

Monthly Missiological Reflection #3

"Why Missionaries Fall"

Within the last three years two long-term missionaries in East Africa, men I count as personal friends, have fallen into sexual sin. "Impossible!" you say? That can not be!! Most "regular church people" perceive missionaries to be super-saints, just a little lower than Jesus. They surely could not sin! But the reality remains: Within the last three years two long-term missionaries in East Africa, men I count as personal friends, have fallen into sexual sin.

One of these missionaries confessionally tells his story to future missions students. He says that many missionaries, like himself, have the perception that they can handle their own problems. Because they are ashamed of their lusts, their daily fantasies, they are unwilling to seek help. "What would my wife and my co-workers think?" they reason. But "confession," according to this missionary, "is liberating but humiliating!" With the wisdom of hindsight and fuller maturity, he confesses, "If I had opened my life and confessed my sins to teammates and national co-workers, I would not have fallen." After his sins became public he remembers weeping in brokenness and shame while flying from East Africa to the United States without his wife.

Another experienced missionary writes that he was totally thrown off balance by the "intensity of the temptations that hit [him] . . . when [he] arrived on the field. Desires that lay buried and almost forgotten in the depths of [his] fallen nature rose up time and again, demanding to be satisfied" (Murray 1998, 66). Paul had probably experienced something similar when he wrote: "I do not run. . . aimlessly; . . . No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize " (I Cor. 9:26-27).

Missionaries are tempted just like all other people. Living in and adapting to a new cultural setting, however, makes them more vulnerable to sin. George Murray writes, "The struggle with a difficult language, different customs, rejection as a foreigner, and unresponsiveness to the gospel can lower a missionary's resistance and make him susceptible to anger, fear, impatience--even dishonesty or impurity" (1998, 68). At a latter stage of adaptation they can become discouraged by the lack of response, continued inability to communicate, and interpersonal conflict with teammates. Discouraged missionaries are more susceptible to sin.

Some cultures overtly parade certain types of sins to which the missionary is vulnerable. Europe, for instance, is a continent of "blatant pornography, uncensored television, and topless beaches" that provides strong temptations for some new missionaries from North America (Murray 1998, 67). In Africa corruption is a way of life, and the missionary can easily compromise his Christian standards by the desire for a better exchange rate or by giving a "gift" in order to circumvent bureaucratic red-tape.

The loss of vision frequently creates an environment where missionaries are vulnerable to Satan's attacks. Missionaries tend to be people of great vision. But sometimes this vision is rooted more in human ego than divine direction. When the dreams of becoming renowned missionaries fade and the immensity and difficulty of "real people" ministry becomes evident, they become extremely vulnerable in areas of weakness. They lose their vision for God's work and begin to think about worldly things. Thus discouragement breeds sin, and humanly-contrived visions die for lack of divine impetus. Consequently, sin can be described as "the greatest cause of fruitlessness and failure in world missions" (Hale 1995, 169).

As a pack of wild dogs follows after a herd of wildebeests waiting for an old one to get tired or a young one to stray, so Satan stalks missionaries hoping to bring about their demise. He is like a "roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). To avoid sin, missionaries must not sleep, as the apostles did in the Garden of Gethsemane, but follow Christ's injunction to "watch and pray so that [they] will not fall into temptation" (Matt. 26:41). Like many missionaries, Peter

did not believe that he would fall (Matt. 26:31-35), and slept rather than prepare himself in Gethsemane. Like Jesus, missionaries need Gethsemane-like prayer experiences so that they might turn their struggles over to God (Heb. 5:7-9). Only the Holy Spirit can emancipate one from sin: Paul wrote, "If you live according to the sinful nature you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live" (Rom. 8:13). This emancipation is not merely the endeavor of individual missionaries as they prostrate themselves before God but also the work of an entire missionary community living transparent, confessing lives in compassionate accountability.

Sources Cited

Hale, Thomas. *On Being a Missionary*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995.

Murray, George. "Missionaries' Temptations." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. Vol. 31. No. 1 (January 1998):66-69.

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