

*Missions and Money ... Revisited*¹ Jonathan Bonk

My interest in the relational dynamics of material and social disparity in close social proximity—with particular attention to its Christian missionary dimensions—is both natural and, probably, inevitable. As a child of missionary parents, my most formative years were spent in Ethiopia, where, until I reached my later teens, I unconsciously absorbed the values and assumed the entitlements of material and social privilege. Reminiscent of the privileged children who were among the subjects of Robert Coles' famous *Children of Crisis* series, I early confronted the burden of my own privilege, subconsciously at first, and later consciously.²

¹ Much of this material has appeared in various published forms over a period of years, including two articles appearing in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*: "Missions and Mammon: Six Theses" Vol. 13, No. 3 (July 1989), 174–181; and "Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem ... Revisited", Vol. 31, No. 4 (October 2007), pp. 171–174. It was presented at the OMSC Mission Leadership Forum, December 2-4, 2005. While on sabbatical at Yale University in 1987–1988, I wrote the book *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (Orbis 1991). The publisher reprinted the book eleven times, until I was embarrassed to have it in print. Much of the material was out of date, and some of my thinking about the subject had evolved. Accordingly, a second, expanded and revised edition of the book was published by Orbis in 2006, entitled *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem ... Revisited*. It included three additional chapters—one by Christopher Wright on the "Righteous Rich in the Old Testament," and two by Justo Gonzalez on "Koinonia in the Early Church" and "Sharing in the Didascalia." A Korean translation of the first edition of the book by Prof. Hu Chun Lee was published by the Christian Literature Society of Korea, Seoul, in 2010.

² Robert Coles is a professor of psychiatry and medical humanities at the Harvard Medical School, a research psychiatrist for the Harvard University Health Services, and the James Agee Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard College. In the 1950s he began listening to American children. The results of his efforts—published in five volumes between 1967 and 1977—constitute one of the most remarkably perceptive social studies ever undertaken on this continent. Heard in their own voices were America's "children of crisis": African American children caught in the throes of the South's racial integration; The children of impoverished migrant workers in Appalachia;

The boarding school that I attended was unapologetically a bastion of privilege. Ethiopians were permanently relegated to kitchen, laundry, garden, and custodial duties. Tinkle the small bell on the dining room head table, and a bare-footed servant would patter in from the kitchen, apron scarcely concealing his own threadbare clothing. The school was surrounded by a chain-link fence, intended to keep us in and Ethiopians out. Aware that we were members of a privileged superior class, we accepted, expected, and sometimes demanded the obsequious deference shown to us by Ethiopians, even adults. In our play and discussion, Ethiopians were subjects of curiosity, sometimes the butt of ridicule, and on occasion even admired for their incorrigible bravery in the face of persecution; but they were seldom friends, and never social peers.

Returning to Canada to complete my education, it would be fourteen years (1974) before I would return to Ethiopia—this time as a missionary with the Sudan Interior Mission. My wife and I were assigned to work in Tigre Province, leading a sixty-five member multinational relief and development team working with survivors of the terrible famine that would precipitate the collapse of Ethiopia's ancient monarchy, and the murder of its venerable last emperor, Haile Selassie. By now a convinced egalitarian, thanks to my natural instincts, my Mennonite orientation, and my somewhat critical view of the modus operandi of traditional mission societies, I ensured that each member of the team—an eclectic mix of medical doctors and nurses, hydrologists and water engineers,

children whose families were transformed by the migration from South to North, from rural to urban communities; Latino, Native American, and Eskimo children in the poorest communities of the American West; and the children of America's wealthiest families confronting the burden of their own privilege. The five volumes in the series, published by Little, Brown (Boston) between 1967 and 1977, include: *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear*; *The South Goes North*; *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*; *Eskimos, Chicanos, Indians*; and *Privileged Ones: The Well-off and the Rich in America*.

agriculturalists and mechanics, drivers and cooks, evangelists and interpreters—received an equal portion of the financial pot. We worked and lived together both in the field and at the home base. I regret to recall that my not-always-subliminal attitude vis-à-vis other missionaries bordered on that of the infamous Pharisee in our Lord's parable whose self-consciously conspicuous piety compared so unfavorably with that of the wretched tax collector who prayed nearby (Luke 18:9–14).

With the deposition of the venerable emperor came a palpable shift in the way that foreigners were portrayed in the public media. The country was in a state of relative euphoria, as its military junta (the *Derg*) proceeded to move the country from oppressive feudalism to enlightened socialism. For the first time in several millennia, peasant farmers could contemplate the prospect of owning and reaping one hundred per cent of what they sowed, since absentee landlords were a thing of the past. Millions faced the happy possibility of learning to read and write as the country's students poured into the country side to teach literacy and socialism. Students, in turn, would learn to respect the peasantry and hard manual labor.

Completing our work in Northern Ethiopia, my wife and I were assigned to Kaffa province in the south, the birthplace of coffee. Here we worked with established congregations scattered across the province. Our primary role was to lend support to the work of evangelists sent by the Kale Heywet Church. The church, seeing in the emerging stress on literacy an ideal opportunity, sent Christian teachers and their families to assist in congregational and community literacy in the hinterlands of the province. Poverty stricken local communities were encouraged to construct simple single-room schools for which the mission would provide roofing tin and a blackboard, while the Kale Heywet (Word of Life) Church would provide the teacher. As the presumably neutral foreigner, residing not far from a small town that boasted a post office and a telephone, I was to serve as

communications and finance conduit between the Kale Heywet Church and their employees, the evangelists and the literacy teachers. The monthly stipend for each family was roughly equivalent to twenty dollars U.S., while my net monthly income was approximately twelve hundred dollars. To this was added such benefits as medical insurance, a semi-furnished house, travel funds and educational opportunities for my children. None of this was available to my Ethiopian colleagues.

I derived quiet satisfaction from what I perceived to be my ability to work in a fraternal, non-patronizing way with these wonderful men and women. Our home was as open to them as theirs was to me when I would visit them each month, delivering their meager monthly wage (unless it failed to arrive, which frequently happened), and their mail. Although I was vaguely disquieted by the conspicuous material inequities that marked our lives, I did not know what could be done about it. There was an unwritten code among foreign missionaries that obliged one to tow the line when it came to wages and other forms of fiscal reward. If one of us were to break rank by being overly generous with our Ethiopian colleagues, not only would this set a dangerous precedent, it would put enormous pressure on the Kale Heywet denomination to do the same, and would probably “spoil” the Ethiopian evangelist or teacher to such an extent that they would no longer be satisfied to work for such a modest amount.

Shortly following the departure of our senior missionary colleagues, government school teachers held a national strike. Although our teachers did not join them, several of them were detained by the police. They were required to show proof that they were legitimately employed by a recognized organization, and not—as suspected—illegally striking government teachers. Since this was an emergency, and the Kale Heywet Church headquarters was hundreds of miles away, where its leaders were dealing with myriad Marxist-revolution-related

challenges of their own, I obliged by providing the teachers with identification cards on which was clearly marked the name of the mission society with which I served. To add emphasis to the fact that they were in good standing as teachers, at their request I provided them with receipts indicating the amount and dates of their monthly reimbursement. The receipt, like the ID card, bore the imprimatur of the Sudan Interior Mission. They returned to their posts, more secure and apparently relieved.

