

**Transcript: [More Modern Lessons From Medieval Missions With Glenn Sunshine](#)
The Missions Podcast #368
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Note: This transcript has not been exhaustively edited and may contain errors.

00:00:05:08 - 00:00:44:20

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 Kocman, director of communications and media with ABWE, joined again here, as always, by Scott Dunford, pastor of Western Hills Church in San Mateo, California. And we are continuing here in the second of our two-part conversation with Dr. Glenn Sunshine, who is the leader of Every Square Inch Ministries, appears himself every week on The Theology Pugcast, and is author of many important things, including *32 Christians Who Changed Their World*, just released this year.

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Alex Kocman

Go ahead and check that out. We'll also leave a link in the show notes. And speaking of Christians who have changed their world, we're continuing to dive into the issue of what was happening in the missions movement or was there even one in the medieval period, especially in the earlier part of that, the time that we think of as a dark period.

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Alex Kocman

But was it that dark? If you haven't listened to part one, you really should go back in your feed or scroll back on the website to find that because that'll set the stage here. And Scott, I'm excited to see what happened after this early medieval period is where people building on these missionary efforts, right? Or were they forgotten?

00:01:20:01 - 00:01:26:05

Alex Kocman

Because I think for a lot of us today, we think of missions history is as starting with someone like William Carey, to be honest.

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Scott Dunford

Well, sure. You know, and, you know, you and I, I mean, you're a Kocman and I'm a Dunford with my dad's side is also Miller, which is German. So we've got these you know, we've got this European ancestry in our story and we just assume, it's always been Christian. And then you realize and you listening to these stories of medieval Christianity, you realize, no, there was like a massive mission movement to see these tribes that were, you know, slaughtering human beings and worshipping all sorts of gods, becoming Christian.

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Scott Dunford

So we kind of left off talking about Boniface. And so, Glenn, what happened then between like the Boniface period of time and where we end up in the Reformation?

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Glenn Sunshine

Yeah, well, that the key here is that Europe gets converted to Christianity and we're dealing primarily with Western Europe here, but it's also true of the East. I haven't talked much about this, but the Orthodox world is sending out missionaries during the early medieval period to the Slavic peoples of they're converting first the Kievan Rus, the people around modern-day Ukraine.

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Glenn Sunshine

They'll push the push further. And there's this sort of boundary area between people with their loyalties going to Constantinople versus Rome. And then you have the Church of the East, which is centered in what was then called Persia, that sending missionaries through Central Asia. So there's a lot going on there. But from our perspective, looking at it from the angle of Western Christianity, you know, Christianity coming out of the Latin world, once Western Europe is largely Christianized.

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Glenn Sunshine

There's little more from their perspective for them to do. There isn't a lot of effort toward missions. Work. Instead, what you get are threats from the South, from the Muslims, and trying to figure out how to respond to that. So you see you see the Crusades as sort of a counterattack against Muslim expansion. You do get some people like Ramon Llull, who is going to advocate not crusade but missions to the Muslims.

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Glenn Sunshine

And if I remember right, he dies doing this. A little later, you'll find Franciscan and other missionaries traveling along the Silk Road after Marco Polo into China, you know, and trying to do some evangelism there. But there isn't much of a focus on evangelism. The closest people that you have in Europe that are not Christianized are the Baltic pagan tribes.

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Glenn Sunshine

There, they're still pagans moving through the 15th century and unfortunate early. The attitude toward them and this is as much political as anything else, is that the proper thing to do is conquer them and force them into the church? So you actually have crusades declared against them and so on. These crusades were largely a favor from the Pope to the Teutonic Knights who controlled Prussia and wanted to expand their territory.

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Glenn Sunshine

You know, so there's a lot of unfortunate things that are going on there.

00:04:32:03 - 00:05:04:22

Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

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00:05:27:20 - 00:05:34:11

Scott Dunford

What I hear you saying throughout this is that when the states getting involved in the expansion of Christianity, it tends to mess it up.

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Glenn Sunshine

Yeah, that that is emphatically the case.

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Alex Kocman

As government often does.

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Glenn Sunshine

Yeah, but there is another part of it as well. One of the key things that determines whether or not missions activity occurs is whether there is some form of reasonable contact act with the people that you are trying to reach. So when there aren't, you know, when everybody in your country, except maybe a small community of Jews, my ancestors, when everybody else is Christian, you're not you're not really going to be thinking much about missions.

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Glenn Sunshine

And what happens is you start turning your attention inward.

