

When Everything Is Missions

By Kevin DeYoung (PhD, University of Leicester)

Pastors, mission committees, mission agencies, and church leaders would do well to read the new (and short!) book *When Everything is Missions*, written by Denny Spitters (vice-president for church partnerships with Pioneers USA) and Matthew Ellison (a missions pastor turned parachurch president and missions coach).

The theme of the book is simple and provocative: we are not all missionaries and not everything is missions, and if we don't get these definitions correct we will not be effective in carrying out the mission Christ gave to the church.

In his foreword to the book, Jeff Lewis (of California Baptist University) notes that in his class on the global context of the Christian faith, 99 percent of his students think every Christian is a missionary, *and* 99 percent think he thinks that as well (12). But the old slogan "every member a missionary" is not really accurate. We are all called to be witnesses and disciple makers, but the Latin word *missio*, like the Greek word *apostelein*, refers to sending or being sent. A missionary, Spitters and Ellison maintain, means (a) sent (b) across a boundary to where the gospel is not known, (c) to see a church planted that (d) can reach that region with the gospel once the missionary leaves (69). When everything is missions and everyone is a missionary, this task is obscured or forgotten.

Likewise, Spitters and Ellison insist that *missio Dei*, mission, missional, and missions cannot be used interchangeably. Though helpful terms when used with precision, we should not assume, for example, that the *missio Dei* and the mission of the church are synonymous. We are not called to do all that God will do, and what we are called to do in missions is not equal to all the good we want to do as Christians. Spitters and Ellison make it clear that they do not oppose social transformation and holistic ministry, but they do not believe these are the goals of Christian

mission. In fact, they argue that when the primacy of disciple making and church planting have been replaced with efforts at social transformation the results have been bad for the spiritual welfare *and* the physical welfare of the people we are trying to reach. In other words, “Making disciples who birth the local church is the key to both evangelism and social transformation” (45).

Spitters and Ellison do not write as armchair critics looking to pick nits over things that don’t matter. They are both deeply engaged in missions and have been for decades. Their burden is that definitions matter: “We contend that many churches do not do missions well because they don’t think about missions well” (19). We will not make progress in the mission of the church if everything is missions. That’s why we must be careful with the words we use.

It is not too late for the North American church to reassert that missionaries are sent-out ones—to cast aside the notion that everything is mission and everybody is a missionary, or that the debate is only a semantic one. We believe the future health of the Church and the advancement of the gospel in our own context is directly linked to thinking clearly about the mission task and missionary roles. To go and make disciples of all nations and send out those whom God has called for specific purposes is not only a command, it is the very lifeblood of our task—of advancing the gospel and joining in the work of Jesus to build His global Church. (80)

Should churches support Christian schools at home and college ministry on secular campuses in the United States? Should we work to have excellent and engaging youth and children’s ministries? Should we be concerned by poverty and homelessness and clean water? Yes, yes, and yes. But Spitters and Ellison remind us that if we think all of this is missions we will end up neglecting the very task laid out for us in the Great Commission. When everything is missions, missions gets left behind.

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