Do We Bible Translators (and Bible Translation Agencies) Know When We Have Succeeded?

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Doug Trick and Hollie Butler   **Vol 3:2 2023**

Doug Trick *is Associate Professor of Linguistics at the Canada Institute of Linguistics in British Columbia, Canada.* **Hollie Butler** *is Linguist/Translator with the Summer Institute of Linguistics Papua New Guinea.*

Introduction

Evaluation can be a sensitive topic. Although we agree that faithful stewardship and purposeful activities are important aims in mission work, there is a certain vulnerability in seeking clarity to the question of whether we have succeeded. Misunderstandings about the meaning of "success" can easily lead to frustrations and conflict, so it is crucial that teams, agency leaders, and other stakeholders share a common understanding of what the evaluation process is intended to measure. For the sake of fostering unity, there is value in stepping back from a ministry's perceived successes and shortcomings to take time to evaluate our understanding of evaluation itself.

Results-Based Management (RBM) is being adopted increasingly in response to the problem that "projects often accomplish the planned activities but fail in meeting the ultimate objectives of beneficial and lasting changes" (Marmor and Bartels 2018, 69). The RBM model has brought a healthy change of focus in strategic planning from *product outputs* to *impact*—what we most desire to see in the communities among whom we serve. While many celebrate that change in focus, others caution against the real dangers of measuring teams' success based on results they cannot directly surface. In light of the tension between these perspectives, this paper considers factors for appropriate evaluation, and it reflects on limitations of impact-focused evaluation, particularly in the context of Christian mission.

Planning as Described in Scripture

We begin with the assumption that "evaluation" is not a stand-alone activity; rather, we engage in evaluation primarily for the benefits it provides in informing a larger planning and implementation process. Therefore, as we explore the biblical foundation for *evaluation,* let us look first to the way Scripture speaks to the larger theme of *planning*.

"God's Part" and "Our Part"

An initial observation is that God is a planning God. Throughout Scripture, we read about His divine purpose in redemption history, "the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11).[1] While we know that God is sovereign, the Scriptures testify to His planning activities for His creation, and the unmistakable truth that "he chooses to work through means to bring about his glory" (Terry and Payne 2013, 26).

God is all-powerful and sovereign to accomplish His purposes as He wills, and yet He involves *people* to join in carrying out those plans. The paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is a mystery that underlies all discussion of planning, and its depths are certainly beyond the scope of this paper, but we know that God has commissioned His church as an instrument of His working in the world (Matt 28:19–20; Acts 1:8). Indeed, to walk in obedience to God is to allow Him to do *His* work through us, and we are called to steward well the gifts we have received to that end (1 Pet 4:7–11; 1 Cor 4:1–4; 1 Cor 12; Luke 19:11–27; Matt 25:14–30). Dayton and Fraser (1990) express well that "we should plan *in paradox*. … We plan as though the future is our responsibility while believing God is the one who makes it happen" (10).

Wisdom, Faith, and Humility in Planning

As image-bearers of our God-who-plans, we too are plan-makers. Proverbs promote the practical wisdom and prudence of planning: "The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty" (Prov 21:5; see also 15:22; 24:27). Jesus clearly expects that wise people plan and count the cost of such plans (Luke 14:28–30). If we celebrate the wisdom of planning for economic pursuits, how much more should we walk in that wisdom for the furtherance of the kingdom of God! Wisdom is a high value throughout Scripture and one that Jesus lived out in perfection. As finite human beings in a world full of need, we must make choices in stewarding well our limited time, giftings, and resources, and prudence helps us make those decisions wisely.

Terry and Payne (2013) reassure that planning is "not an attempt to undermine God's will" but an opportunity to seek His will (226). We are not to make plans independent of God's direction but guided by the Holy Spirit. Dayton and Fraser (1990) further clarify that goals and plans are "statements of faith"; as we seek to understand God's will for the ongoing development of a community or ministry, we align ourselves

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[1] New International Version 2011 used for all Scripture references in this paper. See also Ps. 33:10–11; Isa. 25:1; Isa. 46:8–10; Jer. 29:11; Acts 2:23; Gal. 4:4–5; Eph. 3:8–11.

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in faith with that discerned future, acknowledging our responsibility to act according to our understanding. As our understanding changes and grows, we change our plans accordingly (11).

