



Episode 065: Is Every Christian a Missionary?

Denny Spitters has served for many years in different ministry roles, including two different mega-churches. He's directed a parachurch ministry and he's helped plant several churches. He's also spent 15 years as a business owner, and now serves as Vice President of Church Partnerships for [Pioneers USA](#).

Matthew Ellison has served as a missions pastor for 9 years. During that time he realized there's a growing wave of churches desiring to participate in global engagement in fruitful ways. This led to the founding of [Sixteen:Fifteen](#) where he is President and Church Missions Coach. Over the last 12 years he's been helping churches develop missions vision and strategy.

Matthew, where does the name "Sixteen:Fifteen" come from?

- *Matthew:* It's named after the reference Mark 16:15 which says, "Go into all the world, preach the good news to all creation." We provide missions coaching to help churches clarify a biblical understanding of missions and develop a strategy that takes into account their uniqueness as a local body.

Denny, tell us a bit about your role with Pioneers.

- *Denny:* I've been with Pioneers for 12 years. I serve in the church partnerships team. We have about 10 people on our team, most of whom are in different regions of the US. We mobilize, serve, and resource our missionaries and sending churches.

Recently the two of you co-wrote a book [When Everything Is Missions](#), published in 2017. What sparked the idea to produce this book?

- *Denny:* It's a long story. In a nutshell, Matthew and I talked about it a lot. One day I talked about it with our communications director and the next day I had in my inbox a cover. He said, "Well, I got your cover. All you have to do is fill in the blanks."
- *Denny:* We didn't write this book to protect the turf of "Missions Inc." This is not about writing a self-serving, protectionist publication. Our observation over the last 2 to 3 decades is that there's incredible confusion about what missions is. There are a lot of myths, half-truths and missions drift that are rampant. We observe a boundless, unquestioned expansion of what "missions" has become that includes deconstructionalism, rethinking, reframing and redefining of many historical and orthodox biblical terms surrounding mission.



Give us a sketch, please, of what's included in this book. What's the basic idea?

- *Matthew:* There's a great deal of confusion in a lot of churches about the Great Commission. We really want to encourage readers to not rethink missions but rediscover it. This is the 500th anniversary celebration of the Reformation. One of the key things that Reformation leaders focused on was not a redefining of truth, but a rediscovery of truth. So that's the big idea here.
- *Matthew:* We believe a lot of churches don't have a biblical definition of missions that is shaping and informing their decisions and actions. If churches and church leaders don't have a shared understanding of their Great Commission purpose and goal, they're going to have a really difficult time fulfilling it. At the heartbeat of the book is that there would be a rediscovery of a biblical understanding of missions and the implications for local churches.
- *Denny:* We also want to challenge all believers as Jesus' disciples and all church leaders in the North American evangelical church to reconsider the conventional wisdom of today that says, "Every believer is a missionary. Therefore, everything we do is missions". The big idea in the book is, local churches don't really do missions well because they don't think about missions well. Local churches really need to go back to the Bible to define a foundational definition for missions work, and ask, "What did Jesus ask of us as his church when he gave his Great Commission statements? What are we supposed to be doing?"

Let me simply ask, is every Christian a missionary? Why or why not?

- *Denny:* Everybody is not a missionary, just like everybody is not a pastor, even though we are to care and love one another in the body of Christ. Nor is everybody an evangelist. Yet, we are all chosen to proclaim.
- *Denny:* We see this phrase used to rally people to evangelism and to witness for Christ. But it's simply not working here, and it's not really advancing the global missions fervor and passion. All Christians are called to live on mission for God and be engaged in the Great Commission, but some are called to mission in a specific way. Please stop calling everybody a missionary because it's really not helping what we think it's supposed to be doing.
- *Matthew:* Justin Long says that we say every member is a missionary, but we don't actually mean that. What we mean is this, that every member is a witness ready to give testimony to what God's done, share the good news of salvation, and to be a disciple maker who's working with people to help them grow in obedience to Jesus. But "missionary" means being sent across a boundary where the gospel is not to see the church established. We talk about everyone being a missionary, but we don't really mean it.
- *Denny:* This is not about semantics. It's fundamental to understanding how the gospel is to be advanced in cultures other than our own. The future health of our own church context in North America is directly linked to clear thinking about the missions task and missionary roles.



How are you defining a “missionary”?

- *Denny:* A lot of people want to dispose of the word. Even though the word “missionary” doesn’t appear in the Bible, to say “missionary” is an extra biblical concept may go way too far.
- *Denny:* Kevin DeYoung claims that at the most basic level, a missionary is someone who has been sent. That’s what the word “mission” entails. It may not appear in your English bibles, but it’s still a biblical word.
- *Denny:* The word “missions” is also linked to the word “apostle”, which is used more than 80 times in the New Testament. It simply means “a messenger” or “one who was to transmit a message”.
- *Denny:* A more narrow definition of the term missionary describes missionaries as those who are sent to plant the gospel within a target culture until it expands throughout that culture and perhaps beyond.
- *Denny:* It may not be possible to give a flawless definition of a missionary, but Herbert Kane suggests that in the traditional sense, the term missionary has been reserved for those who have been called by God to a full-time ministry of the word in prayer, who have crossed geographical and/or cultural boundaries to preach the gospel in those areas of the world where Jesus is largely, if not entirely, unknown." This definition, he says though by no means perfect, has the virtue of being biblical.
- *Denny:* We would encourage people to go back to the Bible and really seek out what “missions” is and who a “missionary” is.
- *Matthew:* There’s a lot of biblical evidence for this preservation of a cross-cultural worker. In 3 John, the author John says, "We ought to care for such in a manner worthy of God’s name," and there’s a particular distinction that John gives to them. He doesn’t say, "Support any." He says, "Support such."
- *Matthew:* Our heart is that people would search the Scriptures and really seek to have a biblical understanding and definition of “missions” and “missionary”.

