

Brothers or Mission Field? Engaging Catholics and Orthodox in Global Missions

00:00:00:07 - 00:00:26:17

Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

Greetings and welcome to the Missions Podcast, the show that explores your hard questions on missions, theology, and practice to help goers think and thinkers go. I'm Alex Coachman, director of communications and engagement with Abby. We joined once again for another lazy river ride down into the exciting, lush Paradise of theology with Scott W Dunford, veteran missionary himself, church revitalization and pastor of the Western Hills Church in San Mateo, California.

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Alex Kocman

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00:01:23:01 - 00:01:39:02

Alex Kocman

And Scott, as we put our faith into practice, as we take the gospel of Jesus to the nations, obviously we're going to run into a lot of people who are very different from us. I actually had the privilege this morning for a different program of being a part of a panel discussing what's happening in Gaza right now.

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Alex Kocman

By the way, something very important we should all be thinking about. And, Scott, you might be surprised. Actually, you're probably not going to be surprised. I know we talked about this before the recording started, and you already know the answer to this. But if I were to ask you, Scott, how many Protestant churches, not just evangelical, not Baptist, but just broadly speaking, Protestant churches in general, many Protestant churches.

00:02:01:16 - 00:02:06:13

Alex Kocman

Do you think there are in Gaza? What would be your guess?

00:02:06:14 - 00:02:25:14

Scott Dunford

Yeah, I would have guessed. You know, based on the fact that I knew there was a very large Christian presence, in Palestine, before the foundation of the state of Israel. I would take out, I guess, like 4 or 5 different churches and denominations in Gaza. I know the answer to it, but, yeah. Go ahead, tell everyone.

00:02:25:15 - 00:02:27:11

Scott Dunford

Yeah, that's the actual number.

00:02:27:13 - 00:03:01:16

Alex Kocman

Right? That the answer is actually one. There's, to my knowledge, one Protestant church. It's a Baptist church with about 60 people, which I know some of you felt seen when I said that, you know, some of you thinking I go to a Baptist church of 60 people and then you can relate. It's amazing. Yeah. I as difficult as it is to live as a Christian in that part of the world, the reality is, is the broader you draw your geographic circle, the more you whether you're a missionary, whether you're a pastor, just thinking about the nations, the more you're going to have to get used to rubbing shoulders with people that

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Alex Kocman

are outside of our branch of Christendom and maybe even on another trunk of the tree all together. Not just Protestants. And of course, we have all of our own intramural fights as Protestants and evangelicals. But when it comes to our Roman Catholic friends and our Eastern Orthodox friends of various stripes. Scott, I think if we're going to approach global missions responsibly, sooner or later, we've got to answer.

00:03:26:06 - 00:03:47:18

Alex Kocman

Are we going to view Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox as the mission field or as partners in the mission? That's what we're here to answer today. There's a lot that comes out of this topic. But Scott, I want to hear your personal experience first. I grew up in a fairly diverse city. We were rubbing shoulders with different types of people all the time.

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Alex Kocman

We lived in a duplex. We had a Jewish family on the other side of that, and so it wasn't crazy unheard of for us to be in company with people outside of our exact tradition. But I also know that for others, maybe some of our listeners as well, that might be not so common of an experience.

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Scott Dunford

Yeah. I mean, I remember growing up in, you know, pretty, pretty conservative, fundamental Baptist, Independent Baptist circles when we thought, gee, RBC and Southern Baptist were liberal. But I remember missionaries coming in and talking about planting churches and, and basically saying something like, you know, there are no churches, within any, you know, within any of these areas.

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Scott Dunford

And what they meant by that wasn't that there was no churches. They didn't mean there wasn't. It was Southern Baptist Church or a Greek church. They meant there's no King James, only, fundamental independent Baptist church just like ours in this country. And that number kind of got thrown around, you know, in a way that was, maybe less than helpful because often there were, you know, Christian influences there.

