

Missionary Affluence: A Question of Privilege and Sacrifice

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KEY WORDS

| Cross-cultural Mission | Missionary Lifestyles | Poverty |
| Power | Privileges | Wealth |

ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century Christianity is a religion with an economically poor majority in the Global South and a wealthy minority in the Global North. Missionaries who leave the latter to serve in Africa, Latin America and the developing countries of Asia are confronted with an affluence gap that has the potential to damage their cross-cultural ministries. Thus, missionary affluence can separate Western workers from the local communities in their host countries and subvert the Gospel message they have come to share. Culturally sensitive, simple lifestyles and new models of partnership with indigenous Christians can help Western missionaries to overcome the pitfalls presented by significant differences in access to personal and institutional wealth, education and knowledge. It is crucial, however, that they learn from the biblical missionary role models par excellence, Jesus and his apostles, who relinquished privileges and rights and made extraordinary sacrifices for the sake of their missions.

INTRODUCTION

A Swiss missionary family came to serve in the capital city of an African country. After having consulted the local missionary community, the family decided to send their children to one of the best private schools. The majority of pupils at this school came from expat families and the political and economic black elite as well as from the local white minority population. The school leadership and the majority of teachers were both local white people and expatriates. The family's mission agency agreed to that decision. It was the agency's policy that all missionary children were entitled to go to a private school whatever context in Africa a family was serving. The missionaries' local co-workers and Christian friends not only understood but also shared the missionaries' desire to have good education for their children. Nevertheless, they were still struggling with the missionaries' decision.

The local Christians could not afford private schooling for their own children, and they were well aware that the annual school fees for the missionary children exceeded their own yearly income. In addition, they did not understand why the missionary children could not attend one of the good state schools which existed in the capital. They concluded that the missionaries preferred a white Western education and did not trust the local public school system. They were left with the impression that the education which their own children received was not good enough for the children of missionaries. Without intention, the missionary family had sent out a message of superiority to their local co-workers and friends.¹

Like the Swiss family, the majority of Western missionaries who come to Africa,

¹ This scenario is fictitious but based on real cases.

Latin America or many parts of Asia today are by default in a privileged position. They are by far more affluent than the majority of the indigenous population. Their faith is a faith, as Tinyiko Sam Maluleke notes, “whose wealthiest adherents and institutions reside in the North at a time when its poorest adherents and institutions can be found in the South.”² Contemporary global Christianity is a religion with a poor majority and a wealthy minority.³ The relativity of missionary wealth, which is small by the standards in their home countries and large by the standards of their host countries, is a very common experience of many cross-cultural mission workers,⁴ or in the words of Akinyemi Alawode: “For the missionaries, living in a foreign land may mean being deprived of the pleasures of life at home; it may mean living below the standard of the economy at home [...] Nevertheless, from their host’s viewpoint, missionaries are rich people.”⁵

CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

Writing from a Western position, Jayson Georges gives, what he thinks, is the main reason for missionary affluence. He states: “Because of the large income gap between the countries of origin and ministry, it was (and still

is) considered infeasible for a missionary to live self-sufficiently within the economic system of the host country like Paul, medieval monastics or the Moravians; instead, we rely on funds sent from the Western mission agency.”⁶

Similarly, Jonathan Bonk, argues that both an ever-increasing entitlement attitude and a distorted understanding of basic needs in the West have contributed to the affluence gap between Western missionaries and the people they have come to minister amongst. Moreover, the requirement of mission agencies that one hundred percent of a missionary’s support must have been pledged before he or she can leave for Africa or other parts of the world has also contributed to the affluence gap. Thus, he writes: “It is not unusual, for example, for nondenominational agencies to insist that potential candidates raise the prescribed amount of support before being permitted to venture forth. Furthermore, should support for a particular missionary wane, that missionary will not be permitted to remain on the field, but must return home to garner more support. Such Western mission agencies thus operate on a blatantly “rice-missionary” principle: no money – no missionary [...]. [I]t seems clear that successive generations of Westerners have been enculturated to uncritical redefinition of personal material “needs” in accordance with continually escalating notions of entitlement that most of the world’s population can only regard as widely profligate.”⁷

Another reason why sending churches and mission agencies might support a relatively

2 Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “Christian Mission in a World Under the Grip of an Unholy Trinity: Inequality, Poverty and Unemployment,” in *Mission and Money: Christian Mission in the Context of Global Inequalities*, ed. Mari-Anna Auvinen-Pöntinen and Jonas Adelin Jørgensen (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 68.