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Alex Kocman

Naturally.

00:06:16:21 - 00:06:44:02

Glenn Sunshine

Or you go to crusades or something like that. Now, the interesting thing is this, where you see this changing is in the early modern period where the Spanish suddenly discovered that there's this big chunk of dirt out across the Atlantic that they didn't know about, you know, And they began colonization. And a lot of the colonization ends up being really exploitive, frankly.

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Glenn Sunshine

Right. But you also see people who are opposed to the way the Spanish are treating the native peoples and who work very hard to end this. Bartolomeo Las Casas is the best known of these, but there are others as well. And what will end up happening ultimately is that the Spanish Empire will declare that everybody in their colonies are Spanish citizens and have the full rights of Spanish citizens.

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Glenn Sunshine

Great. But in terms and in terms of the mission activity, they do start trying to convert the locals, but they take this idea. I would argue that they take the idea of Gregory the Great that we talked about last time of contextualization. They're going to take it too far. And what you're going to begin getting is a at least on a popular level, a kind of syncretism, Christianity that has as much contact with traditional folk beliefs and maybe even folk religious one as it has to do with orthodox Christianity.

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Alex Kocman

So an example of that would be like voodoo that we see in the West Indies. It's combining Romanism with tribal religion.

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Glenn Sunshine

Right. Ultimately, you know, that's an extreme example, but it's there. Voodoo, Santeria—there are a whole bunch of these. You don't even have to go that far, even sort of that the popular Catholicism, even where it's not going into these more heavily syncretistic things, there's very little in the way of actual communication of the gospel, or even really much in the way of teaching, say, the Roman Catholic catechism or anything like that.

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Glenn Sunshine

The people are left largely in ignorance, which means that although they are nominally Catholic and they'll go to church and things like that, there's still a boatload of folk beliefs that end up helping shape what they're doing. Nonetheless, we have to at least acknowledge that the Spanish are making an attempt to convert the people in their colonies. Frankly, the people who are running the colonies are much less interested in religion than they are in cash and how to turn a profit out of this.

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Glenn Sunshine

And that's also part of the problem. Now, you will find a lot of people will talk about the utter lack of Protestant interest in missions in the 16th century. And you certainly don't see much. You don't. It's not that you don't see any, but you don't see a lot of Protestant missionary activity in the 16th century.

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Alex Kocman

Sure. Nothing else was happening for Protestants in the 16th century, right?

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Glenn Sunshine

Yeah, but you know what else wasn't happening for Protestants? Colonization. The Protestant states were not out establishing colonies, by and large, in the 16th century. And if you don't surviving. Yeah. And if you don't have contact with people who need evangelism, you don't do missions.

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Alex Kocman

Glenn, can I throw something in real quick?

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Glenn Sunshine

We do have to deal with the English case in a moment, but throw this in first.

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Alex Kocman

Please do. But also, I mean, is part of what you're sharing here, helping us to have a judgment of charity for our brothers and sisters in ages past? Because it is easy as people in the missions world to look back on church history and say, well, they should have been doing missions, but would you have been doing missions if you were a Protestant in a country that just became a Protestant country?

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Alex Kocman

Not more than a few decades after Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Chapel, I mean, we do need to hold ourselves accountable as well and recognize sometimes

there are external factors on the church that might prevent mission and God's sovereign over all of that. I think I hear some of that in the application of what you're sharing, right?

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Glenn Sunshine

I think that that's absolutely true. But again, remember, they're not colonizing states. You know, Germany does not establish colonies. Switzerland is landlocked. They're not establishing colonies. Sweden, Norway, Denmark. They're not doing colonies in this period. England is starting. And actually, interestingly enough, you get a little bit of Huguenot activity in Brazil. The French will send out a mixed Catholic and Huguenot party to try to colonize in Brazil.

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Glenn Sunshine

The Huguenots, interestingly enough, were interested in trying to convert the natives. The Catholics were interested in exterminating the Huguenots, and that's in fact what ends up happening. The English, when the English establish their companies, that's what they called the people who were going out as colonies. They had chartered companies. The charters of all of the companies

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Glenn Sunshine

talk about bringing the gospel to the native peoples. So, this was on their radar. The "how" they did it is a different question. They weren't always very active in trying to evangelize the natives, though it is worth noting that in Puritan New England you get people like David Brainerd, and you get others who are actively working at converting the date.