Indeed, we hold all our plans with an open hand, with the humility to allow the Holy Spirit to redirect our efforts and activities in ways we do not foresee. By maintaining this posture of flexibility, we acknowledge that the wisdom that we exercise in planning is as nothing before God's perfect wisdom, which accounts for countless variables that we will never see, and aspects of His character and purposes which are beyond our understanding (Isa 55:8–11). Although we are called to seek wisdom, we are warned against being wise in our own eyes (Prov 26:12). Though we make plans, "it is the Lord's purpose that prevails" (Prov 19:21).

Ultimately, we in our finitude do not know what the future will hold, and James justly warns against the presumption that boasts confidently about what is yet to be (James 4:13–16). Humility in planning entails a readiness to change course rather than a resoluteness to cling to a well-developed plan, as our understanding of God's purposes in a situation develops. In our planning, we acknowledge that our understanding is never complete.

Direction and Accountability

In Scripture, we see evidence for two general purposes for evaluation. The first purpose, as we have described, is to inform planning and to contribute to wise decision-making. This evaluation for *ministry direction*—including both redirection and continuing in what is working well—is based on the understanding that we are wise to learn from the past and present, and to apply that learning to our future endeavors. Such evaluation helps equip us with clarity to choose well our next steps forward and to be faithful stewards of all that is entrusted to us. This purpose for evaluation is valid not just at the ministry level but also at the personal level, as we are called to "examine [ourselves] to see whether [we] are in the faith" (2 Cor 13:5).

A second purpose for evaluation is *accountability*. Ultimately, we are accountable to God, and perfect evaluation is in His hands (Matt 10:24–26; 1 Cor 4:1–5). However, living and working with accountability to *others* celebrates God's design that we, as members of the one body of Christ, serve Him in community. It is an outworking of our call to "consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb 10:24). Such evaluation, against a Western preoccupation with individualism, recognizes our human proneness to error and sin. The biblical basis for this kind of

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evaluation is perhaps clearest in Paul's epistles, where he admonishes the believers in various churches toward unity and striving together as one body toward righteousness (Rom 12:3–8; 1 Cor 12; Gal 6:1–2; Eph 4; Col 3:12–17; 2 Thess 3:6–15).

These two basic purposes for evaluation are not independent of one another. As we submit to evaluation for the immediate purpose of *accountability*, its greater purpose is to inform the *direction* of our lives or work. However, the immediate purpose of *accountability* most overtly acknowledges our interdependence, whereas the immediate purpose of *direction* most overtly acknowledges our need to seek wisdom in our walk. A second distinction between the two purposes is one of control. Evaluation for *accountability* requires that the evaluated have a high degree of control over the areas being evaluated, whereas evaluation for *direction* alone does not require the same level of control, and an assessment that redirection is needed does not necessarily assume any degree of failure or shortcoming on the part of those "responsible." Related to the matter of control is a third distinction: in evaluation for *direction*, the evaluator may often be the evaluated; whereas, in evaluation for *accountability*, the evaluator is outside of the evaluated.

The Development of Results-Based Management (RBM)

As our discussion turns now to the Results-Based Management (RBM) model, it is helpful to place this approach within the context of its development in Bible translation work.

A Shift in Focus

There is a strong tendency for organizations to measure success in terms of resources, activities, and outputs. A church-planting agency might point to an increase in the number of church-planting workers, a corresponding increase in church-planting activities, and an increase in the number of churches planted. These increases were considered indicators that the agency was successful. A Bible translation agency might point to the number of completed Scripture translations as an indicator of success; to provide access to Scripture was to faithfully discharge our duty to the communities among whom we served.

However, concerns with this approach developed as Bible translation teams grieved over apparently "successful" projects where printed Scripture remained unused, and communities remained untransformed by God's Word. Perhaps we needed to reevaluate

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our understanding of "success." In response to this need, the RBM model suggested that we place greater emphasis on *impact*—the transformation that we desire to see in the communities we serve *over* the narrower accessibility of materials to those communities. Thus, we began developing our corporate goals and measuring "success" according to the impact of Scripture on people's lives. This explicit attentiveness to impact required a redesign of our strategic plans with increased attentiveness to encouraging the community's use and engagement of Scripture, alongside Scripture translation and publication.

