**Wholly Available**

Missionary Motivation Where Consumer Choice Reigns

by David Maclure

Jesus Rocks! - Christian Entertainment Makes a Joyful Noise. Hot Concerts. Big Books. New Movies.

So proclaimed Newsweek’s front cover for July 16th this year. In the issue, several journalists and social commentators highlighted what has become apparent even to secular America — Christian Culture is pushing in on the mainstream from its traditional role on the periphery and Christians are embracing consumerism in a big way. “‘God, Mammon and ‘Bibleman’” declared the header to one article which then carried a section highlighting the worth of some the key entertainment sectors like music ($747 million), literature ($1 billion) and film ($17 million) in the USA. The phenomenon is drawing critical study from some analysts who see a new and sharply defined Christian subculture, which in turn is yielding further subcultures in parallel with the secular world: romance novels, various musical genres, even theme parks and touring festivals are catering to the individual consumer-driven Christian.

Where does the mission world fit into this particular aspect of the 21st Century Western Christian Worldview? Traditionally and stereotypically, we imagine missionaries to live in a somewhat blinkered world of minimalist needs, aged colonial mentalities and old hymn-singing — an out of touch group of people more at home wearing sandals on an African dirt road than wearing Nikes to a Delirious concert. But where exactly is the mission world sitting as regards ‘consumer choice’ at the start of the 2lst Century? And as regards consumerism, are there implications in view of scripture concerning our attitude, motivations — our ‘availability’ - to the demands of the Great Commission? In this essay I will attempt to touch on some of these questions by examining ‘consumerism’ not only as it relates to the accumulation of personal wealth, but more broadly as a mentality present in Western thinking. ‘Mission’ is taken in a traditional sense, of Western missionaries going abroad into cross-cultural work in foreign lands.

During the decades that followed the second world war, and in particular in the creative outbursts of the 1960s, Christian culture (on both sides of the Atlantic) began to fashion for itself a new identity in a shiny post-war world. Despite being particularly vocal on issues of politics, science and the end times, Christianity in the age of the baby-boomers sidled up to and embraced consumerism relatively quietly in the closing half of the last century. Specifically in the last decade, missions has caught up with this trend such that the landscape of missions groups, societies and organizations — indeed, the very nature of how missions is ‘done’ — has undergone something of a revolution in which the consumer mentality plays a key part. Missions today is a far cry from the world inhabited by the mission founders William Carey, C.T.Studd or Peter Cameron Scott.

Most, if not all, of the major overseas sending organizations in the UK and USA have sought to repackage themselves for this new generation of consumer-driven Christians. TearFund were the original trend-setters in the early nineties with their new look flower logo now splashed across their publicity and website. AIM in 1995 redesigned their logo (and with it came T-shirts, posters, tea-towels) to commemorate the centenary of the organization and Wycliffe Bible Translators in 2000 launched themselves with the slogan ‘Words For Life’. As the international secretary for a Christian Union, I have seen the evidence of this re-packaging first hand. I receive the majority of mail for the whole CU —several parcels a week — from mission organizations pitching their particular angle on the Great Commission. OMF offer a free wall-calendar, OASIS a fold out brochure, and Arab World Missionaries a free CD-ROM. The mission organization has had to learn to market its product to lure prospective personnel and funds from church leaders. It has had to adapt in order to survive a competitive market.

Further to this, potential missionaries are almost treated (and perhaps expect to be treated) as possible client career people who need to be nudged into their overseas cross-cultural calling by prospects of a pension plan and detailed schooling arrangements for their kids. First-termers arrive in distant lands with all the necessary mod-cons. A lap-top (with modem for email from the bush), washing machine, and 4WD vehicle are par for the course.

Broad notions of consumerism, therefore, have slipped into the missions ethos at every level: in the recruitment and preparation for, and in the implementation of, the Great Commission to evangelize the people of foreign lands. Nowhere is this more clear than in the gradual shift towards a Short-Term Mission ethic. On the surface, the new proliferation of church-based, youth-oriented cross-cultural work (building, too, on the continuing popularity of the ‘gap’ year for students about to enter or just finishing university) appears a good thing. The Short-Term package looks to be the late savior for the traditional mission organization which, in a post-colonial, post-modern setting, is struggling in a “crisis of organizational identity.” As Richard Slimbach further remarks, “. . . short terms have increasingly taken on the character of a standardized religious service offered to a new generation of consumers...”

