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### Short-Term Missions and Their Ethical Shortcomings

Breanna Watson

*Ouachita Baptist University*

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Breanna Watson

Dr. Eubanks

Christian Ethics

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### Short-Term Missions and their Ethical Shortcomings

The short-term mission movement is an enigma for the modern believer, as he or she attempts to follow Jesus' command in Matthew 28 to "go and make disciples of all nations" while also coming to terms with the ethical implications associated with supposed compassion-driven tourism that is often unhealthy at best and dehumanizing at worst. "There are no one-week tourist visits in the Bible that we can point to and say, 'that's healthy,'" writes Mekdes Haddis, Ethiopian missionary and advocate for believers in the Global South, a term encompassing Asia, Africa, and Latin America. "The missionary journeys we see in Scripture are almost always long-suffering, long-term, and selfless, whereas in our day, it's almost like there is an unspoken rule that says, 'satisfaction guaranteed'" (Haddis, 108). The short-term missions movement, involving "short term travel experiences for Christian purposes such as charity, service, or evangelism" (Parker), has been primarily guided by US evangelical denominations. Gaining popularity in the 1980s, it has since been transformed into an evangelical effort that boasts nearly 1.5 million people each year (Nagel, 1). In a time where globalization has shrunk our World to the point where one can travel from one side of the globe to the other in a span of days, purchase an adventure pack and sandals, and call him or herself a missionary, it is necessary that we as Christians learn to distinguish between westernized evangelical practices and the true Biblical definition of missionaries and mission work. Although well-intentioned short-term missionaries have certainly enjoyed positive outcomes, this paper seeks to explore

how short-term missions trips, or STMs, are largely unethical and go on to produce negative consequences for both those who go and who receive. Not only do STMs fail to reflect true Biblical examples for missions, but they also encourage the mismanagement of economic resources and generally discourage relational mutuality among the “goers” and the “receivers.”

Paul the Apostle is truly the epitome of one living a life of mission in complete surrender to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Fascinatingly, we watch as Paul clearly defines himself as an “apostle to” or “among the nations,” not just to the Gentiles. He goes on to Syria, Cilicia, central and western Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, sharing the gospel to different ethnicities with very distinct cultural backgrounds (Burke, 117). 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 mentions Paul “becoming as a Jew to Jews and as a Gentile to Gentiles” or aiming to reach all people in their cultural context and geographical location with the restorative power of the Gospel (Burke, 128). Some theologians have pointed to this view of missions as being the ultimate imitation of God the Father, as the divine comes down to meet His people both in the tabernacle and on earth in the form of a man. In this way, “God acts like a father to his children, a doctor to his patients, and a teacher to his students” (Burke, 131). Yet even Paul acknowledged the limitations that exist for one’s missionary activity, stating clearly in 2 Corinthians 10:13 that he and his co-laborers will “keep within the limits of that sphere which God has assigned.” Here, Paul refers to staying in Corinth as not to invade on the geographical territory of anyone else or take glory for spreading the gospel in that area where he was not called to go, which likely indicates a divine appointing that leads to mission in the first place (Burke, 205-207). These attitudes are contrasted with those held by many of the individuals who embark on STM experiences. “In the New Testament where short-term missions are modeled by Paul, we see him staying at least three years in one place,” argues Haddis. “During that time, he plants churches, develops leaders, and hands it off to them

to lead. When he goes back to visit, the intention is to encourage and build them up” (Haddis, 108). Not only do short term trips differ in regard to duration, typical STMs ranging from one week to two years, but most of them partake in a very different focus altogether. This is because many Western STM teams have a tendency to view time as a limited and valuable resource, thus viewing their one-to-two-week mission trip as an opportunity to “do missions” and achieve as much as possible rather than the focus being on relating with others as Paul did. In “When Helping Hurts,” experts in poverty alleviation strategies Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert assert that more often than not, most STM participants expect results, like the completion of building projects and health checkups. However, they share that true development cannot occur as a “two-week product,” but rather as a “lifelong process” (Corbett, Fikkert, 157). This lifelong process may be comparable to Paul’s interactions with congregants from his church plants, where he shared meals, life, and economic resources with them as a mutual, rather than one-sided, practice. The short-term missionary often “uses his or her experience to construct a sense of moral self through the act of volunteering” (Occhipinti, 263), often taking the glory for doing good or making disciples in a way that Paul said he would not do in the passage of 2 Corinthians. Occhipinti goes on to summarize findings from an article entitled *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times*, written by Wanda Vradi. In studies conducted by Vradi, even though little evidence has been found to support the claim that volunteers actually “help” those in need, these experiences are still attractive to the “goer” because of the expectation to “convert the experience into social and economic capital upon their return” (Occhipinti, 259). In this way, it is a challenge to find a strong comparison between the same Paul that said, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” and “mission tourists” that take a break from their comfortable lives to do volunteer projects in another country for a week, usually with little

to no ability to communicate in the local language or come to a deep understanding of the culture of the people he or she is there to serve. This is not reflective of a healthy biblical perspective, and yet it is exactly the type of perspective STM trips create.