"Splash and Ripple"

An important strength of RBM in Christian ministry is that it overtly distinguishes and acknowledges diminishing levels of control as we move from what we do to how we see God at work in the community. In RBM, *inputs* are the resources (human and material) that teams invest in the work; *activities* are the things we do to help bring about the impact that we aim for; *outputs* are the immediate results of those activities; *outcomes* are the longer-term results; and impact is the ultimate change in the community to which the activities contribute.

Cox (2007) provides the helpful illustration of a person holding a rock over a pond: "The person drops the rock into the pond creating a splash and then ripples. Inputs are the person and the rock; the output is the splash, and the ripples are the outcomes and impacts" (14). The RBM model highlights the cause-and-effect nature of our work in ministry, but it acknowledges that "ripples are harder to track [than splashes] because they cover a widening area, influence a larger number of people, and their outward movement takes time. Outside influences (other ripples in the pond) also complicate their outward progress" (23). We can plan for and carry out activities that we pray and hope would lead to the outputs, outcomes, and impact that we desire to see, but we cannot directly carry out impact.

Flexibility by Context

The traditional focus on activities and "products" meant that goals could be standardized to some extent across ministries. A challenge with this approach is that "without intending it, we can allow fixed goals to take precedence over the impact goal of transformed lives" (Brown et al. 2006, 4). With RBM, however, desired impact became acknowledged as an individualized preferred future, which was context-specific, and impact goals were developed in collaboration with the ministry's many stakeholders. Thus, RBM fosters deepened communication and team relationships for carrying out

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the work. Likewise, the flexibility of RBM to adapt strategic planning to a particular situation means that the model more readily allows for adaptivity to changing circumstances. Referring to RBM applied to the public sector, Mayne (2007) notes that "implementation ought to be seen as incremental, with explicit review sessions built in so that the experience to date can be reflected upon, the challenges reassessed and implementation approaches appropriately revised" (105). As a ministry grows and develops, stakeholders systematically seek to measure progress against the impact statement.[2]

RBM Concerns and Objections

The development of RBM helped address a real problem by confronting the faulty assumption that busyness equals success in ministry. While this model has been adopted in many contexts, concerns with RBM have also arisen.

Practical Challenges

Secular literature provides ample discussion of technical concerns inherent to RBM, particularly in terms of developing measurable metrics for assessing a project's success in achieving its desired impact (Mayne 2007, 90). Unmeasurable goals impede determination as to whether or how well they are attained. Without such clarity and the ability to act on it, the usefulness of planning may even be called into question.

Mayne (2007) perceptively observes that measurement for the public and non-profit sectors is for "soft events" that simply cannot be measured with scientific precision, but he argues that it is still useful to gather information that provides clarity regarding the results of a project—and that is itself a kind of measurement (99–100). Such an understanding is certainly true in the context of Christian mission, as the heart-level transformation of communities by the Holy Spirit is far from measurable in the scientific sense.

Still, there are correlations, however imperfect, between measurable outcomes and heart change, and we can draw on those correlations to choose indicators that help us aim in the right direction. There are things that we as workers can do to encourage the communities we serve to engage with Scripture, and there are things that we do and fail

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[2] In a nutshell, the Program Plan begins with the current context, a clear and concise statement of a preferred future, and then proposes sets of activities and resources that will help move toward the preferred future. As the "current context" changes, the pathway from the present to the future is adjusted.

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to do that can get in the way of Scripture's impact. While life-changing transformation is ultimately the Holy Spirit's work, we retain a responsibility to work by God's enablement, and to work wisely and diligently. Evaluation helps provide meaningful feedback as to how we can become better stewards of all that God has entrusted to us.

Deeper Concerns

In addition to the practical challenges, still deeper concerns are tied to an emphasis on impact over activities: if we are held accountable for the impact of Scripture in the lives of individuals and communities, will not workers in difficult situations risk becoming discouraged at the scarcity or lack of fruit (which may be out of their hands)? Will not pride be a looming temptation for workers who see much fruit in their communities? Might comparison with other ministries become a snare if we distill impact to measurable metrics? If supervisors, donors, or other stakeholders call us to account for impact in the communities among whom we serve, might we become frustrated by a weak correlation between our efforts and the impact we see? Perhaps many of these objections arise not from RBM itself, but from an inappropriate application of RBM. Perhaps clarity regarding the factors that make an evaluation appropriate or inappropriate in a given context can help shed light on these concerns.