There is certainly a lot about this new world of missions to be congratulated and I would not harp unconditionally for a return to the supposed good old days of past missionary glory. The improvements in publicity are long overdue, and with new stores of information on well-maintained websites the missions community is tapping into a valuable medium to communicate and recruit for the perils and joys of cross-cultural work. Bible translators have saved months of meticulous language analysis thanks to the power harnessed in state-of-the-art programs like CARLA. Further, the craze for the Short-Term has opened the eyes of many young people to the realities of God’s work in other areas of the world and has often been a valuable first-step in clarifying for Christians whether full-time missions work is for them.

There is a fine line, however, between simply keeping up to date with design and technology and adopting some of the less savory aspects of the consumer mentality in the world around us. The polished veneer of the brochures may not offer robust solutions to our Great Commission needs. As Naomi Klein recently observed, one key trend in global marketing is a move towards ‘brand, not product’. That is, the image of a thing is becoming more lucrative (and thus more marketable) than the thing itself. I hesitate to say that mission organizations are marketing themselves along these lines, but I believe they flirt with this danger especially as they promote short-term work. To pick at random one example, a brochure I received yesterday highlighted five courses available for young people. Despite the large size of the pamphlet, the descriptions were only two sentences each and couched in terms of ‘diverse and challenging environment’, ‘ideally situated’ and ‘missions experience’. Indeed, the mission world has developed its own nomenclature complete with buzzwords and terminology — Unreached People Groups (UPGs), Strategic Target Areas, cultural integration etc. There is nothing wrong with these things in themselves and they have their particular use in mission discourse. But beneath the schemes, strategies, words and techniques lies the ‘product’ of missions—the gospel, God’s Word to all mankind. The danger of our smart lingo is that the ‘brand’ —the idea or concept of mission — receives intrinsic value beyond the original aim of the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations. The ‘feeling’ of doing mission becomes unconsciously more important than the actual desire to see a host people moved to worship the Lord. As this slippage occurs, mission becomes a self-gratifying experience for participants and a pat on the back for their sending churches and agents who feel satisfied at a consumer choice well made.

Further to this, our pluralistic society favors a multi-cultural outlook. Whilst, on the one hand, this appears to promote notions of cross-cultural missions there remains a distance at the point where Western culture meets foreign culture. From McDonalds last year introducing a very much toned-down, shrink-wrapped, fast-food promotion of Indian food (the McCurry), to Disney World including a ride about the ‘small, small, world’ — a sanitized place of gleaming, friendly children of all colors, the world’s message is that cross-cultural inter-action is fun to watch only from a distance, and foreign things are best digested from the safety of our present comfort zones. Similarly, in passing quickly through a foreign culture on a short-term trip and returning two weeks later back to the UK complete with photos to boot, the young short-termer can be left with a sense that his/her excursion abroad felt much like a package holiday. Indeed, Jim Lo calls this taking a ‘spiritualized vacation trip’ where participants adopt ‘a tourist posture instead of a missionary-servant posture’. The aggressive western culture slides meaninglessly across the dependent host culture and no real engagement occurs or emotional ties forged. Instead of advancing the cause of missions, the exercise simply re-enforces worn stereotypes and old power relations.

Whilst the short-term mission movement steadily marches forward the unfortunate seesaw effect is that missionaries participating in long-term careers are on the decline. This is particularly worrying as it begins to sever the prospect of deep, meaningful, life-long relationships that can be established between a missionary and host people. Furthermore, especially in discipleship and church-planting ministries, years and decades are what are needed to establish a firm Christian basis, and the short-term craze cannot support this single-handedly. WBT translators know this all too well — it takes around fifteen years to complete a New Testament translation, not counting the years of literacy and integration before a Bible portion actually begins to reap visible results in the lives of local people. Career missionaries must play an essential part in the twenty-first century missionary movement. There is a malaise even in the long-term mission world, however, and it is the inability of present day missionaries to effectively sever themselves from their home cultures. No missionary has ever completely achieved this, of course. Indeed, the nineteenth century forefathers brought with them their own modernist notions of superiority and empire which colored their best missionary efforts.

For Westerners abroad today the problem is, as Tom Sine points out, one of an unhealthy ‘dualistic discipleship’ where the Western Dream shares our agenda with Christ-like priorities. One hotly contested issue is MK education. Many missionaries prefer to return home for their children’s education, or take up stations near to good boarding schooling or in turn fuel time and energy into home teaching. The needs of children are of course integral to the missionary family, but it is now becoming acceptable to allow ministry to be determined along lines of ‘what is best for the kids’. Via email and through the wonders of modern air-travel missionaries remain in touch with home at the touch of a button and can be back within a day. As the lines of communication with the West open ever wider, the global village becomes ever more realized, so missionaries are able to bring more of the West with them in their (emotional and physical) carry-on luggage. The short-termers may brush through their host nations leaving nothing of value, but the long-termers can be guilty of the opposite problem: accumulating so much stuff from home that they create for themselves a ‘Little America’ in the middle of Darkest Africa. This inability for Western missionaries to escape their middle-class bubble is a limiting factor in their effectiveness to reach all mankind with the gospel because their calling becomes class-determined and geo-specific. Indeed, there is evidence that Protestant missionaries are focusing on the upwardly mobile classes of the world’s great cities and have little to do with the poorest of the poor, the inhabitants of the slums9. The trappings of a consumer mentality bound up in the missionary retention of Western values have contributed to a severe undermining of the best endeavors of even our long-term workers in the field.

