

Turning Sacred Cows into Holy Hamburgers

by Dr. Brian Abshire

Every year, right around this time, suddenly I get a number of phone calls, emails or letters from people I haven't spoken to in years; and amidst all the "Hi, How are you" stuff is also the "exciting opportunity" their little "Sally" or "Billy" has to "minister" somewhere; and they are graciously offering ME the chance to be involved if I will just send a check.

Just between you and me, few things infuriate me more when people attempt to put a pious front on their basically selfish orientation; i.e., Christians refusing to acknowledge their real motives for doing something; trying to make it sound "spiritual" when in reality they just want something for themselves. Whether it be Amway, or some other pyramid scheme, life-insurance or some other con job, they all try to sell me something not on its merits, but on the "idea" that somehow, THIS product, service, ministry, etc., will somehow make me "holier" by participating. And of all the scams that come across my desk, "short term missions" work is the one that makes me want to scream the loudest, use bad words and throw things.

You know the scam because you have been guilt-tripped into giving money to some friend, or some friend's kids, so that they could spend two or three weeks in some third world nation doing "missions' work." And of course, what sort of mean, nasty monster must I be to object to such "service for God?" And there of course is the false-piety; what these people are "selling" is the idea that by giving money to support these "missions' trips" we are giving to the Kingdom.

Well, I want to argue that this is NOT service for God; but rather a waste of time, money and energy that is inherently deceptive, manipulative and self-serving. Now don't get me wrong; I have every respect for REAL missionaries; you know the one's I mean; people who leave family and friends behind to preach the Gospel in some difficult place, confronting paganism, animism and demonism. These people are heroes and I have every respect for them.

However, please don't call yourself a "missionary" if you don't do "missionary" work. Missionaries preach the Gospel, start churches, disciple leaders and open new territories for

Christ. Thus if you are an accountant, school teacher or cook working for a mission's organization, you are NOT a missionary. You are an accountant, teacher or cook working maybe in a foreign land. And while accountants, book-keepers, cooks and janitors all have important work to do, they are NOT "missionaries." Misusing this term commits the fallacy of "equivocation" wherein you subtly shift between the meanings of words using the connotations of one meaning to justify the connotations of another.

The one question I always ask a missionary who is home on deputation is "who was the last person you led to Christ." Time and again when I have interviewed "missionaries" I find that few of them actually DO evangelism OTHER than simply "preaching." They often raise enormous amounts of money (a significant percentage of which goes to build expensive office buildings and to pay for "administration" and staff here in the US) and live on a salary that puts them in the top 2% of the culture where they "minister."

And short-term "missions" are simply all expense paid vacations to exotic locations so people can feel good about themselves on YOUR dime. The scam starts with someone wanting to "motivate" young people about "missions." Then, a program is developed wherein high-schoolers are encouraged to go to some third world nation for a couple of weeks to do "short-term mission's work." That "work" usually consists of doing some light construction or something, singing a lot of songs and holding hands for Jesus with everyone feeling really good about their "service" to God. But to go on this trip, they need YOUR money to finance airfares, hotels, meals, insurance, etc. And usually you have to raise 20% or more above basic expenses which goes right to the mission headquarters.

Now what has this "mission's trip" actually accomplished? Well, do you really think it is cost effective to send a bunch of untrained American teenagers to Central America for three weeks to do light construction work? Are third world nations really THAT short-handed in labor that it makes sense to import at great expense American unskilled labor? Couldn't you do the SAME construction work for a FRACTION of the cost by hiring local workers? So, the first "benefit" of short term missions is to deprive local people of some desperately needed work and wages; boy that must really help the kingdom!

And what about this "work" constitutes "missions;" do these kids have any training in sharing the Gospel in Spanish, Portuguese, French, Xhosa, Zulu, Swahili or whatever? What, that would take years to master and we cannot expect our kids to actually SPEAK the language of the people to whom they are supposed to be "ministering" to? And these kids have NO theological training, NO evangelism training and in fact will likely never actually TALK with foreign nationals anyway? So other than playing "ping-pong" in the Recreation center, or doing some "grunt" work

that could be hired out much more cost effectively, just what DO these kids do?