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Scott Dunford

But because you and I talk about mis geology and we start talking about these ideas of like, reached or like was as a technical term, not whether someone's saved or not, but whether they're mis theologically categorized as a, as a people group or a language group that's reached, often you see these numbers of like less than 2% Christian.

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Scott Dunford

And then you dive into that. They mean like anything that's Christian, they mean Orthodox or Catholic. And that kind of begs the question, as we go into these places that maybe are like 99% Catholic, are they Christian? Should we be sending missionaries to places that have large numbers of Christians, but not evangelicals? And that kind of really kind of.

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Alex Kocman

Begs us.

00:05:45:19 - 00:06:05:19

Scott Dunford

To think through those questions about, you know, what are we calling Christian or not Christian? Should they be the targets of our evangelism? And, and even beyond that, like, should they be part of our strategy? Should we think about where we're sending people if there's a large number of people who are Christian, but maybe not evangelical Baptists?

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Alex Kocman

So let's break this conversation then into those four questions. So first, are they reached? Secondly, are they are brothers. Thirdly, should they be a primary target of missionary efforts? And then finally, how do we factor them into our missions strategy. So we'll kind of follow that direction in this conversation. Let's just start with whether or not they're reached.

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Alex Kocman

I mean, you kind of alluded to this, but when we talk about unreached people groups, we're not just talking about how many people in a given nation or population are saved. We're talking about how many of them have been really exposed to the gospel of Christ at all, in any form. Are there any churches nearby that have any modicum of a Christian witness at all?

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Alex Kocman

So, Scott, I want to hear how you answer the first question. Are they reached? I would say yes. I would say in the most technical sense, absolutely. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox are reached. Many people may not realize that the definition that I've heard of unreached is not only less than 2% professing evangelical Christian, but less than 5% Christian of any stripe whatsoever.

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Alex Kocman

When we're talking about unreached, we're not even making a judgment about a person's soul so much as just the question of accents. Do they have access to the gospel? If a person is Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, they may or may not be getting a certain theology, or they may or may not have access to certain truths within their tradition.

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Alex Kocman

As we would judge it, obviously, as Baptist evangelicals from this side of the fence, but they absolutely have access to the gospel. Definitionally. How would you answer that question, Scott?

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Scott Dunford

I would answer yes to it. And I would look at it from this idea of like, maybe, thinking of like an aquarium, right. Like, if you're in an aquarium, that's, that's Muslim, you know, for instance, unless something from the outside comes in to that bubble that you're in or that aquarium you're in, you're never going to have the opportunity to know the gospel, hear the gospel, believe the gospel.

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Scott Dunford

You're not going to come across Christian scriptures. It would take something from outside to enter that in order for you to hear the gospel and be saved. If you're within a Hindu bubble, same exact thing, you're not going to accidentally stumble into the gospel, reading that provocative Gita. You just aren't, or going to the Hindu temple or worshiping, you know, the gods in those temples, however, within Christendom, you know, if you are in a Catholic church, yes, there's obstacles there.

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Scott Dunford

I would say, I know some might disagree, but I would say, yes, there's some obstacles there to understanding saving faith in Jesus Christ. But the Word of God is there, you know, there is there is a right understanding of who God is in the father, son and the Holy Spirit. The gospel is articulated in the in the Christian creeds that are recited in, in the liturgy itself, sometimes as the scriptures are being read, if they're being understood.

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Scott Dunford

Granted, there's a lot of other things that are confusing, but someone could come to faith in Christ. Within the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church. That would never happen, barring a miracle, within Islamic, setting or within Hindu settings. That's kind of how I would look at it.

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Alex Kocman

I would agree with that, that I would actually go a step further than that. Not only that someone could, but I think many do. And I think it's fair to make a distinction between what happens at a lay level in some of these traditions versus what the official doctrine of, for instance, the Roman Catholic magisterium is. I can look at the Council of Trent and have major theological concerns, namely with the fact that Trent anathema as is the Apostle Paul, directly makes the claim that the justification is not by faith alone, through grace alone.