Three weeks later the local bailiff served me with a 23-point indictment, brought against me by the very seven Ethiopian colleagues to whom I had so recently rendered service. Charging that I was a “running dog capitalist and exploiter of the people”, the document then went on to enumerate my misdemeanors, reaching its climax with the accusation that I had consistently defrauded them of half of their contracted wages. When I protested that the teachers were not in fact employed by me, but by their denomination, they declared flatly that I was a liar, presenting their ID cards and pay receipts as proof. Stamped on both was the name of the mission society with which I served. When I then offered to show the officials the individual contracts that each of the teachers had agreed to with the Kale Heywet Church, and which were kept in a filing cabinet in the central office of the elementary school, they responded that there were no contracts, and that I was lying. An inspection of the filing cabinets revealed that they were right—the contents of the file drawers had disappeared. Mission policy clearly stipulated that Ethiopian employees be reimbursed a minimum of what was then the equivalent of forty U.S. dollars per month, yet according to the SIM receipts signed by me, these men had been receiving only half of that amount. I was guilty as charged. The only recourse open to me was to compensate them for their back-pay and damages.

This, together with several similarly distressing experiences, was what drove me from Eden. Acutely and humiliatingly conscious of a self exposure that had been for long evident to

my Ethiopian fellow believers, I was now able to distinguish between the good and evil in the gross material inequity that I had until then passively ignored. Neither denial nor the standard rationalizations of the social consequences and theological implications of gross economic and social inequity in close social proximity were any longer available to me. Having contentedly chosen to see these things through a glass darkly, I was blinded by the merciless clarity with which they now pierced my conscience. I understood as never before why the rich live apart from the poor, if possible. And why, when circumstances force them to live in close physical proximity, the rich must protect themselves and their possessions with walls, bars, dogs, armed guards, the society (if possible) of the similarly privileged, and—if necessary—lethal violence or even war. This experience provided me with an opportunity to view myself from the vantage point of the poor among whom I lived and worked, and the more closely I looked, the less I liked what I saw. My ruminations eventually resulted in the book, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem*, drafted during a 1987–1988 Yale sabbatical, and published by Orbis in 1991 as the fifteenth volume in the American Society of Missiology Series. After fifteen years and eleven printings, an updated and revised edition of the book was published in 2006.

Exploration of the roots of poverty and elucidation of the supposed well-springs of affluence were neither the purposes of the book *then*, nor are they the focus of this paper *now*, as important as these subjects might be.³ Nor *was* it

³ Stephen C. Smith estimates that “There are on the order of one million programs around the world attempting to reduce poverty . . .”, in his book, *Ending Global Poverty: A Guide to What Works* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. xi. Smith is Professor of Economics at George Washington University, where he directs the Research Program on Poverty, Development, and Globalization. His material is based on the *World Bank Development Report: Attacking Poverty*, World Development Report 2000/2001 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Equally gloomy is the most recent report of the World Bank, *The World Bank. World Development Report 2006: Equity and*

or *is* it my intention to address the immensely complex, ideologically polarizing questions swirling around missiological debates about *dependency* and *interdependency*. Rather, my attempt was then, and is now, to show how both the effectiveness and the integrity of decent, well-meaning missionaries and mission organizations can be compromised when their theories and practices are demonstrably at odds with those of the Lord they proclaim.

My argument may be summarized as follows:

- Western missionaries tend to be materially wealthy, relative to most people in the so-called “mission fields” in which most of them serve, and this affluence is at least partially due to factors that cannot be replicated by the poor today;
- It follows that what the Bible says *to* and *about* the rich, it says *to* and *about* Western missionaries. *Wealth* and *poverty* are among the most frequently recurring themes in our Christian scriptures.⁴ While gross economic inequity in close social proximity poses profound relational, communicatory, and strategic challenges for missionaries, more serious are the complex questions of ethical integrity that challenge us as wealthy followers of Jesus living and ministering in contexts of profound poverty;
- Since neither missionary training nor on-field orientation adequately prepare aspiring missionaries to adequately acknowledge or address the ethical compromises characterizing those who—in St. Paul’s words—“*peddle the word of God for profit*” (2 Corinthians 2:17) in contexts of poverty, it is vital that the institutions and agencies responsible for training missionaries and facilitating mission work address the issues directly, deliberately, persistently, and

Development (Washington, D.C. and New York, NY: The World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ See the appended article by Jim Wallis, “A Bible full of Holes,” appearing in *The Mennonite* (November 21, 2000), pp. 6–7.

Biblically through theological reflection, training, mentoring, and policy.

1. Western Missionary Affluence. Western missionaries tend to be materially wealthy, relative to most people in the so-called “mission fields” in which a majority of them serve, and this affluence is at least partially due to factors which cannot be replicated by the poor today. While the statistical data informing the book is now out of date, the integrity of its central argument seems to have been reinforced in the twenty years since it first appeared. In 1989, in an article published in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, I noted that throughout the period often referred to as the “William Carey Era” of modern missions, the per capita gross national products of the developed and underdeveloped worlds widened from a factor of less than two to one in 1792, to three to one by 1913, and seven to one by 1970.⁵ Since then, the situation has actually deteriorated for more than twenty percent of the world’s population. According to recent World Bank figures, approximately 1.5 billion people subsist on less than \$1 per day, while some 2.8 billion live on less than \$2 per day.⁶

Missionaries from Western lands, on the other hand, reflecting the culturally-prescribed material entitlements of aggressively consumer cultures, grow ever more rich by the standards of a majority of the world’s population. As recently as August 17, 2005, the “basic support” of a missionary family—good friends of mine who were en route to South Africa with a well-known faith mission—was pegged at \$4,344 per month. An additional estimated \$600 in monthly “ministry funds” would also be needed, on top of “outgoing funds” in excess of \$19,000.⁷ However inadequate \$60,000 per annum might

⁵ See E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 15.

⁶ Stephen C. Smith, *Ending Global Poverty*, pp. 1–8, passim.

⁷ In an email dated August 17, 2005. This support would cover salary, administration, health care, and pension.

be for sustaining a North American family at levels of minimal social and material entitlement in a bi-cultural, intercontinental ministry, it guarantees them a place among the privileged in the social hierarchy of South Africa. How easily accustomed we become to our escalating scale of material entitlements, with one generation's luxuries mutating into another generation's needs. Peter C. Whybrow observes that "As America's commercial hegemony has increased and our social networks have eroded, we have lost any meaningful reference as to how rich we really are, especially in comparison to other nations."⁸

While libraries of books have been written explaining how this fortunate state of economic affairs arose, and how—with assiduous attention to the proper economic ideology—increasing levels of consumption can continue not only forever but for everyone, Western affluence is at least partially due to factors which cannot be replicated by the poor today. In a more innocent age, it was possible for Western missionaries to believe that their relatively comfortable way of life was the inevitable outcome of a national life organized in a Christian way, and that, given enough time and sufficient conversions, the poorer peoples of the world could one day likewise enjoy the good life. Not only were Christianity and civilization inseparable, but, in the sober judgment of some of the keenest Christian thinkers of that day, no one could "become a Christian in the true sense

of the term, however savage [they] may have been before, without becoming . . . civilised."⁹

Sixteen years into the twentieth century, with "civilized" nations in the throes of one of the most savage and pointless struggles in the pathetically war-strewn record of humankind, it was still bravely asserted that . . .