3 Maluleke, “Christian Mission in a World Under the Grip of an Unholy Trinity”, 68.

4 Cf. Rita Smith Kipp, *The Early Years of Dutch Colonial Mission* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), 51.

5 Akinyemi.O. Alawode, “The Importance and Challenges of Money in Christian Missions,” *HTS Theologesie Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): 3. <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/hts/v76n1/46.pdf>.

6 Jayson Georges, “A Missionary Ethic of Economic Affluence,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2009), <https://missionexus.org/a-missionary-ethic-of-economic-affluence>.

7 Jonathon J. Bonk, “Mission and the Problem of Affluence,” in *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, ed. James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 297-99.

high living standard of their missionaries is the problem of missionary attrition. To keep Western missionaries ‘happy’ and the attrition rate low they are enabled to lead privileged comfortable lifestyles in contexts where poverty is often the plight of the majority of the indigenous population. John Rowell notes: “In the modern era, discomfort and disunity are probably more common causes of early departures from the field than either death or disease. But economic realities still dictate that the most cost-effective mission is the one that can keep missionaries on the field and can get out of them the best service they are capable of offering. Taking good, practical care of missionaries is an obvious and logical decision. So goes the economic rationale for maintaining missionaries in relatively lavish means on the fields in which they serve.”⁸

For Samuel Escobar, it is the failure of evangelical mission organisations, in particular, that has hugely contributed to the problems created by missionary affluence. Evangelical missionary models, Escobar argues, “have not been able to overcome the distance and barriers created by the comparative affluence of missionaries and agencies.”⁹ Instead of working with their indigenous partners evangelical mission agencies tend to bypass them and perpetuate their independence.¹⁰

Jim Harries, a British missiologist and missionary based in Kenya, argues that Western development workers and missionaries, because of their privileged financial positions, have power over local people – whether

they are aware of it or not.¹¹ This power can easily become a significant stumbling block for their work, even if they take the task of contextualisation seriously, do their best to be cross-culturally sensitive and demonstrate a high degree of humility. Harries explains: “At the same time, they have an armory of available money (of vast size in local terms) constantly at their [disposal] that they are free to wield at any time they wish. This puts a Westerner into a position of structural power that no amount of (feigned?) humility can undo. Westerners coming into poor communities are immediately in the position of being major power brokers, while also being majorly ignorant of cultural norms.”¹²

While not every Western missionary has huge amounts of money at his or her disposal, as suggested by Harries, it is certainly true that many of them have their ways of raising additional money for themselves or projects that they support. In the same way, there is no reason to assume that *money power* is alien to the mission field. When Western missionaries support a local project financially, experience shows, that they also want to have their say, or with the words of an English proverb “The one who pays the piper calls the tune”. That the ones who pay make the final decisions is one of the well-known principles of Western public finance.¹³ Against this background, it should not come as a surprise when supporters back home expect missionaries to play an active role, i.e., to monitor or even control and direct the use of any pecuniary donations.

8 John Rowell, *To Give Or Not To Give? Rethinking Dependency, Restoring Generosity, and Redefining Sustainability* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 125.

9 Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2003), 48.

10 Escobar, *A Time for Mission*, 48.

11 Jim Harries, *Theory to Practice in Vulnerable Mission: An Academic Appraisal* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 55.

12 Harries, *Theory to Practice in Vulnerable Mission*, 55.

13 Cf. Richard M. Bird and Robert D. Ebel, “Subsidiarity, Solidarity and Asymmetry: Aspects of the Problem,” in *Fiscal Fragmentation in Decentralized Countries*, ed. Richard M. Bird and Robert D. Ebel (Cheltenham: Edgar Elgar, 2007), 6.