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Alex Kocman

And yet I can also recognize that, the individual Roman Catholic, may or may not share that understanding, or even be aware of that. And I know that, many sincere, evangelicals, brothers of ours would be tempted to disagree with that. But I think we have to keep in mind, Scott, that, Jesus saves not our perfect articulation of the doctrine of salvation.

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Alex Kocman

Now, we would expect that that when Jesus saves, he does so in a way that's intelligible, that leads to a person recognizing sound doctrine and being guided by the Holy Spirit to pursue truth as best they can, wherever they're located in the world. And so I don't want to, come across as completely open handed on that issue.

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Alex Kocman

But fundamentally, we have to remember Christ saves and he's able to save many people who have imperfect or sometimes faulty understandings of the doctrine of salvation. I think that's a decent enough starting point. Which maybe leads us to the second question. They are reached Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, by definition they are reached. But secondly, do we, as Evangelical Baptist Protestants, do we regard them as brothers?

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Alex Kocman

Scott.

00:11:32:03 - 00:11:47:06

Scott Dunford

That's a hard one for me, to be honest. I think in a broad sense I do. It's interesting that even thinking about my own Baptist confessions, you know, that that anathema to the Pope and call him the Antichrist. So. Well, I guess.

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Alex Kocman

That he is that Antichrist in the second, right? That's right.

00:11:50:15 - 00:12:34:00

Scott Dunford

So while I would definitely reject Pape ism, I do think that I have a lot more in common with, you know, a Catholic in Gaza, for instance, or an Orthodox, Christian in Ukraine than I do with, you know, a Hindu. Yeah. You know, and like you said, you know, not only is there the possibility of them being born again Christians but there also is probability that many are, you know, that they are they do trust Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, even though the gospel proclamation within those traditions is very watered down and obscured by other traditions that are very unhealthy in and against the gospel.

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Scott Dunford

So, I mean, I think in a broad sense, I would say brothers is in there in the Christian family. But again, in a more narrow sense, I think we say this about going back to the whole Christian question. I think we use it the same way. Like, am I a Christian? Well, that comes down to whether I'm a believer in Jesus Christ or not, but in a large sense, I could be called a Christian just because I say I'm a Christian and I'm not something else than Christian.

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Scott Dunford

I think the same thing would be true with other like in a narrow sense, if someone's my brother, they're my brother. If they call on Jesus, I don't know the content of their faith and

heart, but I can call them brother if they have a profession of faith in Christ. That that's a hard one. I don't know how you handle it.

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Alex Kocman

Yeah. Scott. I'm in. I'm in a similar position to you. No one is technically my brother. If they don't fully belong to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, there are professing evangelicals who aren't my brothers. If it ends up that they're not sincere believers, if they end up being scoundrels in the end and reprobates and outside of the faith.

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Alex Kocman

Right. So, and likewise, anyone within Rome, anyone who's a part of the church of the East who, is, is truly a brother. Maybe despite what, from our perspective, would be a pretty muddled gospel from some of those traditions. Is therefore my brother. But I, I do like what you shared, Scott. You know, it's relative to what I think is the question, a Catholic in a place like Gaza is, certainly a better recipient of the label brother than maybe a Muslim living in a place like that or even a, a Jewish person in, in Israel, again, someone who professes faith in Christ.

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Alex Kocman

I do want to on the side of regarding that person as a brother, not knowing their heart, not being able to give a full doctrinal quiz to everybody that I encounter. But I do think that we should place a lot of, deference in the fact that somebody claims the name of Christ, confesses Jesus as Lord.

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Alex Kocman

Has been baptized in the name of the father, and of the son and of the Holy Spirit, that triune name, that is a crucial dividing line. Does that mean that everyone who claims the name of Christ, everyone who has been baptized under the Trinitarian formula, does that mean that they're all true brothers in the Lord? Know.

