, and again in Ephesians 4:11, he includes "apostle" (interpreted, "one who is sent"), which would correspond to the missionary. But, like I Corinthians states, not everyone is an apostle, but we have different roles in the church. If everyone is an apostle or an evangelist, then nobody is turning those new converts into disciples. And that's my core complaint: We as evangelicals are fixated on evangelism and *do not actually make disciples*. In fact, we do so poor a job that many of our own young people, like Jesse and Libby, cannot maintain their Christian convictions in the face of a hostile world and end up dropping out. In fact, most of the young people are [Already Gone](#) [1]. As a matter of fact, as I observe the emphases and strategies in the Baptist church and in youth camps and rallies, I see a fair bit of effort made to impart an emotion-based conviction that they *should* be in evangelism programs and go on mission trips.

So we want them to be evangelists and missionaries, but we haven't made *disciples* out of them.

In light of the new development, I looked around on the Net and found that there are others who share my concern about short-term mission trips. This long-term career missionary to Costa Rica actually wrote a [five-part series](#) [2] about what she dislikes about short-term mission trips, and the pietistic defenses that church people commonly raise (and later followed up with [this article](#) [3] comparing her worst-case short-term mission trip scenario with the method Jesus actually employed when He sent out his mission teams). Another, perhaps more thoughtful and balanced commentary, [is here](#) [4]. In both cases, there is counterpoint. The Costa Rica missionary is not opposed to short-term mission trips in principle, and she intends (some day) to write some articles about "good" short-term mission trips. The "Gospel Coalition" article is part of a pro-con "debate", and the "pro" position is linked from the article above. From what I can tell, however, most of the "good" aspect of the short-term mission trip involves or requires working with, or being invited by, a church or agency in the foreign country to be visited. This appears to be the case particularly when the mission trip is coordinated by a para-church organization. As a matter of fact, the FSBC group pictured above was invited to the Czech Republic to help with a youth camp (see the report [here](#) [5]).

Unfortunately, this doesn't really ease my mind much. Churches I've attended have had college-age summer missionaries from other U.S. states, and in some cases from other countries, come to do local evangelism work and help with youth group activities or youth camps. I see this idea as a "gimmick", an evangelism tool of using an interesting person from another country with a different speech accent to get the attention of the target audience. And I've seen it be successful. But the

end result is the same: The church crows about the "saved souls", but doesn't know what to do with them. I would hope those churches and agencies in the foreign countries who bring in our Tucson or U.S. short-term mission teams would have a better idea about intentional discipleship than our American churches seem to. But certainly the young people in those teams being sent do not.

In the end, I would have to admit that short-term mission trips are not necessarily a bad thing or that we should categorically cease doing them. However, before I would endorse my daughter's participation, I would rather see a number of things in place first:

- Before a church sponsors or encourages its people to participate in a short-term mission trip, it must have thought through what "disciple" really means, and have in place an intentional discipleship strategy.
- The church must be successfully reaching unbelievers *and discipling new believers* in its own mission field - its own city - before worrying about people elsewhere.
- The short-term mission trip should be coordinated with a church in the target country, or organized by a para-church ministry that performs this function.
- The church may make the short-term mission trip opportunity *available*, but must not coerce or encourage its people to participate, but rather allow people to choose for themselves in response to their own commitment to God and not some emotional state induced by the church leadership and culture.
- Participants must be disciples themselves, and understand the importance of intentional discipleship for the people they will meet on their mission trip.
- The team must reject the appeal to parade their tally of "saved souls" to the church upon their return.
- Short-term mission trips must NOT be used for unrelated purposes, such as summer entertainment for youth, or providing a "good experience" for youth, or a chance for foreign tourism.
- Similarly, prospective team members should be screened for motive. Individuals desiring a "spiritual experience" or religious tourism should not be included.

On a related note: Local outreach or evangelism activities can be good or bad, and are (as near as I can tell) more likely to be bad or counterproductive if they are not driven by the right motives and carefully planned and coordinated. The church start-up I am currently hanging out with, [Tucson Reformed Baptist Church \[6\]](#), is allowing or assisting a young man from the mother church in Gilbert to start a college ministry on the University of Arizona campus. I'm already questioning the prospects of having a student from the rival *Arizona State University* trying to reach UofA students, to say nothing of the wisdom of having to drive two hours to Tucson from the Phoenix area for his Bible study (and again for Sunday services) and then two hours back - I don't see much opportunity for *building community* under such

circumstances. But the method of attracting students to his nascent ministry was to hand out tracts.