Having said that, “the concept of affluence”, as Georges helpfully points out, “should not be limited to money, but understood within the broader notions of wealth, access, and non-material desirables.”¹⁴ Missionaries are not only affluent because of their higher income but also because of their knowledge, access to education, prestige, etc. “[A]ffluence implies”, as Georges puts it, “access to a greater amount of choices.”¹⁵ Many Western missionaries come from countries, such as Australia, Canada, the Netherlands or the USA, where people demonstrate a relatively weak control of their desires and impulses.¹⁶ In such indulgent cultures personal freedom, happiness, enjoying life and having fun are important values.¹⁷ People, in particular, appreciate having leisure time and the ability to do with their money as they wish. In contrast, people in *restrained* cultures tend to delay social pleasures and do not value personal freedoms so highly.¹⁸ Frugality and discipline are regarded as important values.¹⁹ According to Hofstede Insights, many African countries, such as Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zambia, can be classified as restrained.²⁰ Consequently, it should not surprise us when affluent Western missionaries from indulgent societies are closely watched by the local African community, in which sharing of “what one has with others and especially the members

of one’s family, clan, tribe, and friends” is considered an important virtue.²¹ Since Africans are generally good observers they take note of the accommodation missionaries rent or buy, the cars they drive, the holidays they have, the places they eat, the schools they send their children to (or do not send to in the case of home schooling) and the people they socialise with. The affluence of missionaries can lead to envy and suspicion among the local population,²² since the latter see missionaries with access to personal and institutional wealth, education and knowledge of which they can only dream.²³ Missionary affluence can prevent missionaries from developing genuine relationships, let alone friendships, with indigenous people who are struggling to make ends meet. It can separate the missionary from the local community and the majority of society and create an *us versus them* mentality among the missionaries toward the local people and vice-versa.²⁴ Bonk, for example, notes: “To the missionary family belongs the privilege, power, and position that go with wealth. Conversely, it is hard for the poor family to understand or appreciate the motives of the missionary family, in his eyes privileged beyond imagination as evidenced by clothing, transportation, holidays, special schools, technology, and other amenities that are the lot of the rich.”²⁵

Similarly, Phil Parshall writes about the negative perceptions that some indigenous Christians have of an affluent missionary

14 Georges, “A Missionary Ethic of Economic Affluence”.

15 Georges, “A Missionary Ethic of Economic Affluence”.

16 Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, Edwin R. McDaniel and Carolyn S. Roy, *Communication Between Cultures* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), 193.

17 Yvette D. Hyter and Marlene B. Salas-Provance, *Culturally Responsive Practices in Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences* (San Diego: Plural Publishing, 2019), 55.

18 Hyter and Salas-Provance, *Culturally Responsive Practices in Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences*, 55-56.

19 Samovar, Porter, McDaniel and Roy, *Communication Between Cultures*, 193.

20 Hofstede Insights, “Country Comparison,” www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison.

21 Joe M. Kapolyo, *The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives Through African Eyes* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), 40.

22 Cf. Jonathan Bonk, “Affluence: The Achilles’ Heel of Missions,” EMIS (1985). <https://missionexus.org/affluence-the-achilles-heel-of-missions/>.

23 Cf. A. Scott Moreau, “Missionary Affluence,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 645.

24 Georges, “A Missionary Ethic of Economic Affluence”.

25 Bonk, “Affluence”.

lifestyle: “One national Christian observed the “luxurious” standard of missionary housing in a Muslim nation and questioned, “If the missionaries live on such a standard of affluence here, why do they speak so much of heaven? They have their heaven right here.” Another national categorized a luxury hotel, to which missionaries went on Saturdays to relax and swim, as a “hell hole.”²⁶ These examples show that missionary affluence has the potential to subvert the Gospel message that the missionaries have come to share.²⁷ It can lead to resentment, rejection and even open conflicts.

Abraham Akrong draws attention to another potentially negative aspect of missionary affluence. Akrong argues that the affluent missionary lifestyle is a reason why today’s missionaries are seen in a similar light as their predecessors during colonial times. While missionaries of the past were sometimes perceived as agents of colonialism, there is the danger that contemporary missionaries are perceived as representatives of the wealthy countries of the northern hemisphere. Akrong writes: “In the heyday of the colonial era, mission was co-opted into the empire-building ideology of colonialism. In the contemporary world, mission is imperceptibly allowing itself to be co-opted into the structures of multilateral organization whose affluence at the local level are creating problems for the witness of the church. Since the missionaries are often seen as just another group of experts or consultants of either a multinational co-operation or multilateral organization because of their lifestyle, they are not significantly differentiated from the other representatives of the North. The perception of the missionary as just another

representative of the affluent North in the South comes with all the divisions and symbols that separate the affluent North from the poor South.”²⁸

