

Neglect One, Neglect the Other

*Neglect the Worldview, Neglect Authenticity
Neglect Local Resources, Neglect Authenticity
Neglect Authenticity, Neglect Credibility*

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Introduction

A missionary shared the following testimony in his newsletter:

Dear Friends and Supporters,

A well known witchdoctor becomes a follower of Jesus!

What an amazing transformation! He was what some call a witchdoctor or sorcerer. The rich and poor, the educated and uneducated sought his services because he was possessed by some great spirit. People would travel from all over the country to experience his magic, hoping it would better their weary lives. The rich paid him handsomely, and the poor sold their only chicken to solicit his help. But then he heard the good news of Jesus Christ from our team! He was baptized with others in his community. He wanted to be with us everywhere we went. *This is why we do what we do!*

Sincerely,

Your Missionaries to the Middle East

At the very point the recipients of the newsletter were opening their envelopes, the witch-doctor-turned-Christian was being kicked off the team and out of ministry.

The name of the man highlighted in the missionary newsletter was Simon. He lived in a region called Samaria in the Middle East. Simon saw the baptized believers in his hometown receive the Holy Spirit through the apostles Peter and John. He offered them money so he could buy the same power. It seems that the witch doctor's worldview (values and assumptions) still drove his behavior.

Peter was not happy: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin" (Acts 8:20–23, NIV).

The Simon scenario happens in global mission efforts more than we like to admit. His conversion was less than authentic; thus his ministry was rendered inauthentic, and even worse, his testimony of Jesus Christ to the community was not credible.

We could analyze this scenario and come up with many reasons why Simon went from witch doctor to baptized Christian to being on the ministry team and then back to being a witch doctor—this time with Jesus’s power added to his portfolio. In this paper, I will cover two key ways that mission efforts fail at producing authenticity, an ingredient absolutely necessary for long-term impact in the Great Commission. First, if we neglect the worldview (including the language), we neglect authenticity. Second, if we neglect local resources, we neglect authenticity. Inevitably, the neglect of developing authenticity leads to the lack of credibility.

Neglect the Worldview, Neglect Authenticity

Worldview is the lens and filter through which people interpret and relate to all aspects of life. A worldview profoundly drives how people live, interact, choose, respond, cope, commit, and sacrifice. If this is true, it only makes sense that every missionary should strive to learn, work within, and impact the worldview of the sociocultural group of his or her host country.

If we do not take the time and effort to understand, work within, and impact worldview, we will merely influence the surface level of people’s lives—that is, their patterned and observable behaviors. In this scenario, people may adopt some Christian patterns of behavior and develop an affinity toward Christianity and Jesus, but many of their driving assumptions about life remain untouched.

A neglected worldview sadly results in lukewarm Christians who neither stay the narrow road (Matthew 7:14) nor impact those around them. Superficial impact results in superficial conversions, which consist of adapting to Christian patterns of behavior while lacking a deep worldview expression and commitment to the gospel, faith, obedience to Jesus Christ, or the Great Commission. When it is time to count the cost—a crisis or persecution hits, donor funds dry up, handouts cease, and one’s favorite missionary-patron goes home—for such Christians, moving on to something they deem better or back to the way things used to be comes easily.

In mission work, neglect of worldview often leads to unintended consequences. Because we don’t do the hard work of learning and working within a peoples’ worldview, we intervene in their lives with only frail understanding and may make things worse rather than better. We may be pleased that we have enforced change at a superficial level—such as enabling access to clean water—while remaining completely oblivious to the fact that we have disturbed something at a deeper level. David Abernethy, Stanford University Professor Emeritus of Political Science, gives us one such example:

The changes coming from outside—and let’s remember that the traveler’s presence and the traveler’s generosity constitute external intervention—could begin to shake up the stratification system within the village. Let me take as an example digging a well, something that’s often seen as an obvious project in areas which don’t have much water, or where they have water but it’s in a dirty river five miles away. Duncan’s reference to the well Stanford travelers proposed to construct in a Zambian

village comes to mind here.

The well is seen by the tourist as a public good, which is why it's such an attractive philanthropic project. Everybody stands to benefit from access to water, particularly if it's better quality than what is scooped up from a muddy, polluted river.

But to say that everyone benefits is not to say that everyone benefits equally. And here's where problems begin. Men in the village quickly recognize that a well is going to benefit women more than men. Why? Because it's women who walk five miles to get the water and five miles to bring it back.

Men don't do this. Fetching water from the river is women's work. It always has been, as long as anyone can remember, and as far as men are concerned it always will be.