"The civilisation which is called Western is the slowly developed product of religion. . . . [and has] surged forward to its present high water by means of the internal pressure of its inner Christian élan, . . . an impulse which is but the expression of a Christian principle of life moving within."¹⁰

Many Americans, regarding this nation as the apex of Western civilization and avatar of universal progress, unapologetically pursue their "manifest destiny" of political, cultural, economic, and military hegemony. But to those who look more closely at the why and how of this ascendancy, both Western Christendom and neo-Christendom—born, advanced and sustained through violence—have been demystified. Obscured by the noble ideals and economic ideology to which we attribute a way of life that is the envy of the world lies a more sinister history which cannot be legitimately replicated by our would-be emulators: centuries of brutal slavery that emptied Africa of an estimated 60 million of its inhabitants; genocidal conquest of

⁸ Peter C. Whybrow, *American Mania: When More is Not Enough* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), pp. 38–39. Whybrow is the Judson Braun Professor of Psychiatry and Bio-behavioral Science and the director of the Jane and Terry Semel Institute of Neuroscience and Behavior at the University of California in Los Angeles. George Packer's appended opinion piece, "When Here Sees There," appearing in the April 21, 2002 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, is a poignant reminder of the global impact of media inundation of poor countries with pictures of America's "glittering abundance and national self-absorption."

⁹ David Jonathon East, *Western Africa: Its Condition, And Christianity the Means of its Recovery* (London: Houlston & Stoneman, 1844), p. 243.

¹⁰ Allan John MacDonald, *Trade, Politics and Christianity in Africa and the East* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1916), p. 54. A more contemporary extension of this proposition is developed at length by Rodney Stark in a series of books, including his most recent *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (Random House, 2005) and his earlier *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton University Press, 2003). A less flattering assessment of the impact of monotheistic belief can be found in Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (W. W. Norton, 2004).

three continents that issued in the obliteration of an estimated 90% of their incumbent populations; a two-ocean moat and a century of relatively cheap national defense; maintenance of a privileged position through both the actual and threatened use of nuclear and chemical weapons of mass destruction; such instruments of development are not available to the poor today.

While factors such as these do not mitigate the inherent economic and social advantages of a democratic way of life based on law and the protection of private property, they should at the very least induce a profound humility in those of us who consciously serve as exemplars of Christianity or development in the “underdeveloped” populations of our world. It is difficult to imagine what the lands of old Christendom would be like today if virtually the entire populations of the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand—together with large segments of South Africa and Israel—were packed back into what is today known as greater Europe.

We are now haunted by distressing indications that for most of our fellow human beings, there neither *is* nor *can be* any possible road to our way of life, with its visions of ever increasing levels of comfort and consumption. But since the only economic gospel that we Westerners can proclaim is the one that we personally model, we can do little more than keep running on our consumer treadmills. Quite apart from the factors alluded to above, the stark and brutal truth is that the natural resources of our planet are sufficient to support “developed” life for only a tiny fraction of its human population. Accordingly, we emissaries of the Western churches must be prepared as never before to test the truthfulness of our assertion that “Christ is the answer” in the context of personal material want. At the very least, a missionary’s personal stake in the most affluent and powerful civilization in the history of our planet needs to be acknowledged and considered when formulating a strategy for Christian mission of any kind.

But I am in danger of straying from the most significant part of this paper. Christians—including those in affluent societies—will always be a pilgrim people, strangers in the land, bound for a city whose ruler and maker is God. Who among us had anything directly to do with either our nation’s ascendancy or its defining policies?

In the colorful words of the once editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, we feel “like flies on the chariot wheel; perched upon a question of which we can neither see the diameter, nor control the motion, nor influence the moving force.”¹¹ While the siren allure of manifest destiny in all of its self-congratulating and self-serving permutations is the natural fuel of the idolatry known as nationalism, even the most patriotic Christian, when confronted with the gulf between God’s Kingdom standards and his or her nation’s self-serving agendas, admits to the impossibility of spanning the chasm. The truth is, *no earthly nation state will ever be Christ-like*. No nation will lay down its life *for* its enemies. No nation will love those who wish it ill, in the self-sacrificing spirit of our Lord. Nations are by definition self-serving and self-promoting, rather than Christ-serving and self-denying. The best a nation might manage is some form of Christendom.

2. The relative affluence of Western missionaries has serious strategic implications of course, both positive and negative. On the negative side, **Western mission strategies, beginning with the support of missionary personnel, are money intensive.**

Without ample supplies of money missionary efforts from the West would be severely truncated. Indeed, it is safe to conjecture, they would virtually cease. A decade ago, North American Protestant mission agencies reported a total income of \$6,417,379,916 for

¹¹ W. E. Russell, *Sydney Smith* (London: MacMillan & Co., 1905), p. 107.

2008.¹² The money is distributed among 800 U.S. and 105 Canadian agencies representing nearly 139,269 “full-time on-location” employees, of which 47,261 are American and 2,229 are Canadian career missionaries.¹³ The money was used to finance a wide range of operations whose implementation and sustenance required the kind of financial and technological support available only in the West. Schools, books, hospitals, autoclaves, x-ray machines, vehicles, radio and television sending and receiving equipment, tractors, grain, airplanes, cars, jeeps, trucks, well-drilling machines, computers, scholarships, international conferences and consultations, and the myriad of other vital accouterments of those mission strategies originating in the West require a scale of affluence unavailable anywhere else in the world.

Possession of wealth virtually ensures missionary insulation. A primary advantage of wealth is its capacity to provide those who possess it with goods and services which serve to cushion them from the harsh realities of life. The survival instinct which is common to all organisms is, in the case of human beings, supplemented by the desire to proceed from birth to death as comfortably as possible. When compared with the poor, those who are rich are

¹² This figure represents the combined total incomes of US and Canadian agencies in 2008. Total income for overseas ministries reported by US-based agencies was \$5,700,848.815 for 2008 ... a 0.45% decrease from 1995 figures when adjusted for inflation; for Canadian agencies the 2008 total was \$716,530,000 ... 1.3% above inflation adjusted figures for 2005. See *Mission Handbook: U.S. and Canadian Protestant Ministries Overseas*. 21st Edition. Edited by Linda J. Weber (Wheaton, IL: Evangelical Missions Information Service 2010). These figures are from A. Scott Moreau’s interpretative essay, “Putting the Survey in Perspective”, pp. 34–95.

¹³ These figures do not include the estimated 1.5 million North Americans sent by their churches on “short-term missions” forays each year. See the April 2010 issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Vol. 34, No. 2), especially “U.S. Megachurches and New Patterns of Global Mission” by Robert Priest, Douglas Wilson, and Adelle Johnson (pp. 97–104), and “Taking Wolves Among Lambs: Some Thoughts on Training for Short-Term Mission Facilitation” by Karla Ann Koll (pp. 93–96).

able to achieve astounding comfort on their journey through life, while at the same time being able to postpone—seemingly indefinitely—the end of their pleasant journey.¹⁴

The word “insulate” is thought to have derived from the Latin *insulatus*—meaning to make into an island. In its contemporary usage, the verb “to insulate” means “to prevent or reduce the transmission of electricity, heat, or sound to or from (a body, device, or region) by surrounding with a non-conducting material.”¹⁵ Both the etymology and the definition of this word are instructive in the context of the present discussion, since to a remarkable degree Western missionaries, because of their affluence, inhabit an island in a sea of poverty. Their affluence constitutes quite literally the “non-conducting material” which protects them from the “heat” and “sound” of the poverty in which the majority of the globe’s inhabitants live and move and have their being. Since Biblical faith is above all a relational faith, it is not only sad, but sinful, when personal possessions and privileges prevent, distort, or destroy the relationships of Christ’s followers with the poor. But this appears to be an almost inevitable consequence of personal affluence.

