

Reshaping the Self-Distorted Foreign Missionary

What happens when the western missionary finds his body abroad

by Mark Roth

“What’s Wrong with Western Missionaries?” The title of Nik Ripken’s article grabbed me by the eyeballs and gave my nose a good yank. *Of course* I clicked the link posted on Facebook by my cousin.

Of course, because I lived in Mexico most of the first fifteen years of my life. (That’s a bit more than one fourth of my life.) I’ve been a member of our congregation’s Mexico mission board the last twenty years of my life. (That’s over a third of my life.) Between those two chunks, I lived another six years or so in Mexico, five them as a married missionary. (That’s slightly over another tenth of my life.) Oh, I should clarify that I wasn’t born in Mexico. But “pretty close,” so to speak. My parents entered missionary service when I was less than two months old.



I decided to use excerpts from Nik Ripken’s article as indented jump-off points for some of my own thoughts.

As darkness settled in...I asked these believers about Western missionaries.

“What do we do well? What things do we not do well? What should we start doing? What should we stop doing? What should we pick up? What should we lay down? What makes a good missionary?”

These believers looked at each other in horror. For hours, they had related their most personal stories.

They had shared accounts of rejection by parents and siblings. They had unpacked events where they had been shamed and beaten. They had told of other believers who were forced to marry nonbelievers. They had even recalled brothers and sisters who had been brutalized before being killed for their faith. They had not held back the most intimate stories surrounding their families, faith, and persecution.

But when I ask this final question about Western missionaries, they froze.

I pushed harder. I sincerely needed to hear what they would say.

Finally, with great hesitation, one of the believers looked at me and said, “I don’t know what makes a good missionary, but I can tell you the name of the man we love.”

If the missionary doesn’t love the people, how can he be a good missionary? Sure, he can declare the Good News. In their own tongue. Fluently. Even with the local accent. But if he doesn’t truly love the recipient of his message, **why should that person respond to the Message of Divine Love?**

If the people don’t love the missionary,
how can he be a good missionary?

If the missionary doesn’t love the people, how shall they love him? And if the people don’t love the missionary, how can he be a good missionary?

Well, back to the article...

I journeyed to five different places in that country. For ten long days, I interviewed believers. Each time, as I reached the end of the interview, I asked the same question: “What makes a good missionary?”

The response was identical each time: “We don’t know what makes a good missionary, but we can tell you the name of the man we love.”

Amazingly, I heard the same name in every place!

When I asked why they loved him, the answer was always the same: “We don’t know. We just love him.”

I have taught, preached to, and held Bible studies with many people in Mexico. If I ever do it again, I think one of my top-most priorities in my presentation will be seeing an audience of individuals, each of whom I love.

That was the way Christ saw His audiences. And since He now lives His life in me, He would love them through my love. And I would love them because of His love living out through me. The people would know it.

“Christ liveth in me.”
(Galatians 2:20)

Well, why do you suppose Nik’s missionary friend was so loved by “his” people? Brace yourself for the answer!

Finally, one of the men leaned across the table toward me and said forcefully, “You want to know why we love him? We love him because he borrows money from us!”

[...]

“He needs us. The rest of you have never needed us.”

Except the other missionaries *did* need the “natives.” They just lived as though they didn’t, unaware of their own need. After all, missionaries are supposed to be need-fillers, you know, not need-havers who “have” to rely on the “natives” for help.

If I ever serve Mexico again, I want to live out such an awareness of need. **I want to esteem my fellow believers there as essential to my own spiritual well-being and development.** Not in a contrived, artificial sort of way. Not in a theoretical, conceptual way. I want to live in the reality of being part of a local body of believers called together by God for their mutual benefit. I don’t want to be a warped member, disconnected from the local body as though I had no need of it.

I want to be a beneficiary of God’s work in them. Just like God tells us so plainly in 1 Corinthians 12:14,18,21 and Ephesians 4:15,16...



For the body is not one member, but many.

