

The Main Thing

When doing short-term mission work in the third world, you will inevitably be confronted with opportunities for ministry in an ecclesiastical (church organization) or theological setting different from your own. To keep such situations from becoming an issue, it is helpful to understand the main thing concept. That is, some things are primary, some are secondary and still yet, some are tertiary. For us, this means when working in a trans-denominational setting, we work at keeping the main thing the main thing. Focus on what is primary and avoid discussions that divide rather than build up. When we say something is secondary or tertiary we are not saying they are unimportant, just they are things that Satan uses to distract from ministry. Jesus never allowed Satan to distract Him or take Him down a side path.

There are some things that must be understood and believed in order to be a Christian (the person and work of Jesus Christ). In other areas, good and Godly people who truly love Jesus and honor the Bible as God's infallible Word, genuinely disagree (mode and subject of baptism). And then there are teachings where even members of the same fellowship have differences (use of alcohol in general, and even alcohol verses grape juice in communion). Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 8 in dealing with foods offered to idols makes clear that what one person knows is truth and clearly understands, should still be tempered in dealing with a weaker believer. So many American Christians want so much to prove their church is the one that has everything right that they often drive people away. Jesus did not tell the thief on the cross it was too late for him since he did not have time to get all his right. All he needed to know was that he was lost and that Jesus saves.

Surely it would be disappointing to find yourself in the midst of people who have no opinions on things secondary and tertiary. It is not that these are unimportant. All Scripture is given by God and is profitable and every believer should be in God's Word daily, learning to love Him and serve Him more and more. But it is equally disappointing to find yourself in the midst of people who elevate ever single issue to primary status. They want to draw a line in the sand at every step. Usually when you find someone like this, the person they are most trying to convince is themselves. They feel a sense of self confirmation by convincing others of their position. We want to draw people to Jesus, not ourselves. There is much you can preach and teach about Jesus in the primary sphere that will be of great profit to the church in the third world.

It is most helpful to learn to respond to certain questions by saying "I have an understanding of ?? but I know other believers, possibly some of you, have a different understanding. I will be happy to talk with you about this privately, I would rather spend out time now with a greater focus on how to better love and serve Jesus!"

While we are on the subject of questions, you also need to be sensitive to questions that you really have no context for which are rooted in third world culture. While all cultures must be brought in line with Scripture, we need to work with third world leadership, helping them understand the need for change and let them move their own people. The best example here is the question "how do you deal with a polygamist who becomes a Christian?" "What about his wives?" Not a question you get very often in the USA. The typical American answer is he is only married to the first wife and the others must go. Problem is, sending a wife away in much of the third world is a death sentence. Plus we need to remember "For I hate divorce," says the LORD" Malachi 2:16 NASB

Occasionally, another great answer is "I don't know but will find out and get back to you!" Also, we must never forget that our enemy is Satan, not each other. He is the one who wants to confuse, divide and destroy.

Primary is defined as that which is at the core of Gospel.

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| •Virgin birth | •Salvation by grace | •Death, burial and resurrection of Jesus | •Authority and sufficiency of Scripture |
| •Deity of Jesus | •Second coming | | |
| •Blood atonement | •Trinity | | |

Some examples of things secondary:

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| •Mode and subjects of Baptism | •Wine verses grape juice or even fruit juice | •Sunday vs Saturday worship | •Practice of Spiritual gifts |
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Some examples of things tertiary:

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| •Millennial view | •Fine details of second coming and rapture | •Calling someone Pastor, or Reverend, or Priest | •Wearing a clerical collar |
| •Bible translation to use | | | •Women as pastors |

It is so hard not to want to build an American church rather than a Christian church. Too many of us equate the Christian church with the American church. We must remember that the church existed for over 1500 years before there were any American Christians.

One final note, I was very humbled years ago when I realized how pathetic it was for Americans to go tell Ugandans what it meant to be a Christians when for the decade of the 70s, Ugandan Christians had been dying at the hands of Idi Amin. American should go with the attitude of "Lord, help me learn from them!" We must come along side believers in Uganda and seek to help them and not to have the idea that we are there as masters.