

Title: What is A.I. and Why are we doing this?
Text: Matthew 28.19-20 – Great Commission
Theme: Missions Strategy
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Book of Acts – the Acts of the Apostles – what they did and how they attempted to carry out this great commission. It was not always pretty, but in spite of challenges, problems, they made tremendous progress.

The epicenter of the gospel started in Jerusalem, then to Antioch, eventually to Alexander, Rome and N. Africa. Later, the gospel re-emerged in Germany, Switzerland, England and eventually to the West, and in our own United States. Today, while many churches and schools are in the states, there are tremendous movements for Christ in Korea, China and Brazil. The world is our responsibility, but we cannot pull it off all by ourselves. When you look at the history of Christianity, you realize that for the first 1500 years, Christianity, as it was known, had a rather centralized and organized approach. The Reformation began to change all of that. Instead of their being a world-wide centralized approach, it was left up to each country to determine what its national religion was going to be. This was the approach for about 250 years. The American experiment had quite an influence in many ways, and this was one of them. Eventually in many countries, the idea of a national, centralized, organized specific religion gave way to a decentralized, non-governmentally backed approach. The advantage of a centralized approach is that churches work together to accomplish agreed upon goals without wasting time, resources and people working on the same task. The disadvantage is that if false theology creeps into the organization, it often corrupts the whole organization and becomes a mess.

I come from a background of being an independent Baptist, meaning I grew up in and have served in churches that were not officially associated with or tied to other churches. While the pastors of certain churches may fellowship together, the churches were each independent franchises. This arrangement was in reaction to the fact that so many denominations and organizations go into a liberal direction, and there has to be a way to stop that or to not be part of that. The thinking was, it is easier to never be part of something than to be part of something and have to pull out. I frankly never gave it that much thought and figured it was easier to minister and serve as a church without having to be related to, beholden to, or connected to anyone else. This type of thinking makes it very convenient for people to think that it really doesn't matter what happens to other churches just as long as my church does fine.

I graduated from a college that in many cases had a very narrow box that it expected its graduates to stay in. In several areas I did not agree with how they defined the box and did not stay in it, knowing that I would be rather isolated from them organizationally. Personally, I have not had a group to connect with, and as a church, we have not been real tight with other churches, although we certainly enjoy some good relationships with other churches in part due to our softball league.

I believe that it was around 1998 that I met a couple of pastors who were in a similar situation. We had a similar theology and philosophy of ministry, but we did not have an organization or identity that we could call home. We formed a friendship and ate lunch once or twice a year. During one of those meetings I was introduced to a man by the name of Bob Provost. One of the churches was having him as a guest speaker and this guy was telling us about what had been going on in Russia. I knew a little bit, but this guy made it sound as if we absolutely had to get there – right now! Bob used to be the administrative pastor of a church called The Chapel in University Park, which was in Akron, OH, just up the road from where I grew up. He had also been on the pastoral team of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA where John MacArthur serves as the Senior Pastor. Bob is the president of the Slavic Gospel Association, which is a mission primarily dedicated to helping the churches in the former Soviet bloc countries.

We were aware of a little of what was taking place in Russia since the iron curtain had been torn down, but Bob was able to give us first hand accounts. On July 9, 2000, Bob Provost came and preach here on a Sunday while I was going to be gone on vacation. He did and from that day forward, many of you also became captivated with what God was doing in Russia. There were several things that we began to learn. We learned that the gospel preaching churches in Russia had not been completely destroyed during Communism. Depending on the local officials at the time, some of the churches had more freedoms than others. We also learned that due to several factors, the older male population in Russia was rather small. Therefore, the churches had a high percentage of women members. Unless you were a member of the communist party, you could not get an advanced education. Therefore, the churches were often made up of people who were poor, and in some cases, not exposed to much education, certainly not to many resources at all. With the fall of communism, some of that began to change. The churches were seeking to reach out to the young people, which they had not been able to do before. Some of these young men had a desire to be involved in the ministry, but there were not too many places that made this practical. There was and is a huge need for college level and seminary level training in Russia. Rex and Lori Durham are part of a solid school in Far East Russia. Rick and Marilyn Perhai (who will be at our Missions Conference) are part of a solid school in Kiev, Ukraine, and there is a good school in St. Petersburg. But, when you consider that this country is 11 time zones wide, 2 schools, plus 1 in Ukraine is hardly a blip on the screen.

Another thing that we learned was that the Baptist churches in Russia were fairly well organized and connected. The only major difference that they had was whether they would be a registered or unregistered church. (explain) Therefore, for the most part they did not have different Baptist denominations with competing labels, competing missions programs, competing schools, programs, etc. Nor was there anything as an independent Baptist church. If you had a Baptist church it was part of the Baptist Union. That was just the way that it was. Each region (obelisk) had a capital city, where traditionally the central Baptist church was located and where often the regional pastor served as pastor. Each regional pastor was viewed as the head pastor who organized the other pastors, and these regional pastors all worked together on a national level. The quality of the leadership varies from region to region and from church to church, but the general

situation is that there are not too many opportunities for the young men of the church to be trained. Into this gap stepped many mission agencies from the States. Some of the mission agencies were not consistent in their theology, and some of the resources that were used were based more upon philosophies that were man-centered instead of God-centered.

