



World Mission Feature Article

Incarnation and Money

Julie Murphy

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Covenant Theological Seminary

Rabies—you really don't want it. So when Mission to the World (MTW) found out that I'd been bitten by a semi-stray dog in Lima, Peru, they set things in motion to get me back to the US in order to get a recommended shot that is unavailable in Peru. Peru does have the regular rabies vaccine series (which usually suffices), but this was a different, extra shot that for some reason the doctors at the Centers for Disease Control think is necessary. Fortunately, the timing coincided with an already scheduled trip to the US, so I only had to move my flight up by a day; insurance covered the rest of the costs, except for the co-pay, of course.

When this whole scenario came up in a conversation with a couple of Peruvian friends, who have severely limited financial resources, I tried to cover my embarrassment and shift the blame by saying repeatedly, "Muy exagerado"—meaning that I thought the response of my family and my US-based mission agency was "very exaggerated," a bit over the top. To begin to articulate to my friends the idea of flying to the States for a shot that, odds are, wasn't even needed, sounds utterly ridiculous in that particular setting. The words themselves sounded frivolous and fanciful and rang of privilege and advantage. The flight alone cost more than what my friends would make in six months. Yet, in relating the circumstances to a fellow American, the scenario sounds completely reasonable, responsible, and even expected.

And there's the rub. As an American, and as an American missionary, I have this huge safety

net. For most of the people I worked with, however, life is far more precarious. There's a good distance between the tightrope and the safety net. Is it possible for the person resting in the safety net to credibly and effectively offer words of instruction, hope, and encouragement to those on a tightrope without a safety net? Can this only be done by joining them on their tightrope? Or are we all in fact in the same precarious place, needing to know that what is most important is who we are relying on for safety?

Jonathan Bonk, in his book *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem*, argues for the incarnational model of ministry. He calls the affluent Western church and missionary to give up their wealth and reject the spirit of materialism of our age and culture in order to, like Christ, become like those whom they are serving. Otherwise, we have no way of truly identifying with the poor we claim to serve.¹ There is a great deal of truth in what Bonk says. I found myself convicted as well as able to identify with a number of the difficulties he enumerates in regard to crossing the socioeconomic divide that stands between the West and the poor in the Third World.

Bonk says that "at the very least, the Incarnation means giving up the power, privilege, and social position which are our natural due."² I would say that this is true for Christ, for he is due

¹ Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 116–117.

² *Ibid.*, 117.

all honor, glory, and worship—all of which He gave up to purchase our salvation. But in this case, I would actually go a step further, as I imagine Bonk would also, and say that we really have nothing that is our “natural due.” Even when we as Americans speak of the need for personal responsibility, there is still underlying that a sense of entitlement that we need to face and resign. We expect that we should have life insurance, more than adequate health care, a retirement plan, a bedroom for every family member, running water, electricity, vacation time, and the list goes on. We feel it is our right—our God-given right—to have these things and far more. It’s astounding to see what we define as “needs” in our culture.

So when we carry this set of “needs” to a country that defines that word in radically different terms, where do we find common ground? I have felt the hollowness of comforting the poor with words of God’s promised provision—hollow not because the words are untrue, but because they are coming from me, someone who has never experienced the same type of need. I have felt guilty before for having a double bed all to myself when I knew families who slept two or three in a twin bed. What is the standard of “need” and how should we redefine it? Is the answer to give up my bed? Perhaps, but not necessarily.

It’s true that there is a social barrier through which it is very difficult to break. The Western missionary is quite “insulated” and it can result in “isolation,” as Bonk describes.³ David J. Hesselgrave speaks of the amount of money that people in other countries see American missionaries spend and says that they “might be forgiven, then, for thinking that the United States in particular is the source of an inexhaustible supply of funds.”⁴ Very true, so of course relationships will be painted by this dynamic. When US missionaries work in poor churches

overseas, there seems always to be a deference given to the opinions of the Americans, especially if they are paying the bills. There is also often a hesitancy to correct an American missionary who is being culturally insensitive or irrelevant, even when that correction could be offered in a helpful manner. Sometimes it is hard to know, as an American, if you’ve been befriended for the sake of actual relationship or for the sake of the money you represent. I have felt used before as I noticed certain relationships being characterized more by a constant request for financial help than by genuine friendship. I’ve also been deeply blessed in seeing such relationships transformed by the Gospel into genuine, mutual, caring friendships.

