

“THEY DID BUSINESS WITH YOU BECAUSE OF YOUR GREAT WEALTH OF GOODS”

The Tragic Repercussions of Materialism and Consumerism in Missions

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The moment has never left my mind. As I prepared to address the missionary body of a particular organization, praying and meditating on God's Word for the assignment, a Bible verse stared back at me:

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, take up a lament concerning Tyre. Say to Tyre, situated at the gateway to the sea, merchant of peoples on many coasts, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: . . . Tarshish did business with you because of your great wealth of goods; they exchanged silver, iron, tin and lead for your merchandise.” (Ezekiel 27:2–3, 12, NIV)

I read it several times and sensed the Holy Spirit wanted me to insert the phrase “spiritual business” and apply the passage to missions from the West to the Rest. So I read the verse many times with the inserted phrase:

Tarshish did spiritual business with you because of your great wealth of goods.

The meaning was clear! Many nations around the world do spiritual business with Western Christians because of the wealth of goods we bring and send in the name of the gospel. In other words, too few people are having conversations around their cooking pots about our abundant faith, willingness to deny ourselves, prayer vigils, and ability to endure persecution.

As background information, Tyre was a city that operated from a status of prosperity, grandeur, and pride, and it was known for its vast trading with other nations. Tyre was capable of being a worldwide leader in trade because it was advantageously surrounded by water. Likewise, the Western church is unusually capable of doing spiritual business around the world because of our wealth. As a matter of comparison, very few Christians from the so-called developing world come our direction to plant churches, preach in our existing churches, open non-government organizations, and solve our social issues. We have a Tyre-like capacity to send, go, bring, and give en masse,

and many times in the same places, over and over again. Darren Carlson puts this reality into perspective: “I have seen with my own eyes or know of houses in Latin America that have been painted 20 times by 20 different short-term mission teams.”¹ If I were to begin merely listing the amount of money spent overseas per Western church denomination, church, and organization, we might feel nauseous.

Still, some of us might wonder why this is a bad thing. What is the downside to economic abundance and the capacity to pass it on in high quantities as part of the Western mission modus operandi?

Simply this: when people do spiritual business with us because they sense that our affluence and wealth will dramatically improve their material and social status, something goes terribly wrong with the spread of the gospel and discipleship.

Alan Hirsch recently made this comment in an online training program offered by Verge: “Someone said that ‘what you win them with you win them to,’ which means, if you win people by entertaining them into the kingdom, you have to keep on entertaining them.”²

Relating to our context, if you win people through providing material benefits and social perks, you will have to keep on providing these things for them. Hirsch goes on to explain that if, as a point of entry to a relationship

with Jesus, we use perks or give the sense that responding to the gospel leads to personal and social economic improvement, we end up with a bait and switch. We eventually have to inform people that following Jesus involves a life of sacrifice, denial, discipline, giving, loving, forgiving, living blamelessly, and ultimately becoming like Jesus. All of a sudden the switch doesn't make being a Christian sound so good after all.

Furthermore, when we win people through material benefits, we cloud Jesus's paradigm of "counting the cost of discipleship" with Western consumerism and materialism. Media and business in the Western world thrive on baiting consumers and making them disciples of consumerism. Continuing with Hirsch's line of thinking:

Anyone who comes to Jesus in a Western context is already a well-disciplined consumer. It's a religion. Consumerism is being defined by what we consume. It is, like I said, the search for meaning, identity, purpose, and belonging tied to the consumption of products. The problem is that consumerism is the alternative religion of our day. Without a doubt, it is the secular religion of our day. There is no such religious force in the West as powerful as consumerism....

You cannot build a church on consumers. They will desert you at a moment's notice because they

have no commitments beyond their own needs. You can't build them. Jesus is quite wise in this. You can take his advice quite seriously, quite literally: die. Jesus can take 12, and by extension the 70, and build a movement that changes the world on disciples. He could never have done that on consumers. You've got people who are willing to pay the price. They've already died to their own agendas. They are now living through the Lordship of Jesus. With that, you can build movements.³

Let's return to Ezekiel 27:17 with the added emphasis: "Tarshish did spiritual business with you because of your great wealth of goods." Is it possible that a part of the world is doing spiritual business with us because of our great wealth? If yes, the repercussions will show up later when the world is filled with Christian consumers rather than those ready to live as Jesus lived. "Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6, NIV).

With brutal honesty, I can tell you that when people talk about Western Christians around their cooking pots, in their tea shops, and in their churches, it is more about how to connect to our wealth of material goods than it is about how to connect to our wealth of faith. In this case, what is the solution? How do we create conversations around the world about our faith, our prayer lives, our perseverance, and our Jesus?

How do we transform the constant conversations about missions and money in the same sentence? From my perspective, Western missionaries must prayerfully and dutifully consider what it will take to protect our mission ethos and practice from materialism and consumerism and recommit to Jesus's paradigm.

I leave us with this challenge. Read the gospels, the book of Acts, and the epistles. Write down Jesus' paradigm of making disciples (both in word and in action). Then, let us prayerfully realign our paradigm. I have a feeling there will be a lot less materialism and consumerism in our paradigms when we are truly aligned with Jesus's model.



¹ Alan Hirsch, "Consumerism: Cancerous Barrier to Effective Disciplemaking," *Verge: Discipleship Making Blueprint*.

² Alan Hirsch, "Babying Consumers vs. Sending Disciples," *Verge: Discipleship Making Blueprint*.

³ Darren Carlson, "Why You Should Consider Canceling Your Short-Term Mission Trips" *The Gospel Coalition*, June 18, 2012.