One of the ministries that SGA (Slavic Gospel Association) was involved in, there in Russia was called the Strategic Bible Institutes. They worked like this: The pastors in a region would identify the young men in their churches who were leaders or potential leaders. These men from this region would commit themselves to go to school for a year (Sept – May), which was held in the central church or one of the main churches in a region. The teachers would be provided by churches in the States, with some of the classes augmented by Russian teachers. The teachers from the States, may or may not be pastors, may or may not know each other, may or may not have a consistent philosophy of ministry or agreed upon theological system. But, this approach has been very helpful in jumpstarting the theological education so desperately needed in Russia, but it is not a long-term solution.

- 1) The SBI's demanded a high-level of travel and time that is practically not sustainable.
- 2) The SBI's demanded a high-level of financial commitment that while very cost-effective on the one hand, had the unintended result of creating a dependent relationship. Practically speaking, there was no way these students could be part of these schools if someone did not pay for their living expenses (travel, food, salaries for their families – if married, books). Especially as some of the students were added to missionary budgets from sponsoring churches in the states. This had the unintended result of providing very little motivation for the churches to think of financially supporting their own pastors.
- 3) The SBI's did not provide much opportunity for follow-up in a field setting, since all of the training was in a classroom setting.
- 4) The SBI's had very little contact with the actual pastors, but trained the potential pastors, many of whom would serve with the current pastors, and in many cases, the traditions and practices would negate some of the training that these men received.

So, while the SBI's were effective in getting some training going on and in some cases of helping getting some of these men prepared to start churches, which they did, it was becoming more and more clear that there was another way that was needed to address the situation.

Keep in mind that there are several dynamics that are at work.

- 1) We believe and embrace the local autonomy and authority of each church.
- 2) He who holds the money, usually holds the influence. There is so much money flowing into Russian ministries in different ways, and usually with strings attached.

- 3) There are competing national and personal views. There is on the part of some a level of distrust some of which was fostered by the pastors who viewed the Americans as liberal, and soft.

Therefore, in some cases (Oryel, Kirov-Chepetsk) we had some very good schools that had some good long-term results in the region. In other cases (Krasnodar), the results were mixed because the leadership in the region was divided. In some cases, the pastors would send the students to the school because it would give them some training, some money, but on the weekends, the pastors would try to make certain that the students were not embracing everything that we taught them. This set the stage for some arguments in class that in cases were more about national pride (the Americans vs. the Russians) than it was about theology.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch here, we were working with several churches here in the Detroit area to staff these schools. This gave us an opportunity to work very closely with these churches, develop much stronger relationships together, and seek to address the problems that we were encountering with this project in Russia. Also, the fact that our churches were doing this in a concentrated way, gave us a unified voice when speaking with the leadership of the SGA. SGA along with the national leadership of Russia began to develop a different approach to help address the needs of the churches in Russia. One of the pastors from our coalition of churches here in Detroit was part of those strategy sessions. The result was what is called the Antioch Initiative.

Acts 13.1-3

The goal of the A.I is to help develop within each region of Russia a local church that is theologically, philosophically and functionally so sound and healthy that it becomes a self-supporting, training and sending base for its region. This church as the location, and the pastors in the region will eventually take over the practical charge of recruiting (which they already do), training (which we do), sending (which they do) and supporting (which we do) of the men and ministries in their region. Right now, based upon what we know, there are only 3 churches in the entire country that actually pay the salary of their pastors. Therefore, the A.I. is a 5-7 year plan that focuses upon reaching and training the pastors in a region, so that they are in a position to able to take their own region to the next level. It differs from the SBI in several ways.

- 1) AI focuses upon the current pastors in a region.
- 2) The AI classes only meet 3x or 4x per year (ours – 3x)
- 3) The AI students (pastors) are not paid a stipend.
- 4) The AI work and homework is done in their local churches.
- 5) The AI work focuses directly upon the pastors of the region and then the leadership in the main church.
- 6) The AI approach opens the door for other ministries from our local churches in the coalition to the local churches in that region that can have much longer term results based upon the relationship and trust that is established.

The SBI's (Strategic Bible Institutes) have been a very good ministry investment. But, we want to do more than go, teach and leave. Real life and ministry change takes place over time where the follow-up is done in a real life setting. The SBI's that we (Detroit coalition) have participated in, have earned us a lot of trust and respect from the leadership in Russia. I believe in many ways, while they have been very good, they prepared us for something that is going to be even better.

