

**“LOOK AT US!”(ACTS 3:4):
THE MISSIONARY IMAGE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

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At three o'clock in the afternoon, Peter and John were walking to the temple to pray. Equipped with Jesus's final commission and power from the Holy Spirit, they were walking with their mission in mind—to make disciples.

This particular afternoon, Peter and John encountered a man who had been crippled since birth at the temple gate called Beautiful. The beggar was as much a part of the scenery as the gate itself:

When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. (Acts 3:1–5, NIV)

When the beggar at the temple gate met Peter and John's stare, he had only one thing on his mind—*monetary help*. Peter and John were apostles . . . or you could refer to them as missionaries. Their long-ago scenario plays out all over the world today. Missionaries walk about in their host countries, districts, or villages. Residents look at them, expecting something. But what? How have their previous encounters with missionaries unfolded? What have they heard from others about missionaries? More importantly, what images do local people hold about missionaries and Christians from abroad, and what are the implications of those images?

The image on a person's mind when face-to-face with missionaries and visiting Christians is important. That image, whether formed by Christians or non-Christians, will have implications for better or for worse.

In this paper, I will share what I think the “missionary images for the worse” are these days. More specifically, I address the images that missionaries project and thus the images people hold about missionaries from three perspectives: 1) seekers in a cross-cultural context, 2) resisters in a

cross-cultural context, and 3) millennials in the North American context,¹ who are the next generation of missionaries.

As I expound on these three perspectives, some of the key implications will become obvious. Finally, I will make some suggestions as to how we might recreate the missionary image to align more intentionally with Jesus and the disciples—for they were quite successful in their efforts to make obedient disciples.

The Seekers' Perceived Image of the Missionary

When I use the term “seekers,” I am including those who are curious about Jesus, the gospel, Christianity, and missionaries; those who have made some intentional movement toward God; and those who consider themselves Christians within a particular cultural context.

Missionaries are Prosperous and Lucky

It is inevitable that Christians leaving from places such as North America, the United Kingdom, France, Singapore, and South Korea will create a sense of comparative poverty in many of the countries where they go in the name of missions. Sudden exposure to material things that are readily available to the goer but not easily available or affordable to the hosts provokes a sense of poverty and casts people into a dichotomy—that is, it divides them into the haves and the have-nots.

Speaking as a North American, I have observed that the so-called have-nots often draw the conclusion that Christianity and the American dream are somehow intimately related. *I want to be lucky and prosperous just like you, so I want to become a Christian.* More specifically, the American missionary is an avenue to Christianity; Christianity is an avenue to English; English is an avenue to jobs with foreigners; and jobs with foreigners are an avenue to the American dream and even maybe a ticket to America. It is true that somewhere in the midst of all those avenues people do come to know Jesus as their Savior, but I would posit that they rarely come to know him as their Lord.

While I was living in Cambodia, a Cambodian pastor applied for a US tourist visa so he could visit the United States. The US embassy official denied him a visa. Why? Because many Cambodian pastors and church personnel who were previously granted visas by the US government never returned to Cambodia. These Cambodians became illegal aliens in search of the American dream, thus creating a distaste in the mouths of the US Embassy officials toward granting more visas.

It is often the case that those sitting by their modern-day temple gates view missionaries and visiting Christians as a link to prosperity and good luck finally coming their way.

¹ In the case of millennials, I will be writing strictly from my personal experience of direct interaction with millennials in North America. I cannot speak of millennials in places such as the UK. When I use the term *millennials*, I am referring to the younger generation who are preparing to serve overseas.

This Missionary is My New Patron

Missionary “A” hires a local man for all his translation needs. After only five weeks of working for the missionary, the translator starts going to church and referring to himself as a Christian. Six months into his missionary service, the missionary goes home for a family emergency. Due to the fact that the missionary would not be coming back for at least six months, he suggests to his translator to find other employment. So he does. When the missionary returns, he meets with his previous translator for a bowl of noodles and ice coffee. The translator proceeds to inform his former employer of his new job as a translator for the Mormons and that he now considers himself a Mormon.

Basically the translator was saying, *I have a new patron, and I am whatever he is.* Anthropologists refer to this type of asymmetric social relationship as a patron-client relationship (PCR). From the client’s point of view, the thinking goes, *If I align myself with this person and become loyal to whatever they value, I will benefit from their ongoing help.*

An organization or agency can also be cast in a patron role. Over and over, Cambodian Bible College students have conveyed to me that they are in Bible school to get a certificate so they can find a job with a high-paying nongovernment organization (NGO). What they mean is, I go to Bible school via a scholarship, and all my basic needs are covered. Then the missionary agency will continue to subsidize me after graduation since I will be a pastor or church planter; or better yet, I will get a high-paying job with a Christian NGO. In other words, the client perceives the Bible school and/or Christian organization as his patron and negotiates his relationship based on this mind-set.