While missionary affluence can lead to situations and responses as described by Bonk, Parshall and Akrong above, it must be noted that not all local people, especially if they are Christians, see missionaries in such a light. Not all Africans expect a missionary to live in a tin shack or mud house. In his book *When Helping Works* Michael Bamwesigye Badriaki tells the story of an American missionary serving in Uganda who organised social justice trips for young short-term missionaries from his home country.²⁹ This missionary tried to break the short-term missionaries and compelled them “to do manual labor, sleep on shabby mats, become exposed to malaria infected mosquitos, and be crowded in a small room.”³⁰ Badriaki questions this approach by asking “Is the condition of being poor some type of underclass category and torture chamber suitable for the belittling of the affluent? Is that a gospel-centric attitude? What have missions come to?”³¹

Experience shows that there are Africans who do not necessarily have a problem if the missionary’s accommodation and lifestyle are different from their own because most of them aspire to a better accommodation and lifestyle for their own lives. Moreover, many African Christians will sympathise with missionaries who have left behind family and friends to serve

26 Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 121.

27 Moreau, “Missionary Affluence,” 645.

28 Abraham Akrong, “Deconstructing Colonial Mission: New Missiological Perspectives in African Christianity,” in *Christianity in Africa and the Africa Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage*, ed. Afe Adogame, Roswith Gerloff and Klaus Hock (London: Continuum, 2011), 74.

29 Michael Bamwesigye Badriaki, *When Helping Works: Alleviating Fear and Pain in Global Missions* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 90.

30 Badriaki, *When Helping Works*, 90.

31 Badriaki, *When Helping Works*, 90.

God and his people far away from home. They will appreciate the sacrifice missionaries make by being separated from their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. If, however, local Christians get the impression that missionaries lead a life they could never afford in their home countries, in other words, that their ministry is anything but a sacrifice, they might start to speculate about the missionary's true motives for coming to Africa. The same is true if missionaries are unwilling to share some of their affluence with others. Some of them might do so with good intentions. They feel that they cannot share too much with the local people because they do not want to run the risk of making *rice friends* or *rice Christians*. This seems to be a laudable attitude to have, but it is, in fact, a problematic one, as people who do not share with the less privileged are seen by the African community as being greedy and self-centred and therefore immoral.³² People who do not share are seen as people who are simply not interested in others. Harries notes: "Westerners hold deeply to the belief that friendship should be based on other than money. [...], what might be in English termed as "begging" for something, a very socially undesirable action, can in Africa be a way of showing someone the greatest possible respect. Relationship often, if not typically, is in Africa based on a necessitated sharing of resources. Westerners need to know this. To refuse to share can be interpreted as being a refusal to enter into relationships."³³

Some missionaries, who lack cross-cultural sensitivity, are not aware of these dynamics mentioned above. Others are, but they put their

conscience at ease by reminding themselves of the many material sacrifices they are making (e.g., career, income, health care, food, leisure activities, etc.) by serving far away from home. These sacrifices, they believe, justify some form of compensation. The problem is that the material sacrifices missionaries make (unlike the sacrifices in the area of family relationships) are not necessarily seen by the local community. Furthermore, the Bible does not speak about any earthly/material compensation for sacrifices Christians make. However, what the Bible speaks about are Christian workers who are aware of their privileged position and are willing to waive privileges or rights for the sake of their ministry and the gospel

Finally, it is important to note that the biblical teaching challenges not only missionaries who work cross-culturally abroad but also economically privileged indigenous Christians who seek to reach out to those who belong to the poorer segments in their society. The fact that the wealthy missionary is a fellow countryman or woman does not remove the stumbling block that their affluence presents. What Ashley Barker writes about Thailand resonates with the situation in southern African countries where well-to-do Christians from large urban churches organise mission trips to deprived rural communities: "The lifestyle challenges raised by mission in slums are not issues only for Western missionaries in the developing world. The Thai Christian community in Bangkok, for example, is predominantly wealthy, and so the gap between those living in Klong Toey slum and most Christians in Bangkok can be acute. It's one thing, for example, for a Thai Christian to share a Christmas message and then drive back home to a mansion. It is quite another to consider how the life and teachings of Jesus who was born in Nazareth relate to the lifestyle of

32 Levera Levi, *Together in Christ: Form 1: Pupil's Book* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publisher, 2005), 168.

