

Watering Down Missions Edited and posted by Bob Young

Steve Richardson, in his book *Is the Commission Still Great?* (Moody, 2022), says that the contemporary church's concept of missions has been watered down. He claims that biblical missions is quite specific, and that missions today has fallen prey to "**genericide**" – what happens when a specific word comes to be used generically.

Think about how pervasively the modern church uses the concept of missions. Churches develop mission statements; churches describe themselves as missional. Christians are urged to live "on mission" or to live "missionally." Today, virtually everything done by a church or by Christians is being described as missions. After all, is it not true that everything the church does advances God's mission – fellowship, caring for others, having coffee with friends, preparing care packages, caring for orphans, the list is endless! Is everything a Christian does missions?

A primary focus of my ministry is international mission work. A broadened use of the word missions has also occurred in foreign missions – everything the church does is placed under the generic "missions" umbrella. Suddenly, everyone who does anything in a foreign country has become a missionary. Are they?

What happens when *missions* is generalized? When *missions* become a generic word? Richardson seeks to answer such questions.

What happens when everything becomes missions? **Broadening missions to include almost everything dilutes the core focus of the Great Commission!** The Commission is about making disciples, baptizing believers, taking the gospel into all the world. What happens when *missions* suddenly includes dozens of activities that do little or nothing to advance God's kingdom purpose to seek and to save the lost?

Here's what happens! Xerox becomes a verb and no longer refers only to a specific company. Jacuzzi is used generally to describe hot tubs. Google is a verb that applies to any search engine. The generic use of these words detracts from the original meaning when these words referred to specific brands and companies. The original companies can lose trademark rights. Here is a definition of genericide: "the process by which a brand name loses its distinctive identity as a result of being used to refer to any product or service of its kind."

It no longer matters what activities will be part of a mission trip. As long as Christians are going "somewhere," it is missions – to play with children, teach sports, deliver benevolence, or sing (even in a language those listening do not understand!). **When everything becomes missions – God's eternal mission fades into the background.**

Early missionaries went forth with the gospel, usually overseas, long-term, full-time, penetrating new cultures. Now Christians take vacations and call it missions. Many Christians think of missions so broadly that the word potentially includes any and every activity.

Richardson describes a missions class where the teacher presented a list of Christian activities and asked the students to indicate which activities they considered to be missions. While all agreed that taking the gospel to the lost was missions, a surprising number included in missions such activities as taking "soup to my Christian next-door neighbor" and personal devotional studies. What activities are missions – making disciples of God's human creation? Is missions as simple as reading the Bible to build up my own spiritual life? Is missions as simple as being kind to others? As Philip Slate stated in a mission conference, "When someone asks you for funds for a mission trip, the first question you should ask is, 'What are you going to do?'"

Let us think carefully about Richardson's concern. The impotence of much contemporary mission work is the result of making everything missions. Richardson again, "The relevant question is whether broadening the term missions leads to increased engagement in the task of taking the gospel to every people group on earth. Does calling every Christian a missionary motivate us to pursue the Great Commission more diligently? Or does it dilute our focus?" My concluding thoughts: "In evaluating mission works, questions about evangelism, baptisms, new Christians, and new churches are legitimate. If our mission work is not resulting in the spread of the gospel and the growth of the kingdom, is our mission work biblical?"