

# 30 TO 50 YEARS FROM NOW



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Recently, I saw on television that several women—in their 30s—were diagnosed with breast cancer. Further discovery revealed that the tumors were located exactly where the women placed their cell phones in their bras on a regular basis, and the tumors were similar to the shape and size of the phones. Of course that led to a conversation about potential brain tumors related to holding cell phones up to the ear. A doctor on the newscast explained that in about 30 to 50 years from now, the detrimental consequences of cell phone usage may very well be staring us in the face.

As missionaries, I wonder what will be staring us in the face in 30 to 50 years from now? Are there aspects of our mission work that look progressive and expedient now, but may backfire in the long-term? What changes will we have made around the world that we may regret? Will we find the prosperity gospel running rampant? Will we find that the ability for the majority of the world to show compassion and make disciples in their context is utterly dependent on a few wealthy countries? What if those

few wealthy countries have serious economic downturns? Perhaps a type of Christian secularism and consumerism will evaporate spirituality throughout the world.

Missiologist Jacob Loewen was teaching a seminar on worldview in India to Indian teachers and their missionary colleagues. At one point in the seminar, Loewen entered into a dialogue with the Indian teachers. This dialogue is a perfect example of unwanted consequences staring missionaries in the face. The dialogue unfolded in the following manner:

**Jacob:** Each culture has at its center an “axle” from which radiate all the “spokes” that hold the wheel together and help it to perform its appointed tasks smoothly and without undue difficulty. What is the hub around which the missionaries’ way of life revolves?

**Indian Teachers:** Money! (was the unhesitating and unanimous response)

**Jacob:** How can you be sure?

The Indian teachers recounted incidents that in their eyes offered clear proof that money was at the core of all material and spiritual

aspects of Western missionary life and work.

**Jacob:** What about your fathers and grandfathers before the missionary and the white man came? What was the axle of their way of life?

**Indian Teachers:** War!

The Indian participants explained that their grandfathers had practiced killing because that was the way to get spirit power.

**Indian Teachers:** Had our grandfathers been Christians, the Spirit of God would have been the center of our lives because God is the most powerful of all spirits.

**Jacob:** And now that all of you are Christians, is the Spirit of God the axle of your Christian way of life, too?

**Indian Teachers:** No, our axle is money...because...that is what we learned from the missionaries.<sup>1</sup>

Jacob’s dialogue with the Indian teachers pressed the missionaries to look at what was staring them in the face after years of missionary life and work. I doubt the missionaries intended to convey that money was the axle to their mission strategies and personal lives. I wonder if much

has changed since that day Jacob Loewen recorded that experience in 1975. What images are we spreading along with the gospel? We do have ethical responsibility for the wrong kingdom images and misconceptions we pass along with the gospel. I am convinced that we may very well be treading on a slippery slope in regards to sowing unintended and unwanted changes around the world in the name of the gospel. I have at least two major concerns, which I convey below through preventative actions:

1. Put the cost of discipleship back into conversion experiences. The apostle Peter's words to those gathered at Pentecost were

exacting: "Change your life, turn to God and be baptized." The people's response to Peter was equally heartfelt: "Cut to the quick, those who were there listening asked Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers! Brothers! So now what do we do?'" (Acts 2:37-39, *The Message*). Poverty has driven many of those who do missions to unknowingly diminish the cost of following Christ. The heavy-handed emphasis on the immediate social and economic perks has often led to self-serving conversion experiences. Offering presents, handouts, free charitable services, and promised tuition fees

hand-in-hand with the gospel inevitably draw people to superficial commitments to Christ and those commitments often wane when the "going gets tough." We don't want to look back and wonder why freshly reached unreached people groups are slipping into nominalism so quickly. Like Peter, ensure conversion invitations include counting the cost.

2. Return to the power and simplicity of the Great Commission. As Western Christians, we add on and import so much baggage and non-essentials (which always cost lots of money) to the Great Commission effort and faith experience. As those who do missions from the West come with suitcases, containers, and wire transfers, the majority of the world comes to the conclusion that money is the key and participation in the Great Commission is doable only for the well-to do. According to Jesus' own words, He is the power source to fulfilling the Great Commission: "Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20, *The Message*). The more humble missionaries make the Great Commission effort, the more opportunity for Jesus to exert His power, the more every people—from all walks of life—can equally participate in the Great Commission.

As missionaries, we are ethically responsible for the unintended changes we create around the world. What images will we have fostered, knowingly or unknowingly, about God and His kingdom in the minds and hearts of people 30 to 50 years from now?

As mission-minded Christians, we are charged to change the world. Let us commit to make changes that truly reflect God's will and kingdom, not our own. 

<sup>1</sup> Quoted and adapted from Bonk, Jonathan *Missions and Money* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 78.