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Alex Kocman

We know that there's false professions of faith. We know that there's insincere or misguided professions of faith, but that that should really mean something. And I'm very concerned about this, this feeling of narrowness, like we're the only ones who understand anything. You know, the old joke about the, the, the Baptists, and I'm a Baptist so I can make this joke.

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Alex Kocman

But the joke about the Baptists, when they go to heaven and they're riding up the elevator with Saint Peter. Right. And you get to one floor and it's, well, you know, here's the Pentecostals and they're whooping and hollering and go to the next floor. And it's this group that's doing their thing. And, and then you get to this, you know, third floor and it's, it's very quiet or, you know, you have to be hush hush.

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Alex Kocman

This is where the Baptists are. They think they're the only ones here. And there's different versions of that joke, and there's versions of that joke that pick on every denomination. I think, you know, part of having good natured conversations like this is being able to pick on ourselves a little bit. But I think if there is an error that we tend to make within our tribe, it's not, generally speaking, the error of losing Goosey Ackermannism where everyone's in, the error that the people like me and you tend to make is the error of thinking that we're the only ones who truly know Christ and everyone else is apostate.

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Alex Kocman

And I think, as with most things, the truth is somewhere in between. But fundamentally, if someone regards the father of the Lord Jesus Christ as their father through Christ, my default is going to be to regard that person as a brother, unless through the specifics of their profession of faith or through their life, they give me reason to think otherwise.

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Alex Kocman

That's where I would land on that one. Maybe you're thinking, though, about that. Not just the family of faith. Maybe you're someone who's thinking about your family, your own flesh and blood. And, we do want to mention our sponsor, Reformation Heritage books, and specifically talk to you men, Christian men. Do you want to be a better husband or a better father?

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Alex Kocman

I know I do well in How to Lead Your Family, doctor Joel Beaky offers a biblical and practical guide to leading in the home as a prophet, priest, and king. You know the three roles that Christ has that we share in as well. Drawing from decades of pastoral and family life experience, this short read is packed with wisdom and encouragement to help men lead with conviction and with grace.

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Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

Use the code lead all caps to get 20% off and also new customers can receive a 10% coupon by email after their first order and after they create an account. So that offer end September 30th. Make sure you take advantage of that. Scott. Coming to the third question now, we recognize there's some nuance in how we approach who our brothers are abroad.

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Alex Kocman

But the question for us as the missions podcast is, should we then regard them as the primary targets of missions and evangelistic efforts? Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, brothers and sisters, are they the primary targets of mission for us? And while you think about your answer to this, Scott, let me just add this small caveat. Roman Catholic to Eastern Orthodox.

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Alex Kocman

I think we're talking apples to apples. I do think there's a difference between Rome with her claim that salvation is not by grace through faith. According to the Council of Trent, among many other areas of Rome. But there's a difference between that problem and the challenges from our perspective, the challenges associated with orthodoxy. Orthodoxy doesn't really, to my knowledge, plan a very clear, forensic justification sort of flag in the ground, in a way that we as Westerners would really like, for them to do so systematically.

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Alex Kocman

But their emphasis is elsewhere. Their emphasis is on mystic, communion with the divine. Their emphasis is on thesis, and not on forensic justification, the way that we look at it as Protestants. So even when we're asking, are they our brothers? How do we treat them? We're talking about very different things. So but with that caveat out of the way, Scott, how do you answer should they be the target of our missionary efforts?

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Scott Dunford

You know, I think there's kind of an answer to this that we've talked about in the past that, within the tradition of Christianity in general, and that is, throughout Christian history, there's always been re evangelization of Christian areas. Right? So remember, we talked before with, I think, Glen sunshine about the, the, the, the Irish re evangelization of Europe.

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Scott Dunford

Where yes, they recognize that hey, this isn't they didn't use these terms, but this isn't unreached. These aren't going to the pagan lands. But the gospel has to be made fresh again in each generation. And I think when we think about evangelism and, and, and missions to areas that have become very secularized and, and maybe Christian in name, but do not have gospel faith.