This social gulf makes genuine fraternal friendship so awkward as to be virtually impossible, a phenomenon well documented by Robert Coles in his study of the children of affluent Americans. A wealthy mother’s six-word response to the troubled inquiry of her nine year old daughter somehow says everything the rich have ever been able to say concerning their relationships with the poor: “they are they and

¹⁴ See “Table 16.3 Health Indicators, 1964-90,” pp. 252-53, of *World Resources 1987: A Report by the International Institute for Environment and Development and the World Resource Institute* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). Missionary longevity makes missionaries a good risk for insurance companies, a number of which offer missionary clients reduced rates on life insurance policies.

¹⁵ *Collins English Dictionary of the English Language* (1979).

we are we.”¹⁶ Nor have honest observers of Western missionary social behavior been blind to their apparent inability to establish close friendships with the poor.

A friend is an intimate . . . someone with whom one generally has much in common. In their friendships, people naturally gravitate to those with whom they are not only temperamentally but socially and economically compatible. It is humanly almost impossible for a wealthy family to share a deeply fraternal relationship with a family whose material and economic resources are a pathetic fraction of their own; who cannot afford an education for their beloved children beyond minimal literacy, while the children of the wealthy family anticipates as a matter of course opportunity and money for education up to the very highest levels; whose house is a tiny one-room shack (made of straw or cardboard) with no amenities, while the wealthy family resides in a western-style bungalow, complete with kitchen, bathroom, private bedrooms for each member of the family, carpeted floors, stuffed furniture, closets and bureaus filled with clothes, and personal servants; who must rely solely upon leg power to get anywhere, while the wealthy family has access to car, jeep, power-boat, or airplane; for whom the concept of vacation doesn't even exist, while the wealthy family spends one month of each year traveling and sightseeing, or simply taking it easy in a resort far away from the grind of every-day work.

Between families of widely disparate means and standards of living, friendship is extremely unlikely. With whom does a missionary naturally choose to spend leisure time? With whom is a vacation comfortably shared? Who is likely to listen comprehendingly, sympathetically, understandingly, to a couple as they pour out the peculiar frustrations, burdens and perplexities of missionary parenting? With

whom is a western missionary likely to go shopping for family birthday or Christmas gifts? Who is able to commiserate with the missionary on the inadequacy of his or her support level? From whom will a missionary likely seek advice on personal financial matters—investment, banking, saving? In every case, it is very doubtful whether the poor would have any part in these aspects of a missionary's life. The social rapport required must obviously be reserved for social and economic peers. The presence of the poor in such situations would be an embarrassment to any missionary of even moderate sensitivity.

The staggeringly high relational price which western missionaries must pay for their affluence could perhaps be overlooked, or at least endured, were it not for its insidious effects upon the communication process. For medium and message are both significantly affected by the relationship of the missionary to the convert or would-be convert. If the message of the cross consisted simply of a series of theologically correct propositions about God, man, and salvation, then the obligation to preach the gospel could be fulfilled by means of public announcements over the radio. But the Word must always be made flesh, and dwell among men. And the Way has always best been shown by those who can be accompanied by would-be pilgrims. A missionary is above all a Way-shower, whose life must be imitable by his converts. The missionary is not simply a voice box, but a pilgrim who invites others to join him on the narrow way.

It is clear from the Christian revelation that while mankind is a social, communicating, and thinking creature, he is—at root—a profoundly theological being, created in the image of God. As a consequence, there is no facet of his life or thought which does not in some way reflect or affect his theology. While much more could be said about the strategic and relational implications of communicating the Gospel from a vantage point of wealth and power, I move on to consideration of some

¹⁶Robert Coles, *Privileged Ones: The Well-Off and Rich in America*, Vol 5. *Children in Crisis* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown Books, 1977), p. 77.

profoundly ethical implications that emerge as a direct and inevitable consequence of relative missionary affluence.

3. Rich, Poor and Mammon in the Bible.

When within a given social context we are rich, it follows that what the Bible says *to* and *about* the rich, it says *to* and *about* us. Missionaries are not an exception to this rule. *Wealth* and *poverty* are among the most frequently recurring themes in our Christian scriptures. While gross material inequity in close social proximity poses profound relational, communicatory, and strategic challenges for missionaries, as outlined above, more fundamental are the complex questions of ethical integrity that challenge any wealthy follower of Jesus moving in contexts of profound poverty. Among those who make their living by speaking *for* God and *about* God, Christian missionaries—perhaps more than any other professional religious group—are acutely aware of the need for consistency between what they say they believe and how they actually live.

In both the Old and the New Testaments, there is a modest stream of teaching that is of comfort to the rich: the sanctity of private property, the association of wealth with happiness, prosperity as a reward for righteousness, and the sometimes close link between personal behavior and poverty. Such teaching is of no small comfort to those who, by whatever means, find themselves in the happy state of relative comfort and affluence. We are permitted a measure of modest self-congratulation, together with opportunity to give thanks to God, the true source of our personal good fortune.

But any soothing theological reverie into which the materially blessed might sink is more than anticipated by the less flattering and painfully didactic portrayal of the rich that pervades both the Old and the New Testaments. This teaching, woven into the warp and woof of God's directives about what is good and appropriate for His people, is calculated to make

those of us who are rich much less sanguine about our good fortune.

I recall the story told to me by an AIMM missionary-linguist, Paul Thiessen, who, with his wife and children, lived and worked for several decades among the Siamoo (Sp?) in Burkina Faso. As one of eight children born to a poor cobbler in a small Mennonite community in Southern Manitoba, he recalled the shame of having to go to school wearing worn, hand-me-down clothes and shoes, and carrying a lunch of simple lard and bread sandwiches. A shy, naturally quiet boy, among some of his better memories was listening to his minister preaching on Biblical themes that stressed God's concern for the poor, and the prospect of frightful judgment for the rich.