Patron-client relationships are complex, and I have only scratched the surface of their dynamics. Nonetheless, the bottom line is that the client’s loyalty to the patron, the sway of influence that the patron has on the client, and the unspoken built-in benefits for both parties easily distort the missionary’s effort to make authentic disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is often the case that those sitting by their modern-day temple gates deem the missionaries and visiting Christians as patrons, and their loyalties to Christ may rise and shift based on such relationships.

A Missionary is a Potential Donor

“Can I have access to your white man?” This was an actual question posed by one pastor to another in a particular cultural context. I am aware of this interaction because the pastor on the receiving end of the request told the American visitor (the white man), and the American visitor told me. What the inquiring pastor meant was, “Can your friend from America be my donor too?”

Due to the way missions unfolds these days, a Christian visitor and/or missionary is nearly always viewed as a potential donor. In many places around the world, if pastors or churches in the local context don’t have a donor from abroad, they feel like they cannot possibly succeed on their own—at least not at the pace and convenience of others who do have access to donors.

I have heard it said more than once that Cambodian Christians would purposely avoid missionaries who came from less wealthy countries in order to connect to the missionaries with the most money. Speaking personally, I receive numerous e-mails from all over the world attempting to lure me in as a potential donor. The e-mail content is crafted to make me feel like I could be an instant hero and part of something utterly godly and amazing in some far corner of the world. But the true, hidden intent is a request for me to be someone's donor. All the other roles stated in the e-mail are secondary to the donor role.

Why is seeking out funding and donors from foreign countries a problem? Should Christians of nations, who have received the gospel and have developed the church from 70 to 100 years, still be asking foreigners to pay for their evangelism, discipleship, church planting, benevolence, pastoral salaries, buildings, and programs? Is it possible that donor-type missions has conditioned the recipients of those donations to always view themselves as recipients?

It is often the case that those sitting by their modern-day temple gates see the missionaries and visiting Christians, first and foremost, as donors.

The Resisters' Perceived Image of the Missionary

The term “resisters” denotes people who are antagonistic toward Christianity, the church, and what is perceived as the foreigner's religion.

Missionaries are Postmodern Colonialists

The Muslim father was ready to shove a sword into his own son because he became a follower of Isa. But there was more to the father's anger than his son's conversion to what some call Christianity.

From the father's perspective, the foreigners arrive with their development projects and charity to manipulate people to convert to their religion, and their fellow Muslims only convert because they are opportunists. Some people throughout the world perceive missionaries as some type of post-modern colonialists who want to make everyone like them. “Colonialism was presented as “the extension of Civilization”, which ideologically justified the self-ascribed superiority (racial and cultural) of the European Western World over the non-Western world.”² Some people around the world conclude that missionaries exhibit a self-absorbed superiority and an agenda to push their Americanism or Westernism on others in the name of their religion—in the name of Jesus. Carl Medearis, who lived in Lebanon for twelve years, shares a conversation he had with a student:

I was teaching a class at the American University of Beirut one day; and after class, a young man came up to me and asked bluntly if I was a missionary. “Are you kidding?” I asked. “What makes you think I am a missionary?” “You were talking about Jesus earlier,” he said, “and I thought that you were a Christian missionary.” I held my hand to my forehead, appalled. “Are you saying,” I asked, “that I'm one of those people who

² En. wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism

wants to spread capitalism and democracy and political idealism, and Westernism and import a new religion?” He looked at me suspicious. “Well, that is what missionaries do, isn’t it?”³

When the gospel messenger and the message come with English classes, money, power, Western education, and democratic voting structures related to church politics, you can imagine why Muslims who are proud of their heritage and identity may perceive missionaries as postmodern colonialists.

It is often the case that those sitting by their modern-day temple gates regard the missionaries and visiting Christians as postmodern colonialists.

The Millennials’ Perceived Image of the Missionary

The term “millennials” is used to describe people who were born between 1977–1994. As young adults, millennials have a worldview unique to their generation. For the sake of this article, *millennials* indicate the next generation of missionaries.

We are Social Justice Superheroes

What is a superhero? A benevolent character who can do whatever needs to be done in a way that is bigger, better, and faster than the average person. A superhero swoops in and out to protect and rescue the public., and always leaves as a hero.

Whenever I meet a college student who is studying to be a missionary, I ask them this question: “What do you have in mind for the future?” Their answers almost always reveal the desired role of a rescuer and a hero. “I plan to rescue women and children out of human trafficking. I want to heal the social injustices around the world. I long to make a safe haven for street children. I want to provide clean water for Africa”. I rarely hear a young missionary-to-be say, “God has committed to me the message of reconciliation, and I will implore others to be reconciled to God” (1 Corinthians 5:19–20, NIV).

May I state that I have no problem with social justice. Rather, I have a problem with how people implement it, especially in a country not their own. For example, John may go to a soup kitchen once a week to help dish out food. But what about the classmate he passes by every day with barely a glance because the classmate has a mental illness or disability? When is the last time Josh moved into a neighborhood where the people struggle with poverty rather than doing a two-night sleepover as a homeless person to raise awareness and money for the homeless? How about the college student who went to a poor area overseas for four weeks to advocate for social equality, while at the same time provoking a sense of poverty because he didn’t want to leave his gadgets and conveniences at home? Debra enjoys packing meals for the starving children overseas somewhere, but she doesn’t try to even make one friend in her neighborhood who has material, social, and spiritual needs. What about Ellen, who mobilized a team to dig a well so the women would not have to walk such a great distance to get water but triggered a huge social breakdown

³ Carl Medearis, *Speaking of Jesus*, Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2011. 127.

in the village because the women no longer had a role to keep them occupied, and the men feared this would lead to loose women with nothing to do but gossip and criticize their men?

