

CONQUEST: THE AMERICAN WAY ...BUT IS IT THE BEST PATH?



GREG PARSONS
/ GLOBAL DIRECTOR,
U.S. CENTER FOR
WORLD MISSION

Every two years I am reminded just how easy it is to fall into nationalistic triumphalism. Blame the Olympics. Here in the U.S. we generally think of the Games as friendly but serious competition—may the best man or woman win! The rest of the world, however, often sees America and

China, as unfairly fielding mostly professional athletes who are likely to win a medal in almost every event.

Followers of Christ sent into the world from more powerful nations face a bigger problem. Not only do others perceive in us an underlying mentality of conquest, their perceptions are largely true. Like it or not, perhaps without realizing it, we actually do think we are superior. As believers we try to combat such tendencies, but in the end we approach our global outreach both assured of the truth (which is good to a point) and expecting, if not demanding results. If we're honest, we in the English-speaking world feel particularly proud of the massive biblical resources available in our language, some of which is actually helpful. Add to this our emphasis on (and experience in) explaining the Bible and it's not surprising that people see us as *teachers* rather than *learners*. We have all the answers! The fact is that those we are going to "reach" and "serve" know full well that we haven't lived *our* faith out in *their* cultural context.

Our mobilization efforts feed this mentality. We preach, pray, and encourage young people to "get out there and make a difference with their lives." We tell them, "You can reach a group that has never had the gospel!" The truth behind this is lost if it reinforces our superiority complex instead of God's purposes in redemptive history.

Global workers who persevere through the difficult "stuff" of cultural adjustment know that they often have no idea what to do to make an impact. They work in the frustration of little visible fruit. Blame it on the training they didn't receive or the fact that they aren't using some favorite strategy of ours, the reality is that in most places in the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist worlds, we are neither prepared by our cultural or church background, nor are we perceived as particularly helpful (other than as a source for money!).

Recently I heard another story from workers who, after sending people for ten years to India have yet to see the "breakthroughs" they have seen back in the States and expected in India. By now, they know that they have no idea what to do. Not only does the lack of any progress cause avoidable attrition, but more importantly they are making no visible progress for the gospel.

Yet even as I write about "visible progress," it sounds triumphalist. We don't even have the words to describe what we are trying to say without reinforcing the problem. And many of these words or illustrations are from the Bible. We use OT illustrations, such as Joshua, and talk about

conquering the enemies of the land. I've heard people fervently praying that the gospel would fall like *bombs* to the unreached peoples of the world!

I know what they mean, and I appreciate the heart that I hope is behind it. The scarier thing to me is what comes across to the non-believer: they see a "we know your problems... we have the answer! The trouble is that we often don't even know how to shape the question the same way they would.

I realize that all of this is not true of all of the workers we are mobilizing and sending out. While I am often discouraged by what I hear, I am often encouraged too. I see God sending out people who have a heart to serve, to learn, to grow in cultural understanding, and to trust Him for the impact. Despite the temptation of triumphalism, we should continue to pray big prayers and to prepare the next generation of workers with a big vision—one tempered by love, discipline, a servant's heart, dove-like innocence and snake-like wisdom (Matthew 10:16).

Let me close with a question. A mission leader who works with younger leaders around the world asked me the other day about characteristics of new workers that lead to effectiveness. We can continue to contribute to "fruitful practices." (See a great list to start with noted in several articles in the *IJFM*, issues 26 and 27. See: www.ijfm.org

What characteristics do you think are crucial? Share your perspective below this article on our web site.

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