As missionaries, he and his family settled in the largest village of Siamoo-speaking people—a community of an estimated 800. The most powerful man in the region was the chief, whose prestige was enhanced by his possession of an old broken bicycle. As Paul began the work of Bible translation, the numerous passages from which he had once derived consolation now made him uncomfortable; the tables had been turned. Caught in the glare of God's word as interpreted by his neighbors, the status he now occupied left him and his family embarrassingly exposed, raising deep questions about their integrity. Here are some of the reasons why:

A. Rights associated with acquiring, using, or disposing of personal wealth are—for the people of God—subordinated to an obligation to care for the poorer, weaker members of society. The divinely sanctioned guidelines were to be followed literally, and were intended to prevent a fragmentation of society into those who enjoyed perpetual economic advantage over those who suffered perpetual economic hardship. Included in the Mosaic guidelines were provisions for:

(a) **recurring years of jubilee**, when all land was to revert to its original owners—Leviticus 25:8-28;

(b) a regular **sabbatical year** when debts were to be forgiven—Deuteronomy 15:1-6; 2 Chronicles 36:15-21;

(c) **tithing** every year, with the poor as primary beneficiaries every third year—Deuteronomy 14:22-29;

(d) **strict guidelines, favoring the borrower, on loans, interest, and loan collateral**—Leviticus 25:35-38; Deuteronomy 23:19-20; 24:6, 10-13, 17-18;

(e) **gleaning regulations strictly for the benefit of the poor**—Deuteronomy 24:19-20;

(f) **debt repayment guidelines, favoring the poor**—Deuteronomy 15:1-11;

(g) **stipulations regarding treatment of employees by employers, favoring employees**—Deuteronomy 24:14-15; and

(h) **strict limitations on the wealth of kings**—Deuteronomy 17:14-17; (cf. 1 Kings 6-7; 11:1-6). The divine intention is clear: not only were the poor to be protected from exploitation; the law was designed to ensure that they were its chief beneficiaries.

B. Wealth and prosperity are inherently dangerous, frequently associated with fatally destructive personal and national orientations.

(a) **The prosperous tend to marginalize God**—Deuteronomy 8:10-20;

(b) **Wealth is the natural culture in which pride and a self-deluding sense of security and self-congratulations [self-made man or nation] seem inevitably to flourish, at both personal and national levels**—Ezekiel 28:4-5; Jeremiah 6:13-15; Jeremiah 12:1-4; 17:11; 1 Timothy 6:6-19;

(c) **Wealth is almost inevitably associated with overindulgence, gluttony and greed, which is idolatry**—1 Kings 6-7; 10:14-29; 11:1-6; 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; Colossians 3:5 [Greed is the insistence on more than enough in contexts where your neighbors have less than enough];

(d) **The wealthy frequently abuse personal power by mistreatment of the weak and contempt for the poor**—1 Kings 10:14-29; cf. 1 Kings 12:1-24; Jeremiah 22:13-17; Ezekiel 16:49; 22:25-29; Job 12:5; (e) **The priorities**

and orientations of the rich seem almost inevitably to be fatally misguided—Isaiah 5:7-8, 20-23;

(f) **Personal overindulgence and craven respect for the wealthy compromise the integrity of those who claim to speak for God**—Jeremiah 6:13-15; 8:10-11; Micah 2:6-11; 3:5, 10-11. Religious leaders and missionaries in the early days of the church who “loved money” warranted especially harsh criticism—Matthew 23:23-26; Luke 11:39-42; Cf. Matt. 7:21-27; Luke 6:46; 11:28; 2 Corinthians 2:17;

(g) **Christ pronounced woes on the rich and made it clear that it was almost impossible for a rich man to inherit eternal life**, and that to be a “wealthy disciple” comes close to being an oxymoron—Matthew 19:16-24; James 5:1-6;

(h) **Preoccupation with self, money and pleasure are signs of a doomed ‘last days’ way of life**—2 Timothy 3:1-5;

(i) **Personal wealth demands absorption in mammon, deadening a person’s or a nation’s sense of their spiritual destitution**—Matthew 13:22; 22:5; Luke 12:13-21; Rev. 3:14-21 (The Laodicean church, apparently surfeited with mammon, lacked the most elementary Christian essential, Christ himself!);

(j) **Wealth never satisfies, but breeds covetousness and greed ... a continual desire for more**—Ephesians 4:17-19; 5:3-11. Our Lord’s description of those whose hearts are weighed down with ‘dissipation’—unrestrained indulgence in the pursuit of pleasure—is an apt description of consumers and consumerism (Luke 21:34-36); Such teaching should give sober pause to Christians living as aliens and strangers in a culture in which the pursuit of happiness is a constitutionally guaranteed right of every citizen. When this orientation to life is on conspicuous display in contexts of poverty, certain consequences are inevitable.¹⁷

¹⁷ George Packer’s article, “When Here Sees There,” appearing in the April 21, 2002 issue of the *NY Times Magazine* is instructive in this regard.

C. Wealth and prosperity do not signal righteousness, but are in fact often signs of greed-driven exploitation of the poor—Proverbs 13:23; Isaiah 32:7; Job 21:7-16; (a) **Faithfulness to God is no guarantee of personal prosperity or security**—Jeremiah 44:15-18; (b) **Not only is it possible to have too little, it is possible to have too much**—Proverbs 30:8-9; (c) **Not just active oppression, but complacent neglect of the poor leads inexorably to judgment**—Deuteronomy 8:19-20; 28:15; 2 Chronicles 36:15-21; (d) **Religious orthodoxy without practical concern for the poor is a hollow sham**—Isaiah 1:10-23.

D. God not only actively identifies with the poor and the oppressed, but He resists the rich who oppress or simply ignore them—Exodus 22:21-27.

(a) **the promised Messiah would identify with the poor and the oppressed**, coming for them and as one of them—Psalm 22; Isaiah 53; Jesus was born in a stable, and, judging from the nature of their offering, his parents were far from rich—Luke 1:46-56; 2:1-20, 21-24; cf. Leviticus 12:8. His first recorded public words related to the poor—Luke 4:18-30; Matthew 15:31-46.

(b) **God's children are marked by their proactive concern for the poor and the oppressed**—Job 30:24-25; 31:16-28; Amos 5:4-24; 6:4-7; 8:4-7;

(c) **God meets the needs of the poor through the actions and interventions of His obedient people.** This was the intent of the laws dealing with the treatment of the poor by the rich—Nehemiah 5:1-13.

(d) **Christ's true followers proactively identify with the poor in practical, costly ways**—Matthew 23:1-39; 25:31-46.

E. Economic repentance is costly, and therefore very rare. The powerful and wealthy customarily deal with prophetic preaching by dismissing or destroying the preacher, and engaging the services of those willing to offer a more sanguine interpretation of their greedy self-indulgence—Isaiah 30:9-11. A rare Old

Testament account of repentance is found in Nehemiah 5:1-12, while in the New Testament Zacchaeus serves as a rare example in Luke 19:1-9. In the early days of the Church, **rich Christians were commanded 'not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth ... to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share'**—1 Timothy 6:17-19.

F. Genuine spiritual revival is closely associated with economic reformation and justice. Repentance without the fruit of repentance is meaningless—Micah 6:6-16.

For congregations in which most members enjoy access to the material entitlements thought to be minimally essential to families living in North America, scriptural teaching on wealth and poverty is vaguely, though not poignantly, disquieting. Of course, we North Americans are well aware that this planet is home to vast numbers of impoverished and even destitute peoples, and that some of these can be found in our inner cities. But any niggling disquiet of conscience that we might feel—usually sparked by fleetingly surreal images on our flat screen television sets—is easily quelled or at least controlled. What, after all, do such people have to do with us? Our very helplessness in the face of endemic human tragedy is, in its own way, mercifully reassuring. But when the spiritual leader of the congregation is the one person enjoying a relatively lavish standard of living, Biblical teaching becomes more difficult to either explain or model. It is this that is most problematic for the wealthy missionary.

This, then, was the substance of my argument, here reiterated:

(1) Western missionaries frequently discover themselves to be relatively wealthy within their ministry contexts;

(2) when this is so, what the Bible says *to* and *about* the wealthy it says *to* and *about* the missionaries themselves.