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Glenn Sunshine

Now we're in the 18th century now, so we're a little later, but they are actively working at converting the native populations. If you read the accounts of King Philip's War even earlier, you will see people talking about, quote, praying Indian arms. The praying Indians were the Indians who had converted to Christianity. Now, they weren't really wild about the praying Indians because they maintained their own culture.

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Glenn Sunshine

They didn't become English.

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Alex Kocman

But kind of a roadblock to the colonialist project in some way.

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Glenn Sunshine

Yeah. And unfortunately, in this period, Christianization equaled Europeanization. Right. Because the only example that they had of what Christianity looked like was Europe. Right. So, it was making them like Europeans. So, the praying Indians were not trusted because although they were, they said they were Christians. They were not behaving like Englishmen. They were so living in the in the young and sometimes in separate villages.

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Glenn Sunshine

But they're still living like the native population did. So, there was a question in their minds of whether or not they were really Christians. But nonetheless, you do see the effort is being made to convert them. I think it's really kind of unfair to accuse the Protestants of being uninterested in this. It's largely it. Again, it's largely a question of access to the mission field.

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Scott Dunford

And it's so important for us to remember, as Alex pointed out, just trying to look at this period with some charity. But if we could start, you know, we have a little bit of time left, I think it'd be really helpful for us. Just pick your brain a little bit. But what are some of the key takeaways? You know, when you look at this period of time and certainly, we look at a guy like Boniface and admire his courage, but it's easy for us to look back at this time period and go like, well, you know, was it you know, was it was the gospel faithfully proclaimed was being passed on or was there

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Scott Dunford

some mixture of error with it? It's hard for us to determine. (You know, at least Alex and I, but I mean, you have an opinion stronger than that on it.) But what are the things that you would say? I wish missionaries today would learn these things about, you know, from this period of time. And the saints from that period of time.

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Glenn Sunshine

Yeah.

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Scott Dunford

What can we take away from that?

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Glenn Sunshine

Yeah, well, the mistakes that ends up being made and by the way, the beginnings of the modern missions movement with Carey. It occurs where the British have colonies, right? The second wave occurs under Hudson Taylor occurs where the British have colonies. You know, this access thing is really important, but. But what I would say is that, first of all, did they have error in their theology?

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Glenn Sunshine

Yes. Do we have error in our theology? Yes.

00:15:01:09 - 00:15:02:05

Alex Kocman

Yes.

00:15:02:08 - 00:15:03:06

Scott Dunford

Can do.

00:15:03:09 - 00:15:05:07

Glenn Sunshine

Yeah. Yeah.

00:15:05:09 - 00:15:08:07

Scott Dunford

Now. Now, which ones? I want to know. No. No.

00:15:08:11 - 00:15:09:11

Glenn Sunshine

Yeah.

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Scott Dunford

Yeah. Here. Of course.

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Glenn Sunshine

Here's the. Here's the problem. If we're honest and actually think about who God is, we've got to realize that our brains are in capable of really getting it right.

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Scott Dunford

Yeah, it's.

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Glenn Sunshine

Important. And as a result, if I can give myself grace to be wrong about some things, I don't know what they are. Because if I knew what they are, I change. If I can give myself grace to have blind spots and trust that God will give me grace as well, we should do the same for the people of the past.

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Glenn Sunshine

We need to remember that evangelical Christianity is a Johnny come lately on the scene. It really develops in the 18th century in Britain. We've got 1,700 years of church history before what we think of as the gospel emerges as sort of a young, the whole conversion is thing and all of that, that that's a relatively recent phenomenon in church history.

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Alex Kocman

Right. People were getting converted before conversionism. Right. Had really been worked out and honestly is still being worked out and there's good and bad and ugly with that. And sometimes it's treated well and other times not applied well. I think another point of application here—I'd love to hear you comment on is the issue of access.

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Alex Kocman

Even today, access is something we think about because we define unreached people groups, not just as those who aren't converted, but those who don't have access to the gospel in terms of their neighbors, in terms of access to Scripture and all of those sorts of things. We are at the tail end of the American empire, and we've been given a unique opportunity to travel throughout the world and to have access to really anywhere in the globe.

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Alex Kocman

Who knows how long that will continue to be the case that things in the West, just in general, I think it's fair to say they're not improving at the moment. Will we be found faithful where we're in a period of history where it's not colonialism, but through air travel and globalization? We have a lot more access to the world than we've ever had, and that puts us in a maybe a similar position.

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Glenn Sunshine

I would actually point out another part of this. There are many countries that are close to Christianity. Those countries that are close to Christianity have a lot of people who have come to the U.S. and are living right here. Yeah, which means we have access to people groups in the United States that we can't get to on the mission field.