Well, they have an “experience.” And that is what so infuriates me when I am asked to give my hard earned money. In reality, these kids (and often adults) are doing NOTHING for the Kingdom that could not be done better, and more cost effectively by locals. But it makes people feel GREAT to be able to say “Well, you know I did missionary work in Africa.” And because American Christians are so selfish, they will close their heart to a legitimate plea such as “We need money to build a new building at our mission’s compound in Zambia” but will jump at the chance to pay thousands of dollars so they can go and have a “missions’ experience.”

And of course, at least these people DO go to a third world nation; I have even MORE heart-burn about Americans going to Hawaii or some other tourist destination and claiming they are doing “Mission’s work;” especially when they are doing jobs that again, could be hired out to locals at a fraction of the cost. Rich people often send their kids on a tour of Europe so they can live for a couple of years in a foreign culture, soak up the language, art, cuisine, etc., and so come home with an enriching life-experience. Some Christians get the church to finance their kids to do the same thing; but they have to “spiritualize” it because they lack a little moral integrity to admit this is the actual goal. Maybe I am a little TOO cynical here; but never underestimate the degree that Christians are willing to embrace self-deception when it suits them. But if so, then someone has to blow the whistle on this scam and call it what it is; just another form of “spiritual” socialism.

So why then do missionary societies and programs work so hard at selling short term missions’ projects that they KNOW accomplish NOTHING to actually change a culture? As the old adage goes, follow the money. These organizations also KNOW that it is hard to get people to give money. So they have to create ways to generate income.

OK, if I haven’t really offended everyone let me throw one last shot across the bow; MOST (not all) “Missions” work is a scam existing to support a bureaucracy, NOT to actually evangelize pagans. Something like half of American missionaries in Africa end up in Kenya; yet every year, the plea comes down to support our “missions” work there. Why so many missionaries to ONE nation that has been evangelized for over a century and has an over 70% Christian population? Why do most “missionaries” NEVER lead ANYONE to Christ? Why must missionaries raise incredible amounts of money BEFORE they can “go to the field;” significant amounts of which STAYS in America at the national headquarters?

I am not here decrying the hard, thankless work of REAL missionaries; just all the “wannabes” and bureaucrats who use the emotive term “missions” as a way of creating administrative nightmares that soak up millions of dollars every year and accomplish NOTHING of significance for the Kingdom of God. Think about it; the church in Europe and the United States (despite recent political muscle demonstrated in the 2004 election) has in the main lost the culture to humanism, socialism and immorality. So what is it exactly that we hope to accomplish overseas? Is recreating the failed American evangelical church in other cultures really a worthy goal?

This is not to say that the Christian church is not growing exponentially in third world nations; some estimates place the growth of Christianity by 8% a year meaning that EVERY day, another 250,000 people in the world are confessing Christ. Literally, within a very short time, the entire world will be Christianized! You may be shocked by this figure and wondering why most local missionaries or mission's organizations never mention it. But the reason may be again, monetary; the vast number of “conversions” across the world is NOT the result of missionary activity but rather personal evangelism .

There are REAL missionaries like Peter Hammond and Tim Keller and the other members of Frontline Fellowship. They get bombed by Muslims, robbed by bandits, struck down with dysentery and malaria while being attacked by the secular press and even slandered by some of the brethren. But they actually SHARE the Gospel with the unsaved and train LOCAL Christians in developing a consistent, comprehensive and Biblical worldview. I have nothing but respect for “Bob and Jane” who work surreptitiously in Muslim nations quietly evangelizing all the time knowing that one wrong move could get them arrested, imprisoned or murdered. These people deserve every dollar I can raise, and every prayer that I can give for their safety and ministry.

But I have become very cautious about giving ANY money to ANY charitable organization because through experience, I firmly believe, that despite the good intentions of many, such “ministries” are usually a waste of time, money and people. I have a hard time taking food out of my kid's mouths to pay for someone else's kids to have a three week religious vacation in Mexico or South America. And I deeply resent having the “touch” put on me by “friends” waxing piously about how spiritual their kids are for wanting to go build a recreation center in Puerto Rico rather than spend Spring Break in Mazetland (however, there ARE “mission's groups” that WILL send your kids there on Spring Break so they can minister to all the bikini clad bimbos on the beach; I am NOT kidding!).

