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The impact of Jonathan J. Bonk on my perception of missions and money and lessons for life

The Impact of Jonathan J. Bonk on my Perception of *Missions and Money* and Lessons for Life

By Mary Getui

My first encounter with Professor Jonathan J. Bonk was some time in the late 1990s when he visited the Department of Religious Studies, Kenyatta University, Nairobi. His main mission was to introduce the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB). Needless to say, since that day, the DACB has grown in leaps and bounds. During that visit, Bonk also distributed copies of his book *Missions and Money* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996). The DACB project and the publication had a very positive impact on me because I had personal interaction with the person behind those great ideas. Bonk came across as humble, visionary, focused, and Christ centered. This positive encounter proved the truth of the adage that states that there is never a second chance to create a first impression. I would like to share a few insights from and on the book *Missions and Money*, which has influenced my teaching and indeed has also challenged my approach to issues surrounding mission and money, and life in general.

Some paragraphs in the book that captured my attention are in Bonk's words in the introduction -

> The book has not been an easy one to write. As the son of (Mennonite) missionaries who spent the best part of their lives in the service of the people of Ethiopia; as one whose closest friends include numerous missionaries; and as one devoted to the task of sharing with the world the good news of Jesus as Savior and Lord; it is with deep sense of personal humility and unworthiness that I write, for I am aware of the deep and often sacrificial commitment to service characterizing many missionaries.... It is my intention to speak the truth, insofar as I am able to discern it. This book is an attempt to explore, however inadequately, one aspect of Western missionary life and ministry which has for a variety of reasons, been virtually ignored in the writing and teaching of most contemporary missiologists. The conscience, someone once said, is like a sundial. The person who shines his flashlight on it in the middle of the night can get it to tell him any time he wants. But when the sun shines on the dial, it can only tell the truth. That our consciences have been infected by the highly contagious hedonism characterizing Western societies cannot be denied. It remains to be seen whether the infection is lethal.... In this book I

> speak as an evangelical, primarily to evangelicals. Others of the household of faith are welcome to listen and are invited to contribute, of course. But if the language and agenda of this book seem sometimes strange and unfamiliar, I beg you to bear with a fellow disciple.

The content of these paragraphs is Bonk's self-introduction. He writes from experience, intending to highlight the truth and to obey his conscience. He recognizes those of the household of faith, as he also seeks forbearance for any lack of clarity. These are virtues worth emulating, not just for mission but for life in general.

Broadly speaking, the book describes the nature, scale, and consequences of missionary affluence, examines some of the relational, communicatory, and theological challenges facing the rich missionary, and attempts to point to the narrow way out of the mire of personal affluence, which is a difficult path certainly, but also a hopeful one. There are a myriad of lessons in this content not just for the western missionary, but also for the leaders and followers of the burgeoning ministries in Africa today and in the everyday life of every individual, especially the Christian.

The book has two forewords, one by Walbert Buhlmann, O.F.M. Cap., and another by Zablon Nthamburi, the former a Western Catholic priest and the latter an African Christian priest. This is a balanced choice on Bonk's part, to have input from two diverse and relevant sources. Each of the two has raises critical issues that highlight some of the major concerns that Bonk raises.

Buhlmann addresses the following issues. Even though money and spirit are quite different realities, no one will claim that they have no relation to each other. This is a reawakening reality that leads to the question of what this relationship should look like. Mission churches founded and supported by Northern churches in the South cannot exist without money but neither do they necessarily thrive if money is available in abundance.

Again there is a reawakening reality on the core place of money. What is quite disturbing, however, is that the availability of money in abundance does not necessarily translate into thriving mission. Why not? What else is necessary for the church, and thus the individual and the community to thrive? An imbalance between the relative wealth of evangelizer-missionaries and those among whom they work distorts the transmission and inculturation of the Gospel. This is quite deep, an indication that inculturation is more than just culture, and that culture incorporates money and issues with money. While the book discusses missions and money in its Protestant dimensions, it also has Roman Catholic dimensions. As noted above, Bonk has indicated that the issues

he addresses touch and apply to those of the larger household of faith. The following questions are important:

- Is the flow of large amounts of money from North to South still needed? Should the status of the younger church remain humble and its growth proceed only as local economies grow?
- Would such a step lead local Christians to exert greater efforts toward socio-political and economic development and liberation than when, for example, they seek all the funds for a new pastoral ministry training center from foreign sources rather than raise half or an even larger proportion locally?