Aligning Purpose and Focus

We are always evaluating. Even evaluating whether we should evaluate something is itself an evaluation and one that we, in our finitude, must make. The question, then, is not whether we evaluate but what we focus on in our evaluation. Impact-focused evaluation is good, helpful, and appropriate for guiding decisions about a ministry's direction, based on the outcomes of past activities and an awareness of up-to-date relevant conditions. But it becomes less helpful if it is used to hold workers—individually or as a team—accountable for their work; it becomes even less helpful, and even harmful if it is used to hold those same workers personally accountable for their own spiritual vitality or condition.

Figure 1 on the next page illustrates the appropriateness of evaluation based on the relationship between its "focus" and "purpose." The *focus of an evaluation* can be a worker's spiritual condition, a worker's activities, or the impact seen in a community. The *purpose of an evaluation* can be for the worker's personal accountability, for his or her work accountability, or for informing the ministry direction. The "blurriness" of the "line of appropriateness" in the chart illustrates the lack of clear independence between

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each pairing of adjacent categories, as who we are is not entirely separate from what we do, and what we do is not entirely separate from what God does in bringing about impact in a community. Still, the existence of a line nonetheless shows that the categories remain meaningful labels for understanding what makes evaluation appropriate or inappropriate.
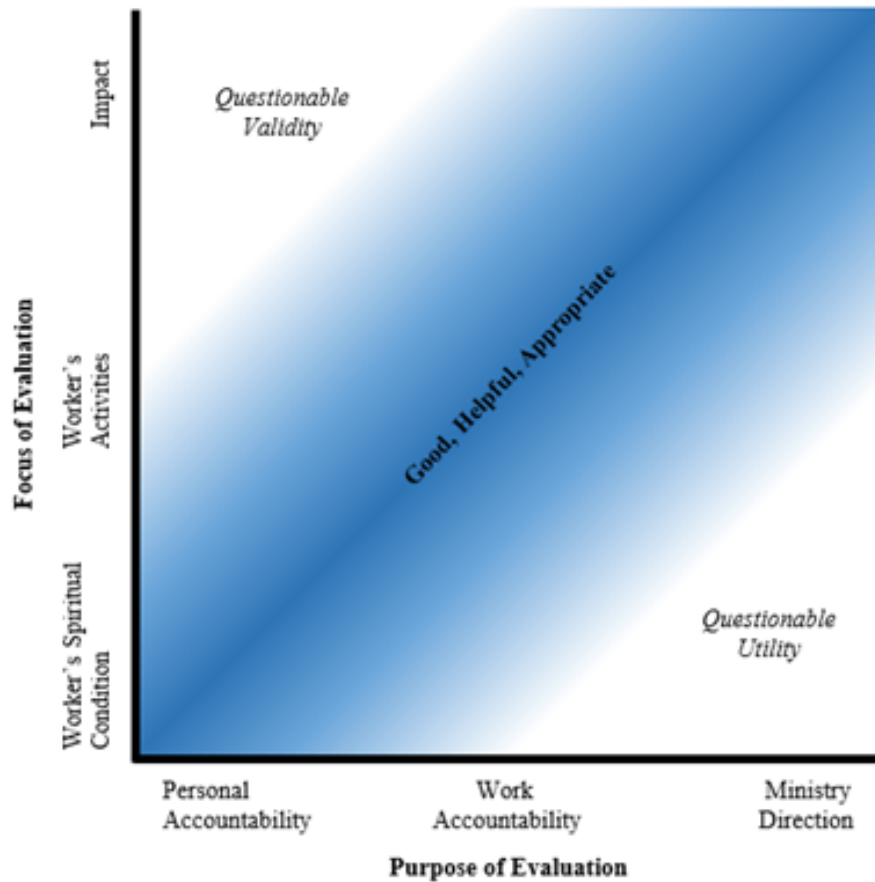

Figure 1: Appropriateness of Evaluation by Purpose and Focus

As seen above in the biblical basis for planning and evaluation, wisdom calls for making evaluative judgments about the state and progress of a ministry, in order to help us prayerfully plan our next steps toward encouraging and making space for the Spirit's transforming work in a community. The impact focus of RBM provides an ideal framework for this evaluation aim, because it encourages us to set our sights beyond current activities or simply busyness, and to more intentionally consider impactful growth in the community among whom we serve. The dark shading in the top-right portion of the chart represents this appropriate application of RBM to ministry direction.