(3) Since our faith is above all a relational faith, lived out in actual social and cultural contexts, the verbalization of “the real Gospel” is potentially contradicted, obscured, or subverted by the good news of plenty, of which the missionary himself or herself constitutes “exhibit A”.

(4) In addition to multifaceted communicatory, strategic and relational consequences issuing from a missionary’s relative affluence, fundamental questions having to do with his or her ethical integrity emerge as a direct result of Scriptural teaching on the relationship between rich and poor, and between God’s people and their possessions.

Missionaries have tended to “adopt” [slip into] one of four possible responses to this state of affairs: (1) associate primarily (i.e., “person to person” rather than “personage to personage”) with those of approximately equal social and economic privilege; (2) assume a simple lifestyle that they hope belies the extent of their privilege, whilst surreptitiously maintaining the benefits of Western entitlement in critical areas such as medical care, transportation, education of children, and retirement; (3) shift the debate from the moral/ethical dimensions of missionary affluence to the realm of mission strategy, focusing on the relative advantages of church independence as compared to dependence or interdependence; and, finally, (4) adopting a radically incarnational lifestyle, giving up privilege and living as those among whom one ministers.

While each of these approaches can be sufficiently beneficial as to be defensible, I am proposing a fifth approach: assumption of the Biblically informed and contextually delineated status of “righteous rich.”

3. A Missiology of the “Righteous Rich.” The world of today is, if possible, even more economically polarized than it was when I wrote the book. What has changed has been my understanding of how best to respond.

At the time, my concluding chapter—bravely titled “Grappling with Affluence”—made vague calls to bring missionary lifestyles and strategies into conformity with New Testament teaching on the *incarnation*—as both theologically descriptive and strategically prescriptive; the *cross*—as both symbol of the atonement and prescription for the only way of life promised to the followers of Jesus; and *weakness*—as channel of God’s transforming power.

But I was unable to specify just what this change might entail. I invited readers to become part of an ill-defined, inchoate “Fellowship of Venturers in Simpler Living,”¹⁸ and to this day receive a trickle of letters—one as recently as three weeks ago—from idealistic, conscience-stricken Western missionaries wrestling with complex personal questions regarding lifestyle, sharing, tithing, children’s education, health care, and retirement.

To the extent that my thinking on these matters has moved toward a more constructive and helpful conclusion—and I cannot be the judge of that—I am indebted to both the writings and the example of Jacob A. Loewen and his wife, Anne, venerable Christian pilgrims, missionaries, linguists and anthropologists.¹⁹

Each individual in any society is defined by a series of statuses, acknowledged and recognized by other members of that society. It

¹⁸ Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money*, pp. 111–132, passim.

¹⁹ Jacob A. Loewen, one of the most self-transparent missionaries it was ever my privilege to meet, wrestled in deeply insightful ways about missionary roles. Particularly helpful is his essay, “Missions and the Problems of Cultural Background,” in *The Church in Mission: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to J. B. Toews*, edited by A. J. Klassen (Fresno: Mennonite Brethren Church, 1967), pp. 286–318. See also two articles co-authored with his wife, Anne Loewen, “Role, Self-Image and Missionary Communication,” and “The ‘Missionary’ Role,” appearing in *Culture and Human Values: Christian Intervention in Anthropological Perspective. Selections from the Writings of Jacob A. Loewen* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1975), pp. 412–427; 428–443.

is understood that each status carries with it certain roles and their associated behavioral expectations, which vary with the social context. Human identities and relationships are shaped by the complex interplay of recognized statuses, roles, and self-images that comprise the society. In the words of Loewen:

“Roles are the traditional ways people act in given situations. They are learned within the cultural setting. Very frequently the missionary is quite unconscious of this inventory of roles which he brings with him, and so never questions their legitimacy. But we must point out that even the very role of a missionary—a person paid by a foreign source to live in a strange country and to preach a new religion—is quite difficult for most people to understand.”²⁰

For a missionary’s communication of the Gospel to be effective, teaching must be accompanied by personal behavioral and character traits that are consistent with what is being taught. Role sincerity is absolutely crucial to missionary integrity. Those who make a living by being religious are often tempted to act and speak as if all the points they make are personal convictions. When this happens, *role insincerity* functions as a contradicting para-message.²¹ As the old adage notes, “what you are speaks so loud that the world can’t here what you say.”

²⁰ Jacob A. Loewen, “Missions and the Problems of Cultural Background,” p. 291.

²¹ Loewen relates the story of the healing of Pastor Aureliano’s wife, who was ill with malaria. The missionaries “pretended” to believe James 5:14–15—“*Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well...*”—but their prayer for her was not effectual. Later, the Indian pastors prayed for her healing, this time with the desired result. When the missionaries asked why they had not been invited to participate in the prayer, Pastor Aureliano explained that it had been evident that they did not really believe, and that according to the text itself, their prayers would be ineffective. (Jacob A. Loewen, “Missions and the Problems of Cultural Background,” pp. 289–292.)

Loewen points out that until a newcomer has been duly incorporated into the established network of relationships, members of a society will not know how to act toward him or her. This is why early explorers and traders in North America often found it necessary to become blood brothers to individual tribesmen. Once such a link had been established, the whole group knew how to behave toward the newcomer, even though the newcomer might not yet know what was expected of him. While most societies allow for a period of trial and error for newcomers to learn to play their roles appropriately, if a newcomer persists in unpredictable or inappropriate behavior beyond the allowed limit, he or she will be judged to be unreliable at best, perhaps even false.

A related problem arises from “roles” appropriated by a new missionary. He or she behaves in ways which, in that society—unbeknownst to the missionary—mark him or her as belonging to a given status. When the missionary fulfills only a part of expected behavior associated with the status and its accompanying roles, there are problems, and people can feel deeply betrayed or angry. For example, many missionaries, in an effort to help people economically, have unwittingly assumed the role of patron or feudal master. When they then refuse to fulfill the obligations associated with that role, people are confused, frustrated, and even angry. They question the sincerity and honesty of that missionary.²²

I would like to propose that Christians generally, including missionaries—whenever they either anticipate or discover that their way of life and its entitlements make them rich by the standards of those around them—embrace the status of “righteous rich” and learn to play its associated roles in ways that are both culturally appropriate and biblically informed.

²² Jacob A. Loewen and Anne Loewen, “Role, Self-Image and Missionary Communication,” pp. 426–427, *passim*.

It is clear that the Christian scriptures draw a sharp distinction between the righteous who are prosperous and the rich who are unrighteous, and that the distinction between the two is determined chiefly on the basis of their respective dealings with the poor. It would seem absolutely vital for missionaries to make the Biblical study of this subject an essential part of both their preparation and their ongoing spiritual journey.

Representative of this ubiquitous genre of Scriptural teaching are five representative texts—three from the Old Testament and two from the New Testament: Job 29:11–17; 31:16–28; Deuteronomy 5:1–11; Nehemiah 5:1–12; 1 John 3:16–20; and 1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19. They are cited in full, below, from the *New International Version*:

Job 29:11–17

¹¹Whoever heard me spoke well of me, and those who saw me commended me, ¹²because I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. ¹³The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing. ¹⁴I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. ¹⁵I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. ¹⁶I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. ¹⁷I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth.