But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.

And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Every missionary serving within the context of a national church needs to have this as one of his life realities: “These members and I are part of the same body.” He belongs to that local body every bit as much (and even more, in practical terms) as he belongs to his “home congregation” back in the “homeland.” Pity the missionary who doesn’t understand this truth! Blessed the foreign missionary who truly finds his “body” when he’s abroad!

OK, let’s grab another paragraph from Nik’s article...

So much of what we do is about us and about what we can provide. We travel around the world to meet needs, not to be honest about our own, nor to become part of their body of Christ. We are the “haves,” and they are the “have-nots.”

As long as I see myself primarily as the contributor and them as the recipients, I’ll deprive myself of essential spiritual nutrients and strength God puts in them by His Spirit. I wonder how much more mature I would be now had I not seen myself as mostly a “have” with a lot to give. **How much did I miss of what God would have done in my life through them** had I done far better at recognizing them as “haves” with something to give to *me*?

“The rest of you
have never needed us.”

Nik confronts us with a series of questions:

But here’s the challenge: What’s left for local people to do? What’s left for the Holy Spirit to provide? Where do we model how to trust God and his provision through the local body of believers? Where do local believers find their worth, their sanctified sense of significance? What gifts and sacrifice can they bring to this enterprise of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth?

Rarely did the apostle Paul create dependency upon himself. Often in his letters, Paul expressed how desperately he needed his brothers and sisters in Christ.

I want God to develop in me (and I want to cultivate) such a sense of need. And appreciation. And dependence. And respect. And...

I would take to heart the lesson of John the Baptist, saying about a local believer what John said about Jesus: I must decrease so that he can increase (John 3:30). I would invite local believers to lead in the light while I served in the shadows. I would have pressed into what it meant to really need them.

For the last while, I've thought on and off of being a decreaser so that others can increase. I've long thought of being back in Mexico among the people of my childhood and youth — “my people,” yes. As a Bible teacher and Gospel preacher, yes. But also as an encourager and builder of national preachers and teachers. Now I can add to those thoughts this one: as **an intentionally dependent learner from national believers**.

But these are not heights of perspective and experience to which I can hoist myself by tugging more mightily at my sandal straps. To “achieve” these things I must ask God for them (Matthew 7:7). This is *His* work (Philippians 2:13). This isn't about me thinking better thoughts on my own; it's about my having the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:1-8). As with all Christian living, this begins and continues and ends with Christ living His life in me (Galatians 2:20). **This is all about abiding in Jesus and bearing His fruit** (John 15:4-8). Our sufficiency is of Him (2 Corinthians 3:5)!

Christ in me does not ever underestimate, minimize, or dismiss His Spirit's work in the lives of believers just because they are of a different culture than I am. The treasure of Light and Truth abides in any earthen vessel yielded to the Lordship of Jesus. This is true regardless of the nationality or ethnicity of the clay He used to build the vessel. The American missionary makes no better vessel than the national Christian — we are all made of the same temporal, imperfect dust of the earth! We must bear that truth in mind when we read verses such as 2 Corinthians 4:6 and 7:

The American missionary
makes no better vessel
than the national Christian.
We are all made of
the same dust of the earth!

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

Nik Ripken so well expressed some of the truths that have slowly and firmly grown into my ideas of being a foreign missionary serving in the context of an established national church. It also adds new dimensions I hadn't thought of before. Thank you, Nik!

What makes a good missionary? Certainly not the self-sufficient one!

Well, whether you are interested in evangelism generally or in missions specifically, I urge you to read Nik's full article (on the next several pages of this document). And if your interest goes no deeper than “just” praying for missionaries you know, that's deep enough to warrant reading the whole article — it will give you a new way to pray for them.

