

**Short-term Missions**  
**Week 9**  
**Slightly edited from CHBC's Core Seminar**

## **Outline Summary**

1. What is short-term mission work?
2. Is short-term work modeled in Scripture?
3. Is short-term work helpful?
4. How can we maximize the usefulness of short-term trips?

### **I. Introduction**

A couple of weeks ago, we began to think specifically about what it means to take the Gospel to all the nations; of intentionally leaving this country and living in another country for the purpose of sharing our faith with others in that country, just as we are called to do here for those of us who stay here. Last week, we considered the specific topic of missionary methods and how the shape of the atonement (Christ dying for men and women from every tribe, tongue, people and nation) shapes our missions methodology (taking the Gospel to every tribe, tongue, people and nation). Today, we want to consider one specific way we live out that commitment of furthering the advancement of the Gospel to the nations; and that is through short-term mission trips.

### **II. What is Short-Term Missions Work?**

Before we begin to look into the topic of short-term missions, we need to define what we mean by that term. So let me just ask you right here at the outset, what do you think of when someone mentions “short-term” missions trip or project? What comes to your mind?

- A. Mission work: crossing cultural, language, or geographic boundaries to advance the cause of the Gospel.
- B. Short-term: The individual is there generally less than a year. Often only a few weeks. IMB considers anything less than 2 years short-term.

- C. Here are just a few examples of short-term missions:
- i. Short trips to encourage overseas workers by caring for their children during a meeting or conference.
  - ii. Trips to meet locals and give out copies of the Bible in areas where long-term workers would not be able to do this for fear of being kicked out of the country (i.e. being expendable for God's glory).
  - iii. Other examples would be special projects like medical relief work or building a church facility or doing a vacation Bible school.
  - iv. Another type of trip would be helping the long-term workers build relationships with the locals through teaching English or holding certain workshops that provide particular knowledge to locals – i.e., improving agricultural methods, cooking, computers.

## **II. Is Short-Term Work Modeled in Scripture?**

Many American Christians are involved in short-term missions trips. But, before we consider any other facets of short-term mission work, we need to ask if there is a Biblical basis for short-term mission work. Is this type of missionary work modeled in the Bible or is it just an innovation of flighty Westerners who don't want to commit to doing anything difficult long-term?

Specifically, it would be helpful to look and see if the practice of short-term missions had a place in the early missionary work of the Apostles, as we look in Scripture. To consider that, we can turn to the history of early Christian missions in the Book of Acts.

### **A. Peter in Acts 10.**

And let's look at Acts, chapter 10. One possible example of short-term missions in the early church is Peter's visit to the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius in Acts 10. As you may recall from a couple of weeks ago, God sent a vision to both Cornelius and Peter in order that Peter might leave Joppa to travel to

Caesarea to proclaim the Gospel to Cornelius. This trip by Peter involved crossing a huge cultural barrier as God taught Peter that he should not consider the Gentiles unclean; that God had a plan to save Gentiles as well as Jews. And from the passages in chapter 10, it seems fairly certain that Peter's mission took him just a few days to complete before he left Cornelius (vv. 23, 24, 30, 48)

## **B. Other Examples: Paul's Missionary Journeys in Acts.**

We can also see short-term mission trips modeled in Paul's missionary journeys. In the book "Short-term Missions," Mack Stiles summarizes Paul's first missionary journey as a series of short-term trips from one area to the next. He notes that the church in Antioch commissioned Paul and Barnabas for missionary work in the spring of what may have been AD 48 (Acts: 13:3). Among other things, this indicates that from the beginning, the church understood even short-term missions to be primarily the work of the church, not merely the private choice of an individual Christian about how to use his or her vacation time...more on that later.

Paul and Barnabas first traveled to Cyprus, where they went about preaching the Gospel through the whole island (Acts: 13:4). From there they journeyed by sea to Pamphylia for maybe as little as two or three weeks, and they were driven out of this region by the Jews after many had come to believe (Acts 13:13). Then, after traveling by land, they wintered in Iconium for perhaps four or five months where they faced similar acceptance and opposition (Acts 13:51). In the spring of what many think was AD 49, they moved to Lystra and Derbe, where they stayed for a few months (Acts 14:6). From Derbe, Paul and Barnabas spent their summer retracing steps to encourage the new Christians and returned to Antioch rejoicing, in what may have been the late summer of 49 (Acts. 14:27). As best we can tell, the whole trip (really a series of short trips) took about a year and a half.

