

Missions in a Facebook Age

BOB HEERSPINK

The book of Acts describes a Church that grows from Jerusalem to Judea, to the ends of the earth; but the world today is flat. It is smaller, it seems, because of our Internet connections. What does it mean to reach out and to do missions today? How has missions changed in this age of Internet ministry? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. Dave, the nature of the Church is summarized in that classic expression of the Nicene Creed: We believe one holy catholic, Apostolic church; but it has sometimes been suggested, Dave, that there really needs to be another mark of the Church, and that is mission...

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

That somehow we really haven't captured what the Church is like until we talk about the evangelistic command of Christ to go to all the world with the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

We have looked at these various characteristics in a series of programs: The oneness or unity of the Church; the universality, the holiness of the Church; and we also talked about Acts 2:42, the devotion of the early Church to the Apostles' teaching, to fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer; but you have to expand that by looking at the rest of the book of Acts, where the Church also reaches out in mission. It is not enough just to look at these internal marks of the Church without also saying that the Church is called to reach out with the Gospel, even to the ends of the earth. But today, you think about missions and missionaries and you wonder: Is it still relevant?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; because in a pluralistic age, people are saying: Should we even go out and try to convert people to Christianity?

DAVE BAST

Exactly; that seems a little bit offensive, doesn't it? What are missionaries' roles in today's world? Well, we have a guest today who knows something about that – who has done quite a bit of thinking about it, and in fact, that is his daily calling. He is Doug Van Bronkhorst. Doug has been a pastor in several different Reformed and Presbyterian churches, and he is now the executive director of Interserve USA. Interserve is one of the oldest mission agencies in Great Britain and the United States, and it is a pleasure, Doug, to welcome you into the studio, and thank you for coming.

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

I am glad to be here.

DAVE BAST

So, there is the question: Do we still need missions and missionaries today?

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Oh, thanks. Well, that wraps up our conversation... Okay, will you expand on that?

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Well, the Gospel is sharing Christ, it is a relationship with God, and it always has been a relationship; so relationships are still required and important, including the really important relationship of person to person and talking about spiritual things and what it means to know Christ. So, yes, people still need to go and to share, and in a personal way embody Christ with others, and that has always been the mission of the Church and that hasn't changed.

DAVE BAST

What about the argument that with pluralism, now, where we know more about other peoples' religions and maybe we have destroyed some of the stereotypes of the benighted heathen and all that sort of thing; that it is actually offensive to try to change a person's religion or convert them?

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Well, first of all, I wouldn't say we should try to change a person's religion. We are presenting them with the claims of Christ, and what they do with that is really between them and God. Yes, people know more. We know more about them; they know more about us. They certainly know more about various aspects of the Gospel, perhaps; but they still need Christ; always have, always will.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, in the world today, how has missions changed, from your perspective? You know, we have this image of a missionary years ago. I remember when I was a young person looking at some missionary journals, and there was the North American missionary surrounded by helpers, serving in a compound really separate, away from other people. How has that changed in terms of today?

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Some things haven't changed. The commitment to share Christ and to do it with an extra degree of difficulty cross-culturally, that hasn't changed; and that kind of pioneer spirit in the hearts of some people that God places there to go to a really different place – that hasn't changed; but yes, you are right; the context has changed a lot. You can still find missionaries today who look exactly like they did 50 or 100 years ago, so we are talking about change in the sense of here and there, not necessarily every single instance, but by and large, it is very different. One example of that would be that more and more missionaries have jobs overseas. They don't go as professional evangelists, professional pastors, they go as doctors, teachers, business people, engineers, that sort of thing because that is what gets them into a country and that is also what countries need; and that also turns out to be the most effective way of sharing the Gospel. You penetrate a culture when you become part of the culture, and you do that by becoming part of the community. So, you don't live in a compound, you don't look or act different, other than being a foreigner, but you become part of the community.

BOB HEERSPINK

So there is much more sensitivity today about the fact that as we come from, say, North America, we are not there to bring North American culture. We really need to be enfolded into that culture and win a hearing for the Gospel.

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Yes; I think the best missionaries in the past have sensitivity, too. It has always been an issue. Are we preaching the Gospel or are we preaching American or Western or European culture? What I am saying is that the job is to be a part of the community. For example, the largest growth area for our organization are people involved in businesses – for-profit businesses – who go to work in that business, maybe to start it in an entrepreneurial way, who are adding value to that country because of their business, and who are there as Christians rubbing shoulders with those who work with them and for them, with their neighbors, with the people who have children and families befriend in the community where they live. They become part of the culture. They are not completely part of it because they are still foreign, but they become part of it; and that way they actually build relationships and have an opportunity to penetrate even a really difficult culture, let's say, like Muslim cultures, because of their job.