Suggested books to read

- *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*
- *Searching for the Indigenous Church*
- *Foreign to Familiar*
- *Understanding Christian Missions*
- *An Introduction to Christian Missions*

The web version of my article is available on my *Anabaptists* web site (click the link in the footer):
<http://www.anabaptists.org/writings/reshaping-the-self-distorted-foreign-missionary.html>

If you would like to contribute your thoughts on this subject, please do so at my accompanying blog post:
[How to Improve the Needy American Missionary](http://www.eaf.net/mvp/2016/how-to-improve-the-needy-american-missionary/)
<http://www.eaf.net/mvp/2016/how-to-improve-the-needy-american-missionary/>

—Mark Roth (September-October 2016)

What's Wrong with Western Missionaries?

by Nik Ripken

Their words almost knocked me over. They hit me like a horse hoof to the gut.

When I was a young boy, I helped my father train quarter horses. And we always felt the danger of being the recipient of a wayward hoof. One day, not paying close attention, I was kicked, leaving a well-defined hoof print in the center of my stomach. Every ounce of breath left my body.

Decades later, challenging words delivered by believers from an Islamic background left me just as breathless.

Listening to Persecuted Believers

This event took place after we had visited over 45 countries, interviewing believers in persecution from backgrounds including communism, atheism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. We were learning from believers in persecution how to make Christ known and how to give birth to house churches that then would reproduce on their own.

After experiencing the devastation of Somalia, broken over the martyrdom of over 90% of Somali believers, our learning curve was acute. Believers in persecution were generous with their wisdom; they instinctively understood that investing in us gave deeper meaning to their own suffering.

Now we were returning to the world of Islam. It was in the world of Islam where most of the believers we knew and loved were killed. It was in the world of Islam where our middle son died on Easter Sunday morning of an asthma attack. Islamic environments at that time felt like the graveyard of faith.

Islamic Persecution Is Unique

We had already learned how important it was to listen. So we set aside time to listen to the believing culture inside a Muslim country, in rural and urban locations, among both young and old, both men and women, and those literate as well as oral communicators. They told us how they had heard of Jesus and his Bible for the first time. We were startled to discover that their experience was quite different from the experiences of most of the rest of the believing world.

In our earlier travels, we had learned that much persecution originates within governments and institutions of power. In the U.S.S.R. and China persecution was institutionalized. Persecutors were typically somewhere “out there,” and they employed means to find, punish, incarcerate, and kill believers.

In the world of Islam, we discovered that persecutors are typically not “out there,” but “in here.” In Islam, the persecutor often eats at your breakfast table, watches movies with you, and sleeps in your bedroom.

In earlier interviews, we had been told of parents and grandparents who would hide a believing son or daughter from the government. Within Islamic settings, however, it was the parents and grandparents who would often have incarcerated, banished, or even killed their own believing children and grandchildren.

What Makes a Good Missionary?

As we talked with persecuted believers, we discovered that they often wanted to talk not just about their own persecution, but also about us, workers from the West. As darkness settled in, after a full day of stories and interviews, I asked these believers about Western missionaries.

“What do we do well? What things do we not do well? What should we start doing? What should we stop doing? What should we pick up? What should we lay down? What makes a good missionary?”

These believers looked at each other in horror. For hours, they had related their most personal stories.

They had shared accounts of rejection by parents and siblings. They had unpacked events where they had been shamed and beaten. They had told of other believers who were forced to marry nonbelievers. They had even recalled brothers and sisters who had been brutalized before being killed for their faith. They had not held back the most intimate stories surrounding their families, faith, and persecution.

But when I ask this final question about Western missionaries, they froze.

I pushed harder. I sincerely needed to hear what they would say.

Finally, with great hesitation, one of the believers looked at me and said, “I don’t know what makes a good missionary, but I can tell you the name of the man we love.”

When he told me that man’s name, I asked him the next obvious question, “Why do you love him?”

They said, “We don’t know. We just love him.”

The Man They All Loved

I journeyed to five different places in that country. For ten long days, I interviewed believers. Each time, as I reached the end of the interview, I asked the same question: “What makes a good missionary?”