In the various times I have done short-term “missions” I have been INVITED by local people to

their nation to accomplish a specific task; i.e., doing a seminar for politicians, academics or clergy bringing them information and training that they would not otherwise have access to. Most of these "Missions' Trips" I financed out of my own pocket, some have been paid for by the nationals themselves and ONCE I was part of a team that requested outside funds. I have turned down numerous invitations to travel overseas because I felt that I had nothing to offer that could not be accomplished better by the brethren already there; I could support the work there more effectively by donating the cost of airfare and hotels! And occasionally, I have had to turn down invitations to minister where I probably COULD have made a contribution but was unable to raise the necessary funds; American Christians have been burned so many times by so many false claims that when a legitimate need comes along they simply have nothing left to give.

So fair warning; if you send me one of those "support" letters I probably won't send it back in a crumpled ball or turn you in to the FBI for fraudulently using the federal mail service. But please don't expect me to actually GIVE you anything, and don't be surprised if I think less of you. If you want me to help support some worthy mission's project, tell me WHAT, HOW MUCH and WHY; and if it is worthy then I will prayerfully consider coming along side.

Hey look, I have NOTHING against you giving YOUR kids a great "experience." I just object to you "spiritualizing" it and expecting other people to pay for it. If you want your children to play a musical instrument, learn a foreign language, go to computer camp or go on a "missions' trip," then I say, "more power to you!" I sure wish I could afford to give MY kids these kinds of life-enriching experiences; but you know, never once have I ever thought that somehow it was the covenant community's financial responsibility to pay for them. And I am just a little shocked that so many Christians have never bothered to haul out this presupposition and examine it.

If you REALLY want your kids (or yourself) to get a REAL taste of missions work, why not attend one of Frontline Fellowships Great Commission Training course (24 June 2005 - 14 July 2005) in South Africa? This is an intensive, practical, hands-on, three-week course; daily PT, two hours before the sun rises, intensive Bible studies and lectures all morning, outreaches and practicum every afternoon, including prison ministry, film evangelism in squatter camps, Muslim evangelism, mass literature distribution at railway stations and bus stations, personal, one-on-one evangelism, etc., and either outreaches and more training in the evenings, topped up with regular late-night hikes with backpacks in the rain, in the dead of Cape Town's winter, in pitch dark, up and over mountains, or in the middle of a river in the forest. The "GCC" also includes a Bible exam, mission's exam, and numerous other tests along with assignments, Bible studies to complete etc. Most people who attend one of the "GCC's" have never before actual evangelized pagans, and unless they'd been to the Army, acknowledge that they've never been pushed so hard physically. Frontline stretches the minds and muscles of their "missionaries" introducing them to what real missions is all about; sleep deprivation, stress and strain, carrying

heavy weights, ministering in filthy conditions, and being compelled to doing brainwork paperwork in the middle of the most difficult of circumstances. Now if you want my help to have THIS kind mission's experience (think Marine Boot Camp with Bible studies) then I will happily consider supporting you.

But maybe this is too large a leap for the average American Christian so let's meet half way; if you want MY money to send YOUR kids on vacation; well, turn about is fair play; my kids have this evangelistic mission they want to do in deepest, darkest Anaheim where they can confront the idolatrous pagans in Disney Land; after all, California is the most godless state in the Union and tens of thousands of foreign visitors attend Walt's dreamland every year so clearly, this is a great way to "minister" to foreign nationals. . If you support us generously with your money we will brave the horrendously long lines in the burning sun, battle fat-middle-aged women for shade, while being forced to pay exorbitant prices for food and drink, all to the glory of God. Think about it, we can bring the "gospel" right into the heart of darkness, during the "Haunted House" ride offering a glimmer of Christian light! Of course we will not really TRY to evangelize anyone, but we MIGHT get the opportunity... and after all, we will be a "living example" before all those pagans and our three day "mission's" trip will cost far less than going to Africa, or South America; and we will accomplish JUST as much!

So send those checks to:

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The above article by Dr. Brian Abshire is a provocative attempt to challenge our thinking on "short term missions". He raises questions which need to be faced up to and honestly answered. For another article on this subject, see: [Amaturisation of Missions](#)

