

Mission Insights from Global Missions Leaders: Kevin Greeson, David Garrison, and Eckhard Schnabel

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Abstract

This article provides interviews with and significant insights from three leaders in global missions: Kevin Greeson, David Garrison, and Eckhard Schnabel.

Mission Insights from Kevin Greeson

Kevin Greeson serves as an International Mission Board (IMB) field missionary as well as serving as a Strategy Associate in the South Asia region of the IMB. In his initial comments, he mentioned that he is answering the questions from his context of serving among Muslim peoples. He is the author of *The Camel*.¹⁰⁷

1. What do you see as the key theological issues and their implications for missions today?

In missions to Muslims, the key theological issues center on “contextualization.” For example, the use of “Allah” by missionaries and evangelists is a major point of contention. One claim is that Christians should not use the word “Allah” in reference to the God of the Bible. They say, “The God of the Bible is *not* the Allah of the Qur’an.” Missionaries and evangelists who use “Allah” make the claim, “We know that the Allah of the Qur’an is not the same as the God of the Bible.” We spend time and effort in redefining “Allah” to Muslims. It is a missiological principle to look inside a culture for a word that can be used for God instead of introducing them to a foreign word. In addition, Arabic Bibles have translated “God” as “Allah.”

¹⁰⁷ You can read the book *The Camel* (WIGTake Resources, 2007) if you are interested in the things being learned about how Muslims are coming to faith in Christ.

In hundreds of interviews of Muslims who have become Christians, I have discovered that when they use the word “Allah” for God, they understand Allah as the God of the Bible.

There are many other contextualized issues that missionaries are using that cause divisions among missionaries and among professors of theological schools. Those missionaries who use contextualization in their evangelism and do not move into excesses in contextualization are finding the best results.

2. What do you see to be the greatest challenge for a missional church today?

Boldness, the lack of boldness, is the greatest challenge for missions today. Are we going to understand that the gospel needs to be heard by everyone at least once before they die, and are we willing to take the risk to get that out there to them? Also, the lack of vision is a challenge. Can a Southern Baptist church, a church in the USA, have a vision and understand that they can be involved in starting a church planting movement on the other side of the world? Most churches, of course, do not have that type of vision, though we *have* seen a few who have caught the vision that they *can* do that.

Regarding typical churches out here on the mission field—the greatest challenge for them basically is the same thing. While it takes *us* years to connect with people of another culture, these “near-cultural believers” might have it easier, so that a Bengali Muslim who becomes a believer can catch and win someone in a Pakistani Muslim context much faster and easier and not bring on as much baggage as a Western American believer. Getting them to catch that vision, getting them to think outside the box so that they can send missionaries from Bangladesh over to Pakistan has been the challenge. It is the greatest challenge we have with “B2J” (back-to-Jerusalem)—getting these Chinese who are experiencing church planting movements, getting that exported into other countries, it is a challenge. It is just lack of creativity on how to get into another country.

3. What is working in missions today? What are we doing correctly?

A key strategy that is working well among missionaries who work with Muslims is the strategy of transplanting near-culture Christians into neighboring harvest fields. Muslims have been trained to resist Western influences. When a Muslim-background believer is transplanted from one area into a new area, typically a movement will break out in the new area.

4. What is not working, what needs to be changed, and why?

How we use “outside” money into starting a movement, a foothold—we are not doing this very well. Some people say money is like “black cancer.” I have heard nationals over here say, “Money does funny things to the people.” But I do know that it is not a sin, it is not wrong to use money to bring the gospel from the outside of the culture to get into the culture. It is just a question of how to do it, and this has been a very big challenge. It is more about what *not* to do with money than it is what *to* do with money, because we do not have any problems spending money wildly on projects and on access; in other words, how do we use money *wisely*. I am not one who says “do not use it at all.” That just does not sound right and it does not honor people who are giving sacrificially in the USA for use out in the field here. They *want* us to use that money; they *want* us to buy Bibles; to purchase materials, to send missionaries further into these cultures, these communities. So it is a thing that needs a lot of work—the use of outside money.

The hardest thing out here is starting a church planting movement in cities. The gospel flows out in these rural communities, but even in south Asia we are not seeing urban centers take the gospel like that. We do not have people who are writing books and giving us insights and clues on how to reach the cities.

Mission Insights from David Garrison

David Garrison serves as an IMB field missionary as well as being the regional leader for the South Asia region of the International Mission Board. He previously served as interim regional leader for South Asia starting on September 2001, and then became the new regional leader six months later in 2002. He is the author of *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (WIGTake Resources, 2003).

