

Why Every Missionary Should be a Theologian

00:00:05:10 - 00:00:30:19

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 Engagement with ABWE. We joined once again my good friend and partner in crime, Scott Dunford. Pastor of Western Hills Church in San Mateo, California. And we're thankful that you're joining us.

00:00:30:19 - 00:01:07:16

Alex Kocman

Whether you're listening to us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify or watching us on the YouTube channel or perhaps joining us through the Wrath and Grace app or watching us on NRB-TV. However, you came on board today, we're glad you joined us. Of course, the vast majority of our listeners are podcast listeners, and for those of you listening by podcast, we greatly appreciate you not only sharing the show with a friend, but leaving it a positive rating and review to help feed that recommendation algorithm that helps other people not just discover the content, but take next steps of obedience in the Great Commission.

00:01:07:16 - 00:01:27:15

Alex Kocman

Because of the encouragement that they receive here. We've heard some stories even recently, Scott, of people doing that because of the influence of the show. And, you know, it's a wonderful thing. It's a blessing to be a part of it. But today we're getting back to a topic that we've covered a handful of times on this show. And it's time to return to it.

00:01:27:15 - 00:01:52:19

Alex Kocman

You know, Scott, we were talking the other day, this is really our bread and butter. It's bringing together missions and theology. And, you know, there's a couple questions that maybe get thrown around in different quarters of the Christian world. One of them being is every Christian, a missionary. And there's different answers to that. But you and I would come down on the side of, sure, every Christian should be engaged in the great missionary task of the church in some way, as a sender, as a goer.

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Alex Kocman

We should all be about the work of the gospel. But not every Christian is a sent missionary. That's something very particular. A church has to send a missionary with a mission. So not everyone is a missionary in that sense. We need to be sending missionaries specifically. Secondly, is everyone a theologian? You know, the late, great RC Sproul would say everyone's a missionary.

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Alex Kocman

Excuse me? Everyone's a theologian. But is that true? I think we know every Christian should be a theologian. We also look into our churches. And I see brothers and sisters in the Lord that I. I'd love to see them grow in their knowledge of the things of God. I know I need to grow in my knowledge of spiritual things as well.

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Alex Kocman

But then the nexus of these two questions, Scott, is, should every missionary be a theologian? And we've known you and I both. I know many sincere, wonderful, dear folks who've gone, across land and sea to do brave, courageous things for the Lord. And yet we've also seen the cost when they go without a lack of theological preparation, without a solid understanding of doctrine and what can be, what's not able to be compromised, and also where some necessary contextualizing for a particular culture can actually take place, within the context of faithfulness.

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Alex Kocman

Missionaries need that skill set, right? And, I would say that every missionary does need to be a theologian. The question, right is just how.

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Scott Dunford

Well, I think when we look at the question of whether everyone needs to be a theologian, of course we go. Of course they do. Right? But I think, I think the gravity of the situation is sometimes still lost on the typical missionary, because a lot of missionaries, you and I, I've sat through doctrinal interviews at Abbey w we go through a doctrinal interview with every person who joins the mission, and we ask them the basic theological questions that we feel like every Christian should know.

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Scott Dunford

And a lot of people think, well, I'm going to go over there and I'm not going to be running a theological seminary. You know, like, that's not my goal. I'm not even maybe the lead church planter is a support role, but I think what we forget is that of how much theological groundwork is laid through one on one discipleship.

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Scott Dunford

And we assume that, when we are here in the States, that there's a lot of inputs building someone's theology. But when you're in a pioneer missionary setting, when you're in a setting without, you know, like, I look behind me at all my books that I have when I was a missionary, I did not have all those books with me.

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Scott Dunford

I had some things on Lagos on my computer, and I had probably 15 or 20 key texts that I brought along with me. All of those were in English. None of those were in the language we were working in. There's very limited books that I could hand to someone else and say, hey, read this, read this, read this in their language.

