

Is Risk Worth It?

A Practical Look at Risk in the Christian Life

This document is for:

- Individuals, families, and communities making decisions about going to, living in, or leaving ministry contexts of risk
- Church and missionary leaders in the planning stages of cross-cultural experiences
- Missionary, youth, or trip leaders looking for sound training materials on assessing risk
- Pastors, educators, and missionary agencies looking for resources to help individuals and the wider church think about missions

Use this document as:

- A tool for processing and weighing risk in the Christian life
- Support for communicating about risks involved in ministry with family and concerned friends
- A guide for asking questions and making wise decisions about the implications of risk in a particular ministry situation
- A resource for developing training curriculum for mission and ministry preparations
- A resource for a sermon series or Bible study curriculum for people considering involvement in and commitment to global missions

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Is Risk Worth It? A Practical Look at Risk in the Christian Life

Introduction

God calls us to live a courageous life of ministry guided by engaged and wise discernment about how and where to serve.

In this Section:

- We introduce types of risk and explore why ministry involves risk
- We consider risk in light of Jesus's example and God's concern for all human beings

Risk in the Christian life means living in service of something broader than ourselves. It means making decisions about moving toward danger or seeking safety in light of the story of God's plans for the world, Jesus's example, and the leading of the Spirit. All people face known and unknown risks as a part of daily life. Unknown or unanticipated risks can include natural disasters, a sudden death, or a car accident. This essay, however, is about when and how to face *known* risks that involve or invite consideration, planning, and discernment. How do we determine what kinds of risk are in concert with God's intentions, our own discipleship, and the insights of those with whom we seek to befriend and partner? As a class, we are aware that such discernment is intensely personal, relational, and communal. It also involves very unique situations throughout the world. This essay will not resolve these complexities. However, we aspire here to provide individuals and communities with helpful resources and questions for navigating risks both great and small.

What follows is the fruit of a writing collaboration between six theological students, a professor, and five consultants as part of a course project designed to serve individuals and communities weighing risk as part of short or long-term ministry experiences. We have drawn on our collective experience in both local and cross-cultural ministry, sometimes speaking as individuals (using first person language), but always writing as a team. Over the following pages, readers will find scriptural stories, historical examples, theological reflection, a bibliography of resources, and group discussion questions on risk and the Christian life.

Risk of many kinds will always be present in Christian ministry and in the Christian life. Risk is multi-faceted and can include all aspects of well-being: physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, professional, and financial. Risk is inherent in many types of work and especially new endeavors that move us into less familiar territory, across borders, or places where we may not understand a society's histories, cultures, social cues, or languages. Risk is also present whenever human beings seek friendships and partnerships across lines of economic, social, racial, gender, or religious difference. Since God's hope for the world involves seeking mutual well-being through communities of shared resources, friendships across lines of difference, and God's active peace, ministry in partnership with God always involves risk. Jesus's disciples could not follow him without moving along with him into spaces of social, religious, cultural, and financial discomfort. The early church could not grow in its understanding of grace and

participation in the on-going life of the risen Jesus without broadening lines of inclusion: Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female (Gal 3:28). This work involved risk. It was possible because the disciples did not shoulder their risks alone but in fellowship with one another and because they worshiped a God whose faithfulness embraces and overcomes fear.

At the same time, a life of discipleship does not involve taking unnecessary risks. It is not about leading others into harm's way, endangering our own lives recklessly, or suffering in ways that invite injustice to continue. Paul Farmer is a Christian medical doctor whose organization, Partners in Health, works in places like Haiti where human survival is threatened by poverty, disenfranchisement, and lack of medical care for treatable diseases. Partners in Health aims to prevent what Haitians call "stupid deaths."¹ Stupid deaths are those that are unnecessary and preventable. They are deaths in which people are denied dignity and the world is robbed of a person's potential resourcefulness, creativity, and gifts. In places such as Haiti, stupid deaths are the result of disease and marginalization rather than choice. But the term "stupid death" can aptly describe human choices that result in unnecessary risks to the detriment of ourselves and others. Christian discipleship is not about stupid death. Christian discipleship involves respect for all life, our own lives included.

A thoughtful life of discipleship and ministry should follow the example of Jesus, and Jesus risked putting the reign of God into practice. He was killed by the Roman Empire for his courageous ministry on behalf of others and his calling as God's Son. Jesus's death was not a "stupid death," but one that involved heart-wrenching discernment about God's will for his life. Risk is a matter of how to best minister to others and follow God in obedience. It is not about sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice. Jesus's death and resurrection is our final confirmation that *God is on the side of life*. Christians experience God raising Jesus from the dead as empowerment to live a courageous life that is not governed by fear, even fear of death. With God, following Jesus, and led by the Spirit, we are called to stand courageously on the side of life and mutual well-being for all people. We do not need to be shackled by fear of risk or even fear for our own lives. But we live and minister as a lifelong act of discipleship guided by prayer and soul searching, community discernment, planning with safety in mind, and respect for life on all sides.

Whatever decisions about risk are in front of you, whatever contexts or challenges, we hope you will consider the biblical, historical, and theological insights below as an invitation into thoughtful and reasoned discernment about risk in the Christian life. At the end of each section, we conclude with a short list of questions to guide the discernment process.

Questions for Discussion:

- How comfortable are you in situations that involve risk?
- What types of risk have you encountered in your own life? How have you weathered these risks?
- How do you think of Jesus as a "risk taker?" What stories come to mind?
- How and with whom do you make decisions in which risk is an inherent factor?

¹ Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 144.

- How is the church called to be a community willing to risk? What support structures need to be in place for people to minister in contexts of risk?

Biblical Insights Concerning Risk

Risk discernment in the Old and New Testaments includes listening for the call of God, understanding the larger story of God's work in the world, and courage to make wise decisions that are not motivated solely by fear.

In this Section:

- We re-examine biblical stories in both the Old and New Testaments and bring out their insights on risk
- We consider the biblical record as a narrative for understanding and making decisions about risk
- We think about risk through a Christ-centered lens
- We acknowledge the fear involved in risk and assess fear and risk in connection to each other

As we begin to think about risk and the Christian life, it is important to start with scripture. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” How did our forefathers and foremothers in scripture engage in risk? How does God’s faithfulness to God’s people impact the decisions I make about risk? The stories of scripture are our stories as Christians. If we know these stories, they will be our guide for thinking about risk in the Christian life.

Old Testament Insight

If all goes according to plan, I (Aaron) will be living in East Jerusalem teaching at a Christian high school for the 2016-2017 academic year. This is not any ordinary school. It is attended primarily by Palestinian Muslims and the school’s curriculum is dedicated to peace in how they teach history, religion, ethics, and even geography. The school’s motto, “Peace begins with me,” drives home the hope that in the midst of the violence in the Middle East, students would turn to peace and not violence. When I was first drawn to moving to East Jerusalem, I understood that violence and tension are often found there. It was not a decision I made lightly, but I could not seem to shake the idea from my mind. The more I prayed about it and learned of the devastating violence Israel/Palestine experiences on an almost day to day basis, the more I felt called by God to go and work for peace; even in something as small as teaching for one year. I had many conversations with mentors, friends, and family who helped direct my questions and thoughts in helpful ways concerning what risks were actually involved. Knowing the risk, it seemed to me that if God was actually calling me to go, despite my fears, I would go. I knew this was not the first time God called someone to leave home and country and travel to an unfamiliar place. Part of my inspiration for pursuing the call was Abraham.

It is not often that we go to the Old Testament for direction for our lives today, but when thinking about risk it is the best place to start. There are many stories in the Old Testament that speak to the amazing faith of God's people that I have found instructive and challenging. As Christians today, we continue to share in a story that began long ago with God's desire for a distinct people who bear witness to the reign of God—the way God designed humanity to live in the world. Understanding risk in the Christian life begins where the Biblical story begins.