1. What do you see as the key theological issues and their implications for missions today?

I have listed five things. The first one is simply the “population explosion.” How do we reach a world of more than six billion people which in fifty years will have nine billion people? How do we reach a world where the population growth rate is just exploding rapidly and every generation has to be reached anew? That is a theological question and issue.

Second, the Muslim world—the world of Islam. For fifteen or sixteen centuries we have not engaged Muslims effectively from an evangelical standpoint. We have engaged them militarily for about 1500 years, and not even done that very effectively, and we are back in that old pattern of

engaging them militarily. But the theological challenge is how to engage them effectively evangelistically.

Third, post-Christian secularism, especially as you go around Europe, and I think that is one of the big theological issues we are facing today and will continue to face in the future.

Fourth, non-literate peoples. Evangelical Protestants are a people of the Book. What do we do when the vast majority of the remaining non-Christian and unreached people groups of the world are predominantly oral, non-literate peoples? How do you get the Book to non-readers? It is not a new problem; it has always been an issue and remains one today, one with which we as Protestants have to grapple.

Fifth,—and this may seem a little controversial—around the world, major religions, including our own faith of Christianity, as we are bumping into each other more and more, there is a tendency to respond to each other with preconceived, ideological reactions. We see that in fundamentalist Islam, in some strands of orthodox Hinduism and orthodox Judaism, and in some sectors of the so-called Christian world. We are not boldly, openly, actively engaging lost people with the gospel or other cultures with the gospel, but instead, we are concocting reactions and ideological caricatures in many cases of others, rather than boldly, aggressively, winsomely engaging them with the good news of Jesus Christ. I see that as a tremendous challenge in our world today. There is a tendency to cocoon and chunk rocks at others rather than boldly going to them and just loving and proclaiming Jesus to them. Those are my five key theological issues.

2. What do you see to be the greatest challenge for a missional church today?

It is incredible to be a missional church today. We can do things today that were not possible for 2000 years. I have listed a couple of challenges, and I do not claim to make these authoritative or comprehensive. The first one in mind is being *effective* and actually discipling the nations, in other words, people groups at home (in the USA) and around the world. It is one thing to have the kind of church that is a lighthouse and invites people to come in, and when they come in they have to come on *our* terms and grapple with *our* gospel message the way we want to hear it and present it. It is another thing to be effective in crossing cultural boundaries and effectively communicating the gospel, winning converts, and discipling them. It is a challenge for missionaries and a challenge the church is now facing. It is a challenge in which she has not shown great success.

Another challenge is mobilizing, equipping, and unleashing the laity into the harvest fields. All the resources to reach the world to fulfill the

Great Commission are sitting in our pews today or on our church rolls. We must mobilize them, and what is more, we have really got to equip these guys and bring them into their role of learning to be effective fishers of men. Then we need to launch them and to unleash them and say, “Just as Jesus chose laymen and spent three years investing himself into them, making them fishers of men,” we must do the same with our laity and unleash them into the harvest fields of the world and this Great Commission can be fulfilled.

3. What is working in missions today? What are we doing correctly?

Churches are more actively participating in the Great Commission, though it does not mean they are actually succeeding. Ralph Winter recently wrote an article in which he states that it is ludicrous to expect local USA churches to take on the least unevangelized people groups (tough nuts to crack) and in their spare time finish the unfinished task. In a way we must listen to what he [God] is saying—it’s not going to happen just because churches are awake and mobilized. They need to become students of what God is doing around the world. Churches, the laity, the church leaders, the whole community need to join this great game of “Lord, how can you use us? What are you doing? How can we be transformed into useful instruments for you?” So then the question shifts over to “What is working anywhere in the world?”

There are a lot of things that are happening. We have documented church planting movements (CPMs). I just talked to some guys in the research department (IMB) last week, and they said there are now 140 people groups on their CPM watch list. These are people groups that have been identified; they are rapidly multiplying. They are not necessarily full-blown CPMs, but they are moving that way. Missionaries around the world are looking at that; they are studying that and asking, “How is God at work, and how can we join him in that?” I think churches need to be doing the same thing and ask, “How is God at work in the harvest fields around the world? What is he doing, and how can we participate in that?” And to the extent they join in what God is doing, I think there is no limit to what they can do. The very fact that they are awake; they are capable; they are able to travel in a small world and afford to do things does not in any way equate with effectiveness. So I have listed CPMs in the same context—lay-led house church multiplication is working to rapidly sweep across many people groups.