I think you get my meaning. It is one thing to swoop in and out as a superhero and a completely different thing to live a lifestyle of justice, in your own realm of daily life, as described by the prophet Micah: “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, NIV).

We have to be Fundraisers and Project Managers

As soon as I hear the words “I want to start . . .”, I become concerned. “I want to start” means that the person already has in mind what he or she is going to do in someone else’s context—before even living there—and it usually means a project such as a youth center, an orphanage, a coffee house, or a rescue center for the vulnerable.

Those of us who have gone before the next generation have modeled project-oriented missions. Projects dictate that missionaries have to become fundraisers and managers of the projects they start. So in a way, we are conveying to the younger generation that a missionary has to be rich or related to rich people, or that he or she must know how to raise lots of money and get out of school debt all at the same time. Wow! I missed that criteria for a missionary calling in the Bible.

We Are Short-Termers

“I don’t want to stay in one place; I want to go all over the world.” I hear that sentiment more and more from the next generation of missionaries. Is this mind-set a result of the boom in short-term missions, the American ADD worldview (one that loses interest quickly), a fear of commitment, the ease of travel in our globalized world, or a combination of all these? I am not sure. But I am sure of what it means—it means that the young adult I’m talking to has no intention of learning anyone else’s language or worldview.

This short-term mindset makes Philosopher Lao Tuz’s advice moot: “Go to the people, live with them, learn from them, love them. Start with what they know, build with what they have . . . and when the task is finished and the work is done, the people will say, we have done this ourselves.”

Not What Everyone Expected

Of course, we must return to our story at the temple gate called Beautiful. I do not think the beggar expected or initially appreciated Peter’s response, although I am sure he did eventually:

Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. (Acts 3:6–9, NIV)

When the people came running to see the lame man walking around, Peter pointed to Jesus as fast as he could:

When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? . . . By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see. (Acts 3: 12, 16, NIV)

It seems Peter did not want the onlookers to get the wrong image. He did not want them to consider John and himself as superheroes, nor as donors, nor as the next good-luck charm, nor as the next project managers of a new medical clinic. He wanted people to view them merely as stagehands, preparing for Jesus’s entrance on to the stage as the central actor of the great story. Peter was merely an inviter—not to a program or a project, but to a life of faith in Jesus.

Recreating the Missionary Image

Allow me to collect the missionary images throughout this paper and state them in one place:

prosperous and lucky
patrons
donors
post-colonialists
social justice superheroes
fundraisers and project managers
short-termers

I really don’t see any of these missionary images as dominant in the New Testament. I don’t know—maybe if the apostle Paul had applied himself as a donor or started humanitarian projects, he would not have been so rudely or violently kicked out of so many places. As for Peter and John, they learned from the best of them: they learned from Jesus.

Jesus didn’t come as a Hero; He came as a Servant

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped; but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6–8)

*Jesus didn’t make Himself Indispensable to Other People’s Maturity;
He moved on when Codependency Started to set in*

At daybreak, Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.” And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea. (Luke 4:42-44)

*Jesus didn't become a Project Manager;
He showed Compassion in the Rhythm of Everyday Life*

Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.” (John 6:26–27)

*Jesus didn't carry Loads of Resources;
He used what was around Him at the Time*

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans). Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? . . . Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (John 4:8-14)

*Jesus didn't try to solve all the Problems of the Poor and Vulnerable as a Donor;
He hung out with Them as a Friend*

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Mark 2:16–17)

A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.” (Luke 7:37–39, NIV)

*Jesus Didn't Come to Merely Make Chronic Recipients;
He Came to Make Producers*

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness . . . These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts—no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave.” (Matthew 10:1, 5-11, NIV)

Carl Medearis, who works with international leaders in the Middle East, says, “What is remarkable about Jesus is what he didn’t start. What he didn’t do. Jesus didn’t fix the world. He didn’t solve its major maladies. As a matter of fact, He specifically avoided all the titles and responsibilities that would have given him political authority.”⁴

Summary

In summary, missionaries have cast themselves in roles that seem contrary to the example of Jesus and the disciples. As a reaction, people around the world who are recipients of missionaries and their work have created images in their minds about missionaries and Christians in general. From my perspective, many of these roles and images are a distraction from the heart and guts of making obedient disciples of Jesus Christ. I wonder if you would be willing to sit out on the front porch and swing with me, to sip tea together at an outdoor café, or to go for a walk along the creek and consider how we might redesign our roles as missionaries and create fresh images around the world?

⁴ Carl Medearis, *Speaking of Jesus*, Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2011, 77.