Chapters 1-11 of Genesis display God's beautiful creation tarnished by sin, violence, and evil. Then, God's plan for reconciliation and restoration is revealed in the call of Abraham. Reconciliation is the overarching narrative of scripture from Adam and Eve, to Abraham and Sarah, which culminates for Christians in Jesus and the church. In Genesis 12, God calls Abraham and Sarah to leave their country and home to go to the place God would show them. Through Abraham and Sarah's descendants, God plans to raise up a people who will be the conduit of a redemptive project in the world. God calls Abraham and Sarah to be in a privileged relationship with God, in a specific place, with a unique promise to be a blessing to all nations. Yet Abraham does not know where God will lead him and his family. Abraham's faith carries him through the unknown, potential risks, and possible dangers. But because God called Abraham and Sarah, they went. While we do not know the extended discernment process behind Abraham's decision to leave, we see many of the challenges they faced, and the result of decisions they made. After Abraham and Sarah leave their hometown, they face personal, relational, emotional, political, and economic risks.

As Abraham journeys to the promised land from Haran, he builds an altar worshipping God, but a famine forces him to move out of the promised land down to Egypt. In Egypt, he faces more direct risks to his family. Abraham feels threatened by Sarah's beauty and exposes her to increased risk by giving her to Pharaoh. The man who was promised a land is now exiled. The man who was told he would become a great nation has given up his wife. Yet God is with them. It is because of Sarah that things go well for Abraham in Egypt, and Pharaoh gives him livestock. But the risks continue.

Abraham faces a different kind of familial risk when he and his nephew Lot are unable to live near each other since the size of their herds creates strife for their herdsmen. They decide to separate peaceably by dividing up the promised land. After the relatives separate, God reminds Abraham of the promise: "For all the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth" (Gen 13:15-16 NRSV). God remains close to Abraham in the face of even small familial challenges.

Trouble continues, however, when Lot finds himself caught up in an international conflict. The very place God promises to Abraham and Sarah is not without its own inherent risk. It is riddled with political tension and teeming with violence. When foreign kings take Lot captive, Abraham cannot sit quietly. He leads 318 trained men to pursue them and tactically divides his small forces and gains back his nephew from the powerful kings. This is, no doubt, a miracle against such formidable forces.

Still, greater difficulties remain. How will Abraham have children with Sarah, who is beyond her childbearing years? How will they continue to trust God in more demanding circumstances? Will they fulfill God's promise to bless all nations, or fall short of God's call on their life?

In the midst of Abraham and Sarah's fears, God speaks to them and says, "Do not be afraid...I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Gen 15:1). Abraham has well-founded doubts; he has already faced a deadly famine, a powerful Pharaoh, and battled mighty kings, and there are still more challenges to surmount. How does God respond to these genuine concerns? God takes personal responsibility for the fulfillment of the promise by making a covenant with Abraham. In the face of great fears, God vows to maintain God's promise. This promise, however, does not come without struggle. God's call leads Abraham to risk failure. Following God comes at a risk to Abraham, Sarah, and to their commitment to the promise. Fortunately, Abraham's call and God's promise do not rest on Abraham's ability to overcome the challenges placed before him. They rest on the covenant-faithfulness of God to bring Abraham and Sarah through each challenge they face.

I have focused on the story of Abraham in particular, but there are many more stories in the Old Testament describing how God brings God's people through risk, danger, and fear. God's faithfulness carries the Bible story forward. It is what Moses relies on when leading the people out of Egypt. They face the Pharaoh and his armies as they leave Egypt, and starvation and drought in the wilderness. God, however, provides for the people in natural and supernatural ways by giving them just what they need for each day, never too much, and never not enough. God's faithfulness is what Joshua relies on in the battles the Israelites face. God tells the people God will fight for them and because of this they do not need standing armies, fierce generals, or strategic battle plans. They are forced to trust in God as their protector, not human preparation or strength. God's faithfulness is the reason God stays with the people despite their waywardness in the book of Judges. Even though the people desire to have a king like the nations—a notion God sees as a direct rejection of God's rule—God is faithful to them. God works with the people by honoring their decisions even when they reject God outright. God "rejects their rejection," as it were, and remains faithful to them. God's faithfulness gives the prophet Jeremiah the strength to endure when the people reject his message, throw him in a well, and treat him like a false prophet. Though Jeremiah doubts his own call, significance, and mission, God is faithful to Jeremiah and the rebellious people. This radical faithfulness is what gives hope to the exiles in Babylon that one day they will be restored to Israel. It is what gives Daniel and his three friends strength to defy the empire and remain true to God when their lives are on the line. God's radical faithfulness empowers the people of God to live in ways that seem impossible.

These stories are inspiring to modern day Christians who face fear, but I think it is worth mentioning that the people in these stories did not have a hope in the resurrection that Christians do today. The hope in the afterlife that Christians confess comes after the Old Testament. When I (Aaron) think about these stories, I find it incredibly powerful to remember that these people do not have the ultimate hope which we have because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the face of fear, God's faithfulness sustains God's people through their challenges, fears, and doubts. Like Abraham and Sarah, God calls us to ministry that may take us to far-away lands with many kinds of different risk to ourselves, our families, and the people we serve. God did not abandon Abraham and Sarah. They met many obstacles but God's faithfulness sustained them through their fears. Our circumstances and challenges are different, but their story can help sustain us through our fears as well. God's radical faithfulness continues into the New Testament where we see more examples of faithfulness, risk, and overcoming fear.

New Testament Insight

Living as fully committed disciples of Christ means that we will open ourselves up to the probability of risk. In my own life, this meant the decision to leave a good paying ministry job and a home I (Dawn) loved in order to come to Emmanuel Christian Seminary for additional schooling. A lot of people thought my husband and I were crazy, but God continuously met our needs as we followed God's call for me to pursue a seminary education so that I could better equip others. Were we afraid? Yes. But it has been worth it: not just the last three years of school, but the opportunity to clearly see God's faithfulness in our lives. For Christians, the fulfillment of God's faithfulness is understood most clearly in the sacrificial love of Jesus as demonstrated in his self-giving life and ultimately, his death on the cross. In Philippians 2, Paul encourages believers to have the same mind as Christ who emptied himself on our behalf and was obedient to God's call to the cross. God affirms Jesus's risk by raising him from the dead and Paul exhorts us to follow his example. Jesus's ministry involved risk, and he chose to give regardless. As followers of Jesus, we are warned that we will face trouble and persecution. In response to this, we must "go the extra mile," "love [our] enemies," and "be perfect" (Matt 5). Like Jesus, we are called to risk for the sake of the reign of God and for the good of all people. Jesus's example of self-sacrificing love for others is the "why" behind our choice to risk.

There is tension, however, between our recognition of Jesus's self-sacrificing love and our responsibility to be wise in the stewardship of our time and resources. What is the faithful way to make use of our gifts, time, and talents today? What is needed for the long term in contrast with the short term? Jesus is our example here as well. He understood his own need for Sabbath rest and prayer. He turned away from some, and placed limits on who he would heal and what he would do so he could fulfill his calling to preach the message of the reign of God (Mark 1:37-39). As Jesus spent time in solitude, his relationship with God allowed him to fully embrace his calling and understand the priorities of his mission on earth.

Jesus's teaching is filled with reminders to follow him without much discussion of risk. There is an expectation, rather, that there *will* be risk. We assume there will be trouble and hardship as we follow him. There are examples of Jesus saying, "Follow me," and the text indicates that those who heard him got up and went immediately.² Other passages speak about the cost of following Jesus, and suggest that homelessness, family desertion, denial of self, carrying a cross, literally following Jesus to die, may be the result.³ One striking example is in John 11 where Jesus is going back to Judea to raise Lazarus. When confronted with the reality that leaders there were trying to kill Jesus, Thomas speaks up to acknowledge they all may "die with him." Followers of Jesus understand that they may share in his risk.

In Luke 14, Jesus reminds his listeners that they need to count the cost of discipleship. As Jesus says, no one begins a building project without estimating how much they will need to finish. This connects with the importance of a process of discernment as we assess risks associated with specific service opportunities. Are we able and willing to see the task through once we begin?

² See Matt 4:19-20, 9:9; Mark 1:16-19, 2:13.

³ See also Matt 8:18-22; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:57-62, 14:25-33.

Our discernment about risk happens best in the context of community. In the early church, a group of believers faced sharp disagreement over how to handle the distribution of food to widows. The apostles gathered the disciples together in order to assess the situation wisely (Acts 6). In Acts 15, there is a risk of a church split based on ethnic distinctions, with the potential result of a Gentile church and Jewish church. In this situation, a council of apostles and elders met in order to come to a consensus. Within the community, there is space to ask what is best for the larger community of believers. In our experience, we had family members and two close friends praying for and counseling us as we made the decision to move. My husband and I believed the impact of my future ministry would be greater if we made this move at this point in life. I am thankful we did not enter a process of discernment about risk and change without wise counsel from others.