Now, actually, I am a fan of handing out literature. One of my favorite ministries I support is [Jews for Jesus](#) [7], and their preferred method is the "sortie", where a team puts on their provocative "Jews for Jesus" shirts and their bag of "broadside" flyers and goes to areas with lots of pedestrian traffic and starts handing them out. First off, the people doing this are **trained**, actually disciples themselves, and are prepared to answer questions and deal with hostile situations. Secondly, the strategy is **targeted**, for evangelism to unbelievers, and in particular, Jewish unbelievers - this drives the content of the flyers, and (reflecting New York and San Francisco and other American metropolitan settings) the style. As part of this,

third, the participants are within the community; the broadsiders must themselves be Jewish, so they can relate to their target group, and members of that group can relate to the broadsider. And fourth, there is **follow-up**, in which persons intrigued by the literature can leave contact information, the organization sends a representative (apparently, the very broadsider that made the initial contact) to talk with them and walk them through the relevant Hebrew scriptures and prophecies, and to guide new converts to a fellowship where they can be strengthened and encouraged. Additionally, I note that the Jews for Jesus organization itself does not benefit from making these converts; it isn't a church, and thus has no other motive than winning Jews to the Messiah. Not much of this is true for your typical church outreach program or evangelism technique. So while I wish them well, I can't hold out much hope for this Reformed college ministry attempt on the UA campus, and I won't participate myself. Now, were I a member of a church that was committed to intentionally discipling new believers, and so could be confident in the opportunities for converts I might see made - would I be trained as a broadside distributor near my neighborhood church? You bet I would!

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1. www.wnd.com/?pageId=100324
2. www.theveryworstmissionary.com/2011/12/whole-can-of-worms-at-glance.html

3. www.theveryworstmissionary.com/2012/04/healthy-short-term-missions-do-it-like.html
 4. thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/06/18/why-you-should-consider-cancelling-your-short-term-mission-trips
 5. firstsoutherntucson.com/missions/updates
 6. www.tucsonreformedbaptist.org
 7. www.jewsforjesus.org
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August 30 2012: Creationist Turned Atheist

This is Georgia Purdom. Yes, she is a creationist, but no, she is not an atheist. She is a scientist, a biologist, with the Answers in Genesis organization. Her picture is here because there is no picture available of the girl she refers to in her [AIG blog post of May 3 \[1\]](#). Like Jesse Kilgore, of whom I wrote yesterday, the girl, Libby, was an ardent Christian and creationist until she went to college and encountered a forceful evolutionism. Unlike Jesse, she hasn't responded with despair and killed herself, so there is hope that, like [Jay Budziszewski \[2\]](#), she may actually be regenerate and God will draw her back in time.



Now, to the point: Dr. Purdom explains how Libby lost her faith in God because she lost her faith in the Bible, because her faith in the Bible was based on the truth of young-earth Creationism. However, this is backwards. Creationists should believe that God created the Earth (rather than having Darwinism producing the world-that-is) because the Bible is literally and dependably true. As Purdom says, "Libby seems to have things backwards".

But think about it a bit. Here's an argument:

- IF God is real, THEN the Bible is true
- IF the Bible is true, THEN God created the Earth like He said He did

Now, both propositions suffer from some squishiness. What does "the Bible is true" mean? Theologians have been disputing this for thousands of years. In Baptist and Creationist circles, "true" is "literally true and inerrant". Furthermore, the theistic evolutionists put a spin on "God created the Earth" as informed by contemporary origins "science". But look at it from Libby's point of view. She is a young-earth creationist, so both these statements will get no disagreement from her. Then, when

you add the next proposition,

- God did not create the Earth; rather, Darwinistic evolution is the correct explanation

then the conclusion

- Therefore, God is not real

flows from a valid argument. Now, the reason Libby accepted the third proposition is because it was being thrust at her in her college classes, and she was not equipped to deal with it.

Now the comparison with Jesse is most similar. Both had been brought up with a lot of facts for the purpose of engaging their peers - Jesse with his "debating" and promoting "traditional values" and Libby with her "creation apologetics". In other words, they were equipped for attack rather than defense, and when they encountered an enemy that would not retreat from their attack, they had no defense to fall back upon. They were ill-prepared by their churches and their parents.

Both Libby and Jesse did not bring their doubts to their parents. Perhaps this is because they already knew their parents were no better equipped to deal with the challenge than they were themselves. While Libby reports that her parents "were great fans of Ken Ham and Answers in Genesis", somehow the parents missed the boat about defending the veracity of the Bible and developing a solid relationship for their child with God and with themselves.