And so a project seen by an outsider as helping the entire community can be seen by villagers with power, the men, as lowering their status relative to villagers lacking power, the women. Besides, a well means that women will have more time because they're not spending two hours walking to the river and two hours back. What are they going to do with all that free time? Perhaps they'll get together and celebrate their raised status and demand to have it raised further. So you can see both men and women envisaging a future in which the longstanding dominance of men over women is challenged. This potentially profound revision of the village social system is triggered by the apparently innocent act of digging a hole for water.¹

Drinking easily accessed water is nice, but is it worth the trade off—men and women angry at each other? The imposed well project was by no means holistic—that is their project addressed a physical need but created new social issues: apathy, idle time, jealousy, and disdain. If you are a Westerner, you may be struggling with what you perceive as inequalities between men and women in this Zambian village. There are two things we need to keep in mind: 1) The well project didn't do anything to improve social relationships, and 2) Authentic changes in regard to societal relationships has to come from within the people who hold a certain worldview. All the more reason for missionaries not to neglect the worldview.

I have no idea if Christians implemented the well project described by David Abernethy, but I do know that if it was, the men of that village were unlikely to be too thrilled about Jesus and his ways. Neglecting a worldview leads to unintended consequences and in turn spoils the opportunity for authentic transformation from the inside out.

Neglect the Idiom, Neglect the Worldview

Worldview and language are inseparable. Worldview is housed in language, right down to its idioms. If understanding, working within, and impacting a worldview is vital, and if a language expresses a worldview and a worldview impacts a language, should not cross-cultural communicators do all they can to learn the heart language of a people right down to its idioms?

For a cross-cultural worker, to neglect the heart language of a person is to deny that person respect. To know a cultural group's idioms is to know their language and is to know them. In the Apartheid era, Nelson Mandela stated, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." While Nelson

¹ David Abernethy, *Ethical Dilemmas and Practical Risks in Tourist Philanthropy: Responsible Travel Handbook*, 2006, 21

expresses his thoughts in a pithy manner, anthropologists describe language in a more verbose way:

Language is not just a means of expression comprising phonology, semantics, syntax and grammar. It is much more than that. It is essentially an embodiment of the culture of the native speakers. Language encompasses a people's tradition, folklores, morals, norms, customs, etiquette, oral history, artistic inclinations, world view, belief systems, and all that has been handed down from generation to generation. Language confers a feeling of common origin, ancestry and shared value among the indigenous speakers (even where different dialects exist). Thus language instills a strong and passionate feeling of oneness, togetherness, solidarity and cohesion.²

Wow! If we neglect the language, we neglect a whole lot! Not realizing the depth and breath of what language encompasses is as idiotic as thinking the human body is merely skin and bones. If we do grasp the complexities and significance of communicating in the heart language and yet somehow dismiss it as vital to our missionary strategy, we have somehow deceived ourselves.

You may think that missionaries learning a language down to its idioms and proverbs is a given. You may wonder why I am spending effort to convince my readers of this point. Although I cannot give you statistics, I see and hear more and more that missionaries are neglecting the heart language of the people they serve. There are a variety of reasons for this. Among them: 1) "So many people around the world speak English or want to speak English as their second language, so why bother to learn?" 2) "If we want to make disciples and train using a conference culture, we have to use English as the common denominator"; 3) "Demanding programs and projects don't allow us time to learn the language"; and 4) "Using and teaching free English is a great evangelism and church-planting strategy."

No matter how legitimate these and other reasons seem, neglecting the language of the people you want to serve, and thus neglecting their *worldview*, cheats both you and them of authenticity. How many Simons will we produce if we can't or won't identify with, work within, and impact their worldview, which includes learning their language? "If you don't consciously identify and speak to their worldview, by default you will speak to your own."³

I am writing here to missionaries, so let me ask: are we not the ones called to do the cross-cultural work? If we rely on our own language and thus our own worldview to communicate, are we not forcing the local people to do the cross-cultural work—to make movement toward us instead of us toward them? And does this not put us, our language, and our culture in a position of superiority? Might they not conclude that our God is American or English or French?

Without mastery of the language of the people we serve, we will be prevented from going beyond the surface, and in that case, impact will be mostly superficial and people's newfound faith in Jesus dismissible as soon as a life of supposed Christian bliss wanes. The credibility of the Christian testimony will equally wane.

² Nuha Foundation, An Education NGO

³ J. O. Terry, *Following Jesus: Making Disciples of Primary Oral Learners*, Progressive Vision, 2002

Neglect Local Resources, Neglect Authenticity

Neglect of local resources—that is, missionaries using foreign resources for the mission task rather than using local resources—creates masks and pretense. Missionary donors become the experts and the powerful in someone else’s country, while the recipients become the needy and the people-pleasers, eventually becoming

more committed to satisfying the donors than satisfying the Lord Jesus and the people in their own network of relationships who should provide organic accountability.

Masks and pretense start as soon as a person perceives the messenger of the gospel as a potential source of chronic help. Put yourself in the shoes of one who is receiving two things at once— an invitation to become a follower of Jesus, followed by news that plans are underway to start a child sponsorship program for your kids and village. How does any normal person sort out his or her motives at this point?

