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**Title: Vulnerable Mission Is Worth A Second Look**

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**Bio:**

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Presently with World Mission Associates, Jean coaches and trains pastors, churches, missionaries, organizations, and teams on how to intentionally inspire indigenous people to mobilize their local capabilities, resources, and cultural creativity.

**Abstract:**

There is a common belief that missionaries or mission organizations from the West have a personal material and economic advantage and that they should use that advantage to its utmost around the world.

This mindset is in sharp contrast to the apostolic age and has yielded serious consequences which often render the Great Commission effort counterproductive.

The purpose of this paper is to invite mission practitioners to revitalize the vulnerable positioning modeled by the apostles in order to minimize hindrances to the Great Commission and enhance local productivity.

**Vulnerable Mission Is Worth A Second Look**  
**By Jean Johnson**

*I could see that we were in big trouble.* The Cambodian pastor and I had teamed up to motivate and train church planters from his church. The very first session, we made the following request: “Please share your experience in coming to faith in Jesus Christ.” The first man shared how a Christian organization gave out free glasses, and this was the trigger to his belief in Jesus. Another man talked about how his family received rice and yet another how he received a piece of land. The same type of testimonies continued. All I could think was, *We are in trouble.* I kept my concerns to myself. About a month later, sitting in a circle on the same woven mat, the church planters began to ask for glasses, rice, and land so they had perks to share with their neighbors, as they shared the good news. In this case, a cycle of dependency was well on its way.

Throughout the world and even more so in the West, there is a common belief that missionaries, mission organizations, and churches from the West have a personal material and economic advantage and that they should use that advantage to its utmost around the world, especially to help the poor and advance the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Mathematically and in terms of generosity, this seems true. The more generous we are, the thinking goes, the more resources we will give; the faster we make resources available to others, the faster the church of Jesus Christ will grow worldwide. However, this formula did not work for me.

In my early days as a missionary in Cambodia, I went right to work as a pioneer missionary with the aim to make the first handful of disciples—and do this in such a way that those local disciples would perpetuate the disciple-making commission in their own context and among unreached people groups in their Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria.

Unfortunately, I conceptualized and organized “church” in Cambodia based on some of the resources I had the ability to obtain from my homeland and make available for work in Cambodia. I reasoned, *If I am generous and “pay the bills” now, inevitably the impoverished Cambodians will catch the vision and assume full responsibility through their own cultivated generosity and maturity in Christ.* This “inevitable” self-giving and self-responsibility was more rare than common. In actuality, my method of subsidizing the discipleship-making process and church movement in someone else’s country actually stifled that very process of maturity and independence for the local people. I certainly tried to make up the gap by teaching on giving, generosity, and stewardship, but the dependent mentality was deeply ingrained. In the gap of economic disparity, my means became the enemy of empowerment and actually impeded the Great Commission effort—the *spontaneous* multiplication of disciples of Jesus Christ.

Roland Allen, a former English missionary who promoted mission strategy for indigenous churches in the early twentieth century, summarized my predicament in the twenty-first:

We must remember that the vast majority of our converts have been, and are being, educated in dependence, and that the vast majority of our missionaries have not advanced even to the point of believing in the desirability of spontaneous expansion from the very beginning. Even those who believe in its desirability are commonly under the impression that they are labouring with all their might to stimulate it, whilst they are practising those very things which hinder it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1962), 41.

A variety of Western mission agencies are presently teaching and motivating existing believers around the world to take their place in the Great Commission by becoming responsible stewards and generous givers—hoping that somehow all the generosity around the world will combine and equal a “reached” and nonimpoverished world. In some ways, I am a part of that task force. But I am convinced that we need to avoid unhealthy dependency at the foundational level—the beginning—by ensuring our practices do not hinder spontaneous expansion in the long run.

Our methods are informed by the twin thoughts that “poverty is so profound around the world” and “we are blessed to be a blessing,” but many of those methods choke the ability of the local church to multiply in its own context, much less go full cycle and become missionaries to another people group. But why does that pair cause certain methods to be amiss? In my case, other people’s material lack and my American abundance caused me to approach missions work as a heroine: “I am here to make a difference and to make up the difference.” But each time I imposed a “church life” beyond the local people’s ability (using all the goodies we need to “do church” in America) and made up the difference, I created a dependency mentality—ingrained thoughts developed among those with whom I worked:

“Our ways are inferior and will never equate to yours.”

“This is how it works; the mission pays for what they started.”