Job 31:16–28.

¹⁶"If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, ¹⁷if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless--¹⁸but from my youth I reared him as would a father, and from my birth I guided the widow--¹⁹if I have seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or a needy man without a garment, ²⁰and his heart did not bless me for warming him with the fleece from my sheep, ²¹if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, ²²then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint. ²³For I dreaded destruction from God, and for fear of his splendor I could not do

such things. ²⁴"If I have put my trust in gold or said to pure gold, 'You are my security,' ²⁵if I have rejoiced over my great wealth, the fortune my hands had gained, ²⁶if I have regarded the sun in its radiance or the moon moving in splendor, ²⁷so that my heart was secretly enticed and my hand offered them a kiss of homage, ²⁸then these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high. (Job 31:16-28)

Whether we subscribe to the “hidden hand of the market” as the source of all good things, or whether we detect in the regional, national, and global marketplace the not-so-hidden hand of the economically and politically powerful, it is clear that Job understood himself to be personally responsible for playing a proactive role in the material well-being of poor people in his orbit, and that this is the way God wanted him to be. At the very least, a wealthy missionary will need to be prepared to explain why God-fearing Western missionaries should be considered exempt from this ancient standard, and whether God has changed His mind since Adam Smith in the eighteenth century so kindly rectified the muddled idealism of apparently unworkable Mosaic economics.

Deuteronomy 15:1-11.

¹At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. ²This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not require payment from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed. ³You may require payment from a foreigner, but you must cancel any debt your brother owes you. ⁴However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, ⁵if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. ⁶For the LORD your God will bless you as he has promised, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations but none will rule over you.

⁷If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. ⁸Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. ⁹Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward your needy brother and give him nothing. He may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. ¹⁰Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

If the principles, ideals and objectives outlined in the Deuteronomy 15:1–11 (cf. Leviticus 25:8–17) passage have any kind of legitimacy across time and cultures, one may well ask whether any nations today could be deemed righteous. Whether or not such practical concerns should be expected to characterize Western nations—descended from a Christendom that was and is far from *Christian*—the people of God, especially missionaries, must explain how the relationship between rich and poor is to be addressed in similarly appropriate and practical ways today.

Nehemiah 5:1–12.

¹Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. ²Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." ³Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." ⁴Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards." ⁵ Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject

our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."

⁶When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

⁹So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? ¹⁰I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! ¹¹Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil." ¹²"We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say." Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised.

For those of us who are wealthy, it is sobering to find in the Scriptures scarcely any record of repentance on the part of the rich. Here in Nehemiah is one heartening instance, a reminder that no matter how complicated the issues or how deeply entrenched and personally vested the self-interests, it is possible to repent. What would repentance look like from the vantage point of powerful mission organizations in contexts of poverty? That is difficult to say, since the righteous rich missionary or mission agency, while informed Biblically, must be defined contextually.

1 John 3:16–20.

¹⁶This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷If anyone

has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. ¹⁹This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

This passage, and many others like it, makes acutely uncomfortable public reading when wealthy missionaries serve in contexts of dire poverty.

1 Timothy 6:6–10, 17–19.

⁶But godliness with contentment is great gain.

⁷For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

⁹People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. ...

¹⁷Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Contained in these texts are the minimal guidelines—“righteous rich templates” in a manner of speaking—that should guide the righteous rich whatever their time or place. That such texts will be applied to wealthy missionaries by the poor among whom they live and work is a certainty. And so they should be. The challenge for the wealthy missionary will be to make sure that he or she is seen as righteous,

according to the standards of the group in which he or she lives and works, and above all, in ways that consistently reflect the mind of Christ whom he or she represents.

I have been involved in the training and nurturing of missionaries for much of my adult life. For the past thirteen years, I have had the extraordinary privilege of serving Christian leaders and missionaries from around the world here at OMSC, through our community and programs assisting them in their quest for spiritual, professional, and intellectual renewal. It is natural, then, that I should bring my paper to a conclusion by proposing that our training and re-training curricula and on-field orientations should include courses and forums for serious, sustained discussion of this troublesome issue. To my knowledge, systematic exploration of the dynamics and missiological implications of economic inequity in close social proximity is not usually a part of missionary training, on-field orientation, or post-graduate mission studies. Included in every mission studies curriculum should be at least one seminar exploring Biblical teaching on wealth and poverty, the rich and the poor, with implications drawn and applications made for Christian missions and missionaries. ²³

Conclusion. A missiology of the righteous rich is, at its core, no more than a willingness to be useful in terms defined by the local contexts and people. For this there can be no better exemplar than our Lord Himself. With a mission more sweeping in scope and magnitude than those of even the most daring mission strategists, his

²³ Most Western seminaries offering graduate training for missionaries do not address this issue to any significant degree, and those that do tend to use my book.

Sometimes—for example at Gordon-Conwell Seminary—I am called upon each year to come and engage in dialogue with students who have read my book. Other seminaries, such as Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, have invited me to conduct a seminar in their D.Miss. program. While I welcome such opportunities, teaching on the subject should begin much earlier, at the undergraduate level. It is this, more than anything else, which has embarrassed me into thinking beyond the book that I researched and wrote in 1987–1988 and published in 1991.

commission was to save the world. Oddly, by the standards of Western missions, He spent His life as a laughably parochial figure, never venturing in his actual ministry beyond the borders of his own foreign-occupied country. By the standards of even the most forgiving mission administrators, he proved to be frustratingly deficient when it came to actually fulfilling his mission. His major difficulty seemed to have been the interruptions that intruded into his larger plans for the world.

Almost everything written in the Gospel accounts of his life relates directly or indirectly to the wrenching, but strategically petty, personal agendas of the ordinary men and women who pressed in on him on all sides during the few short years of his ministry. The Creator God incarnate, bent on saving the whole world, allowed himself to be interrupted by the sick, the lame, the blind, the withered, the bereaved, the outcasts, the pariahs, the deaf, the demon possessed, the grieving. Whatever he may have been doing at the time, he seemed never too busy or tired to stop and pay close attention to their agendas.

How understandable it would have been for Jesus to regretfully turn away the ordinary people who constantly sought his attention, reminding them that as Creator of their planet, now charged with redeeming it, he simply did not have time to give attention to the personal details of their everyday lives. Instead, he demonstrated that any proclamation of the Good News that does not intersect with the actual needs of ordinary people is not good news, but mere religious propaganda. On this issue he was at distinct odds with the Pharisees, as his followers today should be.

It is trite to remind ourselves that it was his willingness to yield to one final, fatal interruption on a hill just outside Jerusalem that accomplished our redemption. It is this interruption that lies at the heart of the Gospel that takes missionaries to the ends of the earth.

We Western missionaries have a lot to learn from our Lord. Defined and driven by corporate and ecclesiastical agendas that are the product of organizations and well-meaning church leaders often thousands of miles away, we sometimes have no time to serve people on their own terms, thereby implicitly denying both that we are servants, at the beck and call of those among whom we minister, and that *they*, rather than we, ultimately determine our usefulness.