Besides the examples of Jesus and the early church, the life of the apostle Paul illustrates these values as well. In the face of abuse and persecution, he spoke with boldness about Jesus Christ (Acts 9:26-28).⁴ Paul understood that his mission would inherently involve difficulties, but knew that we must endure hardship to enter into the reign of God (Acts 14:22). Additionally, stories about Paul are characterized by his willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit. When Paul sees a vision of a man asking him to come to Macedonia, we find that Paul and his companions got ready to leave immediately (Acts 16:9-10). Throughout the book of Acts, instead of believers praying for safety, we see prayers for those in risky situations to be bold (Acts 4:23-31). The author of the book of Hebrews reminds us of innumerable believers who were tortured, imprisoned, stoned, flogged, destitute, homeless, and mistreated yet were commended for their faith and were perfected by their lives (Heb 11:36-40). Like these men and women of faith, we, too, are called to live by faith, not by fear.

Nowhere in the Bible is it suggested that we will *not* face fear. Fear is a natural emotion. Rather, in the face of fear we are called to realize that God is with us. The phrase, “Do not be afraid!” is a common refrain in scripture. In three of these occurrences, God speaks directly to a person, commissioning them to a specific work God has for them. As they are confronted by God, God encourages them to not be afraid.⁵ Indeed, God often reminds people to not be afraid just before God transitions them into a new phase of life or mission. Scott Bader-Saye reminds us that the “path out of fear is not power but trust, not strength but vulnerability before God.”⁶ Bader-Saye emphasizes the culture of fear that drives many of our decisions noting that “uncertainty turns to fear” and “the culture of fear routinely squelches...an extravagant embrace of life” (13-14). Long time missionary, Tim Ross, notes “Fear causes us to forget who Jesus has called us to be.” Often our discernment is influenced unnecessarily by fear rather than faith.

For Erin Githiru, director of mobilization for Christian Missionary Fellowship (CMF), ministry involves the recognition of our fears and how they affect our decision making. When counseling new or potential missionaries, CMF makes a point to not dwell on the risks, whether perceived or real, as much as to help the recruit discern their sense of calling and reassess their

⁴ See also Acts 10:45-46, 14:19-22, 16:40-17:2-3, 18:4-6, 21:33-36, 40:22:1-21.

⁵ Melanie Simpson, "The Heart of Worship," in *Finding Their Voices: Sermons by Women in Churches of Christ* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2015), 102. Simpson's examples are David (2 Sam 7), Isaiah the prophet (Isaiah 6), and Mary (Luke 1).

⁶ Scott Bader-Saye, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 12.

fears in light of that calling. Additionally, CMF helps mission teams create contingency plans for situations where they might face risk. Rather than helping us to avoid risk, preparation helps us minister well within contexts of risk. Thus CMF recruits enter service confident in their calling, knowledgeable and prepared for known risks, and less apprehensive about ministry.

Throughout scripture, God's faithfulness to God's people carries the story forward from Abraham, to Jesus and Paul, and to us today in the church. As part of that community, certainly we will face great challenges answering God's call. But we do not face these challenges alone. We do not live in a closed world without help. We have been gifted with faith. Like Abraham, Jesus, and Paul, we will face obstacles. But in those challenges, we are reminded that we do not need to be afraid because God is with us, empowering us to do the work God gives us. While fear is a normal response to risk, God's faithfulness allows us to face risk by having trust in God. This gives us confidence to be faithful to God despite our fears as we follow God's call.

Questions for Discussion:

- How would you describe the connection between faith and fear in your life? How did reading about Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Paul change the way you think about faith and fear? How is risk part of these stories?
- Which Biblical story about risk impacted you the most? Why do you think this story important to the discussion of risk?
- What other stories might inform our discussion of risk and discernment?
- What fears surround your ministry? What steps can we take to ensure that our fears do not overrule our faith? How does God's faithfulness change how we think about our fears or what risks we take?

Historical Insights Concerning Risk

The examples of historical figures provide opportunities for discerning how others responded to God's call to ministry in situations of risk.

In this Section:

- We explore the place “faith” has in preparing for and working in ministry and missions:
 - Do the actions of an individual or group impact the world wide church in any way?
 - Has the climate for missions changed in any way that alters the level of risk deemed acceptable in modern missionary endeavors?
- We consider several missionaries from different eras to understand the processes they went through when considering risk in ministry
- We describe how our ministry is guided by the Holy Spirit, who works through us and in our absence

If I (Elizabeth) were to identify my attitude towards risk in a quote, I would choose Franklin D. Roosevelt's much quoted phrase, “All we have to fear is fear itself.” I do not consider myself a risk taker. I am not a skydiver and I have never had much interest in amusement park roller coasters. However, I have always chafed at restrictions based on other people's ideas of what was “safe” for me, especially anything based on the reasoning that I am more vulnerable than my older brother because I am a girl.

When I was 19, I attended college on the south side of Atlanta and began working at an afterschool program for children experiencing homelessness. It was in a bad neighborhood, the kind of neighborhood with signs saying “No cruising between 9:00 PM and 6:00 AM,” the kind of neighborhood with houses with boarded up windows. I used to pull up to red lights and feel my heart rate go up because of the perceived risk. I was afraid. I hated being afraid.

So I embraced the fear. I spent two school years volunteering with the afterschool program and after my junior year in college moved into the neighborhood working as an intern. I left my doors unlocked and my windows down while I was driving--my air conditioner was broken and it was hot. I got to know parents and families and began waving to people in the neighborhood because I knew them. I stopped being afraid. I grew to appreciate the benefit that comes from living together.

And then I had to leave—I needed to finish my degree and then I made the decision to attend seminary. I was back on the south side several months ago, driving through this once familiar neighborhood and I was afraid. I came up to a red light and locked my doors. I feel a great deal of guilt for leaving. We learned quickly, working with children experiencing homelessness and instability, that what works is stability, structure, and continuity. I was just one more person who came and left and sometimes I am not sure my time there made any difference.

I can justify my decision: seminary will make me a better minister. I plan to move back to the south side after I graduate and continue living in this community. But I regret the time I spent away. I regret the lost possibilities and I question if I made the right decision.

I come from a long line of Christians who have taken risks and made choices that seem impossible for the sake of the gospel. Historically, many who claim to be followers of Jesus have risked everything to minister. Transmitting the “Good News” has required a willingness to sacrifice comfort, connection with loved ones, and familiar surroundings while embracing the potential for persecution, hostilities, loss of material possessions and even loss of life. With this in mind, are we called to throw caution to the wind and blindly pursue Christian mission with no thought of potential consequences? Does the historical record demonstrate recklessness on the part of missionaries or does it confirm an aversion to risk and a narcissism born of self-preservation?

As a Christian minister with several years of experience in missions, there are various questions I (Dan) have found important in assessing risk prior to engaging in Christian ministry. What place does my faith have in preparing for and then working in missions? Does the development of contingency plans demonstrate a lack of faith or does the lack of contingencies demonstrate lack of prudence? Should I consider only personal risk or are there wider concerns such as immediate or extended family? Do the actions of the individual or group impact the world wide church in any way? What does this specific act of Christian ministry communicate to the rest of the world and does it matter? If it does go wrong in some way, who will be blamed and what consequences might there be for the ministry, other missionaries in similar situations, or the world wide church?

Discerning any historical precedence in regard to risk and ministry may help alleviate some of our natural concerns as well as provide a framework for considering the above questions. In the following section, we examine four case studies from various periods throughout history, first comparing the Moravian missionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries to a more modern example, that of the ill-fated short term trip mission trip taken to Afghanistan by a group of South Korean Christians in 2007. Next, we discuss the way two families weighed their desire to preach the gospel in a dangerous situation with their desire for personal safety. Comparing and contrasting examples of both wisdom and the lack thereof in mission endeavors can benefit individuals or teams as they engage in ministry.