What are some of the negative consequences to this idea of everyone being a missionary?

- *Matthew:* When everything is missions, nothing is missions. What is everybody’s job tends to be nobody’s job. When you call everything “missions” you obscure the global cross-cultural dimensions of the Great Commission, and the priority of taking the gospel to the unreached. The unengaged gets washed out.
- *Matthew:* If everyone’s a missionary and every good or altruistic work is missions, why bother extending the gospel to the nations? Human nature is very predictable when it comes to setting priorities. Naturally the things that affect us most intimately are things that are going to receive first dibs on our attention. It takes a big adjustment to our mental and spiritual orientation for us to add a focus on geographically or culturally distant people who are living/dying without the gospel. If everything is missions, I think we most likely end up neglecting or marginalizing the people that need the gospel the most. These are fundamental issues. The statistics bear witness. Even today, 1 out of 10 missions workers goes to the unreached.



In Season Two we had two episodes about the unreached:

- [Episode 051: “Unreached People Groups: The Facts” with Duane Frasier.](#)
- [Episode 052: “Unreached People Groups: The Faces” with David Joannes.](#)

If everybody’s a missionary and missions is right next door, the concern for the unreached could be diminished. Do you agree with that, Denny?

- *Denny:* Yes. People wander off track very quickly and mission drift really occurs. Matthew 28 says that we are to go and make disciples of all nations, all people groups. People want to separate out the "make disciples" part and you can't do that with the English language the way that's designed and the way that it's translated. You have to connect "make disciples of all nations".
- *Denny:* The definition of missions is getting broader and broader. It is really creating this gigantic mission drift away from the very core of the Great Commission.
- *Matthew:* Denny's talking about the verbs in the Great Commission statement in Matthew 28. "Make" is not even in the original language. The verb is actually "disciple" and as Denny noted, it's a transitive verb. It only makes sense if you're pointing to an object so disciple.
- *Denny:* There's a lot of elements of the missional movement that Denny and I appreciate. The West is increasingly becoming post-Christian and that has changed the way people do ministry in the context of our culture. We need to be salt and light. But what's come out of the missional movement is this thinking that everyone's a missionary and everything is missions. Once again, the priority of taking the gospel to all people gets obscured.

Many of our listeners are pastors, church leaders. They may be on a missions committee. They may be saying "Okay, you've convinced us that this deserves another pass. We need to think about this again." What should they do next? Matthew, what steps should they take?

- *Matthew:* It takes some time and prayer, but pursue a biblical definition for missions. Don't settle for a definition that's constructed by circumstances or culture. Pursue in scripture what the Great Commission fulfillment requires. So open up the word, pray that God would illuminate and let the Scriptures speak for themselves.

Denny, if you had a chance to stand in front of that group, what would you want to say to them? What should they do next?

- *Denny:* If they were to read this book, I would hope that they would see from the very beginning of it that I love the church. We believe the local church is God's chosen tool to reach the nations.. We think that because we're a part of the church in North America that we all need to really repent from a lot of myths that are not really in the Bible, reclaim biblical values guided by the Holy Spirit.



- *Denny:* We have lost a passionate fidelity to the true gospel, and it's beginning to show up in a multiplicity of ways. We are losing the whole idea of the priority of the gospel being what we're sent to bring to the nations. I would encourage missions leaders and missions teams to really ask the question, "How are we making disciples of all nations? How is that happening in our church, and what are the steps that we can take to really see that that can happen?"
- *Matthew:* John Piper has said that where zeal for worship is weak, zeal for missions will also be weak" Just by calling someone a missionary you're not going to stoke the flames of their heart for Jesus. What drove Paul was this idea that there are people groups that have no witness of Jesus. A big step is just to ask God to kindle within your heart a love for Christ and for his name and renown.

Besides this particular book "When Everything is Missions", are there any particular resources that you might like to mention?

- *Denny:* We've got a couple appendixes in the back of the book. One is a recommended resource list. There is a section that's only about four pages long, but it really helps people with reflection questions that can move them forward and ask some of the foundational questions that need to be asked in churches and as leaders.
- *Matthew:* Denny and I collaborate on [the Mission Table](#). Our thought was if we could gather leading missions thinkers and practitioners around a table and really tackle some of the most critical controversial topics that were impacting missions, it would be worthwhile for churches and missionaries and mobilizers. Our Season 1 episode is our most viewed episode, and it was called [Is Everyone A Missionary?](#) There's probably 25 different episodes on there and more coming out on regular basis.
- *Matthew:* I want to give a plug for [Perspectives](#). I know of no better course that really unpacks the grand narrative of Scripture. This course has changed many people's biblical understanding of missions.

Let's turn to the positive here. Where have you seen this really for the glory of God, Matthew?

- *Matthew:* One particular church I worked with in Venice, Florida just last year began the coaching process with Sixteen:Fifteen. A big part of the process early on is helping them to wrestle with a biblical definition of missions that then shapes and informs their missions actions. A handful of people on the missions team held fast to a biblical, historical view of missions. Others had adopted the prevailing philosophy that everyone's a missionary. Probably about midway into the process, there was a moment where God had really spoken to these leaders, and they had come together. They said, "Yes. The gospel is global. It's cross-cultural. It's for all nations." This church is now engaging unreached people groups in a completely brand new capacity, and the pastors are championing that vision to engage the unreached. They're not slowing down their efforts to reach their city at all. They just made a distinction.
- *Matthew:* I've yet to encounter a situation where a church's embrace of a biblical definition of missions negatively impact their outreach efforts.