Another area that is very exciting that I think churches can be involved in (and a few churches *are* getting involved in) is some encouraging breakthroughs in Muslim evangelism. For the first time in 1500 years, a lot of people are starting to say, “We need to walk in Muslim shoes a little bit and understand the world through their eyes, to

get in their skin and see why we have been so ineffective for so long.” What we are beginning to find is as we do begin to speak their language and understand their worldview, we begin to build bridges of understanding to them, so that many of them are starting to cross over those bridges now and are coming to faith in Jesus Christ. We have seen literally tens of thousands across South Asia come to faith in Christ and it is because we are stepping over the line to understand and build bridges that they can cross back over to Christ. Churches can do that too and it does not automatically happen—it takes a *commitment* to do it.

4. What is not working, what needs to be changed, and why?

This is a kind of paradoxical answer, because on one hand what is working is also not working: outsourcing the Great Commission to a small band of highly educated professionals. On the one hand, when guys get highly educated and they get focused on the Great Commission, they do get better at it. They become more effective. But thinking of the entire Christian community of believers, thinking that there are enough of those guys (i.e. full-time professionals) to do it all, to get the job done, that is not working. So in a way our success is our failure. It is right to say that this is a very serious, all-consuming pursuit that merits people being professional full-time missionaries and fully ministers and servants of Christ. But on the other hand, unless we find ways to expand that harvest force, so that they are giving more of their time to learning, to upgrading, to expanding their involvement and capabilities in fulfillment of the Great Commission, there is not any hope of us keeping up with this population explosion. For even as we train people at Midwestern, Southwestern, or Southeastern Seminary or all these schools, it is great to do that, but they have got to be *trainers of trainers*. When they come to the field they have got to be thinking not just, “What can I do?” but rather, “How can I multiply myself and what I have learned—my vision, my passion, my skills?—How can I multiply that exponentially in my national partners?” Only as we become that grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies and then produces a harvest a hundred, a thousand fold, only when that happens, are we going to get out of this “professionalism” in which we think, “Unless you are really professional and highly trained, you really are not likely to get anything done.”

We do not ever want to get in a position of criticizing excellence and quality and criticizing learning and training. I have my Ph.D. and my M.Div., and those things are great, but they are worth absolutely nothing when it comes to “Am I any more saved than anybody else?” and the bottom line is we need to take everything we have learned and find ways to create lay empowerment, lay education, and lay training, and drive that out to every sector of the Christian community.

We should not be afraid to look *anywhere* to learn what God is doing. It is his work, and it is his world.

Missions Insights from Eckhard Schnabel

Eckhard Schnabel serves as professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He has been at Trinity since 1998. His biographical sketch can be found at <http://www.tiu.edu/divinity/people/schnabel>. He is the author of the two-volume *Early Christian Mission*, the required text for doctoral students for Midwestern Seminary's spring 2007 European Study Tour seminar.

1. What do you see as the key theological issues and their implications for missions today?

I think nothing has really changed since the time of Paul or Augustine, the time of Luther or Calvin, or of Whitefield and Wesley, or even Billy Graham. The key question always seems to have been the nature of the gospel, the centrality of Jesus Christ. I think we in the West are taking this for granted. I have been asked by the university to write a popular book about Paul's missionary methods, so it basically means taking chapter twenty-eight from my big book (i.e., *Early Christian Mission*) and write it up in a more popular form. I am doing a few new things also. I have been reading church growth literature. There is a ton of very helpful material, especially when cultural anthropologists like Paul Hiebert focus upon what culture means and so forth; they all seem to take for granted that everyone knows what the gospel is that is being preached by missionaries, and probably in some context they can. But even if one looks simply at the index (of such books), sometimes Jesus Christ is not mentioned at all, even if he is mentioned in the book itself. Really, it is the centrality of the cross and what that means, not only in terms of our confession of faith or our dogmatics. What does this really mean for doing church for example, doing missions, we see really there are immediate ramifications, so just to give one example: after I wrote my big book on mission, I wrote in German a commentary on 1 Corinthians. What I wrote was obviously not new. I was really impressed how Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, highlights the fact that the gospel is really incomprehensible. If the gospel is defined as the news of the crucified Savior, it says for Jews it is a stumbling block and for Greeks it is nonsense . . . none of them had the necessary hermeneutical, intellectual, or traditional parameters that would make the gospel message he preached as easily understandable. Then he goes on to say, that is the context of the argument, that to look for methods, for rhetorical strategies that make the gospel more easily believable is really

a contradiction to the gospel itself. We might darken the gospel or even put it under a bushel, as Jesus said in a different context. The context of Corinthians is that there were Christians in the church who evaluated their former and present missionaries and pastors and preachers on the basis of the stipulations of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Paul says you cannot really wax eloquently about a crucified person, because it is painful, it is shocking, and that the death of a Jew on the cross to boot should contribute salvation for the world—I mean Greeks can only laugh at this. So Paul says the cause for faith—it is not any method, any rhetorical strategy, but the power of God. He does provide the power of the Holy Spirit, which of course is not signs and wonders, because that is what the Jews want of course, but he can give it to them.

