

To Catch the Wind:

A New Metaphor for Cross-Cultural Mission Partnerships

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When Alex was a boy, cattle were herded through the unpaved street where he lived, three blocks from Main Street, on the way to the slaughterhouse two blocks away. He and his friends would note the number of cars that drove by each day: usually one or two. The rural community in Brazil where Alex was born seems as far away in history as the Middle Ages. Yet, today it is a booming center of industrial activity. Many are now flying on aircraft made in his home town by Embraer, the fourth largest aircraft maker in the world. There has never been another period in human history in which such radical and rapid transformation has occurred. It seems that Alex's grandfather in Brazil had more in common with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob than he would with this generation today.

Because of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, the West has experienced unprecedented development and economic growth. We have been blessed in many ways. Diseases have been eradicated, people are living much longer, technology has made daily life so much easier, reliable infrastructure has been created, and many more people have discretionary income to give for the kingdom of God. We define our objectives, gather resources, organize tasks, assemble necessary components—all with great accuracy and precision. In the material realm, we seem to accomplish virtually anything we set our minds to. By gaining control over our material environment, we have removed many of the uncertainties of life.

Amidst these changes in the West, a mindset of high-control became further entrenched in many areas of life. Whether consciously or unconsciously, most of us at some level believe we are “in control.” Except for extraordinary events like Hurricane Katrina or 9/11, we feel we can control outcomes. But here's the problem: Often without realizing it, many Westerners have transferred this mindset or paradigm of high control (which has often worked well in our Western material realm) and have assumed it will also work in the spiritual realm and in global missions.

Because the nature of a paradigm constrains how we see and interact with the world, we (the authors) wanted to bring this “high-control paradigm” to the surface and examine whether there might be a more effective mindset to shape our global mission efforts.

Two Paradigms of Control

We in the West have been so successful in taming the material world to serve our needs and aspirations that we have assumed a paradigm in which control of resources and processes is also the default mode for ministry. Consider...

- We often express our obedience to God in terms of methods and management—assuming a high level of control, taking charge of tasks, and measuring outcomes.
- We set dates, create timetables, and identify numeric results by which to evaluate how well we serve the Lord and his church.

This approach to ministry assumes that the principles of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution are transferable to the affairs of God's kingdom around the world. But could it be that much of this high-control paradigm is *not transferable*? That cross-cultural partnership with the majority world church requires a different way of thinking?

Suppose instead we began with a paradigm in which God is in full control and man has considerably less control? What if we truly viewed the material world as being subordinate to the spiritual world?

This issue of control is critical; it impacts everything. Although most Western believers espouse that God is in control, our high-control paradigm has a built-in aversion to living with high trust in God, i.e., a low-control paradigm. Could this help explain why relying upon one's own strength is, for many Christian leaders, the default mode for day-to-day life and ministry?

This article proposes two metaphors to clarify the contrast between high-control and low-control paradigms, and to guide us into more effective, perhaps more biblical, cross-cultural partnerships.

The Powerboat and the Sailboat

To illustrate the different paradigms of control, compare a powerboat to a sailboat.

A powerboat captures the essence of the Western paradigm. Power is inside the boat, in the hands of the human operator. The powerboat metaphor represents "taking control." It is confident, modern, powerful, noisy, expensive. The destination—and getting there fast—is often most important. Unless there is a calamity on the sea such as a catastrophic storm, it will go wherever the captain directs, as long as he or she planned well and has enough fuel. The powerboat epitomizes high control.

Contrast the sailboat, representing the paradigm of less control. While the people in a sailboat have some control and power, their power is much more subordinate to the wind. Success depends completely on their cooperation with the wind. Some days the vessel will travel great distances. Other days the Wind will be calm—time to rest and build deeper relationships. The slower days are not deemed inferior to the days when greater distance is traveled—for the journey itself is as important as the destination. Sailors know that a strategy that worked yesterday could get them killed tomorrow. They respect and carefully assess the context, and realize that flexibility is one of their greatest resources. The sailboat epitomizes high trust, and less control.

The external circumstances are the same in both paradigms. The seas are what they are and the weather will be what it will be. The difference lies in the vessel: the design is different, the training is different, the journey is different. Perhaps most important is the mindset of those who choose a powerboat versus a sailboat.

Implications for Cross-Cultural Partnerships

If we function from a paradigm of less control as illustrated by the sailboat metaphor, how might that change how we partner with majority world leaders and churches?

1. *Greater mutuality*: If we function from a base of material power, there is no way our partners will be able to work alongside us in mutuality and equality. The material power will likely create resentment, suspicion and confusion. However, if we truly depend primarily on God, we can function with greater mutuality and respect as our eyes will be focused on the same Source.

2. *Relationship is primary, accomplishment secondary:* The high-trust paradigm helps us to step back and see the big picture. If we accomplish outcomes, yet we fracture relationships and alienate people, we have not succeeded. If we accomplish outcomes yet our prayer life has decreased and our trust in God has lessened, we have not succeeded.
3. *The standard is faithfulness:* The phenomenal capacity of Westerners to control their material destinies has influenced how we see our service to God. We have optimistically assumed that we can approach world missions in the same way: We define the goals, determine the resources needed, procure the right staff, implement the plan, and expect results. In non-Western contexts where infrastructure and processes are often less stable, partners find it more helpful to measure success by examining “faithfulness.” (Even with stable environments, some partners may define success this way.) We see in Scripture that in the end, faithfulness is also the standard by which God will measure us (Matthew 25:14-30).
4. *Embracing vulnerability:* Starting from a point of vulnerability and high trust creates in us a willingness to listen more carefully to others, which is critical for working effectively together in cross-cultural ministry. It is also frequently the starting place for deep personal growth and transformation.
5. *Sensitivity to context:* The sailing metaphor also provides a greater respect for context and a willingness to consider it carefully. Often in the West we are quick to export ways of doing ministry with the belief that what works here will always work elsewhere; however, doing this might actually quench an indigenous model for ministry that would be far more effective.
6. *God’s Word alive:* The sailboat metaphor, or the high-trust paradigm, has implications for the value of Scripture in how we “do” missions. In the powerboat paradigm, modern business practices are dominant. Could it be, however, that if the sailboat paradigm is chosen, Scripture becomes even more vital, more indispensable for how we fulfill the Great Commission? From the beginning, God knows and controls everything; at the same time He has ordained for Himself a people on mission who must depend wholly on Him for security, wisdom, happiness and success. In this paradigm, the operative word is trust, not control.

Conclusion

A paradigm does not determine how much we love God, the level of our commitment to Him, or our personal holiness and devotion. Many who have developed “powerboat structures” have been men and women of great faith. We recognize their contribution and their accomplishments by God’s grace. “Powerboat structures” have often been effective for a given time, in a given context, or a given era.

The goal of this article is to help the church further examine its presuppositions about control, and explore whether a low-control paradigm is needed in this current era of global missions. In a world ripe with injustice, instability and oppression—and where the center of gravity of the global church has seen a massive shift from the West to the Global South—could it be that high-control “powerboat thinking” is far less effective than “sailboat thinking” in cross-cultural partnerships?

The Authors

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