Inauthenticity sown and bred at this foundational level spreads into all other aspects of growth and development, whether that be a Christian’s personal growth in Christ or a church or ministry.

Sometimes I really want to open up to my donors—my fellow believers from my own homeland who support and send me out—about hardships, doubts, fears, failed efforts, or the pitfalls of the short-term teams they’ve sent. But I find myself quite hesitant. *What if my donors think I am weak or incompetent? What if they conclude that their financial gifts have gone to waste or that I am complaining?* That scenario includes only a handful of donors within my own cultural group. Now imagine a whole people group sensing that the missionary force that is calling them to Christ is both the messenger of the gospel and their donor on many fronts? The recipients may be tempted to be less than authentic for fear of losing resources that benefit their ministry, their families, their friends, and themselves. What masks might they wear? What masks might we hide behind? How much of the relationship between the missionaries and the people will be convoluted through pretense—never reaching the level of authentic relationship?

I don’t want to be a pastor, but the missionary invited me to go to Bible college. If I say no, I will lose my salary as a dorm parent in the missionaries’ orphanage.

We must do whatever ministry the missionary donor sees fit, even if it doesn’t match our vision or culture. We can’t lose the fringe benefits. My family and others depend on it.

Darling, become a Christian and go to church by all means. They are paying for our children’s school fees.

Or from the missionary donor perspective:

I thought that my injection of funds into projects, churches and leaders on the mission field would always prove advantageous. What I didn’t expect was leaders jumping from Christian organization to Christian organization for the best deal. I didn’t foresee people changing churches when they discover there is more foreign action and benefits in the church down the road. I didn’t imagine that members of local churches would conclude that foreign mission agencies and churches from rich

countries are supposed to pay their pastors and for their biblical functions as a church.

A missionary from Nagaland, sent to India, shared an alarming story with me. She was serving as an interpreter between local Christian leaders and Christian visitors from America. She overheard one of the local Christian leaders say to his colleagues in their local language, “Tell our visitors what they want to hear, and when they are gone, we can use the money how we see fit.”

Maybe that is why Jesus didn’t send the disciples out with the dual roles of missionary and donor! Perhaps that is why the apostle Paul didn’t want to allow money, in any form or fashion, to ruin or distort his relationships with potential converts, new converts, or those he trained as leaders. Making the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel dependent on our foreign resources will create way more half-truths, compromise, people-pleasing, confusion, and pretense than it will honesty, trust, authenticity, credibility, purity, sacrifice, and humility.

So what is the alternative? Is it possible that every-church-to-be *already has what it needs around it*— the human, material, spiritual, and social resources to be the church in its local situation? If we consider the church in Acts as a viable model, I think we must answer with a resounding “Yes!”

Neglect Authenticity, Neglect Credibility

The more that vision, ideas, creativity, leadership, prayer, resources, and accountability arise from within the local people, the more ministry-related experiences and outcomes will be authentic and impactful.

The more resources that come from the outside, the more probability that jealousy, competition, manipulation, learned helplessness, and entitlement will arise. These less-than-credible attitudes and behaviors will not make the gospel appealing to those watching. What about the stories we hear of Muslim fathers who try to kill their sons and daughters, new followers of Isa (Jesus), because the father views donor-driven efforts as manipulation—as a way to coerce converts—and converts themselves as chasers of the American Dream rather than as authentically loyal to Jesus?

Authenticity attracts (and spreads); half-heartedness repels. Authentic local believers will have much more impact on their neighbors if their faith and their living out of that faith is not driven by ulterior motives (or perceived to be so) of personal perks. How many times have I heard onlookers say, “Our people are quick to abandon their identity and faith for a job, free English, a trip to America, and freebies”? Even if in some cases this is not reality, a pipeline of outside resources gives that illusion.

If people are going to be rejected, let it be for their intense faith and genuine conversion rather than for superficial conformity due to an improved economic life. If they are going to be accepted, may it be because they love their neighbors sacrificially, pay for their own faith and religion, and live an exemplary life.

Learning a worldview (including language) and exercising the self-discipline and innovation to use and promote local resources rather than foreign resources is *hard* work. I find fuel to

stay the course from this quote by Calvin Helin: “Short-term gain masks the consequences of long-term pain.”⁴

More and more, serving as both a missionary and a donor is the norm. Is there anyone out there who sees a need and urgency for missionaries who are just that— messengers who are resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2)? This model does not mean that we keep proclamation of the gospel and throw out the holistic partner of demonstration—of love in action. But it does mean that we love others as part of everyday living rather than as a chronic donor who is too busy to learn, work within, and impact a worldview. Let’s reverse the title of my paper:

Focus on the Worldview, Foster Authenticity
Focus on Local Resources, Foster Authenticity”
Foster Authenticity, Foster Credibility

⁴ Calvin Helin, *The Economic Dependency Trap: Breaking Free to Self-Reliance*, St. Louis, MO, Ravencrest Publishing, 2011, 50