

The Myth of the 'Mission Trip'

by Joel Taylor, 5pt.Salt, on November 4, 2014

“Youth groups and their leaders love ‘mission trips’ but it’s time for a bit of honesty among the practitioners of such enterprises. First, they exhibit a kind of colonialism and an attitude of superiority. That is, the mission trippers leave their affluent homes (mission trips are expensive) and they travel to some impoverished area and spend a few days or a week or a couple of weeks to help out the ‘less fortunate’ because they can’t manage without outside help. This is really nothing besides imperialism- a holdover from the 19th century era of American expansionism and ‘manifest destiny’.

Second, ‘mission trips’ are thinly veiled vacations for the participants. To be sure, a few hours each day are spent in a sort of ‘community service project’ or an ‘evangelistic enterprise’ (because, again, the poor wretched natives have never heard the Gospel and they cannot get by without the help of their betters). But the majority of time is spent by trippers in the usual touristy things. Along with plenty of photo-taking.

Third, and most importantly, such trippers tend to ignore or overlook the real needs of their own neighbors and communities and instead opt for the more ‘spiritual’ ‘missionary field’ far afield. To say it bluntly, many mission trippers have never bothered to mow their elderly neighbor’s yard or worked to evangelize the local housing project or bothered to take their unwed mother neighbor a box of diapers or some cans of formula. They prefer, tragically, to do their ‘gospel living’ far from home, for a brief period of time, and so allow themselves to feel, ironically, quite spiritual about their neglect of their 355 days a year flesh and blood neighbors.

I've had dealings with enough mission trippers to know how these kinds of 'adventures' are viewed and perceived. They are not founded on substantial theological reflection. Rather, they are yet one more manifestation of the self serving pseudo-Spirituality now passing itself off as 'Christianity' or 'Christian Ministry'.

When Jesus issued the Great Commission he said 'as you go, make disciples' ... There's nothing about discipling in short term mission trips. Disciples aren't made overnight- they are an investment measured in years, not days. When Paul was in Ephesus, he was there two years. He didn't drop into town, repair a few roofs, throw some tracts around, see the sites, and leave. He settled in and served his neighbors.

That's evangelism. Lifestyle evangelism- not mercenary evangelism which seeks to get more than it gives and of which mission trips are the primary modern example.

Youth leaders and young people need a substantial dose of honesty here in this matter. If you want to take the kids on a road trip to the nearby amusement park, have at. But don't call it a mission trip just because you left a tract on the table at the Cracker Barrel (while neglecting to leave a tip for the overworked underpaid underappreciated server).

In sum- if you really, really want to be a missionary- start with your next door neighbor. Start with your own 'Jerusalem' and then go to your own 'Judea' and 'Samaria' and finally, only when you have expended every ounce of energy you have in those fields, strike out for the 'uttermost parts of the earth'."