33 Jim Harries, "The Place of Money in Mission between Africa and the Rest: A Personal Theological Narrative," in *Wealth, Health and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life*, ed. Stan Chu Ilo (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 189.

those both sharing and receiving the Christmas story. The incongruence between medium and message may be a major barrier to the transformation of slums in Bangkok.”³⁴

RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES: THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

There are only three times in the New Testament where we are told that the apostle Paul demanded his rights. In Acts 25:11 we read that Paul made use of his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to be tried by the emperor in Rome. Paul was innocent. Neither the political nor the religious charges against him were justified.³⁵ When Festus, the Roman governor, suggested that he could be tried in Jerusalem the apostle feared that he would not get a fair trial there. Luke notes that Festus wished “to do the Jews a favour” by making this suggestion.³⁶ The governor might either appoint members of the Sanhedrin as his counsellors in Paul’s case or hand him over to a Jewish court to deal with the religious charges, while he himself would deal with the political charges against the apostle.³⁷ In any way, it seems that Paul felt that the Jewish capital was too dangerous for him.³⁸ If he wanted to have a chance of fair treatment he had to escape from his own people and their leadership,³⁹ and so he was left with no option

34 Ashley Barker, “Enfleshing Hope: Incarnational Approaches to Emulate,” in *River of God: Introduction to World Missions*, ed. by Douglas D. Priest and Stephen E. Burris (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 34-35.

35 Acts 25:8.

36 Acts 25:9.

37 Cf. William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), 238; John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 366; David J. Williams, *Acts* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 408.

38 Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 238.

39 Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 2003), 335.

but to say to Festus: “I appeal to Caesar”. Derl Keefer suggests that Paul’s decision should be seen in the light of his desire to spread the good news of Jesus. He writes: “Even in this situation, before we jump to criticize him for demanding his right as a Roman citizen, we must realize that this appeal only served to fulfill his desire to take the gospel to Rome. Although it was not in the way that he envisioned, demanding his right took him to Rome where he was able to save many to The Way.”⁴⁰ In other words, appealing to the emperor was the only way that Paul could be obedient to his apostolic calling, which included witnessing to Jesus in the capital of the Roman Empire.⁴¹

We can see the same apostolic motivation in Paul when he reminds his opponents of his Roman citizenship in Acts 16:37 and Acts 22:25. In Acts 16:37 he mentions his citizenship and demands a public apology for the sake of the church and its mission. I. Howard Marshall points out that leaving Philippi the way the magistrates had suggested “could have set a dangerous precedent for the future treatment of missionaries and also could have left the Christians in Philippi exposed to the arbitrary treatment from the magistrates.”⁴² Divulging his status as a Roman citizen in Acts 22:25 saved Paul from an extreme form of torture and enabled him to testify about Jesus in Jerusalem and ultimately in Rome. Thus, Luke reports that Jesus appeared to Paul shortly after saying to him: “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”⁴³

While Paul makes use of his right as a

40 Derl G. Keefer, *The Wesleyan Preaching Resource, Volume Two* (Lima: CCS Publishing, 2002), 77.

41 Cf. Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 335.

42 I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 274.

43 Acts 23:11.

Roman citizen in these cases for the sake of the Gospel, he encourages the relinquishing of personal rights throughout his letters for the same purpose.⁴⁴ In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 9, for example, the apostle Paul discusses the rights of full-time Christian workers. These rights include the right to be married and the right to receive hospitality.⁴⁵ However, there is one right that Paul expounds on: the right of the Christian worker to be sufficiently supported for his ministry. Paul writes in verses 13 to 14: “Don’t you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.” Paul reminds the church in Corinth that they have a God-given responsibility to support their gospel workers in material terms. This is the church’s responsibility towards all workers including the apostle himself who started the work in Corinth. “If we have sown spiritual seed among you”, Paul asks, “is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn’t we have it all the more?”⁴⁶ Paul points out to the Corinthians that they are the fruit of his ministry. He is their spiritual father. Together with Barnabas, Paul was instrumental in the Corinthians coming to faith in Christ. Therefore, they have an obligation to support him. John Phillips comments: “He was an apostle and had been ordained an apostle by the Lord Himself. He was a missionary and his success as a missionary was evident everywhere he went. He had thrown himself into the work [...] If anyone had a right to be financially

44 Keefer, *The Wesleyan Preaching Resource*, 77.

45 Corinthians 9:4.

46 Corinthians 9:11-12.

supported by the Lord’s people, he did. The Corinthians, especially, since they were part of his success and proof of his gifts and fruit of his unwearying labors, ought to acknowledge his claim. If anyone had the right to financial support, he did.”⁴⁷