The Moravians were an 18th and 19th century Christian movement, founded in Germany out of the Anabaptist tradition. They were originally led by Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf and had their beginnings in dissension and separatism.⁷ As the Holy Spirit moved, bringing about restoration and a renewed love and devotion to Christ, the community responded with missionary zeal. They felt compelled to share their experience of God's love with others, not just locally, but to the far reaches of the globe. In February of 1728, the Moravians embarked on a 100 year prayer vigil for the world, assigning members of the community to one hour long commitments twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. This prayer vigil was the foundation of their missionary endeavors, undergirding everything they did. Their discernment process was unorthodox by today's standards. However, despite what looks like minimal preparation and

⁷ Winfield Bevins, "Into All the World: Count Zinzendorf and the Moravian Missionary Movement," Gospel Centered Discipleship, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://gcdiscipleship.com/into-all-the-world-count-zinzendorf-and-the-moravian-missionary-movement>.

discernment, the Moravians had a robust sense of their purpose as missionaries and were highly aware of the risks involved.

The Moravians demonstrate that prayer and the Holy Spirit are key in the pursuit of evangelism and mission work. From beginning to end, the Moravians opened themselves up to allow the Holy Spirit to direct the process. When an individual felt called to go to the mission field, the community cast lots so that the final decision would be in the Lord's hands. The Moravian missionaries believed that the Holy Spirit came with them on their journey, and also met them when they arrived. The Spirit had been working, preparing the field for the gospel, long before the missionary arrived. Perhaps because of their understanding of the working of the Holy Spirit, with or without their participation, the Moravian missionaries were very willing to withdraw from the field if the situation became too dangerous. When they left, they left with confidence that the Holy Spirit continued to work.

By saying this, we do not mean to imply that the Moravian missionaries were risk averse. Many of them died in the field as a result of disease or the physical hardships they were forced to endure. For the Moravians, it seems that although the risks were significant, their compulsion to go stemmed from their deep love of Christ and the knowledge that the sending community was fully committed to surrounding them in prayer.

The risks and attitudes taken by the Moravian missionaries of the 18th century are unfamiliar to many modern readers. However, to those living in a post-9/11 context, the dangers associated with overseas mission travel have never been more evident than in 2007. Many readers will remember the 2007 news story about the group of South Korean missionaries travelling in Afghanistan who were captured by Taliban insurgents. The missionaries entered the country to perform medical work. Despite the fact that South Korean government encouraged this group to rethink their plans because of specific Taliban threats, the mission workers went anyway.⁸ After being kidnapped, the Taliban began negotiating with the South Korean government for the release of several Taliban prisoners and the assured removal of South Korean troops from the country. Two of the missionaries were executed before terms were met and the remaining missionaries were released.

While it is difficult to compare this more recent group with the Moravians, the South Korean group may have acted without sufficient care and preparation. Their trip to Afghanistan ignored specific government advice to not travel to the region because of threats made by the Taliban. In spite of this, the group travelled. Although they knew about the dangers, the group had no contingency or emergency extraction plans. The missionaries' flaw was not in going, but in going imprudently. Travel to such a dangerous region under the discussed conditions is foolhardy. Of course, people might have said the same thing about Paul's missionary journeys.

While no one doubts the South Koreans were acting in earnest on their understanding of the will of God, the missionaries who survived left the country without having accomplished what they set out to do and seriously damaged the work of the global church. The South Korean government was forced to intervene on behalf of their citizens, carrying out negotiations with a

⁸ Jennifer Veale, "Korean Missionaries Under Fire," *Time*, July 27, 2007, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1647646,00.html>.

terrorist organization, setting an incredibly negative precedent for global missions.⁹ Because the South Korean government capitulated, giving in to the Taliban's demands, missionaries in other parts of the world may be endangered by terrorist organizations who might see the Taliban's success in negotiations as replicable with other governments and other missionaries. In this instance, certainly, the missionaries' methodology and actions resulted in great consequences for the worldwide church.

The South Korean missionaries seem to have been influenced and pushed to go by a charismatic pastor, circumventing any thoughtful discernment and planning. In contrast, before the Moravian missionaries went, they entered into a long process of community discernment which included prayer and planning, prayer for the people, and planning for the specific location. When the South Korean missionaries returned, they were required to apologize not only to the government, but to the church in Korea for the inconvenience and embarrassment caused by their actions. Sacrifice and risk are inherent in missionary service. The Moravian community provides an example of calculated risk and full community endorsement in contrast to the tragedy surrounding the South Korean group.¹⁰

An equally tragic account is the story of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot, part of a team of missionaries to Ecuador in the 1950's.¹¹ The Elliots and their teammates were attempting to make first contact with the Waodani people, a group of Indians living in isolation in the Ecuadorian jungle.

Because they did not know the language, Jim and his teammates began flying a small airplane over the Waodani settlement and dropping gifts: buttons, clothing, cooking pots, and knives. There were some small successes: the tribesmen began accepting these gifts and once sent a return gift of a parrot back up to the plane.

In January of 1956, the missionaries decided to land and set up a camp on a sandbar near the Waodani settlement hoping to make face to face contact with the people, despite not having any language ability.¹² Five days after their landing, the men were killed by a group of Waodani men. It seemed that the missionaries had failed.

From the distance of 60 years, their decisions may appear foolhardy and unfruitful. They attempted to make first contact with a tribe having no knowledge of the language, fully aware that this people group was considered one of the most violent in Ecuador. They went knowing the risks involved, and they died. Do we still think these men acted bravely and heroically or does time reframe the choices they made?

⁹ Choe Sang-hun, "Anger Is Tempering Sympathy for South Korean Hostages," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2007, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/03/world/asia/03korea.html>.

¹⁰ As outsiders, it can be difficult to decide who acted with wisdom and who was foolish. The Moravian missionaries, and maybe the Korean missionaries too, knew that human measurements of wisdom don't make a lot of sense in light of the Spirit of God.

¹¹ For a first hand account of Jim and Elisabeth's work in Ecuador, I recommend Elisabeth Elliot's books, *In the Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot*, New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishing, 1959, and *Through the Gates of Splendor*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 1981.

¹² John Bjorlie, "Online Library of Brethren Writers." Five Missionary Martyrs, September 17, 2006, accessed November 22, 2015, <http://www.plymouthbrethren.org/article/545>.

Time is on our side, and we know that the ultimate result of the work Jim and his teammates began occurred years after they died. Years later, Elisabeth Elliot, Jim's widow, and Rachel Saint, the sister of another one of the men who died, traveled back to Ecuador and moved into the village, living with the people who killed their loved ones. As a result of their work and more importantly, their forgiveness, many of the Waodani eventually converted to Christianity, including some of the men who were directly involved in killing the original missionaries. Still, one has to wonder if the ultimate result justified the missionaries' actions.

Frequently we cannot see the results of our decisions and choices in ministry until long after the fact. We act with faith, trusting that our decisions are made with prayer and in conjunction with the Holy Spirit. Time is on God's side; we are finite. Effie Giles, a former missionary with Christian Missionary Fellowship, and I (Elizabeth) meet weekly to talk about the Christian life. She shared the following experience with me and gave me permission to include it in this section. I am grateful for her insights into the topic of risk and her openness in sharing so others can learn from her experiences.

In 1968, Ray and Effie Giles were commissioned by Christian Missionary Fellowship (CMF) as missionaries to Ethiopia, Africa to begin their work with the Oromo and Gumuz peoples, an unreached and isolated group. The Giles committed to stay for the long term, finding that their work of evangelism, church planting, and education was fruitful.

In 1974, the Marxists took power and the situation changed. The Giles originally thought the revolution would pass them by, due to their distance from Addis Ababa, the capital. In 1977, the Ethiopia team made a trip to Addis Ababa. The original plan was for the men to return to the field, leaving the women and children safely in the capital. The missionaries were staying in the CMF office, in a building which overlooked on-going protests. Ethiopians carried signs reading, "Death to the American Imperialists!" and the CMF missionaries knew that their original plan would have to be abandoned. The entire team would have to leave the country.