Discussion Questions: In light of the clear differences (detailed in our Scriptures) between righteous and unrighteous behavior with respect to the treatment of the poor at the level of nations, families, and individuals:

- **What would a righteous nation look like?** How would its laws, social priorities, and international practices differ from those of an unrighteous nation?
- **What would a righteous business or corporation look like?** Lawrence E. Mitchell documents uniquely American, market driven corporate practices in his books, *Corporate Irresponsibility: America's Newest Export* (Yale 2001), and *Stacked Deck: A Story of Selfishness in America* (Temple 1998). What would a biblically righteous Western multi-national corporation look like, and how could it remain viable given the dictates of shareholder profits?
- **What would a righteous mission society look like?** Given the fact that an organization's corporate ethos is to a large extent shaped by non-religious models in the surrounding culture, what organizational priorities and modus operandi would distinguish a Christian missionary society from secular share-holder driven multinational corporations?
- **What would a righteous congregation look like?** To what extent is it possible for religious congregations today to slip into the behavior and rationalizations characteristic

of the Jewish religious institutions of Jesus' day?

- **What would a righteous family look like?**

These are important questions, since as individuals, families, churches, and organizations we to some extent justify our behavior by referencing corresponding behavior in the dominant cultures that shape us. As the institution of slavery in this country sadly illustrates, when highly regarded national or Christian leaders engage in culturally acceptable but biblically doubtful practices, these practices are easily rationalized and justified, particularly if they serve personal or institutional or national self-interest. We do well to consider the sage observation of John Woolman [1720–1772] that whatever the cloak used to mask the true state of affairs, neither personal, nor institutional, nor national accountability to God is somehow thereby abrogated. “For as justice remains justice,” Woolman warned,

... so many people of reputation in the world joining with wrong things do not excuse others in joining with them nor make the consequences of their proceedings less dreadful in the final issue than it would be otherwise.

Where unrighteousness is justified from one age to another, it is like dark matter gathering into clouds over us. We may know that this gloom will remain till the cause be removed by a reformation or change of times and may feel a desire ... to speak on the occasion; yet where error is so strong that it may not be spoken against without some prospect of inconvenience to the speaker, this difficulty is likely to operate on our weakness and quench the good desires in us, except we dwell so steadily under the weight of it as to be made willing to endure hardness on that account.²⁴

This power of the institution or the state over the individual can hardly be overemphasized. Believers, churches, missionaries, and mission societies can and must be critical of their institutions where these come into conflict with personal obedience, and not merely use these as a cover for personal disobedience.

Were the role of “righteous rich” to be widely appropriated by Western missionaries, it is safe to assume that this would revolutionize the missionary enterprise. We would at once become more Christ-like—not merely comfortably accoutered promulgators of admirably correct propositions about God and inherited notions of ecclesiology—righteous rich followers of Jesus, whose immense good fortune is put at the disposal of the neighbors among whom God places us.

APPENDIX I

NY Times Magazine - April 21, 2002
When Here Sees There
By *GEORGE PACKER*

An Arab intellectual named Abdel Monem Said recently surveyed the massive anti-Israel and anti-American protests by Egyptian students and said: “They are galvanized by the images that they see on television. They want to be like the rock-throwers.” By now everyone knows that satellite TV has helped deepen divisions in the Middle East. But it's worth remembering that it wasn't supposed to be this way.

The globalization of the media was supposed to knit the world together. The more information we receive about one another, the thinking went, the more international understanding will prevail. An injustice in Thailand will be instantly known and ultimately remedied by people in London or San Francisco. The father of worldwide television, Ted Turner, once said, “My main concern is to be a benefit to the world, to build up a global communications system that helps humanity come together.” These days we are living with the results—a

²⁴ John Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, edited by Phillips P. Moulton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 212.

young man in Somalia watches the attack on the south tower live, while Americans can hear more, and sooner, about Kandahar or Ramallah than the county next to theirs.

But this technological togetherness has not created the human bonds that were promised. In some ways, global satellite TV and Internet access have actually made the world a less understanding, less tolerant place. What the media provide is superficial familiarity—images without context, indignation without remedy. The problem isn't just the content of the media, but the fact that while images become international, people's lives remain parochial -- in the Arab world and everywhere else, including here.

"I think what's best about my country is not exportable," says Frank Holliwel, the American anthropologist in "A Flag for Sunrise," Robert Stone's 1981 novel about Central America. The line kept playing in my mind recently as I traveled through Africa and watched, on television screens from Butare, Rwanda, to Burao, Somalia, CNN's coverage of the war on terrorism, which was shown like a mini-series, complete with the ominous score. Three months after the World Trade Center attacks, I found myself sitting in a hotel lobby by Lake Victoria watching Larry King preside over a special commemoration with a montage of grief-stricken American faces and flags while Melissa Etheridge sang "Heal Me." Back home, I would have had the requisite tears in my eyes. But I was in Africa, and I wanted us to stop talking about ourselves in front of strangers. Worse, the Ugandans watching with me seemed to expect to hear nothing else. Like a dinner guest who realizes he has been the subject of all the talk, I wanted to turn to one of them: "But enough about me—anything momentous happening to you?" In CNN's global village, everyone has to overhear one family's conversation.

What America exports to poor countries through the ubiquitous media—pictures of glittering abundance and national self-

absorption—enrages those whom it doesn't depress. In Sierra Leone, a teenage rebel in a disarmament camp tried to explain to me why he had joined one of the modern world's most brutal insurgencies: "I see on television you have motorbikes, cars. I see some of your children on TV this high"—he held his hand up to his waist—they have bikes for themselves, but we in Sierra Leone have nothing." Unable to possess what he saw in images beamed from halfway around the world, the teenager picked up an automatic rifle and turned his anger on his countrymen. On generator-powered VCR's in rebel jungle camps, the fantasies of such boy fighters were stoked with Rambo movies. To most of the world, America looks like a cross between a heavily armed action hero and a Lexus ad.

Meanwhile, in this country the aperture for news from elsewhere has widened considerably since Sept. 11. And how does the world look to Americans? Like a nonstop series of human outrages. Just as what's best about America can't be exported, our imports in the global-image trade hardly represent the best from other countries either. Of course, the world is a nonstop series of human outrages, and you can argue that it's a good thing for Americans, with all our power, to know. But what interests me is the psychological effect of knowing. One day, you read that 600 Nigerians have been killed in a munitions explosion at an army barracks. The next day, you read that the number has risen to a thousand. The next day, you read nothing. The story has disappeared—except something remains, a thousand dead Nigerians are lodged in some dim region of the mind, where they exact a toll. You've been exposed to one corner of human misery, but you've done nothing about it. Nor will you. You feel -- perhaps without being conscious of it—an impotent guilt, and your helplessness makes you irritated and resentful, almost as if it's the fault of those thousand Nigerians for becoming your burden. We carry around the mental residue of millions of suffering human beings for whom we've done nothing.

It is possible, of course, for media attention to galvanize action. Because of a newspaper photo, ordinary citizens send checks or pick up rocks. On the whole, knowing is better than not knowing; in any case, there's no going back. But at this halfway point between mutual ignorance and true understanding, the "global village" actually resembles a real one—in my experience, not the utopian community promised by the boosters of globalization but a parochial place of manifold suspicions, rumors, resentments and half-truths. If the world seems to be growing more, rather than less, nasty these days, it might have something to do with the images all of us now carry around in our heads.

George Packer is the author of "The Village of Waiting" and, most recently, "Blood of the Liberals."

[Copyright 2002 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Information](#)