At the same time, Paul stresses that he did not make use of this apostolic right.⁴⁸ As an apostle of Christ, he was obliged to preach the gospel. On the matter of preaching, he had no choice. He had to do it.⁴⁹ “He did have a choice, however, regarding whether or not to receive pay, and for the sake of the gospel he offered it free of charge.”⁵⁰ Paul knew if he insisted on his right of financial support, it would become a hindrance to the work of the gospel in Corinth. He may have been aware of people in the congregation who “had some reasons to doubt the sincerity of someone who received income from preaching and teaching.”⁵¹ In other words, Paul relinquished his right because he did not want to give anyone the chance to claim that he was preaching the gospel for the wrong motives, i.e. for his material gain, which ultimately would have discredited his ministry and the gospel message.⁵²

Paul, by waiving his rights as an apostle for the sake of his mission, followed the example of Jesus about whom he wrote in his letter to the church in Philippi: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ

47 John Phillips, *Exploring 1 Corinthians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002), 190.

48 1 Corinthians 9:12.

49 1 Corinthians 9:16.

50 Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 216.

51 Knofel Staton, *First Corinthians* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 173.

52 Cf. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 422-23.

Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage [...].⁵³ Put differently, when the pre-existent Son of God became a human being he renounced any divine privilege. Jesus gave up his right to his heavenly glory, riches and power.⁵⁴ He humbled himself to fulfil his mission. Jesus did not use his authority to get his way or to make life easier for himself. Neither did he resist when they came first to arrest and then to kill him. No, Jesus used his power only for others: he raised the dead, he healed the sick and he fed the hungry. His service culminated in his death on a cross where he died as a ransom for many. Ian Coffey comments: “He did not stop being God in order to be a servant but he demonstrated his very God-ness as a slave. He chose to humble himself as a man even to the humiliating and painful death on a cross. This was obedience, humility and unselfishness at its very limits.”⁵⁵

NO SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

There are certainly no simple solutions to the challenge of missionary affluence. One can only agree with Bonk who wrote over thirty years ago: “Lifestyle habits and expectations are not only deeply rooted culturally and psychologically but institutionalized in the sending agencies and in on-the-field structures of *modus operandi*.”⁵⁶ To tackle the problem Bonk made some practical suggestions. Thus, he argued that missionary candidates should read the biographies of missionaries like

Hudson Taylor or James Gilmour, while those involved in the training of missionaries “would do well themselves to model simplicity and contentedness in their personal lifestyles and ambitions.”⁵⁷ In addition, Bonk suggests that mission studies curricula should include the “scriptural teaching regarding the stewardship of money and possessions.”⁵⁸ A simple, sensitive missionary lifestyle, that does not stress the greater resources they often have,⁵⁹ is also promoted by Richard Lewis who writes the following about his time in rural Kenya: “[...] I ate what the Kenyans ate and slept where they slept. I did not build a two-story block building that looked like a Mogul castle on the hill. The Pokot and Turkana people knew I had money, (their view was that all people from America are rich), but I was sensitive not to flaunt my wealth. I usually wore the same shirt and trousers and one change of clothes, which is one extra pair than most of them had. I was careful that my riches did not detract from my love for them while at the same time not creating stress in my own life. Missionaries who are obsessed with having what they have in the States are playing a losing game, and eventually will become dissatisfied and go home.”⁶⁰

In more general terms, Akrong pleads for a radical paradigm shift. Churches from the northern hemisphere, he argues, need to adopt a new paradigm of mission “in which there are no sending nor receiving churches but rather the common sharing of experience, knowledge, insights and available resources at the service of

53 Philippians 2:6.

54 Cf. William Hendriksen, *Philippians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 107-08.

55 Ian Coffey, *Philippians: Crossway Bible Guide: Free To Be God's People* (Nottingham: Crossway Books, 1994), 55.

56 Bonk, “Affluence”.

57 Bonk, “Affluence”.

58 Bonk, “Affluence”.

59 See Titus Leonard Presler, *Horizons of Mission* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2001), 194.

60 Richard G. Lewis, *The Journey of a Post-Modern Missionary: Finding One's Niche in Cross-cultural Ministry* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2006), 107.