Effie says that while they were afraid for their own lives, they were also concerned for their friends; stories were circulating of Ethiopian nationals being killed trying to protect missionary friends. In this situation, the Giles family had to learn to balance their concern for personal safety with the success of their work. Effie points out that there came a time when they were so afraid of making a misstep that might hurt the ministry or their friends that they were constrained in their work. In this instance, risk was not purely motivated by self preservation. Instead, the missionaries decided that the risk was too great for the people they were in Ethiopia to reach. The Giles family considered the safety of their friends when making the decision to leave. But they did not make the decision in a vacuum. The Giles family had support—people inside and outside Ethiopia were praying for the team and helping them discern their response to the risk. Ultimately, the risk for everyone was too great to be ignored. The Giles family was privileged to be able to leave this dangerous situation while their friends remained in grave danger in Ethiopia. We must acknowledge that our process of risk discernment is affected by guilt for those we leave behind.

Although the missionaries left, their commitment to their ministry and the church in Ethiopia never faltered. Ray and Effie constantly looked for opportunities to return to Ethiopia, writing letters to Ethiopian church leaders while in the United States, and once going back briefly to help with famine relief. Finally, after the Marxist government collapsed in 1991, the

Giles returned permanently, finding that in their absence, the Holy Spirit had continued to nurture the church.

What do the stories of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot and Ray and Effie Giles have in common? At first glance, it seems like they are opposites. Jim Elliot went in, perhaps unwisely, and died while the Giles left, protecting their friends in Ethiopia and their own family. Years later, however, both Elisabeth Elliot and the Giles family returned to the field and found that the Holy Spirit had been working in their absence. The Holy Spirit was pivotal in the discernment process of the Moravian missionaries as well. The work of evangelism did not stop when they left and it was not predicated on their presence or their actions.

These stories offer grace to those who are in the process of discerning a call to ministry and to those who suffer from guilt from not going or for leaving ministry before the work is done. When I (Elizabeth) think about my time on the south side of Atlanta, I find that these stories offer me grace as well. We do not work alone and we are never called to finish the work, only to be faithful while we are able.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that we cannot know the long term consequences of our actions. In the moment, it may seem that we have abandoned our ministries before the work is finished or that we have acted foolishly. The historical accounts discussed in this section provide a variety of risk discernment in ministry. The impact of these ministry endeavors transcend cultural boundaries. The common thread is the Holy Spirit, who empowers us and goes with us in our ministry.

Pursuing ministry, something all Christians are called to, always involves taking a risk. We cannot know the consequences of our actions before we take them. But we do know that growth cannot occur if we do not take risks. Fear of the unknown is normal in these circumstances and no doubt experienced by all of the people discussed in this section. We acknowledge that God calls us and goes with us in our ministries, but God has been there far ahead of us and remains even if we leave. This principle should give us confidence as we minister, knowing that the work ultimately belongs to God. This knowledge does not eliminate our need to be involved but does help us wisely consider our involvement without being paralyzed by either fear or guilt. In this section we have recounted stories of men and women of faith who pursued God's call and encountered risk. Preparing to go involves much more than a packing list, a passport, and a visa. Preparing to go means developing a workable theology of risk which will help us make decisions before we travel and while we are engaged in the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God.

Questions for Discussion:

- How do the stories in this section differ? How are they similar or different to the ministry you are considering and its risks?
- How might the deaths of Jim Elliot and his teammates be viewed if they happened today?
- What questions do these stories help you consider? What new questions do they cause you to ask?
- The Moravian missionaries were confident that the Holy Spirit had traveled ahead of them to prepare hearts and lives in the field. How is your ministry supported by the work of the Spirit?

- What impact might your ministry have if something does go wrong? Who might be affected?

Theological Insights Concerning Risk

The question to ask ourselves is not whether our decisions are made between safety and danger, but rather fear and faith. Violence is not the greatest threat in the world today; fear is. Fear causes us to forget who Jesus has called us to be. Fear causes us to draw in the wagons, seek comfort and safety at the expense of mission and mercy. Fear can lead us to forget our deepest identity and betray our most cherished values.

In this Section:

- We analyze what it means to have a “theology of risk”
- We look at how theologians have confronted risk in their own lives
- We question how the church can adapt to a society filled with risk
- We investigate what it means to take up our cross for Christ

Six years ago I (Justyn) was presented with an opportunity to move to Mexico to begin working with a ministry in the city of Puebla. This was mere months after fear of the H1N1 virus caused schools and businesses across Mexico to close and was during the height of the drug war. In the months leading up to my move to Mexico, my family and friends tried to discourage me from going because they were afraid I was taking too great of a risk. My parents had nightmares in which I was kidnapped and held for ransom. My grandparents would call me multiple times a week warning me I was going to get sick. I heard what everyone was telling me but I had to look at my life and decide whether sharing the gospel was worth the risks I would be facing in Mexico. In order to live a life that is centered around the gospel, it is helpful to have a *theology of risk*. This theology of risk will inherently include a theology of suffering as well as we ask ourselves what level what sort of lifestyle our faith calls us to. As we go about our lives, we encounter risks we do not think about on a daily basis. Risk is an inherent part of the human experience. It is impossible to grow and develop emotionally, spiritually, and mentally without taking risks. Risk, however, must be tempered by discernment in order to develop a thoughtful approach to making decisions.

Evaluating risk in our personal lives is part of the bigger question of what God’s will is for our lives. For many Christians, this is the biggest and most fundamental question we consider over the course of our lives. Questions arise about if we are doing enough for others, if we are acting and thinking with too much consideration towards ourselves and our own needs, and if we are living a life of mere comfort with no opportunities to take up our cross as Jesus invites us to do. The idea of sacrifice and taking up one’s cross is an image seen throughout the New Testament. This involves being self-giving and self-sacrificial, which involves many risks. It means paying attention to the safety of others ahead of personal safety. To put it in more radical terms, this means putting the happiness of your enemies ahead of your own happiness. Taking this even further, New Testament scholar Richard Hays says, “Our actions are...to be judged not

by their calculable efficacy in producing desirable results but by their correspondence to Jesus's example."¹³ We are part of the mission of God, the *Missio Dei*, in the world today. Living out that mission provides us with ample opportunities to engage risk.

Risk is often considered in light of the fears we carry with us on a daily basis. In their book, *The Faith of Leap*, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch describe how fear plays a prevalent role in our overarching decision making process. This is not something Jesus suggested or embodied.¹⁴ Fear, in the real, life-draining sense, is not something we consider frequently while making decisions. Even though fear is a natural emotion, we should not make decisions from a place of fear that would otherwise be made from faith. We have a preoccupation with safety in our culture today that keeps people addicted to the need to feel safe. Christian faith is often easy to maintain in the developed world today. We go to church on Sunday, occasionally Wednesday, often for the simple purpose of socialization or so others will think we have "high morals." Faith like this is can be devoid of the courage that is seen in more risky time periods and locations such as the early church or in nations that require adherence to a specific faith.

Risk is something we deal with in our daily lives, but also presents itself at more critical junctures that shape who we are. Choices of occupation, where to live, where to go to school, what to invest our time in, and which relationships to invest in are all risky and have an inherent opportunity cost. Major world events often trigger deeper discussions centered around the idea of wrestling with risk. In his book, *The Irresistible Revolution*, Shane Claiborne describes the agonizing decision of whether to leave his home in Philadelphia to travel to Iraq during the Battle of Baghdad in 2003 for the purpose of spreading peace. He takes more than a year to decide to join a team of peace makers in Iraq, after seeking the counsel of friends and pastors in order to determine the best course of action. He travels to Iraq because the thought of standing by passively while the American government waged war was too great to overcome.¹⁵ He describes this trip as being in alignment with the gospel by saying that "if terrorists were beyond redemption, I'd have to rip out half of my New Testament." Jesus suffered an imperial execution and he invites us to do the same, losing our own lives to find ourselves (207).

Claiborne's actions are not unique in history. Christians have always struggled with how to decide when it is necessary to take risk. In the twentieth century, two prominent theologians, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jon Sobrino found themselves in situations where they needed to understand risk in light of their theological convictions to decide whether their missions were worth dying for.

Born in Germany in 1906, Dietrich Bonhoeffer witnessed firsthand the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. Despite facing tremendous danger, Bonhoeffer preached against the policies of Hitler's regime. When Bonhoeffer's authorization to teach was revoked in 1936 by the government, he began operating illegal underground seminaries to help train ministers and combat the Nazi party's use of Christian doctrine to spread their anti-Semitic views. Although

¹³ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996), 197.

