

Ward, Ted W. 2013. Beyond the Pith Helmet. *Common Ground Journal* v10 n2 (Spring): 113-115. ISSN: 15479129. URL: www.commongroundjournal.org.

Abstract

The author calls for an end to the stereotype of the missionary as unaware culturally, ignorant of the nuances of social and governmental systems, and ministering out of a tenuous sense of call. *From an Unpublished Manuscript circa 1980's.*

One of the impressive sights seen all over Latin America is a heroic, sculptured image of Christ. These huge statues of our Lord perched high on mountain peaks and in border passes of the Andes and above magnificent harbors are hard to miss. You cannot avoid a sense of the splendid, the magnificent and the enduring as you gaze from the harbor of Rio de Janeiro upon the great Christ of Corcovado, floating as if on a ship of rocks in a distant sea of clouds.

The image of Christ is a compelling force in the people's thinking. The Christ of Corcovado and the Christ of the Andes are expressions of people who found one way to declare, "Sirs, we would see Christ."

This is what the mission of the church of Jesus Christ is all about: not the material substance of the statue or the painted icon, but the solid spiritual reality that heralds this most basic human need, "Sirs, we would see Christ!"

The Stereotyped Missionary

The word "missionary" is a turn-off to many people today. The word has negative associations. It conjures up the stereotype of a tired old codger, or dear Aunt Millie, slogging about in a Frank Buck hat and tennis shoes, reading a three-inch-thick book about heaven-knows-what to thirty-two naked children squatting under a banyan tree.

Unfortunately, missionaries on furlough sometimes still feed the old stereotypes. African missionaries still show slides of elephants and lions, though now they need to buy most of them at airport gift shops. The missionary conference slides still give the impression that missionaries minister only to incredibly primitive relics of caveman days. Stripped of their national costume and finery and dressed in western sport shirts, these impoverished creatures do indeed look less than interesting. Their own native dignity, the elaborateness of their customs and institutions, the pride of their own creativeness—all of this, we gather, must be sacrificed to the cause of Christ.

Is it not odd that we have come to expect this cultural devastation as a characteristic of evangelized persons in other lands, yet we do not make these sorts of demands on each other in our own lavish, bloated society.

Destroying the Stereotype

Through travel, and especially through working alongside missionaries and national evangelists, the falseness of these pictures emerges. Many missionaries, perhaps most missionaries, are beyond the era of enforcing the rejection of culture as a prerequisite to Christianity. Most missionaries are not blind even to

the important opportunities for Christian witness in the upper social classes. In short, most missionaries are no more stupid than the rest of us.

So the silly old stereotypes of the pith-helmet missionary who tromps over jungle underbrush and cultural values without knowing the difference are becoming less valid. Granted, not enough missionaries get a background of behavioral science and social consciousness, particularly through the vital research in anthropology, social philosophy, and human learning. Many are not aware of what to look for! But being charitable about it: the dark ages of bumbling, even if it is unfair to represent the past this way, are over. What is a missionary? The term is not from the Bible, but it is useful for labeling the man or woman who has accepted a special mission of Christian outreach overseas. *Missionary* is an arbitrary distinction, but nonetheless useful. And the “pith helmet” conjures up images of Frank Buck and other caricatures of tropical explorers, slogging through tall grass and crocodile swamps in neatly buttoned khaki jackets and very tall boots. (Childhood memories of comic books!)

Newly appointed missionaries today are more alert and energetic people, often a young couple, sometimes a midcareer fortyish pair, usually with some prior overseas experience in business, industry, government, or the Peace Corps, and maybe a summer in Costa Rica swinging a hammer and coaching a construction crew of nationals. Not heading out for a ride to the bottomless pit, not having broken many of their old ties, and now extending their circle of friends into new places of service. These are today’s missionaries, set apart to go forth. But long before this, these folks were called into the service of Christ. Not with some new mysterious call freshly ringing in their ears but with an awareness of a new *assignment*, a new *event* in their series of service activities for Christ.

Forget It—If You Can

Long ago mission executives began saying that they avoid sending a person overseas who is not already working for Christ at home. You may have heard it: a boat ride (or is it a plane ride?) does not make you a missionary. That is a fact. So if you are not already a missionary, forget it.

If you have not learned to speak out for Christ in the English language, why do you think it might be easier in Mandarin, Tagalog, or Arabic? Christian talk that is not backed up by a Christlike life and intimate dependence on prayer will not function better in Borneo than in Birmingham.

Here is sound advice about the next step that you should take: try for a day or two to suppress the idea of becoming a missionary. This is a sincere and honest suggestion, that you have confidence in the Holy Spirit and in God’s capability to finish the tasks that He has begun. So you do not need to hear God’s pep talk; *God* will find ways to get through to you. If He wants you as a missionary, He will not let you forget it.

There are several “Gideon’s fleece missionaries” overseas right now. They may not get back for a second term. When they take their first furlough, God may not bother to wet their fleece anymore. People who repetitively ask God to keep reminding them what they already know are the most to be pitied. They are a drag on mission management as well.

If you assume that all missionaries are overseas because they were called, you have to wonder if God made some mistakes, or perhaps if somebody might be fudging a bit about the call. These are the ones who indulged in risky sorts of propositions to God. Going overseas does not guarantee that God is more pleased with you than if you had stayed in North America. The place you go is relatively unimportant. God’s invitation is to *commitment*, not related to geography or position.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1 NRSV). Does that sound familiar? God is in the business of getting through to you to ask for a commitment of your life and resources to do His will wherever you are. If you do this, you will find really exciting things happening. God will let you work for Him.

You start with the commitment; you sell out the whole scene to God. And to that commitment, God provides the mission. He will really *send* you.

Christ on a Rock

The North American who lives out a real “yes” to Jesus Christ will not run roughshod over others, whether they are other North Americans, Japanese, or tribesmen in the Amazon. You will keep first things first, to clarify the image of Christ through your living, not just through your words. As with the image of the Christ of Corcovado, those who watch you will see the majesty of a *solid* Christ, fixed on the rocks that hold firm, shining through the earthbound clouds.