This mission-imparted mentality doesn’t go away overnight:

I was rather shocked when discussing with a Thai leader the need to bring the Gospel to a large minority group in the country. His response was that they would go to already Christianized tribal groups because they could get fast results, and that they would *leave resistant groups to Westerners who had a lot of money to burn.*<sup>2</sup> (italics mine)

Dependency is not just a welfare condition. It becomes an insidious state of mind that can debilitate generation after generation once it gains a foothold.<sup>3</sup>

If we were to try to identify the one main thing that stands in our way when it comes to the missionary enterprise . . . it would be this: the overwhelming attitude and complex of superiority with which the vast majority of the Western Church is afflicted, and its twin evil, namely, the complex of inferiority that is so deeply rooted in the Church found in the so-called “Majority World.”<sup>4</sup>

Some have chosen a simple equation: Western missionary dollars + African availability and zeal = missionary enterprise . . . This model is simplistic. It attempts to address the problem, but in the process it has the potential of killing

<sup>2</sup> Alan Johnson, *Apostolic Function In 21<sup>st</sup> Century Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Saint, *The Great Omission* (Seattle, WA: YWAM Publishing, 2001),

<sup>4</sup> Solomon Aryeetey, “Sebi tafraste (with all due respects): A Word to the West from the Rest” EMQonline.com, Apr. 2013.

the very same African initiative it purports to bring about. For us, it is of the utmost importance that this enterprise be truly indigenous.<sup>5</sup>

Mission strategies that are heavily loaded with material economic abundance may actually defeat the goal of spontaneous multiplication. How many people make disciples or reproduce the church if they lack initiative, consider the work your problem, are locked in a debilitating mindset of inferiority, and are participating in a church that lacks an indigenous nature? The hindrances to an expert, money-driven mission paradigm are numerous: superficial conversions, the spread of a prosperity gospel, nonreproducible patterns, Westernization of the gospel, syncretism, and more. My goal in this paper is not to elaborate on each consequence, but rather to invite those who do missions to consider alternative paradigms—more, specifically to consider the Great Commission task through the eyes of vulnerable mission. Realizing the fact that there were times my *modus operandi* disempowered local people in the long term, the following statement by Jonathan Bonk forever haunts me:

Material and economic abundance has been a hallmark of the *modus operandi* of Western missionaries throughout the past two centuries. In sharp contrast to their apostolic counterparts of the first century, portrayed by St. Paul as being “on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena” (1 Cor. 4:9), missionaries from Europe and the Americas have — with some notable exceptions — manifested escalating levels of economic and material entitlement beyond the dreams of a majority of the world’s population.<sup>6</sup>

No one can deny the fact that the use material and economic abundance is an integral part of Western missions. Yet, we are hard-pressed to find apostolic examples in which heaps of money was the key to strategy or success. In actuality, Jesus, the disciples, and Paul left money out of the picture for the most part, and their vulnerable positioning in missions is worth a second look. I suggest that vulnerable positioning relates to at least the following: attitude, methods, reasoning, and communication.

### **Vulnerable Attitude**

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power. (1 Corinthians 2:2–5, NIV)

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<sup>5</sup> Solomon Aryeetey, “The Road to Self-Sufficiency in Africa’s Missionary Development,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 33 (January 1997), 34–38.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Bonk, *Missions And Money: Revised and Expanded* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 17.

I am all for combining word and deed, but Western missionaries (and that includes me) may have unconscious ulterior motives for relying on compassion projects that are often elaborate and make outsiders indispensable to the process. We believe that if we are needed by needy people, we will have an easy audience for the gospel. In this case, we become patrons to the people by providing an educational, economical, and physical help. In turn, the recipients of our help become loyal to us, which includes becoming Christians in one form or another.

Not only is this contrary to Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians 1:2–5, it puts the local people, influenced by our mission work, in a position to have to become patrons of others as they perpetuate making disciples. Thus, they need a lot of money to imitate our impressive and persuasive deed projects.

It is my belief that Westerners need to take a second look at what it means to come in weakness with great fear and trembling so that other's faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

### **Vulnerable Resources**

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26–39, NIV)

The Ethiopian official said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" Philip could have answered, "Well, first of all you will need more Jewish-Christian catechism, circumcision, and a more recognized formal ceremony." He

did not. Philip didn't bog down the "believing and following Christ process" with a complicated system or nonessentials:

St. Paul's method is not in harmony with the modern Western spirit. We modern teachers from the West are by nature and by training persons of restless activity and boundless self-confidence. We are accustomed to assuming an attitude of superiority towards Eastern peoples, and to point to our material progress as the justification of our attitude. We are accustomed by tradition to an elaborate system of church organization, and a peculiar code of morality. We cannot imagine any Christianity worthy of the name existing without the elaborate machinery that we invented. We naturally expect our converts to adopt from us not only essentials but also accidentals.<sup>7</sup>

In Philip's place, we might have said to the Ethiopian official, "You need more Christian catechism, and the ceremony should be more official, with robes and a credentialed, seminary-experienced minister." We can read account after account through the gospels and the book of Acts that reveal the messengers didn't bog down Christ-experiences by introducing elaborate machinery and the resources to maintain it.

It is my belief that Westerners need to take a second look at what it means to leave our elaborate machinery and accidentals at home.

