



Beyond the Pith Helmet¹

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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 in border passes of the Andes and above magnificent harbors, are hard to overlook. 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 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 thinking of men and women. 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 answers the 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 have to buy most of them from travel agencies. The missionary conference slides still give the impression that missionaries minister only to incredibly primitive relics of dinosaur days. Stripped of their national costume and finery and dressed in western sport shirts, these men and women 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, has been sacrificed to the cause of Christ.

Isn't it odd that we have come to expect this cultural devastation as the characteristic of evangelized persons in other lands, yet we don't make these sorts of demands on each other in our own lavish, bloated demi-culture.

Destroying the Stereotype

Through travel, and especially through work with missionaries and nationals, I have come to know the falseness of these pictures. For the most part, missionaries are beyond the era of enforcing deculturalization as a prerequisite to Christianity. Most missionaries are not blind to the tremendous opportunities for witness in the upper social classes. In short, most missionaries are no more stupid than you and I.

So let's get rid of the silly old stereotypes of the pith helmet missionary who tromps over jungle underbrush and cultural values without knowing the difference. Granted, not enough missionaries get a background of behavioral science training, particularly the crucial fields of anthropology, sociology, and human learning. But let's be fair: the dark ages of bumbling, if it is even fair to think of the past this way, are over. What is a missionary? The term is not from the

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Bible, but it is useful for distinguishing the man or woman who is assigned on a special mission overseas. An arbitrary distinction, but useful.

As I get to know newly appointed missionaries, I have come to expect alert and energetic persons, often a young couple, sometimes a midcareer fortyish couple, usually with some prior overseas experience with 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 all his or her old ties but extending his or her circle of friends and place of service. Set apart to go forth, but long before this, called into the service of Christ. Not with some new mysterious call freshly ringing in his or her ears but with an awareness of a new *assignment*, a new *event* in his series of service activities for Christ.

Forget It—If You Can

Long ago mission executives began saying that they didn't want to send a person overseas who wasn't already working for Christ at home. You've heard it: a boat ride (or is it a plane ride?) doesn't make you a missionary. That's a fact. So if you aren't already a missionary, forget it.

If you haven't learned to speak out for Christ in the English language, why do you think it might be easier in Tagalog? And Christian talk that isn't backed up by a Christlike life isn't going to get any farther in Borneo than in Birmingham.

Here's my advice as to the next step *you* should take: try to suppress the idea of being a missionary.

I feel safe in suggesting this. You see, I have a lot of confidence in the Holy Spirit, so I don't need to give you God's pep talk; *God* will find ways to get through to you. If he wants you overseas, he won't 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 that first furlough, God may not bother to wet their fleece anymore. People who go around asking God to keep reminding them what they already know are the most to be pitied. And incidentally, they are the greatest drag on the mission structure.

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 doesn't guarantee that God is more pleased with you than if you had stayed in North America. The place is relatively unimportant. God's plea is for *commitment*, not related to geography or employment.

"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" (Romans 12:1).

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'll 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 Ibo tribesmen. 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.