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Scott Dunford

And you think about when you're discipling someone here, how many times in the middle of the night do you get a text from a young man going, hey, I had this random question, right? Have you I'm sure you've had that happen. Right. And, they're watching a YouTube video and they go, hey, you know, I watch this video.

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Scott Dunford

Is this right? And these thoughts are crossing their mind, and they're coming to you and asking you to kind of supplement it, but imagine, you know, now being over in a, in a, in a, either a restricted access place or a pioneering, work, where you are going to be almost exclusively the resource that people use.

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Scott Dunford

And it doesn't matter if you're a church planter or where you're whether you're a theological educator or a your, a nurse, right? That young lady who comes to you as a nurse is going to ask you those theological questions. And your answer is going to be by default, probably the foundation upon which they start thinking theologically. And that is pretty scary, right?

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Scott Dunford

I mean, when you don't when you put it that way, I think that most people would find that the task is much more urgent. They get that you get ramped up to speed than just, I'll figure it out as I go. You know what I mean?

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Alex Kocman

Well, you're the main source. But here's the thing, though, Scott, today, throughout the missions world, it's not even so much the situation that you're describing. What you're describing is a situation, at least, where a missionary knows and recognizes his responsibility to be, a conduit for theological instruction. You're also swimming upstream now against the fact that throughout much of the missions world, missionaries are told, don't preach, don't teach, don't impose a theological system or framework.

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Alex Kocman

Let all of the theologizing that happens be organic and be indigenous in origin and in final product, such that the missionary recedes and is only a facilitator, someone who's there to point to Scripture, to, to, to help catalyze an inductive Bible study effort, which there's much good that can be said for indigenous theology and, and, and of course, contextualizing and inductive Bible study.

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Alex Kocman

But when we're talking about baby converts and fledgling young, vulnerable church plants, for the missionary to choose to not be involved and not bring theological instruction on issues that are clear on issues that aren't just here's what my culture, you know, tends to see in the text of Scripture. But no, here's what the text of Scripture actually says.

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Alex Kocman

This is not just a human system. This is a system that derives from Scripture. And I'm giving this to you in almost a pre digested form. That's the work of missionaries as well, to be instructors and to be teachers. And that means having the theological background to some extent.

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Scott Dunford

And this is where I think we have to get back to helping every single missionary, understand that they need to be pushing and growing and thinking about theology because what they say and their little offhanded comment, to young believer or, you know, imagine yourself in, in a tribe in, in Papua, in Papua New Guinea, where they don't really have a Christian understanding of anything.

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Scott Dunford

You're, you're laying foundations that are going to be the bedrock of what that person and maybe even that family, that tribe believes forever. So take what you're doing seriously, you know, take it, take that task of being a theologian with the urgency that I think it of necessity has. And so, you know, just transitioning that that thought, going a little bit deeper on that, I think there's some unique challenges that are faced, and maybe you and I could just kind of talk about some of those things.

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Scott Dunford

The unique challenge of laying a theological foundation, in a pioneer missionary setting. So, so we understand there's some things about the West that we've inherited that, that allow for certain kind of discourse, which is super valuable. I mean, our found our society has been built upon of obviously a Christian foundation, but also a certain way of thinking about the world, you know, that the Greco-Roman philosophy also gave, gave shape and language to some of the maybe that shape is the right word.

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Scott Dunford

Maybe you could explain even better. But it certainly gave language to how we talk about things. So when the theologian of Nicaea, for instance, they weren't they weren't allowing Greek theology, Greek philosophy to shape their theology, but they did use terminologies that were already being used to help explain, what we might mean by, you know, by the personhood of God.

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Scott Dunford

You know, someone can read that. Or even when we talk about theology, we talk about simplicity or complexity. Well, we're using it in a philosophical, theological way that it might be different than just, an ordinary way. And we go into those other cultures. They don't necessarily think the same ways that we did, you know? So we can kind of imagine that some of those challenges that might be there, that we have got to know our stuff really well because we just can't rely on the shorthand in the lingo, the, the lingo of, of our, you know, of our seminary training.