DAVE BAST

So, there is a big difference right there. I don't think most of us would imagine that an entrepreneur would be an ideal missionary candidate.

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Yes, they certainly are more and more. An engineer... we think of doctors, teachers, and nurses – that has always been there, but now you should think about architects and lawyers and engineers and various kinds of professional people... whatever, really. Tell me what your job is and I can probably find a place for you to do it overseas as a missionary.

BOB HEERSPINK

So is there orientation that you give to help people think through how to grab the opportunities? I mean, I would imagine many people go overseas to serve as engineers, and they never share their faith. What is needed in terms of training, encouragement, support, to take someone who goes as a medical doctor, say, and turn them into a witness for Christ?

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Well, the sad thing is, many engineers here never share their faith either...

DAVE BAST

That's true, isn't it?

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

That is the whole point, isn't it? How do we live out our faith in word and in deed wherever God has placed us? If you have to do it in a different language and culture, it is a little more difficult, but it is still the same basic issue. I actually expect the Church to provide that kind of training, although of course, we do talk about it and it is part of our orientation; but I expect people to come to me who already are sharing their faith, and they are working in their professions as Christians, and in their community and in their family and in their recreation.

DAVE BAST

So that is a failure of our congregations, you are saying...
Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Yes, yes.

DAVE BAST

We should all be challenging ourselves and each other to be sharers of our faith in the context of our professional lives – our work lives – whatever that is: In the factory, in the shop, in the office.
Doug Van

BRONKHORST

And I don't mean preaching the Gospel on company time...

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

Doug Van

Bronkhorst: I mean the way we do our business, working for the glory of God as if Jesus were our employer; and also looking for opportunities, of course, to provide a verbal witness when those opportunities exist.

DAVE BAST

That makes me think of an earlier program we did in this series on the holiness of Christians. It is often lacking in practice. It is there theoretically, but we give off a bad odor when we don't live that consistently.

BOB HEERSPINK

But what this really means, then, is that it is not just a matter of going internationally as someone who has a profession and sharing the Gospel, but that this is really the model for missions that has to take place right here in North America.

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

I was attracted to Interserve, my organization, because I spent time with Interserve workers overseas, particularly in Nepal and Bangladesh, a long time ago; and I saw that they were doing exactly what I was asking my congregation in San Francisco to do at the time. Sunday morning is nice and important. I make my living being a pastor. I think there is a place for this, but what really counts is what you do Monday through Saturday. If we are going to penetrate the San Francisco Bay area with the Gospel, what *you* do out in the world is what really counts; and I saw Interserve people doing that as I followed them around in their jobs and in their family life and in their recreation in Nepal and Bangladesh. If they can do it there, we can do it here. It is really the same thing. It is just that the cultural barrier, of course, has to be then crossed by the missionary.

DAVE BAST

Well, let's talk about that a little bit. What makes it extra hard, let's say, to go to some of the tough places? I know one of the things Interserve says is that we focus on the hard places...
Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Right.

DAVE BAST

In the world. What are some of those hardships?

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Well, sometimes it is physical hardship, although more and more that is not necessarily the case. More and more, missionaries are urban living in rather sophisticated places, at least in comparison to the old days; but the old barriers are still there – the barriers of culture and language. In order to see a person or a community or a culture or a nation change, you have to understand who they are. You have to speak their language and understand their culture and that takes a lot of time and effort and energy.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is not going to yield to short-term kinds of experiences.

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

No, you are not going to change Afghanistan with a 2-week visit.

BOB HEERSPINK

And just putting on a suit... You know, people wearing blue jeans from the West does not mean that that culture is the same as the one that a missionary is coming from.

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

No; for example, Turkey is a country which has a very Westernized look to it. It is very user friendly for a tourist, but it is a very difficult culture to penetrate with the Gospel; and those who live there... the longer you live there the more you understand how hard it is; but people who are committed to doing it are able to do so.

DAVE BAST

As you think... you are a missions executive; what are you looking for in a person who would be an ideal missionary, whether it is to their own culture here in North America or abroad? Give us the bottom line – most important thing.