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However, RBM is not the only kind of appropriate evaluation that should take place in a ministry context. Toward the center and bottom-left portions of the chart, the dark shading there too represents helpful evaluations for the individual worker's work and personal accountability. In these instances, impact is not the best-aligned focus of evaluation. Rather, an evaluation of a worker's activities, over which the worker has greater control, provides a more solid basis for work accountability. Likewise, an evaluation of a worker's spiritual condition, in the context of a discipleship relationship, provides a well-aligned basis for that worker's personal growth accountability.

However, the lighter portions of the chart, particularly toward the bottom-right and top-left corners, represent the misalignment of an evaluation's focus to its purpose. While attentiveness to the worker's spiritual condition is good and necessary for personal accountability, the usefulness and sufficiency of that evaluation focus for making decisions about a ministry's direction is questionable. Similarly, attentiveness to impact is good and necessary for ministry direction, but the validity of assessing a person's spiritual vitality based on that impact is questionable at best, and potentially very harmful, as the following section of this paper will explore.

Significantly, there is less white space in the chart representing the inappropriate application of evaluation focused on a worker's activities than there is for the other two foci. Such an evaluation offers some validity for each of the three noted purposes of evaluation. That is not to say that a focus on worker activities is always the "best" option for evaluation—we have seen that that is not the case—but it does reflect an increased risk of misapplication inherent to the other two foci. An awareness of that increased risk (and recognizing a currently strong cultural tendency toward polarization) helps bring light to some of the controversy sparked by the development of RBM.

Dangers of RBM Misalignment

While an RBM-type impact focus is best suited for informing ministry direction, such a focus is not entirely misguided for the purpose of work accountability, especially when it acknowledges the decreasing levels of control from outputs to outcomes and from outcomes to impact, as is illustrated well with the "splash and ripple" idea. Where expectations for a sort of "soft" accountability, which overtly accounts for the many variables that come between workers' efforts and the impact seen, are clearly communicated among a team, the RBM model can prove useful for providing some level of work accountability. However, where clarity regarding diminishing levels of control

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is lacking, a strong emphasis on impact distorts the reality that ministry workers cannot directly bring about the impact they aim for, and this misalignment—whether real or perceived—can become a stumbling block for workers.

Discouragement

If we view ourselves and our ministry teams as having control over and being responsible for impact, and we do not see the impact we desire and aim for, even with prudent planning and diligent prayer and work, we may be tempted toward discouragement. When we are faithful in the work we do and yet see little or no impact in our ministries, we find ourselves in the company of many others who have experienced similar "failure" in the eyes of their contemporaries. As Terry and Payne (2013) acknowledge, "there will be and must be men and women who will serve the Lord in 'hard-soil' contexts," where they may not see what looks like success in their ministries, but that does not mean they have been unfaithful (40). God's view of success is often very different from the success we aspire.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that the worker's responsibility in ministry is faithfulness, while God is the one who is responsible for results: "Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor" (1 Cor. 3:7–8). For those serving in the work of Bible translation, Hollenbach (1989) rightly cautions against the belief that "our work is not valuable if it does not result in an ongoing, broad utilization of our literacy materials and of the Scriptures we have translated" (1). His caution against equating success with impact remains timely to this day.

Comparison and Pride

On the other hand, when we view ourselves and our ministry teams as having control over and being responsible for impact, and we *do* see the impact we desire and aim for, we may be tempted by pride. When measurements are used to determine our ministry effectiveness, their meaning often comes from comparison to other ministries. Otherwise, we would have little basis for determining which numbers are *reasonable*, *expected*, or *good*. That inherent comparison can pose a real danger to our motivations and faithfulness to God in our work.

To avoid overstating the matter, assessing impact—even numerically—can be a God-glorifying practice. When 3,000 people were added to the church in one day, Luke

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recorded it, and that testimony brings glory to God (Acts 2:41)! As Cruse (1999) points out, though, "Luke's purpose [in reporting impact in the early Church]...was not to underscore Pauline efficiency or Petrine effectiveness. His point was humbly and thankfully to illustrate the overwhelming power of the gospel in and through the lives of those who 'had been with Jesus'" (51–52). If we are to measure results for the purpose of determining our effectiveness, we must be attentive to our motivations, so that we are not caused to stumble in exalting self, rather than exalting God.