¹⁴ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Faith of Leap, Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure and Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 85.

¹⁵ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 204.

Bonhoeffer was very active in fighting the Nazis, the German church refused to stand up to Hitler's regime. The church's refusal to act greatly impacted Bonhoeffer's views on the responsibilities of Christians in the world and how they should react to danger and risk.

In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer often comments on how Christians should respond to the evil they face in the world. No matter how great an evil Christians may face, we do not need to be extraordinary to overcome it. Instead, to overcome evil, all we need to be as Christians is "plain, honest, and straightforward."¹⁶ We have to assume our duty as Christians and not worry about the dangers we face. As Christians, we cannot back away from evil and be silent witnesses like much of Germany was during World War II. Bonhoeffer readily admits it is easier to remain obedient to one's circumstances in life than it is to face danger (30) but he is quick to remind us that God grants us the strength we need to resist evil (24).

When Bonhoeffer was finally arrested, he encouraged others from within his prison cell to take risks and fight against Hitler's regime. Bonhoeffer remained in continual contact with his student, Eberhard Bethge, while he was in prison. Bethge, following Bonhoeffer's example, fought against the Nazi regime by continuing to lead baptisms during the Allied forces' bombing of Berlin. In his letters to Bethge, Bonhoeffer often mentions Bethge's fear and concerns about being separated from his wife and children. Bonhoeffer assures Bethge that his fear and trepidation is natural: "Accept it as intended. If a man loves, he wants to live, to live above all, and hates everything that represents a threat to his life" (396). However, Bonhoeffer reminds Bethge that although his fear is natural, there will always be danger when dealing with a love as passionate as the love God has for humanity. Bonhoeffer urges Bethge to remain firm in his love for God because it is love for God that provides the basis for all other aspects of life. According to Bonhoeffer, only a steadfast love for God can provide a wholeness to life in spite of the dangers we may face.

As the air raids on Berlin continued, Bonhoeffer becomes more explicit with his instructions to Eberhard Bethge. Bonhoeffer embraces the dangers of the air raids and declares to Bethge that the Kingdom of God is "stronger than war and danger" (399). In Bonhoeffer's opinion, the dangers and risks caused by the air raid pale in comparison to the importance of the mission of God. It is apparent from Bonhoeffer's response that Bethge resisted some of Bonhoeffer's advice. Bonhoeffer acknowledges the difference in their circumstances and even tells Bethge that he wishes he could trade places with him and assume all of the risk for himself. Still, Bonhoeffer continues to encourage Bethge and tells him that the danger and suffering caused by the air raids does not prohibit joy. According to Bonhoeffer, joy and danger are not exclusive and can mutually exist side by side. Even during the air raids, happiness can be found because the reign of God is one "for which it is worthwhile risking our lives" (399).

Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino faced many of the same struggles as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Sobrino was born in Spain in 1936 but spent most of his life living in El Salvador among the poor and oppressed. In 1965, Sobrino helped found the Central American University in San Salvador, the capital city. The university gained quick renown throughout the world for its efforts to end poverty and bring about social change in Central America. Sobrino and other professors of the university actively sought to end many of the social systems that oppressed the people of Central America. Many of the university's efforts were focused on ending the Salvadoran civil war, which had already claimed more than 70,000 lives. Despite their

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997), 32.

humanitarian efforts, the university and its professors made enemies of the Salvadoran government. On November 16, 1989, the Salvadoran army invaded the campus and killed eight people, six of whom were professors. Although he was an intended target, Sobrino was away from the university on the day of the attacks and escaped harm.

Having lived among the poor and oppressed of El Salvador and having survived the Salvadoran civil war, Jon Sobrino saw firsthand the potential dangers of following God's call. Sobrino believes the world is suffering and can only be liberated through Christ. As a result of the world's suffering, there is a great deal of negativity which includes sin, guilt, poverty, injustice, slavery, condemnation, and even death. As Christians, we cannot avoid this negativity. Instead, we must analyze it and confront it with the positivity we have because of our faith in God.¹⁷ Christians are a part of God's reign and have been given the message of salvation needed to counteract negativity and liberate the world.

Sobrino identifies the suffering and marginalized people of the world as being members of what he called the *pueblo crucificado* or "crucified people" (84). The "crucified people" is an important theological concept because they are people who share in the suffering of Christ on the cross. Sobrino acknowledges it is controversial to use the term, "crucified," but insists it is necessary. "Crucified" means death and just as Christ died on the cross, the marginalized people of the world are slowly dying as well. Christians are called to be a part of the "crucified people" and become servants of God. However, remarks Sobrino, following the call to be servants of God means that we will face danger (161). Sobrino uses the professors killed during the attacks on the Central American University and other martyrs who were killed during the Salvadoran civil war as examples of the dangers we may face when following God. Sobrino does not intend to discourage people from following God by telling the stories of the martyrs; rather, Sobrino wants to illustrate that when we follow God, there is life even in death because of the resurrection of Christ (254). Although we may be afraid of the dangers we face, it is our faith and the knowledge that Christ defeated death that gives us comfort and strength.

For many of us, the decisions made by people like Shane Claiborne, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Jon Sobrino may seem drastic. The Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, however, in an essay on the theology of risk says that drastic measures need to be taken in order to continue to help spread the church's message in the world. Rahner believes the church has become too content and had thus been left behind by the many changes happening in modern society.¹⁸ Advancements in technology have permanently altered the way people connect and communicate with one another. The world is more connected than ever before and people are looking at the church less often for answers to life's problems. Instead of adapting to the changes, says Rahner, the church began to look inward and focused too much on self conservation. While the church is meant to conserve the gospel and the message of salvation, by focusing on its own conservation, the church has acted detrimentally to its own mission.

Because the church has failed to adapt to changes in modern society, risky measures, like those taken by Shane Claiborne, are necessary to bring the church into the future. Although these short-term trips are not as beneficial to the "receiving" country, their value is often found in

¹⁷ Jon Sobrino, *El Principio-Misericordia* (Sal Tarrae, 1992), 51.

¹⁸ Karl Rahner, "The Theology of Risk," *The Furrow* 19, no. 5 (1968): 266.

translating what is being seen back to the home church context. Rahner states, “The courage to undertake risk is today an urgent necessity” (267). To continue to grow, Christians cannot be afraid to tread new ground. Risks need to be taken. Rahner even goes as far as to say that if an individual ever has any doubts concerning a decision, she should decide in favor of the new risk because of how it can better the church (266). Questions like “How far must I go?” do not matter to Rahner because the church’s current situation is so drastic. Rahner encourages all Christians to continue forward in risk until Christian teaching and conscience prohibits us from moving forward (267). This may seem extreme, but Rahner tempers this position by saying that these measures are not a permanent solution. Christians must continue to assess the situation; if the church catches up to the advancements of modern society, then less risk will need to be taken.

A context in which the modern church frequently addresses risk is with regard to short-term mission trips. Many short-term trips are taken to locations which are typically considered “dangerous.” This leads to a difficult assessment of whether the risk is worth the trip. Short-term mission trips are a somewhat controversial approach to mission work in the church today due to questions of motivation and sustainability. Missions groups are frequently tasked with creating criteria by which they decide if a certain trip is worth the risk.

However, as David Livermore notes in his book, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open*, when people from other parts of the globe travel, they expect danger: they anticipate being in life-threatening situations. In contrast, when people from North America travel, they expect to stay in hotels, eat local food, and have time to shop.¹⁹ Short-term mission trips are sometimes a pseudo-vacation that requires very little “taking up” of one’s cross. It is important to ask if short-term mission trips are driven by a desire to serve God or by wanderlust. Short-term trips should have intentional motivations that are related to serving others for the growth of the kingdom of God. It is important to determine the underlying purpose of each trip from the outset. If the point of the trip is to impact the lives of the people going on the trip, the group will assess risk differently from a group whose purpose is to spread the gospel. The problem with short-term trips is that most are a combination of both.

It is valuable to note that “taking up your cross” does not always lead a Christian to make the brash choice to sell all they own and move to another country like Shane Claiborne did. “Taking up your cross” also does not always mean risking your life to fight an oppressive regime like Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Jon Sobrino. It is a case of opportunity cost: if a Christian moves away from her hometown to a foreign land, she forgoes any potential kingdom building she could have accomplished in the place she left behind. Part of Claiborne’s process of discernment involved the fact that he was the leader of an intentional community in Philadelphia which placed a lot of responsibility for the well-being of others on his shoulders.