the transforming mission of God in Christ.”⁶¹ According to Akrong, such a new understanding of partnership will save the church from its entanglement in the global divide between the poor South and the wealthy North.⁶²

As we have already seen earlier there is much that today’s missionaries can learn from Jesus and the apostle Paul. Like Paul, missionaries need to be willing not to insist on their rights if doing so would hinder their ministry and the spread of the gospel. They need to be willing not to insist on their privileges if doing so would communicate an attitude of material superiority to the local people they serve. At the same time, it is not helpful if missionaries send themselves on a constant guilt trip.⁶³ Missionaries “need to accept that missionary lifestyles will vary as widely as their contexts.”⁶⁴ According to Phil Parshall, their audience is crucial. He notes: “Who is our target audience? If it is the wealthy, then lifestyle compatibility with them pretty well undercuts this as a problem. But a ministry to the poor exacerbates the complexity of the identification process. It seems prudent to me to enter one’s ministry area at as low a financial profile as possible. Then, as necessary, move upward. Those who come in at a higher level seldom move downward. But emotional stability and physical well-being are of utmost importance. I have known missionaries who have held tenaciously to extreme simplicity only to be forced to return home shattered in mind and body. Such a scenario profits no one.”⁶⁵

61 Akrong, “Deconstructing Colonial Mission,” 74.

62 Akrong, “Deconstructing Colonial Mission,” 74-75.

63 Christine Jeske, “Lifestyle Choices in Missions: What to Carry/What to Leave Behind,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2012). <https://missionexus.org/lifestyle-choices-in-missions-what-to-carry-what-to-leave-behind/>

64 Jeske, “Lifestyle Choices in Missions.”

65 Phil Parshall, “Missions and Money,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph

Which rights missionaries relinquish depends on their circumstances. For some, this might mean that they choose to live in a two-bedroom flat though their mission organisation’s accommodation policy allows them to rent a three-bedroom house. For others, it might mean buying a used car or sending their children to a state school though there is sufficient money in their budget for a brand-new vehicle or private schooling. To decide which lifestyle choice to make missionaries need, as Christine Jeske writes, “to ask the right questions and accept God’s answers.”⁶⁶ Among these questions are (a) What facilitates the work missionaries are called to do? (b) How do indigenous people expect missionaries to live? and (c) Are missionaries taking resources away from indigenous people?⁶⁷ Jeske’s comments on the last question are worth quoting: “In a world where materialism often rules, we must remember that not everything we can have is something we should have. This challenge presents itself in many forms. While working at a South African seminary, our family was offered one of the largest apartments on campus free of charge. Was accepting this taking away from someone else, or was it a gift kindly given to us? In many cases, families will honor guests with the best cut of meat or their single egg, while their own children watch in hunger. In these situations, we need constant sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s stirrings in order to give honor and respect to the giver. Sometimes, serving others works in reverse of what we expect. After I made the choice to take my daughter to a public South African hospital, a friend suggested that since public hospitals were strapped for resources,

D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), 484-85.

66 Jeske, “Lifestyle Choices in Missions.”

67 Jeske, “Lifestyle Choices in Missions.”

we should go elsewhere. Was our place in the hospital taking away resources from someone else? Was our attempt at solidarity more of a burden than a witness? [...] Whatever the choices we make about purchases, homes, and housekeepers, we need to walk in the freedom and grace of Christ, trusting the Holy Spirit’s convictions and promptings without judgment or jealousy toward others.”⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

Most Western missionaries serving in middle and low-income countries in Africa, Latin America or other parts of the world face the challenge of missionary affluence. Their financial means tend to be much higher than the means of those they have come to serve. This often results in lifestyles that are detached from the majority population in their host countries, which again harms their ministries. There are multiple reasons for missionary affluence. Among these reasons are an attitude of entitlement and a culture of indulgence. Some authors, therefore, call missionaries to lead more culturally sensitive, simple lifestyles. Others recommend that they need to rely more on God’s Holy Spirit in their decision-making. Others again call for new models of partnership with local churches and Christian organisations in the missionaries’ countries of service. While all these suggestions are helpful, it is crucial that missionaries are willing to learn from the missionary role models par excellence we find in the New Testament: Jesus and the apostle Paul who both relinquished rights and privileges and made extraordinary sacrifices for the sake of their missions.

68 Jeske, “Lifestyle Choices in Missions.”

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