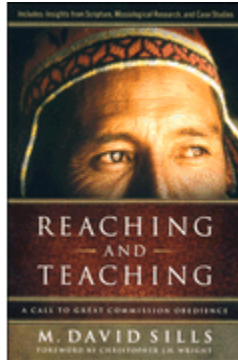


Review

Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience



M. David Sills

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Ralph Winter's 1974 presentation at the Lausanne Conference drastically changed the focus of mission strategy from political nation states to people groups. This transfer of emphasis eventual lead to the current stress upon "unreached people groups" that is currently held by the majority of mission agencies. The identification of unreached people groups in turn has lead to the focus upon engaging and reaching all the people groups of the world as quickly as possible. In *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience*, M. David Sills seeks to call attention to the most glaring weakness in the prevailing mission strategy of the day – a failure to teach all that Jesus has commanded. Sills is qualified to offer guidance in this area as he has served as a church planter and professor in Ecuador. He is currently the A.P. and Faye Stone Professor of Christian Missions and Cultural Anthropology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY and president of Reaching and Teaching International Ministries.

The book is unique in that is goes against the majority trends of the day. It is not a restatement of the status quo. Sills specifically seeks to address the trend of "reaching" people

groups and then abandoning the responsibility of the Great Commission and 2 Timothy 2:2 to theological train and equip pastors and future teachers. He laments that current, “trendy, creative methods,” has led to many missionaries quickly leaving a people group once that group has heard the gospel (12). He writes further that, “Discipleship, leadership training, and pastoral preparation are unfortunately relegated to a lower level of ministry that is not really considered missions” (12). In light of these trends, Sills goal is “suggest correctives” to strengthen the current condition present within missionary activity (13).

Throughout the book Sills’ corrective suggestions focus on two biblical texts – Matthew 28:19-20 and 2 Timothy 2:2. The author points out that according to Jesus; the Great Commission is fulfilled by “teaching them to observe all that [Jesus] commanded.” Sills writes, “Jesus did not say, ‘Go therefore and get decisions from people, then gather them into groups called churches,’ It is the command to teach that I want us to consider as we begin to understand the task of international missions” (18). He argues that the primary focus by mission agencies upon simply reaching the unreached people groups as quickly as possible with the gospel has led to a neglect of “theological education, pastoral training, and leadership development” (18). The addiction to speed has caused mission agencies to withhold, “human and financial resources for theological education in order to speed the work of exponential church growth among the nationals and to avoid all forms of dependency” (29). The result is churches will pastors with little to no theological training that makes them ill-equipped for dealing with syncretism and false teachings according to Sills.

The author uses the 2 Timothy passage to argue to case for an extended missionary presence among people groups. He stresses the importance of Paul’s words as a necessary missionary goal to train leaders who can in turn train others. In answering the question of how

long a missionary should stay among a people Sills writes, “The bare minimum that missionaries should teach must result in trained leadership in the national church that is able interpret the Word of God (2 Timothy 2:15), understand basic Christian doctrine (1 Timothy 4:6), and teach them to others (1 Timothy 3:2)” (64). It is important to note that Sills emphasis on training pertains to theological and leadership training, not *just* church planting training that is present among many agencies. In the call for revamping theological education, Sills is not arguing that Western style seminaries be established. Instead he writes, “Insisting on the necessity of theological education around the world does not naively presume that everyone learns the same way but reminds us that our responsibility is to train believers to interpret and apply the Bible in ways that are faithful to sound theology *and* sensitive to the culture” (165). For Sills, the strategy of some current methodologies of simply leaving leaders with a Bible and the Holy Spirit is not sufficient to warrant faithfulness to the biblical commands of Matthew 28:19-20 and 2 Timothy 2:2.

Those looking for a step-by-step “how-to-do-it” chapter of how to implement stronger theological training on the mission field will look in vain. This is partly because each context must be addressed on a case by case situation, as Sills recognizes. His chapters on “Equipping Disciples” and “Critical Contextualization” are helpful beginnings, but the missionary is still left with the difficult task of fleshing about how to best train and equip his leaders theologically within the context he/she serves.

One weakness of the book is that it fails to give serious consideration to a necessary step that precedes the proper theological training of the nations – the theological training of the missionaries taking the gospel to the nations. The unfortunate reality is that missionaries are not known for their theological abilities. This reality is worsened by the fact that in an effort to reach

the unreached as quickly as possible many mission agencies have greatly minimized the importance of theologically trained missionaries. Too often passionate hearts are the only requirement for missionary service. In my own experience serving in West Africa, only a very small percentage of the mission force had received seminary degrees. The majority had no seminary training or just 20-30 hours of seminary. However, the bulk of classes for those with 20-30 hours of credit centered on missions and evangelism training and not necessarily theological education. The reality is the missionary cannot teach what he/she does not know. Before theological training of the nations can take place, the theological training of missionaries must be given more serious consideration.

This weakness does not diminish the reality of the nearsightedness of the current prevailing missions methodologies that Sills highlights. For this reason, *Reaching and Teaching* serves as a beneficial resource to church, particular to mission strategists, missionaries, and pastors. For the reader short on time Sills' chapter on "Search Versus Harvest Theology: Reaching or Teaching?" gets to the core of what he is arguing. Of particular help in this chapter, especially to younger missionaries who assume what is has always been, is the author's brief history of the development of the concept of "unreached" and "reached" people groups. Even if one does not agree with all that Sills writes, his biblical case for the increased importance of theological education in the place of missions strategy is not easily refuted and should be given serious consideration by all missions practitioners.