The response was identical each time: “We don’t know what makes a good missionary, but we can tell you the name of the man we love.”

Amazingly, I heard the same name in every place!

When I asked why they loved him, the answer was always the same: “We don’t know. We just love him.”

At this point, I began to feel jealous. I wondered why people hadn’t loved me this much. I found myself developing a grudge against a man I didn’t even know!

The final interview in that country ended in the same way. After another long day of interviews I asked again, “What makes a good worker from the West? What makes a good missionary?”

While I silently prayed not to hear the same answer, they said to me, “We don’t know what makes a good missionary, but we can tell you the man we love.” By now, the next sentence was predictable and expected; they mentioned that same name that I had heard over and over again.

The Missing Ingredient in Missions

By this point, I was so frustrated that I told them firmly that I was not going to leave until they told me why this worker from the West was such a wonderful man. I insisted on an answer.

Finally, one of the men leaned across the table toward me and said forcefully, “You want to know why we love him? We love him because he borrows money from us!”

I was stunned. I thought to myself, *Well, I can do that, if that’s what it takes to be loved by believers in persecution.*

His statement, however, hinted at something much deeper, and I pleaded with him to explain. What I heard felt like that horse-kick to the stomach. The words knocked the breath out of my body.

The man said, “When this missionary’s father died, he came to us and asked for our help. We didn’t have much, but we gathered an offering of love. We bought him a plane ticket so that he could go home to America and bury his father. This man and his family give everything they have to the poor. They struggle to pay rent and school fees, and put meat on the table. And when he has a great need, what does he do? He doesn’t go to the other Westerners for money. He comes to us. He comes to the scattered and the poor, he comes to local believers, and he asks for, and gets, our help.”

“Do you want to know why we love him? He needs us. The rest of you have never needed us.”

We Need to Need the People We Serve

I was tearfully overwhelmed. And I confessed the arrogance of Western missionaries “and my own arrogance. So much of what we do is about us and about what we can provide. We travel around the world *to meet needs*, not to be honest about our own, nor to become part of their body of Christ. We are the “haves,” and they are the “have-nots.”

Though our motives are not always suspect, we generally come and tell other people to “sit down and listen” while we stand and speak. We are aggressive, and we expect local people to remain passive. We bring the gospel, Bibles, and hymnbooks. We provide baptisms, discipleship, and places to meet. We choose the leaders. We care for orphans, build orphanages, rescue the broken, and care for the crippled.

And those are all wonderful things.

But here’s the challenge: What’s left for local people to do? What’s left for the Holy Spirit to provide? Where do we model how to trust God and his provision through the local body of believers? Where do local believers find their worth, their sanctified sense of significance? What gifts and sacrifice can they bring to this enterprise of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth?

Rarely did the apostle Paul create dependency upon himself. Often in his letters, Paul expressed how desperately he needed his brothers and sisters in Christ. He called those friends by name years later. He never forgot them. When possible, he returned to be with them. When he could not go, he sent them someone else. And he faithfully wrote to them, expressing his love, encouragement, and correction. In a word, he needed them.

If I Were to Start Over

If I were to start my missionary life over, I would bury my pride and unpack some humility. I would become a brother, a friend, and a peer. I would care more about the names of my brothers and sisters on the “mission field” and less about the numbers of baptisms, people discipled, churches planted, and orphanages built.

I would take to heart the lesson of John the Baptist, saying about a local believer what John said about Jesus: I must decrease so that he can increase (John 3:30). I would invite local believers to lead in the light while I served in the shadows. I would have pressed into what it meant to really need them.

During most of my ministry in Africa, I felt that I was the apostle Paul. I now know that I often need to be a Timothy.

For those of us in the West, this image should seize our hearts: Jesus taking the cloth from around his waist and washing the feet of the disciples, saying, “The last will be first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:16).

[Nik Ripken’s article](#) first appeared at desiringGod.org and is reproduced here by permission of the author.