Both are examples of children who have fallen away from the faith and the church. Both had parents that were focused on Christian ephemera ("winning debates", "evangelism") rather than on Christ and a solid theology and Bible background.

I appreciate what Dr. Purdom says toward the end of her article, when she reflects on how the lesson of Libby applies to her own daughter:

I need to start asking her questions and she how she responds and not just assume she knows the answers. I need to start giving her more detailed understanding of these issues so she can answer effectively when those around her question her beliefs.

That's a good perspective for a Christian parent to have. Parents like me.

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1. blogs.answersingenesis.org/blogs/georgia-purdom/2012/05/03/answers-in-genesis-and-libbys-journey-to-atheism

2. www.leaderu.com/real/ri9801/budziszewski.html

August 29 2012: Debater Turned Atheist

Meet Jesse Kilgore. He's dead now. When he was younger, in church, he was so full of facts and enthusiasm that he considered himself a "debater". Not sure who he was debating, and the [news article](#) [1] where I got the story doesn't say. Perhaps his high school peers. But this church-imparted knowledge must have been pretty shallow. It seems that when he started classes at University, he fell in with an atheist professor who challenged him to read the Dawkins *The God Delusion* book. He did - hiding the book under his mattress in shame, to hide it from his minister father. He was so shaken that he abandoned his faith, became an atheist, and, unable to live under those conditions, committed suicide.



Pretty awful.

But it raises all kinds of questions. First, was Jesse really, truly ever a regenerated believer? Per the common Baptist (and Calvinist) theory, if someone hangs up on Jesus, they never really knew Him in the first place. And yet, his father was a *minister*, a military chaplain. I know that regeneration is more internal than external, but I would figure a minister who actually knew Jesus himself would be in the best position to observe his own son. Or maybe he was fooled by the "debater" image.

Not knowing anything better about Keith Kilgore, the father, I couldn't say he wasn't one of the "easy-believism" preachers, like some in Tucson I know, for whom "if you've asked Jesus into your heart, you are saved and going to heaven, and it doesn't matter what you do." I've known a few people in Tucson who got all excited about young-earth creationism, or politics, or the abortion fight - they professed to be Christians, just like Jesse, and they were really into their Christian ephemera, just like Jesse, but as Jesus described in the Parable of the Sower, the seeds who fell in shallow ground grew up quickly but withered away.

But let's be charitable. Let's say that Jesse really was a Christian who fell into doubt, and the atheism he professed and the suicide he committed were merely expressions of that doubt. How did he come to this situation?

His grief-stricken minister father is blaming the professor and the school. He is claiming that his son was a victim of the Culture War, and of "malpractice" by public school teachers. This is common in our civilization, the "victim mentality", where the problem is always someone else's fault. But let's put the blame where it really belongs.

Early Christians faced true persecution, holding to their faith even if it meant death. Christians even today around the world are making the same choice.

Some Christians today are not swayed by atheist arguments, and are effectively pushing back. Some of them are mature Christians, but not all. What do they have that Jesse didn't have? Perhaps... apologetics training? Perhaps... more than just Bible teaching?

I would put Jesse Kilgore more in the camp of those young people who leave the church because the church never gave them reasons to believe that their Bible teaching was anything more than just religious stories. There was no depth in his Christian education. In fact, it seemed to have specialized in eschatology and anti-abortion and traditional values.

Why is the father blaming the school system? Did he *not know* of the anti-Christian environment there? Why did he not better prepare his son to face the challenge?

Why did Jesse hide the book under his mattress? Why did he confess his loss of faith to a relative and not his father? It would have been much better to have studied the Dawkins book with his father and dealt with the doubts in a friendly, affirming context. In fact, it would be better for young people to encounter books like *The God Delusion* in Sunday School, instead of yet more Bible teaching. There is certainly a wealth of Christian-perspective teaching materials on the Web for Sunday School teachers who are concerned enough to do more than merely "get through" the denominational Sunday School literature. Or for pastors or preachers, for that matter.

I am very sorry for the Kilgore family's loss, and the apparent loss of eternal life for Jesse. All the same, where the father reacts with anger against the enemy, I would prefer to point out the weakness in our own camp. Young people are falling away, or left unable to deal with challenges in the world that church leaders should already be aware of, due to the inadequate training they receive in church. And, sadly, ministers like Keith Kilgore are part of this tradition of inadequacy.

At the same time, I will point the finger at **MYSELF**. The church is not, and cannot be, the primary source of Christian training for children. The family is. The child's primary "minister" is... the *father*. My children are now both in a hostile university setting. I hope the training and example I have given them will serve to protect them against the challenges they will encounter.

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1. www.wnd.com/2008/11/81459