Impact and Control

Aside from matters of discouragement and pride, emphasizing impact as the primary measure of a ministry's effectiveness can become a source of frustration where workers perceive their responsibility in achieving such results. We can only contribute to impact; we cannot directly cause or control it. Mayne (2007), discussing the transition in focus from outputs to outcomes in the public sector, addresses this concern and notes that "it may not be clear just what accountability for outcomes can sensibly mean" (98). He goes on to suggest accountability "for having influenced the outcomes," which amounts to a sort of "soft" accountability that recognizes the many variables outside of a team's control (99–101).

Misunderstandings

An overarching challenge in aligning the purpose and focus of evaluation is the continued potential for misunderstandings among a ministry's varied stakeholders. Workers may have different expectations for evaluation than leaders do, and workers and leaders may in turn have different expectations for evaluation than donors do. Bloesch (1988) perceptively notes that "the two virtues of the technological society are utility and efficiency. A demand for results governs both the secular and religious life of modern man" (148). A reality, then, is that we remain influenced by a cultural context that defines "success" in terms of "return on investment."

Cruse (1999) cautions that "this attitude puts significant and at times inappropriate pressure on the missionary to 'produce' in terms more suitable to a corporate venture than to a spiritual undertaking" (50–51). Terry and Payne (2013) likewise warn that "the capitalist mind-set that my worth and success are determined by the quota of widgets that I can produce by the end of any given day on the assembly line cannot be brought to where I serve. Just because we work hard today, there is no guarantee that we will have the desired quantifiable results by the end of the day (or month, for that matter)" (38).

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Limitations of Evaluation

The RBM evaluation dangers described above pose the greatest risk where there is misalignment between the focus of an evaluation and its purpose. However, even when there is perfect "alignment," when expectations are clear and there are no misunderstandings among stakeholders, planning and evaluation still remain inherently limited in the hands of finite, error-prone, sinful human beings. While we can have some understanding of God's purposes in the world, that understanding is severely limited, so evaluation for any purpose and with any focus remains necessarily tentative, especially in the context of Christian ministry. This limitation and the following implications of it apply not only to RBM but to all human undertakings of planning and evaluation.

Faithfulness and Adversity

Whenever we attempt evaluation, our conclusions must be tempered by the examples of those in Scripture who were faithful to God but did not experience "success" as we conventionally understand it. From our limited, human perspective, it is easy to assume that "success," in terms of prosperity, is a sign of God's blessing, and that adversity is a sign of God's displeasure or, at least, of withholding His blessing. However, the book of Job is emphatic that such assumptions are invalid. It illustrates clearly that there is no necessary correlation between our faithfulness to God and any visible, measurable outworking of it.

In Ecclesiastes, we read of "the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness" (Eccl 7:15). The psalmists, too, speak of "the prosperity of the wicked," and how it can be a stumbling block to the faithful (Pss 73; 78). Isaiah, even in his divine commissioning, was assured by God *in advance* that his message would fail in bringing Israel to repentance (Isa 6). The author of Hebrews tells of Old Testament individuals who were commended for their faith, yet "all these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth" (Heb 11:13).

Was John the Baptist effective in his ministry when he was beheaded? Were Paul and Barnabas successful in Pisidian Antioch, when they were driven out of the region? And if we were to attempt to measure the effectiveness of Jesus' ministry at the time of His crucifixion according to what we could see and measure—from a human perspective—

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what would our chosen metrics have shown? There is a sense in which measurable metrics and defined time frames for measuring results for the kingdom of God are faulty.

Time-Bound Goals and Eternity

Although we live within time and develop goals for stretches of time, we minister in light of eternity and within the purposes of a God who is not bound by time; we are to "judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God" (1 Cor 4:5). This caution, too, should temper every human attempt at evaluation. Although we rightly seek clarity by evaluating results for months and years, some successes simply will not be made known in this age. There may be situations where every measurable metric would cry, "Failure!" But who is to say that those metrics are not actually missing something that is a "success" in heaven's economy?

