

# Hunting the Lion

## An Historical Case Study of Missionaries Fighting a Death Industry

“Take courage,” Livingstone said to them, “I will help you get rid of the beasts.” Dr. Livingstone was speaking to the men of the Bakhatla tribe in Africa about a pride of lions which were attacking their cattle in great numbers, with no fear of man, leading the tribe to starvation. The tribe thought the lions were bewitched so they were too afraid to hunt them. Dr. Livingstone hunted and attacked the pride of lions, miraculously surviving a deadly bite to his shoulder—causing him to be disabled in one arm for the rest of his life.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Livingstone’s response to the tribe in need gets to the heart of the power of the gospel and the missionary response to evil. In this specific case, Dr. Livingstone came to Africa with the purpose of sharing the gospel, but he found a people under attack and he was willing to risk his life to fight for their safety.

This story boldly illustrates the common pattern in mission history of going to the field to share the Good News of Jesus only to find a lion in the midst of the people we have come to serve. How the missionary responds to these lions can greatly impact the gospel going forward. After Dr. Livingstone dealt with this beast, soon another more destructive lion, the slave trade, reared its head and he spent the rest of his life fighting that beast.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannula, Richard M., *Trial and Triumph: Stories from Church History*, Canon Press, Moscow ID, 1999, p.227.

their day which were profiting off the destruction of the very people the missionaries had come to serve. A valid historical model of mission includes helping the people groups “get rid of the beasts” killing them. This successful precedent should inform the missionary response to the modern death industries of our day.

Dr. Livingstone spent his missionary efforts teaching men, women and children to read, so that they could understand the Bible for themselves. Winning a village to Christ only to have the tribe’s women and children stolen into slavery was a huge hindrance to the gospel going forward. The lion of the slave trade that Livingstone encountered horrified, sickened, and haunted him in his sleep. For many years, he felt powerless to fight it. He knew God wanted this evil to end.

After years of hunting the lion of slavery, Dr. Livingstone found a way to attack it. In 1852, Livingstone realized that if there was a proper road through Africa, then the slave trade would end. Dr. Livingstone risked his life in a trek through the Kalihari desert to find a route for the British to use to make the Arab and Portuguese slave trade less profitable, in hope of ending slavery entirely. The plan worked. Livingstone successfully catalyzed the building of a road into the interior making the foot trails used for the slave trade unprofitable compared to the new road for commercial goods. The road he made not only broke the monopoly of the slave trade, hastening its demise, but was also used by missionaries to bring the

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gospel into the interior of Africa enabling millions of people to come to the Lord. The slave trade was ended shortly after his death.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Livingstone was not alone in blessing people through hunting the lions he found; it was a part of a global trend in the missionary effort of the day. In a groundbreaking article in *The American Political Science Review*, titled “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” the author Robert Woodberry gathers a wealth of data from the colonial era. He makes a compelling statistical case that the actions of the conversionary Protestants were part of a unified global pattern of societal reform. Woodberry argues that these actions of “conversionary” missionaries like Livingstone greatly increased the stability of the later democracies that formed.

What were these actions? The same things that Dr. Livingstone focused on:

- a) Promoting religious liberty and education of every man, woman and child so that the people could read God’s Word, which brought greater stability and a shared moral code
- b) Mass printing (which included calling attention to the vices and corruptions in their communities by comparing them to God’s Word leading to repentance)
- c) Calling people to meet, discuss and volunteer, which brought change to neighborhoods

- d) Challenging the Church to care about the burdens of their “neighbor” on the other side of the world and to share in their struggles
- e) Fighting the lions that came with the missionaries, or as Woodberry put it, “publicizing the abuses of colonialism.” These actions not only let the gospel go forward in new ways but brought stability to whole countries<sup>3</sup>

Given what Jesus says about the yeast of the kingdom, it should come as no surprise to us that following the simple kingdom principles of sharing God’s Word and teaching the people ALL that Jesus taught us changes the course of history and blesses more than just the people who take up their cross.

What we should take as a cautionary tale from the mission trends of the colonial era is that in the areas where there was rampant secularization of the Church, though the Enlightenment ideals seemed the same, the results were devastating. Without conversionary Protestant (missionary) actions, there was no one fighting the lions. Exploitation went unchecked, the society at large ignored the cries of the poor and led the people into chaos— all while having access to God’s Word, but no conversionary influence.

The missionaries were united in their fight of the major lions of their day. Their ability to rouse the people to be ready to fight the lions for the sake of the gospel seems to be a legacy unique to their movement. In the post-colonial era, missionaries are less associated with their governments, the global church is much more widespread, and global communication is easier, so tactics may vary, but the need for missionary involvement is no less crucial.

Today missionaries face huge industries, profiting from the death of millions of people, whose reach extends past any one government. Never before in history has there been so much money to be made in the destruction of human life. Never before in history has it been so important for missionaries to speak up against the lions boldly attacking human life in broad daylight with no fear. God sees the destruction and He has a response— may we be a part of that response. 

<sup>2</sup> Livingstone, David, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*.

<sup>3</sup> *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 106, NO. 2, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” by Robert Woodberry, 2012.