

Riding the Waves

by Doug Williams

Every few years or so, a new wave of thought seems to wash ashore, informing us to how to best carry out the work of world missions. One recent article in *IJFM* 21:3 gave testimony to this analogy through its title “Church Planting Movements: The Next Wave?” My fifteen years of missionary experience, while moderate at best, is long enough for me to have watched several of these waves roll in. Right now, the wave seems to be “Insider movements.” A few years ago, everyone was talking about “incarnational ministry.” Other waves include “power encounter,” chronological Bible teaching, the spiritual warfare movement, or analyzing church growth. The list goes on.

My intention is not to criticize any of these movements, nor to belittle the impact they have had on world evangelization. Nor do I wish to imply that these waves are simply isolated fads. We grow and learn as we go, and new ideas are built on the knowledge we have gained by trying the old ones. Many of these methods and philosophies have proved highly useful in helping us to communicate God’s message to the peoples with whom we serve. Rather, my concern is about the *attitudes* we often seem to have about our methods, or about each “new wave” that washes in from the ocean of missiological thinking.

First of all, it seems that no new wave washes over us without making the previous ones seem outmoded or even absurd. Old methods are often criticized as roundly as the new ones are lauded. For example, today’s missionaries are usually trained carefully about the dangers of importing Western culture into the culture in which they will be working. There can be no doubt that this is an improvement over the way that we used to think. However, today’s culturally sensitive missionaries are often freely critical of the efforts made by those who have gone before. They may even subtly (or not so subtly) question the validity of the fruit of those efforts. One recent article spoke of Asian Christians who wear western clothes and sit in pews as “paying silent homage to their missionary founders.” (*IJFM* 21.4, “Church Planting Movements vs. Insider Movements”). It may well be that these people have imitated the customs and dress of those who first introduced them to Jesus, and it could even be that such unnecessary changes were imposed by the missionaries. But to describe

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such believers as “paying homage to their missionary founders” has a taint of sarcasm, and it comes awfully close to questioning the reality of their relationship with Christ. This is a right that we do not have.

Another example is the manner in which missionaries of the “Old School” are often treated as newer workers catch the next wave and adopt a new philosophy of ministry. Those who have ridden those old waves, the ones we now think we see disappearing on the shore, are seemingly often discarded with little thought to the contributions they have made. One colleague of mine from another mission had served faithfully in this country for over thirty years. He was a builder, through and through, and loved nothing better than having another project to complete, whether it was a school, a church, or a clinic. He sponsored many medical caravans, led many people to Christ, mentored other missionaries, and established works in many different areas. So he worked serving the Lord here for many years.

Then, enter the new philosophy. No longer do missionaries want to build buildings (oh no!). Now missionaries must disciple small group churches, which will multiply rapidly, so that after six years or so, small house churches will be planted all over the region and a church planting movement will be launched. In this way, the people are not tied to buildings or structures, and the movement can spread forth spontaneously as people carry the message to new areas. We don’t want any more building projects. So our friend was informed by his mission board. A new wave had arrived.

Now, is there anything wrong with the new method? Not at all. Could it be that it brings with it an improvement over the old way of putting up buildings and drawing people in? Quite likely, it does. Yet, as we observed how this mission board changed its philosophy and way of working, this mature, godly, missionary statesman was quite suddenly “on the outs” because the mission under which he served for so many years was now in effect telling him that he

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had been doing it all in the wrong way. A new missionary couple in their early thirties was brought in, and they were placed in a position of leadership over this man who had over thirty years of missionary experience. No longer fitting in, the elder missionary quietly resigned. The new, properly trained missionary eagerly began work in the newly approved fashion . . . and didn’t last two years before going home in defeat.

Is there something wrong here?

It seems this is not an isolated incident, as mission agencies increasingly try to run the Lord’s work like a corporate office (or so it would appear). Sometimes, those who have served long and faithfully are in effect told to get with the new program, or get out of the way. The wave becomes a tsunami.

Another colleague from yet another mission was recently telling me how that when their mission’s home office changed leadership, one day they were informed via email that as of that moment, the name of their mission board was no longer the same. The waves of change had rolled in. Another couple in that work who had served for several decades in a Christian school educating missionary children returned to the States on home assignment, only to be informed that their services were no longer needed, since their work was outside the new “church planting only” focus.

Is this the next wave?

I am no missionary statesman. I am only 40 years old, and my family and I have been working with our people group for about 15 years now. During this time, we have constantly tried to become more culturally aware, to think anthropologically, to master the tribal language, and to rethink, rehash, rework, or revitalize our strategy every several months or so. We are devoted to seeing a church planting movement spread across the mountains where we serve. We have

short-term goals and long-term goals. We read, we study and we analyze. Waves of change have come and have refreshed us, and given us new direction and light. Missiological waves prevent missiological stagnation, and that is a good thing.

Yet the problem with making a science out of missionary work is that we can often find ourselves taking something that is first and foremost the work of the Spirit of God, and then treating it as if it all depended upon what wave we are riding. Methods become more important than relationships. Things like love, unity, and faithfulness become secondary. In other words, the method becomes so important to us that we are tempted to think more about the wave we are riding than we do the Maker of the ocean, or about the people He has chosen to serve him.

As we step out in faith and seek to obey the Lord’s command to make disciples of all nations, having a good method does not guarantee our success. Nor does having a bad method guarantee our failure.

We came to the field after having been trained in the latest methods of linguistics, cultural anthropology, and tribal evangelism. We are thankful for that training, and we can see how it has helped us avoid problems experienced by others who began the work here before us. Yet the fact remains that some of the most faithful and godly converts in the Awa tribe were brought to the Lord by methods that no one would recommend today.

The new missionary who began this work stomped off up into the hills after learning a smattering of the Awa language. Not living among the people, he would not even recognize the Awa people when he saw them. He knew next to nothing about their culture, and after having found them, he began teaching the Bible in a mixture of broken Awa mixed with Spanish. The result? On his first hearing, one man stepped forward

and said “I want in!” Today, many years later, he is still an example of faithfulness that any missionary would be proud to tell of, and has led several others to the Lord during that time. So the Awa work in Ecuador was launched.

I recognize the fact that good missiologists seek only to find out how God is working, and to align themselves with what He is doing in the world. Yet in doing so, I do not believe that God is honored when we make so much of how He seems to be working at a particular time, that we forget that He is free to work in any way that He chooses. Nor is He honored when we sweep aside those whom He has used in the past, or when we subtly belittle their efforts which were done out of devotion to Him. We would do well to remember that our new insights have only been built upon their long years of experience. And that the methods we are so excited about today will likely be criticized by future generations. Years ago, I remember having pizza with a co-worker, talking and even laughing about all of the seemingly ridiculous things that our mission used to do in the past. But then an uncomfortable thought hit me: “What they will be saying about us twenty years from now?” Sobering thought.

Jesus once said “With the measure you use, it will be measured back to you” (Matt 7:1). Years from now, I hope that those who look back on our mistakes will do so with charity, realizing that we were sincerely doing the best we could with the knowledge that we had. And I hope we can extend that same charity to those who have gone before us.

As we catch the waves of new missionary thought, let us be careful not forget the real contributions of others who have thought and worked differently. Perhaps we do know more now than they did then. But perhaps there are still some things they could teach us. It may well be that when all of our work is tried in the fire, the work faithfully and lovingly done by those godly saints may well have more of a lasting brilliance in the eyes of our Lord than all that we have done with our enlightened methods and ideas. **IJFM**

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