The number of trips that we are planning (as a coalition) to take will be greatly reduced from 12-15 per year, to 3x per year. The cost of this will be greatly reduced to the coalition, but the opportunity for long term change and involvement will be greatly increased. Since we are committed to the leadership of the churches of one region for 5-7 years in this manner, the opportunity for trust, loyalty and mutual learning is greatly increased.

A team of men from our coalition of churches here in Detroit will go 3x a year to KC to train the pastors from the Kirov (and Muri-el) regions. We will follow an agreed upon curriculum and the pastors will be required to do homework in their churches that will help reinforce what they learn in the classes.

The curriculum is as follows:

Fred is going to be the first teacher and the Missions Team has requested that Mel Stull go along with him.

We are hopeful that we can increase the scope of involvement too, so that the key people from our churches can help the key people in their main church develop an understanding and practice of ministry that will serve them and their region well. Some of the areas that they have a need of is in:

- 1) Developing policies and procedures – constitutions, doctrinal statements, finance policies, membership requirements, etc.
- 2) Developing a ministry plan, goals, objectives and strategies.
- 3) Developing a biblical philosophy of ministry.

Beyond that we know that there are practical needs on the congregational level. People need to learn how to be self-starters and operate small businesses. They need help in reaching their community through their orphanage ministries and camping ministries. These are some of the areas that we will explore as time goes on, but we want to do them as part of a bigger picture that develops the church to be a theologically strong, self-supporting, self-perpetuating ministry.

Meanwhile, our churches here in the Detroit area that have been working on this have developed a close-knit respect and appreciation for each other. Our relationships have gone far beyond working on a mutual project. There is a genuine camaraderie among the pastors and the people. There have been some tangible results from this already.

- 1) We are able to be of practical help to each other and work together in shepherding people. (Don Cannell, Aaron and Amy Gryzmkowski)
- 2) We are able to help the leadership of each church and at times the people through mutual counseling, etc.
- 3) The unity and focus of the leadership of our churches has been a great encouragement to the leadership of the SGA who have consistently used our churches in Detroit as an example for other churches around the country.
- 4) We have worked very closely to anticipate problems, document goals, and define very clearly what we want the central church to look like when we are done.

The first trip of this new ministry is coming soon, and starts in Russia on November 1. Therefore, we want to celebrate the launching of this Antioch Initiative with a combined service for all of the churches. That combined celebration is going to take place here at Cornerstone, on Sunday night, October 9th. That is the closing night of our Missions Conference. We have invited all of the people from these other churches to come here for this event. Bob Provost and some of the leadership of the SGA are coming in as well. In fact, Bob is in Tulsa, OK that morning, and the church there is moving their service to earlier in the morning so that he can catch a flight and be here on time that night. Of course, we have to be here in force that night. Every person here needs to be an ambassador for this church to every person who comes from another church. This is going to be our dress rehearsal for the 9 Marks Conference that we are hosting at the end of October. These same churches and people that are coming for this event, are in many cases planning on coming for the 9 Marks Conference. Although we did not sit down and plan it this way initially, the dovetailing of these two events is absolutely Divine.

These churches that are part of this coalition are also seeking to get as many of the leadership and people of their churches to come to the 9 Marks Conference, so that as many people in their as possible can have a concentrated training time that helps them understand from the Scriptures, what really is a healthy church. A healthy church is what we are seeking to build here, and what we are seeking to develop in Russia. These 9 Marks of a Healthy Church is a practical model that we are using in Russia. What a providence to advance our mutual understanding and mutual commitment to what we are seeking to become in addition to what we are seeking to do.

Looking back over the last 16 years, I have learned that I am not an independent Christian who pastors as a lone-ranger an independent completely, self-driven, self-sufficient Baptist church. I am a dependent, mutually committed, follower of Christ who serves on a team of elders of a local Baptist church and we, together are learning how much we need each other and that we are not in competition with the real body of Christ, but we serve to complement each other, strengthen each other, rejoice with each other and help each other. I told you this morning, that I am more excited about what is happening here and what is going to happen here than I have ever been. Tonight, I have wanted to encourage you and thank-you for your trust, for your commitment and loyalty to this ministry. If we were in a continual state of conflict here, then we could never participate in some of these things or be in a position to be a blessing to other churches through the 9 Marks conference. Your joy, your enthusiasm, your consistency are the

support system for much of this. I knew that you needed to know and would want to know what this aspect is all about.

There is another aspect of our ministry that is under development, that I believe in many ways, is even more exciting because of its potential for our lives and our church. When we have more the plans and details worked out, I will be presenting this to you. We are not ready to do it, but we are getting closer. I have been dropping hints about this for several months, and will continue to do so, but one day will connect the dots for you. These are challenging, but good days for our church. Soli deo Gloria.