Paul's second missionary journey seems to have been similar. His stay in the cities averaged maybe about three months for each location they visited, as best we can tell. Churches in Philippi and Thessalonica were established in a matter of weeks and Paul moved on fairly soon after that.

Now, this certainly does not mean that we should all do mission work in this way, but it does give a clear example that short-term work has been used

powerfully as one of God's means to advance the Gospel. Moving to a place and living there for decades to go deep into the community is great, but it is not the only example we see in the Bible.

### **III. Is Short-Term Work Helpful?**

But it is also appropriate for us to ask: "Is such an approach is really helpful in our current context?"

Since Scripture does not command short-term trips as a primary methodology or as a necessary part of evangelism, it is appropriate to ask about its apparent utility. [You might ask class whether they think such trips are helpful to the advancement of the Gospel and if so, how?]

In this regard, I want to suggest at least three major ways that short-term work adds to the overall effort to carry the Gospel around the world.

#### **A. Short term work can be an encouragement to long-term workers.**

1. First, visits by short-term volunteers can provide Christian fellowship and spiritual encouragement; as others have observed about work, especially in restricted-access countries where there are few Christians, isolation and lack of fellowship is often a challenge for long-term workers. A short-term trip can greatly encourage a long-term worker by providing fellowship and support. It would be a good place to start to try to have someone visit them at least once a year.

2. Another way that these trips can encourage long-term workers is by providing practical help with special projects in ways that can further the ministry there. For example, a sister church had some members from their church go on short-term trips to do just that; assisting with things like helping to improve the water quality and instructing in basic business skills.

3. Finally, we should note one other point here. While short-term trips can be encouraging to the workers abroad, we need to be careful about protecting the long-term workers and local believers there in terms of their security. We will discuss that in detail next week in the context of closed countries.

Obviously, we don't want to act carelessly in a way that will result in the expulsion of workers from the country or endanger the safety of local believers.

A former missionary from GRBC shares some good and bad examples of short term trips:

- 1) One great example of a short term trip was when CHBC, led by Andy Johnson, came to encourage us and help us with our platform work. They basically came and said, "We don't want to interfere with what you already have going on here. Please just tell us what we can do to assist you, and we will try our best to do those things." What a wonderful attitude!
- 2) Another church, though, came to visit us, and spent most of the time telling us the "mistakes" we were making: we were living in the wrong part of the city, first of all. Second of all, on a previous trip, they had supposedly "converted" some young children, and we were missing out on an opportunity to disciple them. (We knew that these children, had not in fact been truly converted, they had merely seemed to agree to "get saved" because the church had given them a bunch of birthday cake. Furthermore, our practice was not to directly evangelize children in this Muslim country, because it was against the law. We did have opportunities to evangelize whole families together, but in those cases, consent was given by the parents implicitly.) This was very discouraging. We would have been better off if that church had never come to visit us in the first place.
- 3) On another short-term team that came was a young lady who kept complaining that she felt like a fifth wheel. The other four members of the team were two older couples. She also was convinced that she was certainly going to "lead someone to Christ" while on this four-day trip. So, under that pressure she had put on herself, she did things that were culturally insensitive that we had asked her not to do. She also interpreted things that happened in light of her certainty. So, she walked away from one encounter claiming that she had led a man to faith when in reality, he had no idea what she was even talking about.

## **B. Short-term work can help participants test a call to full-time service.**

1. Part of a call may be evident fruitfulness. Short term trips allow you to test your fruitfulness in another cultural context – by seeing how you relate to others.

2. Determine your ability to adapt to strange environments. So for example, are there particular conditions such as the extreme heat or cold in which you just may not do well? That could inhibit your functioning at a high level. Are you someone who can live and thrive in primitive conditions? A short-term trip is a good way to test those types of things.

3. Allows you to test the desires of your heart. I think we tend to sometimes have an overly-romantic notion of the missionary and the missionary life. Elizabeth Elliot, the wife of the slain missionary Jim Elliot, writes about how people use grandiose language when describing missionaries: so, for example, missionaries don't go, they "go forth"; they don't walk but rather "tread the burning sands"; missionaries don't die, they "lay down their lives." Short-term mission trips are a good way for us to get beyond these romantic notions and see, close-up, what are the nuts and bolts of the missionary life; and to realize that missions is hard work and that missionaries are ordinary people like you and me, who serve an extraordinary God.