I think Paul makes it very clear. He makes a direct correlation between the content of what he preached and the method of how he preached. Of course, I am not an expert on evaluating the mega-church movement here in the USA, and there are certainly a lot of good things going on (many say this is more social and cultural at the moment; it may already be on the way out again; emerging churches may be becoming more popular). And of course the church growth movement of the 1960s and 1970s is not what it was in terms of influence. I think one can learn a lot of positive things from all of these suggestions. We should not fool ourselves that in the end it is *methods* that bring people to faith in Christ; this is something only the power of the Holy Spirit can do. In the West of course, we have this “can do” spirit. We think, especially if you get a mega-church involved, and then academics, well then, we can devise a strategy that gets us from point A to point B. And then projections are being made how much the church should be growing. And usually these things have been completely devoid of theology. And we miss that point, that even in the midst of our strategizing (which we *should* be doing), God is at work. I think this is really key—the centrality of Christ. There has been a slew of new books, mainly in the systematic area, which say “to preach the wrath of God and that on the cross God’s justice was set aside as Jesus dies a substitutionary death”—that this is “Reformation preaching,” and “people do not understand that today”—many of my colleagues say that the doctrine of the atonement, where the cross is central, seems to be increasingly coming under attack, which is not a new thing at all obviously. That was one of the attacks of classical liberalism in the nineteenth century.

We have to remind ourselves what is really, truly central. Paul preaches differently to Jews and to Gentiles, but he always preaches about Christ crucified, he never changes that. And that cannot be contextualized, that is a problem which Paul knows. As a missionary he knows he must and he also knows he can rely on the power of God

which accompanies the preaching. I think I would say for the church this is really a key issue. Of course many have said for a long time the whole issue of the uniqueness of the gospel, the uniqueness of the God we believe in, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, that only through his death is there salvation—in the age of our post-modernity, this obviously is always a very key emphasis (e.g., in Acts 17 before the members of the Areopagus). In the evangelical church itself the centrality of the cross is not questioned and this seems to be increasingly a problem, even if only seemingly people take it for granted. I do not know which churches you attend when you are back in the USA, but I hear it from students and I have been in the worship services with “contemporary worship” (so-called), where there is hardly anything about the cross or suffering. I even have been in *Easter* services where there the resurrection of Christ was not a subject of any of the material offered to be sung by the congregation, just the usual praise songs. Coupled with that—relying on God and his power of the cross and his word—students tell me, and I have experienced it, that his word is not even read publicly in worship. You get a program (i.e., bulletin) in the church and on the program you have all sorts of things but no line that says “Scripture reading,” no line for “prayer”—it is left to those actively involved on the *platform* to do this. I think this is very troubling. How can we say we rely on God’s power and on the gospel if we do not even read the word of God? It becomes questionable what Christians will do at home. And if we do not have sustained prayer in our worship services and sustained Scripture reading (not so many quotations and Powerpoints), then why should ordinary Christians read Scripture at home?

I had a conversation with a pastor who proactively defended *not* having Scripture reading in worship, but he had no problem with having a *dance* on the platform. That communicates to people that Scripture reading is something they can no longer take. Of course, we need to be seeker-sensitive but when we are controlled by what the “market” wants, then I think it has turned into a key theological issue about the authority of Scripture and this is coupled of course with the authority of the gospel itself.

2. What do you see to be the greatest challenge for a missional church today?

We are so concerned with contextualization because we want to be somewhat attractive to people (which is an acceptable idea) so that perhaps we miss the fact that the gospel *challenges* culture. Perhaps you have seen the book by Dean Fleming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 2005)? He talks about areas where the gospel challenges culture, but of course when you look at the title, you

have so much of church moving *into* the culture and so many Christians moving *out* of the culture.