The Unpredictable Enabler

God declares through Isaiah, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa 55:9). In any endeavor of evaluation, we must guard against projecting on God our assumptions of how He is at work in a situation. Cox et al. (2007), in their presentation of RBM, consider the "enablers" and "constraints" that provide the "context" of an undertaking (4). These varied factors influence a project in positive and negative ways, respectively. When we recognize that God is the key enabler of the projects we plan and evaluate, we must also recognize that He is not predictable—nor should we expect Him to be. As Jesus describes, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So, it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

When Jesus sent out the Twelve, and later when He sent out seventy-two disciples, He included instructions for them to "shake the dust off [their] feet" as a testimony against any place that would not welcome or listen to them (Matt 10:14–15; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; 10:10–12). Paul and Barnabas later carried out this action of warning when they were driven out of Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:44–52). In such situations, it was not "wrong" for the disciples to go to minister to those who would be resistant to their message. Rather, they were faithful, obedient in going as they were sent. These examples show that there may be a time when it is appropriate for us, too, to move on

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(evaluation may suggest a change of *direction*), but that does not at all suggest our failure (personal *accountability*) to carry out God's purposes. Like the disciples whom Jesus first sent out, we today are sent not only to those who will receive us but also to those who will reject us. God's ways are not our ways.

Proposals

Thus, we present four key proposals for appropriate evaluation, particularly in light of a widening embrace of RBM principles. In attempting evaluation, we must: (1) clarify the purpose of evaluation, including impact-focused RBM evaluation; (2) acknowledge the need for various "levels" of evaluation with varying purposes and areas of focus; (3) practice humility in carrying out any kind of evaluation; and (4) carefully consider what we mean by "success," in light of the witness of Scripture.

Clarity of RBM Purpose

The focus of an evaluation should align well with its purpose. When an evaluation focuses on the impact of a ministry, its purpose should be to provide clarity toward determining the ministry's next steps. Where this alignment exists, RBM can provide valuable feedback toward moving forward wisely. However, a potentially harmful misalignment of RBM occurs when impact-focused evaluation is used for holding workers accountable for their work, and especially when it is used to discern or hold those workers accountable for their spiritual condition. It is important not only to maintain an appropriate alignment of focus and purpose but also to communicate clearly the purpose of evaluation, so that misunderstandings among stakeholders do not lead to frustrations and other unintended consequences.

Levels of Evaluation

"What gets evaluated gets done." Malphurs (1999) provides a helpful caution to leaders and organizations, "What we choose to evaluate sends a message to our people. It says this is important; whereas something else is not as important, because it isn't evaluated" (202). In light of this observation, the next key proposal is that we give attention to evaluating what is important. It is true, of course, that impact in mission is important, and a key benefit of RBM is that it causes us to give more attention to this aim than we may have in the past, emphasizing activities and products. However, in our focus on impact, we must not neglect other important aims, including the workers' spiritual condition and their diligent labor toward impact they may or may not see.

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It is good to celebrate measurable milestone achievements in our ministries and the impact they represent (Brown et al. 2006, 5). However, we must be careful not to elevate those measures to the point of neglecting other important evidences of God's working. Cruse (1999) seeks balance, "No ministry 'totals' can be considered small and insignificant when accompanied by an ever-increasing knowledge of God displayed through our character in the context of genuinely righteous relationships" (53).

Humility in Evaluation

Glasser (1968) considers missionary planning "an impossible, even dangerous task, chiefly because no human strategy can ever suffice for a divine enterprise," and he rightly calls us to plan with "holy fear" (178).[3] This third proposal, humility in evaluation, is the overflow of recognizing our human limitations in any endeavor of planning and evaluation. We are bound by time; God is not. Our perspective is distorted by sin and prone to error; God's is not. We do not see the whole picture; God does. And so, as we seek *God's* wisdom and direction and *God's* assessment of our doing and being, we acknowledge that our evaluations and planning in this age must remain tentative and ready to change as God reveals His purposes more fully to us.

Reconceiving "Success"

When the seventy-two disciples whom Jesus had sent out returned to Him with joy at the "impact" they had seen in their ministry, Jesus spoke to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. *However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven"* (Luke 10:17–20; emphasis added). Jesus gently reminded His joyous followers that they were more than their ministry. We read in Matthew 7 of others who prophesy, cast out demons, and perform many miracles in Jesus' name. To these people, however, Jesus' response is severe: "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matt 7:21-23) These two passages show unmistakably that activities and even impact are not the ultimate measure of "success."