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Glenn Sunshine

And I think that's something we need to take very, very seriously if we're interested in reaching these people groups there, right here. So. And particularly groups from closed countries. So that's one thing to consider. I take a fairly ecumenical view of things. You know, when I'm looking at the past, basically, if you can sign on to Nicene Christianity.

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Glenn Sunshine

I'm good with you. We can work together. I may disagree with you about a lot of stuff, but that's enough just as a base to work from. Yeah. So, the Assyrian, the so-called Chaldean Church or the Assyrian Christians or the Iraqi church, they're Nestorian. I don't care. They sign on to Nicene Christianity. I can work with them. We have to remember that our doctrine says that we're justified by faith in Christ.

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Glenn Sunshine

We're not justified by believing. We're justified by faith in Christ.

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Alex Kocman

Yes.

00:18:33:16 - 00:18:57:21

Glenn Sunshine

And there are a lot of people who I would believe in all of these churches who have genuine faith in Christ, but who do not necessarily understand the gospel the way we do, who may not accept the idea of justification by faith, but who are justified nonetheless because their faith is in Jesus. And that's how I think we need to look, not only at church is ecumenical now, but if these people in the past.

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Alex Kocman

So, something that we've discussed on the show before, you look at nominal Christianity throughout the world in all of these places where there's been established churches for four centuries and some of the places that you've made reference to. Is your glass half full or half empty with regard to something like nominalism? Or are we looking that purely through evangelicals and saying like, well, they don't articulate the gospel exactly right and so we need to evangelize them.

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Alex Kocman

And by all means, let's share our understanding of the gospel with them, because we think we do have an accurate understanding of the gospel. By God's grace, we've inherited these riches through the Reformation and continual understanding of Scripture that's happened over the past many centuries. But also, can we have a glass half full and say, well, they know the name of Jesus Christ, they know to call godfather, they know the Holy Spirit is given to them by the Father and the Son.

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Alex Kocman

There's something there that we have in common. At the very least, it is a foundation to be built upon and not spat at and not disparaged. Yeah, because that's God's work throughout history and laying that foundation.

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Glenn Sunshine

That's the that's the lesson from the Irish church going to the continent. What you had was a largely dead church on the continent. Corrupt people were living in complete ignorance of the gospel and all of that. And what happens? You get a group of guys from Ireland who show up, who are on fire, who are absolutely sold out and serious about the faith, who are uncompromising about living it out in their own lives, and who are unapologetic about telling people about it.

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Glenn Sunshine

And what happens? People begin flocking to it because what they're seeing are people who really believe something. It's something that's sort of familiar, but this is looking really different. And it's looking different because they're sold out, they're committed and they're uncompromising. And this attracts people. People are attracted to those who are while good leaders, but who are also demonstrate by their life and work words that they're committed to something and that are inviting you to come and join them.

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Glenn Sunshine

That's what the Irish did. They evangelized the continent that was already nominally Christian. That's largely the point of that story. And in the process, they laid the foundation for the transformation of the culture on all kinds of different levels in a few centuries. It took time, but it happened.

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Scott Dunford

So, help me resolve this. You know, what seems in my mind a little bit of a contradiction, which I'm sure that it's not. But, you know, on the one hand of recognizing, okay, there is, and I see in Christianity, as you as you put it, but also in how do we work together, but also this idea of the fact that, like in those times, the Irish, the Irish had to go reach re evangelize areas that were nominally Christian.

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Scott Dunford

Right. How do we reconcile that, or at least how do you try to reconcile that?

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Glenn Sunshine

I am willing to work with anybody who is serious about their faith that accepts at least the basic doctrines of Christianity. The key phrase is serious about their faith. The problem is

the vast majority of people in churches, especially in places where there are state churches, the vast majority of them are what you've described properly, I think, as nominal Christians.

00:22:28:16 - 00:22:32:09

Glenn Sunshine

They are not people who genuinely take their faith seriously.

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Scott Dunford

So, you're not promoting nominalism You're saying we need to we still need to evangelize nominal Christians, right?

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Glenn Sunshine

Yes, because we need or at the very least, the most generous way of putting it is we have to call them to live what they say they believe.

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Scott Dunford

Yeah. Call them to discipleship, right? Yeah.

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Alex Kocman

Right.