### **Vulnerable Reasoning**

For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. (1 Corinthians 9:9–12, NIV)

A typical strategic question is, "What should we do to forward the gospel?" Then we draw conclusions from this question. But I have learned a great deal from the apostle Paul on how to ask a much more vulnerable strategic question: "What will we bear or put up with that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ?" Roland Allen emphasizes vulnerable reasoning through the apostle Paul's example:

Similarly in the Church there was a class of people who made their living by preaching. St. Paul did not condemn these; on the contrary, he argued that it was legitimate that they should do so. Heathen religion, the Jewish law, Christ's directions, all alike insisted on the right of the minister to receive support. But he himself did not receive it, and he was careful to explain his reason. He saw that it

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids, MI: World Dominion Press, 1962), 8

would be a hindrance to his work. “We bear all things,” he says, “that we may cause no hindrance to the Gospel of Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Vulnerable Communication**

So Paul found himself alone for some time in Athens. He would walk through the city, feeling deeply frustrated about the abundance of idols there. *As in the previous cities*, he went to the synagogue. Once again, he engaged in debate *about Jesus* with both ethnic Jews and devout *Greek-born converts to Judaism*. He would even wander around in the marketplace, speaking with anyone he happened to meet. Eventually he got into a debate with some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Some were dismissive from the start.

**Philosophers:** What’s this fast-talker trying to pitch?

**Others:** He seems to be advocating the gods of distant lands.

*They said this* because of what Paul had been preaching about Jesus and the resurrection.

This stirred their curiosity, because the favorite pastime of Athenians (including foreigners who had settled there) was conversation about new and unusual ideas. So they brought him to the *rock outcropping known as the Areopagus, where Athens’ intellectuals regularly gathered for debate*, and they invited him to speak.

**Athenians:** May we understand this new teaching of yours? It is intriguingly unusual. We would love to know its meaning.

**Paul:** Athenians, *as I have walked your streets*, I have observed your strong and diverse religious ethos. You truly are a religious people. I have stopped again and again to examine carefully the religious statues and inscriptions that fill your city. On one such altar, I read this inscription: “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.” I am not here to tell you about a strange foreign deity, but about this One whom you already worship, though without full knowledge. This is the God who made the universe and all it contains, the God who is the King of all heaven and all earth. It would be illogical to assume that a God of this magnitude could possibly be contained in any man-made structure, no matter how majestic. Nor would it be logical to think that this God would need human beings to provide Him with food and shelter—after all, He Himself would have given to humans everything they need—life, breath, *food, shelter, and so on*. (Acts 17:16-25, The Voice)

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I think the greatest tragedy of donor-driven and project-driven missions is the neglect of people's worldview. The promise of upward mobility tends to lead to quick results and gives the impression that the deep work of Christ—transformation—has taken place. So we just move right along. But often, the reality is that there has been a superficial alignment with Christianity, but the worldview—how people intimately view and interact with life—has been untouched, unchallenged, and unchanged. The apostle Paul intentionally discerned the worldview of the people and spoke at the heart of that worldview. Why is this considered vulnerable? Communicating at a worldview level takes initiative, time, patience, effort; and a willingness to not operate out of your own worldview or communicate as if everyone possess your worldview.

“Jesus is a foreigner” is a common conclusion of many people around the world. Giving people the gospel in a language not their own and expecting them to express worship with borrowed music and songs is definitely not a vulnerable approach. By the time the gospel reached the Isaan people of Thailand, the message and experience were wrapped in Western and Thai culture. It wasn't until a grandma unexpectedly stood up and danced in an Isaan style to express her appreciation to Jesus that the Isaan culture was considered acceptable in their worship experience. Paul DeNeui, a missionary who works in Southeast Asia, explains:

What happened after Grandma danced changed everything. Dance became a part of worship. And music soon followed . . . Isaan culture has a variety of beautiful and melodious indigenous musical instruments . . . Over time a whole hymnody of Isaan music has been produced and continues to be written by gifted men and women changed by the grace of God. The church has truly become an indigenous Thai Isaan church that rejoices in using the best forms from their culture to celebrate new life in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Using the local language (instead of Thai) and music caused the Isaan believers to exclaim, “Jesus talks *our* village talk.”<sup>10</sup> I had an American Christian pastor try to convince me that cross-cultural communicators should not make the effort to use or to facilitate the translation of Scriptures into languages other than what he considered the five global languages (Mandarin-Chinese, Spanish, English, Arabic, and French). I have to say this bothered me intensely. Yes, it is true that some languages are endangered, and some consider their language to be a social and economic impediment. But as an outsider, I will never be the one to suggest or “move a people along” in the direction of abandoning their heart language. As cross-cultural communicators of the gospel, it is we who are to learn the worldview and the language of the local people. We can't lose the motivation and drive to learn people's worldview, heart language, and heart music for the sake of ease on our part or a hidden desire to make everyone become like us.

In conclusion, I suggest that *vulnerability* in missions is worth a second look—and a long one at that. I personally think that we have wandered a great distance from our “apostolic counterparts of the first century.”<sup>11</sup> The apostle Paul “reached” an empire in a decade. I

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<sup>9</sup> Paul DeNeui, “What Happened When Grandma Danced,” *Missions Frontiers*, June, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Bonk, *Missions And Money: Revised and Expanded* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 17.

do believe there is something to learn from him. Missionaries clothed in vulnerability allow worldwide boasting to be about the Lord:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:26–31, NIV)