This idea of responsibility to others was seen in a recent interview conducted with Mike and Katie Davis, former missionaries to Kenya. During their time in Kenya, Mike worked in a hospital with over seventy patients. When an American doctor contracted the Ebola virus in Liberia, Mike was asked to go see if he could help care for the American doctor. The Davis family elected to remain in Kenya because the thought of traveling to Liberia for a single patient while leaving a clinic full of patients in need was too great of an opportunity cost. While it is difficult to decide to take risks, perhaps it is even more difficult to decide against it. Often the

¹⁹ David A. Livermore, *Serving with Eyes Wide Open: Doing Short-Term Missions with Cultural Intelligence*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 35.

decision to not take risks brings with it feelings of guilt, shame, or regret. Later, after the crisis has passed, we find ourselves asking what more we could have done. These feelings are normal but they can be unhealthy if we let them control us. Despite being called to take up our cross, we are not called to be the saviors of the world. We all have a part to play in God's plan but we have to remember that only God can save the world. It takes just as much courage for a person to decide to take a risk as it does for them to look at their specific context, like the Davis family, and decide the risk is too great.

Ultimately, every Christian must develop their own theology of risk. We all need to look at our individual contexts and decide what it means for us to take up our cross in the moment. As danger and opportunity arose in Germany and El Salvador, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jon Sobrino decided that they had to act on the opportunity in front of them. Shane Claiborne saw the war taking place in Iraq and decided that it was worth the risk to bring the gospel to the people of Iraq. It is possible that, if Claiborne, Bonhoeffer, or Sobrino had immediate families, they might have evaluated the risk differently and decided that taking up their cross meant acting differently. We are all called to spread the gospel and be with the "crucified people" but that does not necessarily mean we need to place ourselves in situations where our lives are constantly at risk.

We need to pray alone and with others for discernment and to seek God's guidance about how we can take up our cross in a way that benefits the church. We cannot let our fear guide us. Six years ago I (Justyn) was afraid to consider going to Mexico, but I did not let my fears or the fears of my family control my decisions. I felt God calling me to minister in Mexico and I answered that call. During my time in Mexico, I was almost kidnapped twice. One night I was forced to sleep on the floor of a friend's house because there was a gunfight in the street. I saw firsthand the risks that come with taking up your cross for Christ but I also saw God touch the lives of many people who were in need of hope. I spent a night praying with a friend after they experienced a tremendous personal tragedy. I helped a family recover after their uncle was kidnapped. I had the opportunity to spend time with orphans and share the gospel with the homeless because I took up my cross.

We have to be open to following God's call in our lives as our context changes. For some of us, that call may mean taking a short term ministry trip to a place where we feel vulnerable. For others, it may mean moving to a foreign country to spread the gospel. For still others, it may mean volunteering several times a month at a local ministry. All of these activities involve risk. No matter how God asks us to serve, by answering God's call, we play an important part in preparing for the reign of God on earth.

Questions for Discussion:

- What does it mean for you to consider a *theology of risk* in your own life?
- What beliefs about God, Jesus, and Christian service shape how you think about risk?
- How has God called you to take risks in your own life?
- What are some of the ways the modern church experiences risk? How can we better engage risk in society?
- What do the stories of Shaine Claiborne, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Jon Sobrino teach us about approaching risk in our own lives?

Conclusion

*Good decisions about risk involve
care and planning with safety in mind, not to avoid risk
but to enable powerful service and fruitful witness.*

In the spring of 2016, I (Miriam) made plans to visit Burkina Faso to learn from missionary friends and local Christians. Yet as the time neared, an outbreak of the Ebola virus was ravaging West Africa and threatening to spread east to neighboring countries. I decided not to go. Instead, I made plans to serve at a medical clinic in Narok, Kenya. But two weeks before I left, a Somali terrorist group crossed the border into Kenya and killed 70 students at Garissa University College. I was frustrated, fearful, and fatigued. Yet I followed through with my plans to visit Kenya and the experience turned out to be mutually beneficial and rewarding.

As our survey of Biblical, historical, and theological perspectives suggests, it is hard to describe the complexities that surround ministry decisions involving risk. For me, the process often involves fear of the unknown and anxiety. I second-guess every inclination and determination. I come again and again to the uncomfortable realization that my choices presume privileges of citizenship, resources, and availability. The greater risks are borne by those already present, often with no alternatives. I have felt guilt: in the instances above for not being able to support my friends with a face-to-face visit, and also for burdening friends with arranging travel and logistics. In every instance, the decisions are rarely straightforward or entirely clear cut.

Psychologist Brené Brown writes, “In an uncertain world, we often feel desperate for absolutes. It’s the human response to fear.” But faith is knowing “how to wrestle with the unknown and how to embrace mystery.”²⁰ What does this wrestling and embracing look like? Good decisions about risk involve embracing a broader story of God’s work throughout history, throughout the world, and in our partnership with God. Good decisions embrace our best gifts and put our resources to the best use. They involve embracing guidance from Christian friends and neighbors who have the necessary experience and can give sound counsel. Good decisions about risk involve wrestling with the needs of those among whom we serve as well as the needs of friends and family. Good decisions about risk involve care and planning with safety in mind, not to avoid risk but to enable powerful service and fruitful witness. Wisdom in risky situations involves wrestling in partnerships of trust that grow out of Christian communities both locally and globally. No one should bear the burden of a choice, its implications, its possibilities, its guilts, its regrets or successes alone. Decisions about risk ideally happen in the presence of Jesus “where two or three are gathered” (Matt 18:20). Discernment about risk requires praying with humility. We prayerfully look to Christ because we are not ourselves saviors of anyone or any situation. We prayerfully rely on God because we are not the one whose hands hold the world. We prayerfully lean on the Spirit because both the best and worst decisions can unfold in surprising and grace-filled ways.

²⁰ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012), 187.

There is no way to avoid the uncertainties and ambiguities of ministry in contexts of risk. But when I looked away from the news and turned instead to trusted friends on the ground who knew the dynamics of actual versus perceived risk, the right decisions emerged. When I planned with safety in mind, everyone benefited and service deepened. When I turned to prayerful reliance on God, the way forward became clearer. When I resisted the urge to shoulder the burden of decision alone, my choices were wiser and better supported. One situation led to a “no,” and one to a “yes.” Both situations involved potential risk. And both the yes and the no required courage and faith in God's providence and care.

In light of these realizations, we conclude not with a list of “dos and don'ts” for addressing risk in the Christian life, but a set of questions to guide the decision-making process for individuals and groups. You might think of it as a checklist in support of courageous ministry. Rather than highlight the obstacles, we hope these questions instead point toward the right paths of possibility.

Questions for Discernment on Risk in the Christian Life:

- Are there two or three people you can ask to help in the discernment process and offer support and prayer? Are these people who care for you, support your vocational calling, and understand some of the complexities involved?
- What fears surround this endeavor? How might you place these fears within your confidence and trust in God?
- Who are the people who best understand the elements of risk in the places under consideration? Have you contacted those with the best and most up-to-date information or are we relying only on public perceptions or common reporting?
- Are there safety protocols in place and are they the best possible protocols? Have those protocols been tested and updated? If the risk increases substantially, how will you respond?
- Will the effort under consideration unnecessarily put your life or the lives of others in harm's way?
- Is this effort in concert with your vocational calling and discipleship? Do you feel the call of God in this endeavor or are there pressures from elsewhere?
- Is the risk under consideration being taken in solidarity with those most intimately connected to it? Have you listened well to the counsel of those with whom you are partnering?
- Does this risk advance the witness of the gospel and the reign of God? While recognizing that life and death are often not within our own control, are the risks outweighed by the testimony of your actions whether in life or death?