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Scott Dunford

I mean, we go through Europe not only yes, they claim to be Catholic, but if you were to go on a Sunday, most of the cathedrals are empty and very few people are actually attending church of any kind. And so we look at these nations, you know, France, Italy, England to some degree. And we look at these places and say, yes, they need, gospel preaching and presence in those places.

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Scott Dunford

So I would look at that and say not targeting of simply because they're Catholic or because they're not Baptist. But we're targeting them because they have large numbers of people who are unsaved that need to hear the gospel. And, and yeah, that follows in a Christian tradition that goes way back, before Baptists properly call themselves Baptists.

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Alex Kocman

Yeah. Well, and also we as Baptists, we as evangelicals, more broadly, Protestants more broadly, we have nominalism. Two, we have nominal evangelicals that that need the gospel as well. So this isn't, us here on the missions podcast, pointing our fingers at every other branch on the Christian family tree and saying, you aren't sincere. We're the only ones that mean what we're saying.

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Alex Kocman

Rather, it's just recognizing that nominalism in general, being Christian in name only, regardless of your tradition, is, I don't think it's as harmful as others think it is. I would rather have a world full of nominal Christians than a world full of outright pagans. But it's also not sufficient to get you into the kingdom.

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Alex Kocman

You need, explicit saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for that. Biblically.

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Scott Dunford

That's like saying we do have a poke in your hand or a poke in your eyeball. You don't want to poke at all, but. Right. Yeah.

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Alex Kocman

Right. Well, and that's a conversation too, though, because again, we would also say that if someone is a nominal Christian, they are reached, right? Because they've heard the

Christian message. They have access to the Christian message. That's a, a foundation that one can build on. You know, Romans 15, Paul wants to go and preach the gospel to those who've never heard in any way, so that he's not building on another man's foundation.

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Alex Kocman

But we should also say, like, well, okay, if we've got a world full of, you know, there's a third of the planet where the has been laid, but not a lot else has been built on top of that. Well, by all means, we do need people to go and build on top of that foundation. I think we need both.

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Alex Kocman

I think we need people to break new ground, evangelistic speaking. And then I think we need other people that can help build those support structures on top of even places where the name of Christ has been named already. So I think we should think of anyone who's a nominal Christian as the recipient of the gospel. I think we should think of genuine Christians as recipients of the gospel, too.

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Alex Kocman

Romans chapter one Paul says to the Romans that he wants to go and preach the gospel to them, that the gospel is for Christians, too. I know we're thinking about evangelism as just something that we do with unbelievers. But I think that can also lead into this mistake of forgetting that we as Christians constantly need to be reminded of that as well.

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Alex Kocman

And if our churches and if our worship and if our discipleship is about anything, it should be about constantly preaching the same gospel of grace. And the law of God. Two but both

God's law and grace to ourselves, preaching that week in and week out. But we have this other question here. Then Scott. So how do we factor, our Roman Catholic, brothers or friends, Eastern Orthodox brothers or friends, wherever our listeners would fall in answering some of those questions, how do we factor them into our missionary strategy as well?

00:24:06:14 - 00:24:34:04

Alex Kocman

Because I think that a lot of our missions minded friends would be listening to this conversation right now and thinking, yes, but there are more than 3 billion people on planet Earth, more than 7000 ethno linguistic people, groups who've never even heard the name of Jesus Christ. And why should we spend all of this time trying to get nominal, half hearted people around the world of any tradition, be it Protestant, Catholic or otherwise?

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Alex Kocman

Why should we get them to wake up when there's people who've never even had a single chance to hear and that's sort of the more antagonistic answer to that question. But where do we fit these other Christian groups, other branches on the tree of Christendom, into our mission strategy?