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Scott Dunford

You know what I mean?

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Alex Kocman

Yeah. We have a unique inheritance. I want to slow down and think about that unique Christian inheritance that we have in the West that, allows us, I think, to, to grasp certain biblical concepts, but then also gives us more work to do when we bring those into a new context or an unreached or a pioneering place.

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Alex Kocman

First, I want to take a quick pause and share with our listeners, an important opportunity, a is the not only the organization that powers the missions podcast, but also, a mission reaching into 90 plus countries through not only national partners, but through about a thousand sent missionaries from more than 450 sending churches. Now, all of that means that there need to be the type of people here on the team that are effective and biblical at making the connection between teams and places and fields overseas in need of the gospel, in need of healthy biblical local churches and people here in the States, and, and elsewhere.

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Alex Kocman

But people in the states, churches that are ready to send and individuals in those churches that are ready to be sent, that that sends the Holy Spirit prompting them, leading them out to do more for the sake of the gospel among the nations. So because of that, he is looking for a new director of mobilization. It's an important role.

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Alex Kocman

It's actually the role I once occupied, a long time ago, when I was just a young, plucky, wet behind the ears, new recruit to a BWB and one, Scott Dunford, put his hand on my shoulder and brought me into the family. But a BWR, of course, has grown many ways since then, and we now need someone new to pick up the mantle of that role in our mobilization department.

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Alex Kocman

Somebody who can preach and teach, on missions, somebody that brings pastoral or missionary experience, and somebody who's passionate to see people take next steps in fulfilling the Great Commission. So if you think that you might be a fit for the director mobilization role or any other position at BWB, maybe you're listening to this episode months after the fact.

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Alex Kocman

Maybe that position is closed, but we still hires for other positions. Time to time. You can go to epw.org/jobs and find out more information and begin your application online. Again, it's Abwehr org slash jobs. With that out of the way, Scott, I think you're right to highlight the unique cultural inheritance that Christianity has. And in some ways, assumes the Greco-Roman piece of our cultural inheritance in the West has always been intertwined with the Christian story since the first century and onward.

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Alex Kocman

Tertullian famously asked and wrote, what hath Athens to do with Jerusalem? Then? His answer was essentially nothing. He was one. And you see this in other pockets, and you see this in evangelicalism today. There is this desire to brand anything Greco-Roman as pagan and to be rejected and to say, well, it's only the Hebraic worldview that we need to be influenced by.

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Alex Kocman

But I don't accept that, explanation. I think one of the unique things about the gospel and about Christianity is that it's light, but it's also salt. It's a preservative. It tends to preserve what's best in whatever culture it finds itself in. That's what makes it so powerful as it spreads to the nations, outside of the Western world.

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Alex Kocman

But what that means is that colliding with the Western tradition or the proto Western tradition, pre Christendom, in the first century, it took that it took hold of philosophical constructs that that needed to be worked, reworked and reshaped and redeemed. But

ultimately, through Providence became incredibly useful ways of summarizing biblical truth and ways that weren't completely antithetical to the way Hebrews were thinking, either.

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Alex Kocman

The Hebrews weren't idiots. They were able to figure out rational concepts and logical concepts as well. We have this inheritance, and, and it's assumed in the way that we talk about God. I was just reading that to get a little bit nerdy, but I just read a passage from Aristotle this morning where he talks about God being satisfied in himself and needing no one else.

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Alex Kocman

My goodness, that sounds so much like the God of the Bible. So there's these there's these areas of overlap where we can benefit from that when we're going into some places, though, that have never had that as a part of their history and tradition, there's more work to do. And, I'll answer succinctly, Scott, I think the one thing that that the Christian worldview is best at doing is finding what are the redemptive analogies or what of what are sort of the piece children in that culture, if you understand that reference.