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Appendix A: Questions for Cross-Cultural Ministry Preparation

- Have I studied the stories of the Bible to reflect on the nature of risk?
- Have I read about the political history and history of missionary presence in the places I will minister?
- Have I invested in spiritual formation through prayer, worship, and the support of Christian community?
- Have I already invested in cross-cultural experiences in the neglected communities that surround me right now?
- Do I understand the mission agency's emergency contingency plans and how and when they are established and implemented?
- Does my team have a contingency plan for emergency situations? Are there clear lines of authority, decision making policies, etc.?
- Do I have a network of support through family and friends who can offer support both from home and on site?
- Who is my support system (this group should be a solid and diverse group of supporters, prayer partners, mentors, and friends)?
- Have I assessed the resources and assets of my team in responding to risk?
- How can I invest in deepening relationships among my team members in lower stress contexts to help prepare for the unexpected stresses?
- Do I have a list of the best resources for assessing risk in my ministry location (state department bulletins, reports and interviews with/from other groups and individuals working in this area)?
- Do I have an emotional and spiritual health care plan for my time in ministry, and for care upon my return from cross cultural ministry?

Appendix B

Ross, Timothy W. "Advent Survival Kit." Sermon. Hopwood Memorial Christian Church. Johnson City, TN. November 29, 2015.

Sermon text: 1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13; Luke 21: 25-36

Have you ever been afraid for your life? Have you ever lived in a really dangerous neighborhood, ever faced a strong enemy, ever wondered if disaster would soon come crashing down upon your head? A few years back a missionary friend was living in a country that was undergoing a lot of political turmoil, and my friend was nervous about his safety, and the safety of loved ones.

He wrote, "Things are getting kind of crazy here. Daily life is filled with a tension that makes everyday encounters more nerve rattling than normal. I am ok being here but life in our country can get rather scary. We're praying all the time, but I wonder if you could share with me how you have learned to deal with situations that make your knees wobble. How do you keep going? I'm definitely feeling useless and shaky, and even when I build up the courage to get out and do something it seems like something happens in the neighborhood that sets me back again."

How remarkably different the daily reality of many of our missionaries is from ours—they are living out their faith in uncertain and sometimes dangerous environments. We have missionaries living in neighborhoods with big red circles drawn around them on state department maps. We have workers whose daily worries include ISIS militants. We have a couple of missionaries battling cancer as they minister. We have missionaries who are separated from their children for long periods of times. Their lives are so different than ours, and yet, their predicament, and my friend's questions are not so different than the ones we share: How do you

deal with the fear that living in this world brings? When something dangerous or scary or tragic or hard happens, how do you take that next step forward?

How do the citizens of Paris move forward after the terrorist attacks of November 2015? How do the residents of Colorado Springs move forward? How do our Christian sisters and brothers living near Ferguson, Missouri or in Chicago's violent neighborhoods go about their lives? How do you step forward after you've received that call from the doctor's office giving you news that freezes your heart? How do you put one foot in front of the other when a family member has just dropped a bomb that changes *everything*?

The season of advent always begins with frightening apocalyptic events and warnings. Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."²¹

Through the years Christians have scoured these apocalyptic texts to find out when these terrible events are going to occur. When will nation rise up against nation? When will the sea roar and the waves crash? When will the heavens refuse to give their light? If I could just predict when these terrible things will happen, I would make plans to be out of town that weekend! Earnest Bible students have tied Jesus' words to a chair and tried to sweat a crucial confession out of them. When will these calamities come upon the world? When will the Son of Man appear?

Jesus said: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not

²¹ Luke 21:26-26 New Revised Standard Version.

pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”²²

But what if Jesus wants us to focus our attention elsewhere? What if the real question is not “when” but “how?” Not “When will disasters happen; when will the end come?” but *how?* *How* are we to live as the days get more difficult? *How* are we to live in this in-between time, between the two great advents of our Lord, the coming of Jesus in the flesh to this world and the final advent, the final coming of Christ at the end of this age?²³

The biggest surprise in Jesus’ words is not his prediction of destruction and chaos. It is instead found in his advice to his disciples, and to us: “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”²⁴ Here Jesus seems to be saying that all the spooky, frightening, terrible events that mark the unraveling of society and the unhinging of the structure of the planet are actually signs of our redemption. “This ‘in-between time,’ though fraught with tension, is nevertheless also characterized by hope and courage because we know that the end of this story, while not yet here, has been written by the resurrected Christ.”²⁵

So what does that mean for my missionary friend nervously reading the signs of a disintegrating society in his part of the world? What does it mean for our beloved Hopwood kids, studying and working abroad or growing up in a society that is becoming more dangerous?

²² Luke 21:29-33.

²³ David Lose, “Advent 1C: Stand Up and Raise Your Heads,” *In The Meantime: Where Faith Meets Everyday Life*, Nov 23, 2015, accessed Nov 24, 2015, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/>.

²⁴ Luke 21:28.

²⁵ Lose, “Stand Up and Raise Your Heads.”

What does it mean for people struggling not to panic over a doctor's diagnosis, or a friend's descent into darkness?

Don't lose your head, said Jesus. Raise it up...stay alert...keep your focus... your redemption is drawing near. When people around us are afraid to stick their necks out for fear of a terrorist attack, we hold our heads high and step into the future for in Jesus our redemption has already drawn near. When our neighbors become too frightened to welcome refugees into Tennessee because they're afraid there might be terrorists among them, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus (who was himself a refugee child!). When the violence of our city streets pushes us to abandon civil rights and protections for all people regardless of their race or ethnicity, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, looking for ways to be a positive influence, for in Jesus our redemption has already drawn near.²⁶

Violence is not the greatest threat in the world today: fear is. Fear causes us to forget who Jesus has called us to be. Fear causes us to see people as threats and enemies. Fear causes us to circle the wagons, seek comfort and safety at the expense of mission and mercy. Fear causes us to rely on drones, bombs, and bullets, rather than on hospitality, bold witness, and kindness. "Fear can lead us to forget our deepest identity and betray our most cherished values."

As I read through our morning epistle passage from I Thessalonians, it seems that Paul provides us with a sort of "survival kit" that can help us make it through frightening and turbulent times. If we take our cues from Paul, we learn that we have everything we need to lift up our heads, and stand firm against the storms that assail us. If you are going through tough times, I hope these verses bring strength to you today.

²⁶ Lose, "Stand Up and Raise Your Heads."

Paul writes: “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?”²⁷ The first resources in our “survival kit” are thanksgiving and joy. When I wrote to encourage my missionary friend, and now as I stand before you today, my heart is full of thanksgiving and joy. I am thankful to be in relationship with people like you, thankful that my kids have been raised in this community. I can’t tell you how proud it makes me to know that servants of Christ from Hopwood don’t fear the world, don’t hate the world, don’t hide from the world. Instead, we face the challenges of this dark age with courage, and humor, and confidence in Christ that brings a contagious optimism to the lives we lead. I know it’s possible to overcome challenges because I see you live humbly and faithfully. The reason we keep seeing our young people go into all kinds of ministry settings, from work with homeless people, to operating rooms in central America, to the slums of the world, is because your example and encouragement gives them wings to get out there and try.

Paul goes on: “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.”²⁸ We find strength to live fruitful lives when we live as prayerful people, building one another up, asking God to restore whatever is needed in our lives. I wrote to the missionary I told you about, saying: “I have often thought and prayed you, especially when I hear big booms coming from your part of the world. We prayed for you in church last week.” We are strengthened when we know people are praying for us. Jesus said to

²⁷ 1 Thessalonians 3:9.

²⁸ 1 Thessalonians 3:10.

his disciples: “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”²⁹

And here’s where the power comes from: Paul then prays for the Thessalonian Christians: “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.”³⁰ It is the love of Christ we need. The love of Jesus that extends to all. The love of God that binds us together, heals our wounds, fills us with courage. Love covers over our sins, love propels us into service of our neighbors in the world.

Paul finishes by saying, “And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus...”³¹

It’s a big, messy world out there, and sometimes it’s hard not to be afraid, not to retreat, not to “shelter in place.” Jesus says things will likely get a lot worse before the end. That’s not necessarily bad news, it is simply the truth. May ours be a community of light and hope, courage and confidence that welcomes all those who struggle with fear and darkness. The light of Christ shines out in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Let’s stand together, holding onto Jesus with one hand and reaching out to do good work with the other. Into this troubled and sometimes dangerous world we step forward to joyfully, prayerfully, and lovingly serve. Lift up your heads, your redemption is drawing near.

²⁹ Luke 21:36.

³⁰ 1 Thessalonians 3:12.

³¹ 1 Thessalonians 3:13.