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Scott Dunford

I would look at it a couple of different ways. One, and the very broadest of strategies, I think mission organizations partnering with churches, partnering with educational institutions, partnering with groups like Radius and other organizations that we love, that that work on focusing on these things. We should definitely be highlighting those parts of the world that have not yet heard the gospel.

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Scott Dunford

Once, with people who are going to go into eternity without ever hearing that Jesus Christ came to save them from their sins, I think that just makes so much sense that that is where we really try to put energy and effort. So putting that category there, there's also that we you've talked you and I've talked about this a lot.

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Scott Dunford

There is the fact that we don't want to just abandon work that's already like half done. And that allows us to say, hey, we want to stay engaged in these places where, the gospel is taking root and it's growing, but the church is weak and needs to be established. And because I do think in the long run, the, the reaching of the most, the least reach places is going to have to be done not just by obviously the West to the rest, but these other churches within the global South, you know, these the, the emerging church around the world engaging in the Great Commission as well.

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Scott Dunford

And I think a lot more is going to be accomplished by the gospel coming from all directions to these places than just from places like America. To those places. The third part of it, it just comes down to personal gifting. Yeah, a lot of people are into church planting, and I've looked at my own life, so I'm not really equipped to be a church planter in my gifting.

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Scott Dunford

I but I really have a burden for church revitalization and those things, you know, work together. And so my personal gifting is that, but others have more of a gifting and pioneer type work and pioneer church planting and should be engaged in that. So I think those three things have to be thought about. Give the last couple of minutes to you.

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Alex Kocman

Well, I think that we need to walk and chew gum at the same time. I think that a good farmer is going to be rotating crops, and at any given point is going to be thinking about planting new seed in fallow ground, or in new ground, rather ground. That's maybe lied fallow for some time. But then also, harvesting.

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Alex Kocman

And I think that if you look at the history of the church, the failure to harvest is something that has led to, eventually, the loss of those harvests and crops north there, North Africa used to be the bastion of the church. It's a wasteland today, spiritually speaking, obviously because of Islam, but also because I think you could argue there was a failure to harvest and to disciple and to build upon the foundation that had been late.

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Alex Kocman

So I think if we're not thinking clearly, about where do we continue to minister to those who already in some sense would acknowledge Christ? Then we're actually going to find, not just that we're able to take that effort and redirected towards the unreached, but actually that the number of unreached is going to go up, because if we don't build on that foundation, we'll guess what it's going to be lost.

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Alex Kocman

It's going to be swallowed up. But one thing we also have to think about is how do we present the gospel, to our Roman Catholic friends, to our Eastern Orthodox friends, and to the unreached? But is there a different gospel, or is there one gospel that maybe some traditions have and others have maybe gotten muddled over the years?

00:28:25:07 - 00:28:44:05

Alex Kocman

Those are controversial questions, but they're some of the most important theological questions that we can ask. And we're going to ask those in our overtime segment today for our subscribers. And if you're not a subscriber, let's go ahead and join our premium club. Now admissions podcast.com/premium. And for the rest of you we'll see you in our main episode next week.

00:28:44:07 - 00:29:05:18

Alex Kocman

Go and make disciples of all nations. And until then Lord bless. We hope you're enjoying this conversation about missions, theology, and practice to help goers think and thinkers go. And you know that part of the mission of this show is to do exactly that, to take people thinking about the great commissions and how to impact the world and actually help them go.

00:29:05:20 - 00:29:26:11

Alex Kocman

My question is, is that you or is that a loved one, someone that you know? If you're interested in learning what it looks like to take your next steps onto the mission field, even if you're afraid, our team would love to talk with you, to pray with you, not to pressure you into anything, but to help you and your sending church discern the Lord's direction in your life.

00:29:26:13 - 00:29:44:13

Alex Kocman

Good Abby dawgs, send me all one word there you can connect with our team so the Lord's putting on your heart that maybe you need to take some of this listening and thinking, and put some shoe leather to your faith. Go to Abby Dawg. Send me and connect with our mobilization team today.