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Alex Kocman

But what are the things that are already present in the receiver worldview, that can be mapped on to some biblical constructs to give that foundation? That's one thing. And then the second thing is assuming nothing and simply walking through the story of revelation from Genesis all the way to three, all the way to the end. Unfolding that story as it unfolded through the ages, showing that not only there's a God, he loves you, he sent Jesus, but showing that there's a story that goes through the ages.

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Alex Kocman

There's this scarlet thread. Throughout history, God revealed himself in in stages and in further steps to his people, ultimately pointing to Christ and inviting them into that story so that they can find themselves in that narrative and develop what we call and theologians. Missy, I'll just call, you know, sort of the plausibility structure to grasp the basics of the gospel, to not just know that there's a God, but who this God is and what that means, and the fact that he judges the fact that there's right and wrong, and the fact that there's a final judgment and we're not reincarnated and brought back here is something else.

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Alex Kocman

All of that is something that you see develop organically throughout the biblical story. And so I think we have to look for again, what does the receiver worldview have that can be redeemed and connected with biblical concepts? But then ultimately, let's assume nothing. Let's start from the beginning and work chronologically from Genesis to Revelation.

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Scott Dunford

Yeah, I you know, I think that obvious that's important. And not just important. That's crucial. Right? We definitely agree with that. But also for a church, though, to be established strongly, I mean, we see a lot of times people have a lot of Bible knowledge. They don't know how it fits together. And so and I think you and I are on the same page about this, like the importance, there is an importance of systematic theology.

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Scott Dunford

But when we come into a culture, you know, we're used to a culture where maybe monotheism is the norm and we have trouble explaining the Trinity from the idea of how can the three be one when one is the standard, you go to another culture where it's polytheistic or animistic and you start talking about, I mean, we've heard we've had these discussions on here where a missionary, you know, is working with people.

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Scott Dunford

They accept the gospel readily. They believe in the saving God, the creator of the universe. But they're also still, appeasing the little gods, right? Because the high God has nothing to do with the little things. And so, you know, learning as a, as a as you're getting ready and preparing to go into those contexts, really thinking through, how would I explain this very, very, very basically, how do I explain to people who have different ways of thinking about the world they live in, the culture they live in?

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Scott Dunford

And if we don't take that task seriously from understanding philosophy, understanding our theology? Well, when you and I have both been in situations where someone's using big words and they're talking very fancy, and you're like, that guy doesn't know what he's talking about. He read a book and he's regurgitating it to me. There's a huge difference between someone like that who can say all the big words, but if you get them beyond the surface, they're lost because they just read the concept, versus I talking listening to a guy like RC Sproul who could take the most complex things and make them so accessible and simple because he really understood it deeply.

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Scott Dunford

And that's I think our God has to be our challenge to missionaries and of course, to pastors and laypeople, is to take the work of missions so seriously that you become an expert on theology, that you take that task really, and an expert on culture so that you can explain this deep, robust theology to people who do not share those same philosophical, the same literary tradition.

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Scott Dunford

I mean, we're going to, you know, I think a lot of, Brooks in the work he did in the me, try tribe Spitzer and think, you know, how did they learn, you know, some of these concepts from Chalcedon, you know, the unmixed natures of Christ. How do you teach that to a tribal people group?

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Scott Dunford

You know, that's quite the challenge, you know. How do you do that? I think you do that not by being a novice and not by taking, but by taking your work really seriously. I'll let you jump in.

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Alex Kocman

Well, one of the important things you mentioned is, is, yeah, the goal is not just to fill heads with information. It's to see a healthy church form. So as we talk about that, as we think about that, what are some ways where maybe Scott having the lack of that theological understanding, either in the local population or from the missionary himself, maybe teaching poorly, maybe teaching incompletely?