Even when we establish the "right" goals to help guide our activities wisely and to keep us accountable as part of the body of Christ, we can still have a wrong way of thinking about those goals, a way that can pose as a threat to our faithfulness to God by drawing us away from God's heart in the matter. Contrary to the conventional

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[3] Quoted in Terry and Payne (2013, 34).

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understanding of "success," achieving measurable goals in ministry may have little or no correlation to "success" in God's eyes.

Cruse (1999) likewise refers to Peter's perspective on "effectiveness" as an encouragement to faithful workers who may have seen few visible results in their ministries:

> For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. *For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.* But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. (2 Pet 1:5-9; emphasis added)

Cruse concludes, "Godly character plus faithful perseverance always equals fruitfulness and a deeper experience of our Lord Jesus," even when results seem to be lacking (52).

We began this paper with an admission that evaluation can be a sensitive topic, but perhaps it need not be. When we reconceive "success" to be more than simply *what we do* or *the impact associated with those activities*, the sense of vulnerability we experience with the assessment of those areas is decreased. And when we recognize the proper, but limited, purposes of evaluation—whether for informing our direction or providing healthful accountability—we can better embrace it for the real benefits it provides.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the biblical basis for humble evaluation as a clarifying step in wise stewardship and as a manifestation of our interdependence as members of the one body of Christ. It has recognized the helpful shift in planning focus from outputs toward impact brought about by the RBM model, and it has noted RBM's strengths of acknowledging decreasing levels of control in moving toward impact and of adapting flexibly to various contexts. It has also identified objections to the RBM model and discussed the alignment of evaluation purpose and focus as a way to address some of those concerns. Finally, the paper has acknowledged some limitations to all human planning and evaluation, and it has drawn out four key proposals for appropriately carrying out evaluation.

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Planning is good. As Terry and Payne (2013) note, it is "part of the process that Jesus uses to build his church" (33). Although inappropriate evaluation can be unhelpful or even harmful, appropriate evaluation remains a good, helpful, and necessary part of life and ministry, one that helps us grow individually, as a team or ministry, as an organization, and as the body of Christ. Amid all the questions surrounding "success" and "effectiveness" in ministry, we ultimately seek to act faithfully and wisely with desired *impact* in mind but entrusting the outcomes of our *activities* to God, whatever they may be, for His glory.

> With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess 1:11–12)

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Appendix: One story of apparent failure

In the 1980s, my wife and I[4] joined with another couple to begin Scripture translation among a people group who had no real access to God's Word. There was one known follower of Christ (who was no longer living among her people) among this group of over 200,000 people. Our team had a shared God's kingdom dream that included faithful and clear Scripture translation, local people having growing literacy skills and a hunger to know and obey Scripture, families at peace with God and with one another, community leaders who are led by God, indigenous forms of worship, and that the people group would become secure in their place in the nation, confident in the richness of their language and culture, exercising dominion over God's creation around them. We had a vision of kingdom impact and outcomes in the lives of individuals, communities, and the people group as a whole.

After several years of ministry, seeing very little response among the people, we confided our disappointments to workers ministering among a neighboring people group who shared many of the characteristics of the people we were serving. This couple had been in ministry there for about ten years longer than we had. They told us of a time when they felt exactly as we did and were seriously considering giving up and going to serve with a people group who wanted God's Word and would commit people and resources to Scripture translation. But as they looked around at about a dozen people groups in that region, they recognized that thirty years before then, there were no local churches among those people groups, but Scripture translation had begun among each of the people groups, and in most of them, churches had emerged, and new believers had God's Word in their language to guide the formation and growth of churches. This couple chose to remain where God had placed them.

It is now about twenty-five years since that conversation with our co-workers serving the neighboring people group. Among that group, there are now perhaps 100 believers in several villages who are engaging with God's Word and with one another, serving as lights in their communities. There are no known local churches among the people group among whom we were serving. During the past twenty years, there have been several occasions where it looked like Christ was about to build His church among them, and we were hoping to see the kind of impact that we have been dreaming about since we began. We continue to pray and serve.

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[4] Author name for this testimony can be provided upon request.

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