But how might some of these hazards alluded to be avoided? To finish, I would like to pose three questions which must be addressed if the western missionary movement of the twenty-first century is to retain a ‘cutting edge’ impact on world evangelization. These are intended to open up rather than resolve debate.

Firstly, to what extent do western missionaries still consider themselves unconditionally called to a specific ministry? All believers are called to be witnesses, but what about those — like the Apostle Paul — who recognize themselves as ‘set apart’? With short-termers passing through their gap years, and with career missionaries returning home early for their children’s education, has missions merely become a temporary contract for many people? My hunch is that the Lord will continue to call men and women specifically to break new ground in the proclamation of the gospel (as I believe he has always done), by asking them to give of their lives in total submission even if that means putting ministry above finances, future and family. Jesus, when speaking to the rich young ruler, spoke of the benefits (and persecutions) that would accompany a disciple who gave up family and fields for Christ and the gospel.

Related to this is my second question: how can missionaries be clearly directed by God concerning the particulars of their ministry? Can the Spirit still intervene so dramatically as in the day of Philip by overriding human intervention and whisking us away to a strategic point for evangelization (Acts 8:39-40)?

On this issue, I defer to the missiologists, but, again, there is cause for concern in that whilst some areas of the world remain saturated by overseas workers (i.e. Kenya! Mexico / India), there remains relatively little Christian activity in other deeply unreached areas. Only 26% of the protestant missionary force is working in the 10,000 unreached people groups. Per million Muslims there are only 2.73 foreign missionaries (but over 180 per million Christians). An imbalance exists, therefore. The workers may be plentiful but not all the field is being harvested.

Lastly, Western Christians must scrutinize themselves on the issue of personal wealth. Jesus’ teaching is clear: ‘No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot both serve both God and Money’ (Matthew 6:19- 21. 24 NIV). How to apply this truth constructively is a question often ignored, but it must be grappled with. Should we return to the older missionary days of complete minimalism?

A few months ago, I met Hugo and Lessandra Cesart— a Brazilian couple who are part of a mission group called the Radicals. In their two years of orientation before leaving for the field they shared their money in a common pot with the fifty or so other couples on the program. This was an attempt to recreate something of the early church’s attitude to money, as a commodity to be shared. In another model of how to use money, John Wesley, the Methodist preacher of the early nineteenth century lived his entire life on 28 pounds a year despite amassing a small fortune from his campaigns and book sales. His surplus he simply turned back into the Lord’s work. Agur, son of Jakeh, prayed this prayer: “give me neither poverty not riches, but give me only my daily bread.., otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of God”. (Proverbs 30:8-9 NIV). Western missionaries are far more in danger of slipping into the former trap than the latter. The accumulation of wealth not only limits them in their own work, it can cause major problems in the setting of an economically poor host nation.

So what has become the motivation to do mission? As our mission world aligns itself with the consumer mentality, so our processes of decision-making are becoming increasingly based on personal motivation. As we become swayed by the prospect of ‘experiencing’ mission, as we glee in the ease of a mission-trip-cum-package holiday or as we place qualifications on the call in our lives to serve the Lord overseas, we begin to take a firmer grip of the control panel which should rightfully belong to God.

And it is at this point that the agenda for deciding which organization to go with, where to go, what to take and for how long to go unconsciously boils down to a personal choice: the choice of a shrewd consumer-driven Christian seeking the most comfortable way to carry out his/her missionary calling. It barely needs to be pointed out that this is a complete inversion of a biblical decision-making hierarchy.

The universal plan of salvation for all mankind in all of history is an enterprise founded and directed by God. We are but agents under His authority and direction. We move from standing on rock to sinking in sand if we begin to fashion the Great Commission around our own needs. To become wholly available, therefore, is to be in total surrender to the will and direction of the author of our faith as regards wealth, family, future, anything. For this to happen we need to re-think the way we think about mission. Barney Ford, the director of Urbana 2000, recently said this: All of us want to know God’s will for our lives. The question that we ask is, “Lord what do you want me to do?” In His gracious patience the Lord has taught me to first ask the question, “Lord, what are you doing?”