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Alex Kocman

How does that stunt the development of a church? Because I can think of some obvious examples, something we see in the missions world today. We still see insider movements. We still see theologies that de-emphasize conversion and breaking from the old life pre-crisis and walking in a new way of life. As someone who's publicly baptized and saying, I've, I have decided to follow Jesus.

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Alex Kocman

And instead of that, we still have this thought that says we'll stay in the mosque, continue to identify as Muslim, but be praying to Jesus secretly in your heart, even though you're still a part of all of the trappings of Islam. Now, that's an maybe. That's an oversimplification of insider movements, but not really by much. That's essentially what's argued for.

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Alex Kocman

And we see other versions of that maybe, slightly, moderated from that. We see, I see all over the place in the missions world, really unhealthy models for church planting. Sometimes the churches is non-existent because certain things aren't taught. But what do you see that that can potentially happen when those key theological concepts are lacking, are not being taught, are not a part of a missionaries preparation that leads to not only incompletely formed disciples, but then also that leads to stunted churches in terms of their health, their development, and their staying power, so that they're impervious to, you know, a wave of heresy that maybe sweeps through the region

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Alex Kocman

in ten, 15 or 20 years. You know, 100 years later, they're still standing and they're still orthodox. That's hard to come by. Did you know that it can take anywhere from 18 to 24 months or more for the average missionary to raise their financial support? The journey to the field is an arduous one, and for some missionaries, it goes by quicker than others.

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Alex Kocman

Other missionaries are waiting for the right prayer and financial partners to come alongside them and hold the rope for them as they go out to reach the lost. And so would you consider praying for and maybe adopting an AB? We pre missionary, somebody that's already been commissioned and sent out from their local church, and the only thing keeping them from having a fruitful ministry on the field is simply their ability to get there.

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Alex Kocman

You can go to AB Dawgs pre field and find a pre field missionary, whether you just want to pray for them or whether the Lord would lead you to give to one of their ministries, find one that you can support today at AB Dawg Slash Pre Field.

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Scott Dunford

I'm more and more convinced the longer I'm in ministry that we do not spend enough time meaning me. I have not spent enough time truly pondering and going deep into who God is. And my explanations have often been very short. They've been, not complex enough. I've not done enough work to explain those things very simply.

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Scott Dunford

And, you know, you've heard the you've heard the phrase before. I think we've said out here multiple times, the fog in the pulpit becomes, what was the phrase? Missing the pulpit becomes a fog and it becomes.

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Alex Kocman

A fog in the pews. Right? Yeah. If you're a little and which is a powerful statement if you're a little as the preacher, as the pastor, the missionary, if you're a little uncertain about something, your hearers will be very unclear as to what you're saying.

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Scott Dunford

Right. And so making sure that we have a really a robust understanding of God understanding and even with our own cultural wording, you know, our in English, I mean,

you know, that we understand it so deeply. That was we're learning a new culture as we're learning a new language, as we're understanding those things where we're driven to find ways to explain it that are culturally, faith, they're culturally representative, but also really biblically faithful.

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Scott Dunford

That we can really back up what we're teaching with, with Scripture. You know, how many people think the New Testament doesn't call Jesus God? You know, I mean, a lot of Christians have a hard time showing from the New Testament how it definitely calls Jesus God. And, that's shocking, but it's also not too shocking to think that in the mission field, that's not the same way.

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Scott Dunford

Understanding how the law teaches us the holiness and otherness of God and our desperate need for salvation. You know, those are just some of the things, you know, I, I think also even just like a Christian understanding of how the universe works, a Hindu understanding of the universe or even a Muslim understanding of the universe and God, Islam is closer to Christianity because it's derivative of Christianity.

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Scott Dunford

It's still very different than the biblical understanding. A Hindu understanding that was far different in an animistic understanding in a tribal culture is even farther from that. And so understanding those cultures and then how to explain those? Well, that takes serious work and that takes a dedication that I don't see a lot of missionaries taking as seriously as they ought to.