In 1 Corinthians Paul writes to people who have not been Christians very long, people who are still caught up in the value systems and customs of their old pagan past. This is why they are so enamored with rhetorical strategies. This is why some have no qualms dragging others before a court of law. This is why some still go to prostitutes. This is why some males were wearing a head covering to signal their higher social status. This is why some seem to question the resurrection, because the Greeks did not believe in the resurrection of the body, only in some nebulous immortality of the soul. So the problem in Corinth was not theological, as many have assumed for a very long time on some over-realized eschatology. There were many relatively recent converts who had not fully realized how the gospel changes the way they think, or *should* change the way they think, and *should* change the way they act. In chapters eight through ten, some still claimed they had the right to attend banquets in pagan temples. In chapter eleven some had no problem having a communal meal and yet they are rich and have a lot of food and good food, and in the same house church there are poor Christians—they come hungry, they go home hungry. And there is evidence that people in contemporary culture do exactly the same. The church *changes* who we are and what we think. A missional church needs to emphasize this as well. Sometimes I wonder what the problem in the Laodicean church really was. We read that they thought they were rich—rich in what sense? Unfortunately the text does not tell us. Probably not rich theologically, otherwise they would not have been criticized. Maybe it was a rich church with a lot of money; maybe it was the first church with a church choir because music was something like a professional thing in the first century. Some things looked rich from the outside, but Jesus was not even there. I think this is what a missional church needs to watch—as we move into the culture to win people for Christ that we do not lose our Christian identity, so that we do not become *like* the society in which we want to win people for the gospel. That of course creates tensions obviously and that is sometimes difficult. There are no easy answers that can be given. Now in many areas there is no question—Christians cannot go to prostitutes; Christians cannot go to pagan temples. But when it concerns methods, for example, one may ask why Christians should not employ rhetoric in evangelistic sermons—but this is what Paul rejects as he says that the nature of the gospel simply does not allow that. So we have the question, “What can a church do?”

In some mega-churches it seems everything is so focused on the senior pastor as the star; they establish satellite churches; they do not have preachers there, but they pipe the sermon there through closed-

circuit television, and I think it is a contradiction of the gospel—then you do not have churches, you have religious clubs watching video. There needs to be a personal witness, a person there so things *can* be verified. And it expresses the notion that it is only the *person* who has the power to be attractive, rather than the notion that it is the gospel *itself* that attracts people. One really needs to look at every facet of what a church is doing constantly and ask the question: “What is the effect of the gospel and the consequences of the gospel?” There are some churches that are too timid; they seem to do what they have done for 200 years; of course that is not correct either. On the other hand, the desire to always have the latest gadgets, that is not necessarily the answer also.

3. What is working in missions today? What are we doing correctly?

You have people who are faithful ministers of the word in every sense and who love the people. I think there are two very key ingredients: preaching the gospel faithfully, and loving people and being willing to sacrifice for them. If one looks only at numbers, one could say that cults are working. Numbers by themselves do not prove anything. We not only need to look at what has “worked” in churches for the last ten years, but also we need to look at all of church history, or maybe the missionary movement the past 200 years. I think where you have faithful preaching of the gospel with mistakes thrown in (we all make mistakes), but where people loved the locals, loved unbelievers, and sacrificed even their lives for them sometimes, I think this is something God has honored. I think it is not a question of methods at all. I do not think you can really explain the church growth in China; most of the pastors were in prison; there were no missionaries, no seminaries, no think tanks, no methods or strategies, but faithful believers who suffered like everyone else when life was difficult, and who were willing to talk about the gospel when they were asked, and God used that to give the church growth.

4. What is not working, what needs to be changed, and why?

It would depend on individual situations. I am glad for everyone who has come to faith because of the mega-church movement, and surely there are people who have been coming to faith. But then smaller churches in the area after awhile seem to be getting people who were attending a mega-church and they come and say, “Well we need *teaching*, which we really did not get.” The mega-church movement fails to know that as people sit in large gatherings the individual can hide themselves, and emphasizing “small groups” does not always work. I think the problem is that Christians are tied way too much to their culture. I sometimes say that if our garbage cans are as full as those of our neighbors, then

something is wrong; then we are wasteful; then we are not really living as God's people.

It's really living close to the cross that helps us individually and within the church to motivate us to preach the gospel effectively. Short-term mission trips can be very helpful, but when we are thinking of reaching the world we need permanent people. We do not want short-term pastors, because usually a pastor needs maybe even a few years to be more fully effective in a location and that is even more true for people who move to other areas where the gospel has not really taken root. It is good for young people to experience something new, but maybe as I often say, they should not call it (i.e., short-term mission trips) "missions" but maybe "sanctification experience for exotic places."

What does not work is superficial preaching, also probably relying on technology, because people have better professional entertainment on television anyway, or they go to a concert. I think the church needs to focus on what we really know and what we have to do: study the gospel and teach it and get people really excited about the truths of the gospel, and then I think you can motivate our folk.