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Well actually, there are two things: One is, I am looking for people who are good at their jobs. They are good teachers, they are good engineers, they are good professors, they are good business people. They do well in their profession. The second thing is, I am looking for people who do well in their spiritual life, especially who have a passion and commitment to share their faith in winsome ways with the people around them.

BOB HEERSPINK

Doug, we want to thank you for being with us today. It is exciting to hear what is happening at Interserve, and we wish you God's blessing as you continue to encourage the work of the Gospel around the world.

Thank you.

Doug Van

BRONKHORST

Well, thank you.

DAVE BAST

When we return we will be joined by a young missionary who sort of fleshes this experience out in his own life. His name is Eric, and stay tuned.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

This is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink. We have been talking on this program about missions, and in this segment we are really pleased to have join us Eric. He has been a missionary now for almost ten years in various parts of the world. Welcome, Eric, to our program.

ERIC

Thank you very much. It is good to be here.

DAVE BAST

It's an interesting vocation or calling, to be a missionary. It used to be, I think many of us had an image of what a missionary was: Somebody in a pith helmet, you know, who swam through the jungle and found all the benighted savages. It is a little bit different perhaps in an age of the Internet and Facebook. How does one become a missionary? How does that happen? Do you go to a job fair or what brought that about for you, Eric?

ERIC

Yes, I think it is very similar to the past in how God leads each individual person; and for me it was through a series of events, going on a short-term trip through our church, and then through some studies, and then really God leading and touching my heart in different circumstances, where I had opportunities to go abroad and also meet people closer to home; and it just seemed like God was showing me, you know... and through scripture, how scripture over and over again speaks about the nations, and go into all the nations and proclaim.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, it was a really experiential thing, where you actually encountered people in cross-cultural situations, and you felt God working in your life, saying: Hey, this is something that I may be being led to do for the kingdom.

ERIC

Yes; I think it was very experiential in that sense. It was reading scripture, teachings that I was receiving, seeing the great needs around the world, particularly imbalances in some parts of the world that really had nobody working; the Church was so small or nonexistent; in other parts of the world where there were lots of workers, and I just felt God was showing and leading me particularly to go into that part of the world knowing that not everybody would go there; but it also meant that possibly I would be staying here in the U.S., but looking for immigrant communities that their home countries and peoples maybe don't have a witness for Jesus.

DAVE BAST

How did your family, and maybe even especially more your friends, react when they learned this, that this was what you were going to do?

ERIC

I think in one sense there was a joy and a pride. I think there was also a sense of fear of where I would be going to the unknown, to countries where traditionally we may be uncomfortable with... but I think with time, and especially after some had gone and visited, they realized it is a wonderful place, actually, to be, and it is safe in many ways in many of these places, although there is that risk factor.

BOB HEERSPINK

So, you have been serving in Central Asia over the last number of years; we are not going to be more specific about locale than that; but in the work that you have been doing, what concretely is missions like today? What has been occupying your time?

ERIC

I think holistic ministry is the main way to summarize our role in missions today. It is not about one person going to say a church or a Bible school overseas, where the church is already present; and that does happen; but where we were going there really is no church; and if there is a church, it is only one or two scattered believers or people who are afraid to show themselves and reveal themselves; and so we are very much involved in development work or business or working in hospitals. There is a whole gamut of work that we could be doing, but alongside that then we are really very much focused on... we want people to know Jesus. We want to know the hope we can have in him; and so through that, then, we are able to, through relationships, be able to get to know people, discipleship, lead them into a church or build up a church in and through them and their networks because Jesus is working very much through relationships through their groups and their connections that they have; and that is where suddenly you have a small house church building up through their family network.

BOB HEERSPINK

So did you find that friendships were easy to establish? Was there a high level of trust with folks saying you are from a different culture, a different background, but I know that you care about us and I want to know more about you and what you believe?

ERIC

Yes; surprisingly, relationships are so easy there. One of the major contrasts between our culture and many of the cultures around the world is that open door feeling. You just go, and many times you will meet somebody on the street and there is: Come on over, come on over. Let's do dinner together; and you can spend five, six, seven, eight hours there drinking tea, talking, eating together, having fellowship, and through that, especially with time, you are able to get deeper and deeper and deeper with people; learning their hurts, learning their needs, and there are many opportunities where we can talk about Jesus that way.

DAVE BAST

Tell us something a little more about the background – sort of the religious background – of the places that you served. Central Asia... for a lot of people that is a mystery region – a lot of those “-stan” countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union; economically, spiritually, socially, just fill us in briefly.