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Scott Dunford

We really think that's for the PhD guys. We need to recruit to start a seminary, to actually help people go deeper.

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Alex Kocman

And unfortunately, one of the reason missionaries don't value that is because the churches that they've grown up in are not valuing those things. Right. It's a trade off with everything, evangelism, being sensitive to the seekers or attracting seekers or not quite yet saved individuals, has been the M.O. of so many churches for the last 2 or 3 generations, at least in North America.

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Alex Kocman

And the result of that is, sure, maybe attracting more of the masses. But ultimately, if you're saying yes to that strategy, you're saying no to something else. And usually what that's, what ends up being sacrificed on that altar is the development of people who can themselves be teachers, preachers, pastors, missionaries, theological instructors, and so on. There's a real cost to failing to, to fully form people.

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Alex Kocman

And this phrase has been used by others. And I think it's so helpful. What you win them with is what you win them to. There's not really and I realize there's exceptions because God is sovereign, but generally speaking, in the ministries that we operate on a day to day basis, if the modus operandi is to bring in people with a very, base, minimal facts type of argument for the Christian faith, what's the lowest common denominator gospel presentation that we can spread across a group of people and have them receive it and keep coming back for more and not immediately turn them aside?

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Alex Kocman

Then that's what we will win them to. That is the version of Christianity, that they will opt in for, and they'll be on that program unless God sovereignly directs them to something else that's deeper, that's richer, that's more tethered to, doctrine, to history, to tradition. And in order to send missionaries that last, we need more than easy believe.

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Scott Dunford

Seeker.

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Alex Kocman

Missionaries going out. We need people that have been inculcated in a rich. It's not just the intellectual richness, richness, it's also the heart. It's the will, a commitment to loving the Lord, knowing the Lord, pleasing the Lord, delighting oneself in the Lord. But it is also, Christianity is an intellectually demanding faith. There's a lot to know.

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Alex Kocman

It's a rich, rich body of knowledge and truth and information and the type of people that we send need to be the type of people that are hungry for that, who derive joy and satisfaction from soaking in it and from spreading that to other people.

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Scott Dunford

So I know we're going to run out of time here quickly. So I want to like I want to bring it to something so I can imagine, you know, a missionary listening to this being like, great, now I feel like crap, you know, because I don't know how to explain anything. But, Alex, let's talk for a minute.

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Scott Dunford

About what? What can a missionary do? I mean, a mission is already on the field. Maybe they don't have a lot of theological training or they have it, but they don't know how to explain it. Well, what would we say to them to say, hey, you may be here now, but this is how you can grow and buff up your theological training, where you're at.

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Scott Dunford

What where would you tell someone to start? What are some of the things you would tell, you know, layperson on the field, not a church, not a seminary leader, but someone who realizes, hey, I need to get robust in my theology. Where do I start?

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Alex Kocman

Well, I'm going to answer very quickly. And then we're going to break and head to our overtime episode, because we're running very low on broadcast time right now. And what I will, recommend is that missionaries not only familiarize themselves with Scripture generally, but pick up a good systematic theology. One that takes the ideas in the Bible, synthesizes them together, isn't afraid of using the heavier language, the longer words, the technical words to describe certain key concepts, be familiar with those and then get involved in teaching.

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Alex Kocman

Teach an adult Sunday school. Teach a Bible study somewhere where you can teach, because the difference between somebody that's merely interested in the topic and someone who's mastered it is the ability to take complicated concepts and bring them down to a lay level. But get yourself a good systematic theology. Keep listening to the missions podcast is something else that you can do.

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Alex Kocman

Because we wrestle with the hard questions of missions, theology, and practice. And we're going to continue this very conversation. In our overtime episode, we'll talk about more practical ways of deepening in your theological knowledge, as well as what do we do with the fact that we're just not in a reading culture? Some would say we're in an oral culture again.

00:29:40:20 - 00:30:09:22

Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

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Alex Kocman

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