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Glenn Sunshine

And interestingly enough, when you look at the revivals, when you look at, you know, the Wesleyan revival, the Evangelical revival, the Great Awakening, all of those took place in churches. And what they were, in essence, was a call to the people to take their faith seriously. To turn away from living a life that largely ignored the faith and to make it central.

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Glenn Sunshine

The entire point of conversion originally in evangelical conversionism was to convert people from nominal Christianity to a committed Christianity. That's really what it was about. So even our revivals are the sorts of things that, you know, in a lot of ways that the Irish were doing on the continent, and that when we're dealing with places like Europe, we largely need to do now as well.

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Glenn Sunshine

Although in Europe with the increasing Muslim population, we've got another entire mission field.

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Alex Kocman

Glenn, help me with something else too. On the order of Scott's question, I'm with you. My nominalism glass is half full. I can rejoice in the legacy of Christendom, despite the fact that you'll obviously have what right now in many parts of, for instance, Europe, it's kind of an empty shell of what once was, right?

00:24:19:06 - 00:24:36:16

Alex Kocman

But I can still rejoice that there's a foundation there and that people can still know Christ savingly in some of these places where perhaps the gospel was even more vibrant in the past. But what do you do with the fact then, that oftentimes on the mission field, do you find it is more open to the gospel?

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Alex Kocman

Sometimes it's the total pagan, sometimes it's the person that hasn't been touched by the gospel culturally at all. How do we hold those things together? The fact that there's so much of a foundation has been laid historically, and yet where we see the greatest, most explosive growth of Christianity is in parts of the global South that maybe never even had it at all?

00:24:57:05 - 00:24:59:18

Alex Kocman

Or are those two facts in tension, in your opinion?

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Glenn Sunshine

We're in uncharted territory in the West in that we're dealing with a truly post-Christian culture, and that may in fact be a harder area to reach than a completely pagan culture. I suspect it is because people don't take G.K. Chesterton's words to heart. You said Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, has been found hard, difficult, and therefore left untried.

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Glenn Sunshine

Right? Most of them fall into that trap. They think we've been there, done that. Christianity through it hasn't done anything good at all. Now the history of that is completely bogus. Christianity has done more good for the world than anything else has. But people don't know that and they don't believe it. And so we're dealing with people who basically say, been there, done that, done that, got the t-shirt, don't want to go back when they've never actually been there or done that.

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Glenn Sunshine

That's a much I think that's a much more difficult nut to crack than the people who have never heard the gospel in the first place. You'll notice what I was talking about were people who are still in churches, you know, the people who are still in churches, who are at least nominally Christians. That may be something that you can build on.

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Alex Kocman

They think they're still Christian on something, right? Yeah.

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Glenn Sunshine

The people who are opposed to Christians are much tougher, at least it seems to me. And I would argue actually, this is a perhaps an entirely different conversation. I would argue we need to have an entirely different approach to apologetics because the old apologetic no longer works because, well, for a whole lot of reasons. But. Right. And so that that's how I would resolve the tension.

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Glenn Sunshine

You work with what you've got in a post-crisis culture. You've got a really tough row to hoe if you've got people who are at least identify as Christians, that's something you can conceivably build on. And pagans you're just breached.

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Scott Dunford

Well, this has been a fascinating discussion, and we probably need to wrap this up, at least for now. But, Glenn, how can people find out more about you if they want to learn more or follow up, even reach out to you? How can they best do that?

00:27:06:07 - 00:27:42:13

Glenn Sunshine

I have a ministry 501(c)(3) called Every Square Inch Ministries. The website is eversquareinch.org. There's a contact me button there. There's The Theology Pugcast, which I, I do every week with a couple of other guys and occasional guests. I also contribute articles to Breakpoint commentaries a month. So breakpoint.org. And I'm working as well with Reflections Ministries, reflections.org, and I have some things up there as well.

00:27:42:15 - 00:28:05:23

Alex Kocman

A very good and perhaps even the *32 Christians Who Changed Their World*, that might be a good first step for somebody to sink their teeth into church history. And before we go to our listening family, I do want to just wholeheartedly recommend The Theology Pugcast. It's one of those podcasts that I listen to every week whenever a new episode comes out.

00:28:05:23 - 00:28:28:05

Alex Kocman

And if you've found this enriching world, there's a lot more where that came from. And so we just hope that's encouraging for everyone that enjoys things that we talk about here each week theology, missions, practice, culture and all things of that nature. But we thank you for joining us today. If this was helpful to you, go ahead and leave a positive rating and review in your podcast platform of choice.

00:28:28:09 - 00:28:43:00

Alex Kocman

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