4. To Grow in Faith – Just being reminded that God is faithful.

"The short-term mission trips are an instrument God uses to help Christians learn to trust him in deeper and profound ways." (Stiles).

### **C. Short-term workers CAN bring others into the Kingdom.**

Long term work is not the only way for God to produce a harvest. Short-term missions can, in God's providence, yield fruit immediately, as shown by the examples of Paul and Peter. Or, as in many cases, conversions may come later – short-term work can plant the seed that God will later cause to grow. Whatever the case, we should always in every place be ready to give an answer for the hope we have in Jesus, realizing that salvation is from the Lord and that He can bestow it through faith at any time and in any way that pleases him. Maybe even through one of us, by a brief encounter in a distant land.

## **IV. How Can We Maximize the Usefulness of Short-Term Trips?**

**A. Learn about the culture you will visit. Cultural awareness is not the main point, but it is important.**

We should desire to understand other cultures because God knows other cultures. We go to other cultures with the message of redemption as God did rather than requiring other cultures to come to us.

1. Paul's example of cultural sensitivity: 1 Corinthians 9:22.

*"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."*

Paul's break from Jewish traditions was a radical model of understanding the need for cultural sensitivity. Realize who Paul once had been. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees; an expert on Jewish law who was chief persecutor of Christians until he was knocked off his feet on the road to Damascus and converted. He understood his mission to bear Christ's name before the Gentiles and the sons of Israel. And he crossed a huge cultural barrier to do so.

So, we should be willing to consider adopting neutral cultural norms we encounter on short-term trips. Respect and enjoy the good things in different cultures. So for example, dive into the culture when you are on such a trip. Instead of going to the local McDonalds, try the local food; learn a little of the language before leaving; use the public transportation, etc. These are minor things, but can help to build connections, especially if you are going to return to the same place again and again.

*pp. 79-87 – 12 ways/issues relating to building up trust; see also page 137 (diving into the culture)*

Sometimes, given the vast differences in cultures, this can be difficult to do. Leann Stiles recounts a story in their book, in which she and her husband were visiting a Masai village in Kenya for a Sunday worship service during one of their short-term trips. After the service, which lasted five hours, they were invited to lunch at the home of one of the village families. The home, which can more accurately be described as a hut, looked like a brown igloo and was made from

cakes of cow manure. When she got inside the hut, the Masai women immediately took her little baby from her and began to pass him around and began to spit on him -- she later found out that this was a ritual for babies in the Masai culture and considered an act of love. To make the situation even more difficult, lunch consisted of the Masai staple of sour milk (milk that was allowed to curdle). Despite this first difficult experience, Leann writes that she eventually learned to sit in a Masai hut, pass around kids and drink sour milk with the best of them. Best of all, however, God gave her a deep love for the Masai people. (p. 95).

## 2. Peter's example of cultural sensitivity:

When Peter obeyed God's command to go and proclaim the Gospel to Cornelius in Caesarea, it was evidence that he had overcome the cultural barrier to witnessing to the Gentiles, because God had taught him that he should not regard any man as unclean. This is what he says in Acts 10:28-29:

*"You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection."*

Now granted, this particular act was the result of a direct, authoritative revelation from God and was mainly tied up in the change taking place in the new covenant in Christ's blood. But I think there are some principles we can learn. Foremost, we should be respectful and engaging with the culture of those we hope to reach with the Gospel. The point is to foster genuine trust and develop relationships so that we have a greater opportunity to witness about Christ and his work.

Now while all this is true and important, it should also be mentioned that the Word of God also judges all cultures. So we should also remember that sin does not deserve sensitivity. So in Acts 10: 25-26, when Cornelius fell at Peter's feet and began to worship him when he met him, Peter never bothered to ask if that was just "part of Cornelius's culture." Rather, he was willing to risk offending Cornelius on the spot and told him clearly and without any ambiguity to stand up because Peter was merely a man. Cultural sensitivity ALWAYS stops short of assisting or participating in sin. One of my concerns is that I often find people are sadly insensitive about the small, neutral things (like food, culture, habits).



Cultural sensitivity has a goal, and we will be helped if we keep that in mind. Some weeks ago, the teachers of this class may have talked about the topic of contextualization – the way we seek to apply Biblical teaching to a given cultural context. As we said last week about contextualization as a whole (of which cultural sensitivity is a sub-set) we have to ask ourselves about our motivation. Are we trying to be sensitive in a way that makes the Gospel more clear, or are we trying to “fit in” in a way that is motivated by our fear of man or by a desire to smooth off the rough edges of the Gospel? It can be a hard call, but we need to remember that God’s glory is the point, the Word of God is the judge, and clarity for the Gospel is the goal. Keeping that in mind will help us as we decide how to interact with other cultures.