These questions are also relevant for the dependency syndrome and the begging culture of some individuals and even of governments. Mission efforts in education and health should not create the impression of transnational religious corporations at the expense of spiritual life.

- How does the missionary and the Christian strike a balance between being mindful of temporal things, so to speak, and also mindful of the spiritual? Which comes first?
- The extremes of poverty and wealth in today's world are a real scandal. Should this apply just to the secular arm of society?

That this applies to the spiritual realm is a matter of grave concern. Christians are called upon to work toward a climate where reasonable contentment with a more modest living standard must become the norm. The church does not exist for itself but is founded as a sign of hope for the world. And we know that Christians did not receive the command to construct buildings but to invite peoples to discover their fellowship as forgiven, Spirit- enlivened believers under God in Jesus who is the Christ. This is the task of God's people—that they may live more worthily in the sight of God and their fellow human beings. How challenging and true. These statements are timely and relevant, especially for Christians.

Nthamburi also raises similar critical questions. The missionaries in a mission station near his home portrayed a picture of affluence and material privilege. Many of the villagers would have embraced Christianity had they been assured that such immense affluence and wealth was part of the package. But the missionaries did not seem to want to share. Nthamburi echoes John Mbiti's sentiments that African converts to Christianity were beggars of Christian spirituality, ideas, cash, and personnel. The three key issues related to the above concerns are, first that affluence can draw resentment from the less privileged; second, that what we possess greatly influences those around us; and third, that life is a package that combines the spiritual, the theoretical, and the material. Nthamburi further echoes Jean-Marc Ela's sentiments that the church cannot evangelize without sharing the life of the people. This calls all those who intend

to serve others to make efforts to understand and appreciate human situations of influence: parent and child, teacher and student, employer and employee, buyer and seller.

When conflict arises, one can attribute it to the lack of understanding and appreciation of one another's context and to the implications for relationships. Without self-denial, there is the possibility of spiritual neuroticism. Self-denial calls for endurance in the face of pain and discomfort, and brings forth social and spiritual health. Insensitive affluence is embarrassing and contradicts the biblical message. The missionary is called to be discerning in order to avoid being egocentric. These are key lessons for everyday life. Mission efforts will be futile if not linked to the cutting edge, which means that missionaries have to be part of the wheel, not isolated from the people and their realities. For a Christian, focus on the Bible is essential. Yes, Scripture is the tap root of Christianity. The believer—missionary or convert—needs to read the Bible, comprehend it, and be guided by its precepts.

Other critical questions raised in the book include the following: if we are surrounded by things that are beyond the reach of those we expect to reach, they cannot follow us. What are these things and what should be the approach and attitude towards material things? In mission, two issues that require attention are numerical growth and the spiritual health of the converts. Numerical growth may be easy to determine because it is based on ticking off numbers—hopefully there will be no impersonation or ghosts.

But what is the measure of spiritual health? What is the thermometer that determines spiritual health? What doctor determines spiritual health? Can the lowly in society engage in mission to the highly placed? Does that make mission a class and status issue? Create more desire and thou shall consume. How can more desire be created, by whom, and why? What is the way out of consumerism?

Bonk argues that there definitely is a problem regarding missions and money. One way out is to consider this matter as part and parcel of everyday life. Each Christian has a responsibility to play their part within Biblical parameters regarding the teachings on mission and money. The preaching and the practice ought to go hand in hand. Bonk's book offers a myriad of life lessons. Buhlmann has commended the book to anyone interested in the spread of the whole Gospel in the whole world. Nthamburi has indicated that this book is a must for people interested in doing Christian mission in a Christian way.

I salute Bonk for the courage and humility to tackle a pertinent subject in an open and practical manner. He has provided timely guidelines that are applicable in various life situations. Through the book *Missions and Money*, Bonk

has enriched my life. The book never ceases to provide new insights, regardless of how many times I read it. Directly or indirectly, through this book, Bonk qualifies as a DACB subject, both as a contributor to Christianity in Africa—the stories of "missionary kids" are hardly ever told—and because he has covered key aspects that incarnate successful mission.

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