ERIC

Yes, I would say... Central Asia, it is so diverse and it has a history that goes back thousands of years. Some of the cities around me were celebrating 2,500-year birthdays. So, it is hard to give in a quick snapshot what it was like, but the Soviet Union played a major role in how they are today – their economic situation. Many of them are struggling to come out of the Communism, learning what it means to be maybe what they call a democracy today; that could be debatable; but spiritually they are coming out of Islam; predominantly Muslim and Orthodox – Russian Orthodox; but the majority... almost in all of them – 90-95% to 100% are Muslim background.

DAVE BAST

So Eric, you go to Central Asia, you show up as a missionary, although of course you couldn't call yourself that – what did you do?

ERIC

Yes; our main role really was micro-enterprise development, and we also had a language learning center; and through that we were able to get into the community; and the community came to us. We were trying to find:

What are the needs there in a specific location? Asking from them, and many of them would say: We need to learn English or, we need business; and so, we would find ways to create, or alongside them, create businesses that would be sustainable, long-term, and be able to help them as families, as individuals, and help the community. So, the community were really happy about our presence there because we wanted to be there long term and we really love the community; and so, as ways that we could meet some of their needs, but also that they were seeing us as beneficial to their community in just a practical way; and through that we could get into spiritual and deeper things.

BOB HEERSPINK

So after you have worked with people and established relationships, can you give an example of how that became a bridge for the Gospel?

ERIC

Yes; I think just a couple of examples is just how it gets us into the homes of the people. We were allowed to have them come to us, building relationships, going to pick up the feed, going to pick up the birds we are talking in the car. One guy who was – I would consider him more of a secret believer in his community – but we rode for 12 hours to go pick up the birds. So in that time we were able to just talk and spend a lot of time together talking about life, his family, and also just the glory of God and who God is. The other is, my wife was able to build a lot of relationships with women. She was doing a small kind of clothing and small handicraft project; and so she got to know a number of ladies through that, and we were able to bring believers into the project – followers of Jesus into the project – and they were able to also connect up with these other members of the community; and through that they were able to share... usually it is such a long process, and so it is stages; you need time to do it.

BOB HEERSPINK

You have to be patient.

ERIC

Yes; a lot of patience is needed, and not expecting... well, expectant of what God is going to do, surprisingly, through amazing things, but also realizing that this could take twenty years, it could take ten years; and our focus was really on local leaders – followers of Jesus – who would be working there long term. We didn't know how long we could be there, and in fact, we had to leave at one point.

DAVE BAST

Let me ask you... I will call it a little bit of a tougher question:

ERIC

Sure.

DAVE BAST

One of the criticisms that the Church gets is that missionaries are buying Christians in various parts of the world. They are buying converts by giving them things to eat or money or jobs or whatever. How would you respond to that? You have sort of lived out this relational ministry; what is your response?

ERIC

I think it is a good question, and there are many places where that is perceived. We hear it all the time from the local communities; and I think in one sense if they don't understand what is happening, it could be perceived that way; but many of them also are receiving... when I say "them" it is people in the community are also receiving help, say through the development project. They are getting opportunities, too.

DAVE BAST

So there are no strings attached. It is not like you have to go to church to get this, or you have to become a Christian.

ERIC

Absolutely not; and I don't think there is a single person in Central Asia who is working to see Jesus known who is going to give a single person one cent for them to follow Christ. What it more is, is being able to work within the community; and actually a lot of times it is God's bringing blessing upon these people, not through us, but people are seeing that, and because they are connected with us sometimes they are saying: Hey, wait a minute; how are they getting such blessing?

BOB HEERSPINK

So they see the motivation and they see the way God is working through the ministry.

ERIC

Right; they are seeing things and they are often surprised, I think, at the blessing people receive, and they question that; and you know, sometimes they do, suddenly their house is getting blessed. They are beginning to put roofs on their homes or their family is getting jobs.

DAVE BAST

So it is simple ministry: Social, economic, but also spiritual, in the name of Christ, and those whom God is moving in their lives, they respond.

ERIC

Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Eric, we want to thank you for being present with us, and if anyone would like to know more about Eric's ministry, we invite you to contact us at groundworkonline.com. God's blessing to you as you pursue the next chapter of ministry.

ERIC

Thank you, to you also.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on about on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join with us in the conversation.

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