In reading Bonk’s book, I found myself approaching the precipice of believing that the Western church should give up the cross-cultural enterprise to the poor entirely. Bonk certainly does not go that far, but one can feel that way when, in quoting Trevor Verry, he speaks of the inexorable stench, “like the smell of stale cigarettes,” of Western affluence that we inevitably carry with us into missions.⁵ Ken Baker is very helpful here in drawing one back from the precipice. He challenges the incarnational model in terms of its real life, practical application, and by citing the uniqueness of Christ’s Incarnation in contrast to our attempts at identification. Baker also points out that the barrier of economics is only one of many barriers encountered in cross-cultural ministry and that, therefore, removing it is not in and of itself the remedy.⁶

We do need to heed Bonk’s call to repentance for our cultural sins of materialism and greed. We must learn to depend on the Holy Spirit and not on ourselves, our agency, or the American system. Every Christian must learn to deny himself or herself for the sake of Christ, wherever they live. Ministry among the poor, I believe, does call for a simpler lifestyle for the sake of one’s testimony to the Gospel, just as ministry to the rich will most

³ Jonathan J. Bonk, “Missions and Mammon: Six Theses,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13, no.4 (October 1989): 175.

⁴ David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Mission Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005), 228.

⁵ Bonk, *Missions and Money*, 114.

⁶ Ken Baker, “The Incarnational Model: Perception of Deception,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (January 2002): 19–21.

likely take place when living within a wealthier context. It does not follow, though, that one should give up the blessings of decent health care and education if the Lord has mercifully provided those things. As a fellow missionary reminded me when I felt guilty for having a big bed, it is not that I shouldn't have a bed, but I should work to seek better circumstances for those who don't have one. It is possible that the Lord would call me to give up my bed or my life insurance or hot running water or any number of things. I pray that I would be willing and obedient to do so, but also that I would be careful, in doing that, not to set my call to certain sacrifices as the standard by which to measure others' actions.

We are called to follow Christ's example to humble and empty ourselves for the sake of others (Phil.s 2). This is how we "incarnate" to others what Christ has done for us so that we may be known by our love. Baker warns that we must be very careful not to assume that "Christ's incarnational model is possible for us." Christ was born into His culture, He was born into poverty, and we cannot duplicate that.⁷ Orlando Costas speaks to the North Atlantic church and its need to humble itself, give up any claim to "economic, political, cultural and theological control," and put its resources at the disposition of the church in non-affluent parts of the world.⁸ But we are still called to go and cross borders and cultural and economic lines with the Gospel. The power to communicate and connect comes through the Spirit. "By God's grace, we can transcend the baggage of wealth . . . and if we do, it is only by grace."⁹

Money can be an idol and greed a sin for both the wealthy and the poor. Of course the sin of one does not justify it on the part of the other. We need one another, rich and poor, within the body of Christ. Poverty is not a virtue. To adapt the words of Matthew 26:11, we will always have the wealthy with us also. God does not reject them but saves

and instructs them as well. First Timothy 6:17–19 says:

"As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life."

Living and sharing the Gospel does not hinge primarily on matters of economics. The Gospel goes well beyond money. It is about relationship. Pouring ourselves out also includes giving up our time, convenience, ambition, comfort, agendas, etc., for love of Christ and those to whom He has called us to serve. Relationships are certainly affected by economics, but they don't begin and end there. There are examples and stories from both sides—those of relationships damaged because of Western attitudes regarding affluence, as well as close relationships forged despite the economic differences. I know I have unwittingly hurt relationships because of "economic" insensitivity. I have also been humbled and blessed by dear friendships with people who live in poverty, and for that, I am grateful.

I long for a good biblical understanding of money issues as they relate to ministering across cultural and socioeconomic lines, but fear running to the extremes. I am still rather attached to the safety net, but I long to trust the Father more and repent of my own sinful patterns of selfishness and entitlement. Bonk wisely urges the missionary "to begin his lifelong wrestling with affluence—not with his nation; neither with his church or his mission society; nor even with his family—but with himself. If there is to be any repentance, it must begin here. Jesus never called His disciples to a life of conformity to each other, but to Himself."¹⁰ May we do so wisely and with discernment.

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ Orlando Costas, "Mission Out of Affluence," *Missiology* 1, no. 4 (October 1973): 414.

⁹ Baker, "The Incarnational Model," 21.

¹⁰ Bonk, *Missions and Money*, 114.

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The Seminary of the Presbyterian Church in America
12330 Conway Road, Saint Louis, MO 63141
1.800.264.8064 314.434.4044
admissions@covenantseminary.edu www.covenantseminary.edu