### **B. Return to the same place time and again.**

A second way to maximize usefulness is to return to the same place again and again. This fosters opportunities for evangelism and for relationships to develop over time. This helps us to build close relationships not only with the workers in that region but also with locals – both believers and unbelievers.

We see this idea in Paul’s own journeys. Following their first missionary trip, Paul said to Barnabas, *“Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”* [Acts 15:36]. In Paul’s second missionary journey (albeit without Barnabas but rather with Silas), he and Silas visited many of the same places that they had already gone to (some twice before) on the first missionary journey.

(Important Aside): And this idea is not limited to short-term trips overseas. But this is a great idea in general for our lives here in the United States. I would encourage you to go to the same drycleaner, barber, coffee shop – even to the point of standing in the same cashier line at the bank or the supermarket, so you have a chance to slowly build a relationship with that same person – all with the hope that eventually God will provide the appropriate opportunity to invite that person to church or even to have a discussion about the Gospel.

In a similar way, going to the same mission field each year is also good for evangelism. Variety is not the point or the goal. Filling your passport with pretty stamps is not the objective. But rather the goal is to build relationships that over

time may yield the fruit of repentance and conversion, to the joy of souls and the glory of God.

### **C. Know and partner with any local believers.**

A third way to maximize usefulness is to partner with local believers. This is a great advantage. It helps short-term travelers to be more sensitive to the local culture by obtaining valuable information and insights. It helps to foster fellowship for isolated local Christians. And it's just a great thing practically to have that local assistance for all the logistical details that need to be taken care of, such as travel, etc. (e.g., how and where to catch the local bus).

In some restricted-access countries, this may be difficult or even unadvisable, but in general, it is a good thing to partner with local believers whenever possible.

### **D. Maintain year-round relationships with folks in country.**

Finally, maintaining year-round relationships with the long-term workers in the area is important. We can do this in a variety of ways. One way is to pray for local workers. So, one thing you could try to do is to give an update and pray for one of the supported workers at each Sunday service.

We can also do this by keeping in contact with workers to know their physical needs, and to bring them stuff when the opportunity presents itself so that they might be encouraged, *i.e.*, what is sometimes referred to as being an “IBOB” or “international beast of burden.” So one of the things that we try to do on our short-term trips is for each person who is traveling to take two suitcases, one for their own items and then a second filled with items for the overseas workers – books, peanut butter, even the #1 must have item for overseas Americans?  
Answer: Dr. Pepper (according to Andy Johnson)

This can also be true for local believers or unbelieving friends that you make in the course of your trip. One member of a sister church got to know some High School students while in Uzbekistan in 1999 and has continued to keep in touch by occasional visits and the internet ever since. He even got to know the family so well over the years that when their middle son went off to college they asked him to take their son with him when he returned to the capital city and get him settled

in at school. Email or social media are great ways to maintain relationships between visits to a particular city. I like to think of these tools as relational life support – it’s hard to build much of an international relationship by email or social media, but they can keep the relationship alive until the next visit.

#### **E. Make an Effort to Share Your Faith at Home.**

Sometimes, we can make the common mistake of thinking that somehow it will be easier to share our faith abroad than here. But that’s not true. If we are not being faithful here in looking for opportunities to witness, we are not going to do that abroad either. So another way to maximize our usefulness on a future trip is to make efforts to share our faith at home now. Start praying that God would give you opportunities to do this. If we develop an evangelistic lifestyle here, it will seem much less foreign when doing it abroad.

And finally, in preparing for a short-term trip, we should **maximize the resources that are available to us here in this local church** talking with those who have already gone on such trips to learn about their experiences. As I mentioned earlier, the book “Mack and Leeann’s Guide to Short term Missions” is an excellent resource. Another great way to prepare for such trips is to get to know the overseas workers. Make an effort to get to know them both to welcome them and to learn from them.

#### **V. Conclusion**

1. Short term missions can be a fruitful way to carry the Gospel if done well.
2. Sending out short term workers is the responsibility of the church and should be done by the church as a whole, not ourselves.
3. Plan ahead so that your travels will be maximally useful.