Additionally, short-term missions trips are always ethically unadvisable from an economic standpoint. In the 1990s when global wealth increased by 40 percent, more than one billion people fell into even deeper poverty (Borthwick, 69). However, research has revealed that Americans spent \$1.6 billion on STM missions alone in 2006 (Corbett, Fikkert, 151), which is a shocking contrast when one considers how those financial means could have been distributed to better serve the object communities and support long-term missionaries already established in the area. Though it may be difficult to believe, the money spent on one one-to-two-week short-term mission trip would be enough to support more than twelve local, indigenous workers for an entire year (Corbett, Fikkert, 161). Many arguments in support of STMs suggest that those who go on these trips are more likely to become further engaged in missions, either through financial supporting long-term missionaries or engaging in long-term missions themselves (Corbett, Fikkert, 151), which would imply a positive trade-off approach in which the STM is providing more money for missions overall. However, these statements can be countered by further research. In a study conducted by Robert J. Priest PhD in Anthropology, the aim was to test whether prior STM participants would give a greater amount of their own income to support missionaries or mission causes than those with no STM experience. The findings of the study reveal that those who had not participated in a short-term mission trip gave virtually three times as much to missionaries as prior short-term “goers” (Priest, 439). Research conducted by Kurt Ver Beck, assistant professor of sociology at Calvin College with over twenty years of experience in Honduras, also points to the fact that the financial investment in STMs is simply

not ethically justifiable. The data shows that there no meaningful increase in long-term missions giving for either STM teams or sending churches (Corbett, Fikkert, 162). A study released by Baylor University in 2011 positively claims that students participating in STMs have “lower levels of materialism, greater appreciation for other cultures and a better understanding of missions as a lifestyle” (Haddis, 95). However, Priest would rightfully argue that “when wealthy Christians, in the context of STM, encounter human poverty, suffering, and spiritual need, “gratefulness” is not, by itself, an adequate response” (Priest, 440). As Haddis would argue, this comes at a great cost to the receiver and is sure to “destroy the relational aspect of money and its ability to foster connection with others” (Haddis, 127). This cost is surely not ethically defensible, considering how it may devalue and even dehumanize the receiving culture over time as this vicious cycle continues.

Lastly, the short-term missions approach fails to foster a sense of mutuality between those who go on the trip and those who receive “goers” into their country and cultural context. Mutuality or reciprocity involves the sharing or exchanging of something equally beneficial for two parties. Not only are STM teams unable to discover and employ local assets in the context of a one- or two-week trip to invite positive engagement from the receiver (Corbett, Fikkert, 159), but they are likely to misinterpret the relationships they do form on the trip as friendship when there are clear power differentials at play. Haddis points out that, while the one embarking on a short-term mission trip typically has been able to study the community he or she will be going to serve through intentional media from a Western perspective, the receiver often has limited knowledge of the “goer.” As it turns out, much of what many typical receivers know about the missions group has been derived from tales told in the community or Hollywood’s portrayal of the West (Haddis, 98). Corbett and Fikkert suggest that North Americans perceive one-on-one,

profound, and personal friendships as easy to develop on STMs. In contrasting a Westernized, individualistic perspective with that of a collectivist Thai, for example, they maintain that “the Thai person is likely to perceive this relationship as very superficial compared to his deep allegiances to his ‘group’” (Corbett, Fikkert, 158). Even churches that would describe their relationships with local global missions organizations as partnerships must recognize that the provision of material resources and direction from one side inevitably creates a distorted, paternalistic relationship (Occhipinti, 262). Though one of the arguments for STMs maintains that these trips are beneficial for encouraging believers in Majority World countries, they can also discourage local believers by bringing them to surrender their responsibilities and needs to a wealthy group that is anxious to take these on (Corbett, Fikkert, 159). Because of the transactional nature of short-term missions trips, these “missionaries” often remain unaware or disengaged with the immigrants from the country they left to serve residing in their own country. In another seminary survey conducted by Priest, Dischinger, Rasmussen, and Brown, it was discovered that there was no statistical correlation between the number of STM trips abroad and current interethnic relationships at home (Priest, 445). If one of the strongest arguments in support of STMs states that participants will be more likely to live lives “on mission” and explore further engagement with other people groups or desire more strongly to pursue long-term missions later, these findings reveal that this sentiment is based on pure naivety and not ethically justifiable.

With all these points in mind, the destructive nature of short terms missions trips is to be expected. However, STMs are likely not going anywhere, as the model has become so engrained in the culture of evangelical churches in the West and unfortunately many local missionaries and missions organizations in the Global South have become increasingly more dependent on it for

economic growth and support. Because of this, some recommendations to mitigate the damaging nature of STMs may be warranted. First, those planning on going on a short-term missions trip should be tourists to the country in which they plan to serve beforehand in order to learn as much about the target country or culture as possible (Haddis, 112). Fundamentally, short-term missionaries find satisfaction in distinguishing themselves from tourists, “claiming a greater authenticity of experience based largely on the relationships that they feel they have with those they intend to help” (Occhipinti, 263). However, as we have already uncovered, short-term missionaries simply do not have the positive impact they are convinced they do on the culture they are going to serve for a week, as it is very difficult to enter a service context in a culture that is completely unfamiliar to you in every sense and expect to have a meaningful impact from the first, likely culturally insensitive interactions. This will allow STM “goers” to not only better contextualize the gospel message to have a greater impact on the target people group, but it will also allow the ST missionary to engage with the culture through a local’s eyes and focus more on the shared humanity between “goer” and “receiver” that is often lost in the paternalistic nature of short-term missions trips. Niyi Gbade, a leader in a West African missionary sending agency, says this best: “We’d welcome them, but it seems to us in Africa that most Americans are Americans first, and then Christians second... ....we don’t need Americans, we need followers of Christ who come to learn, adjust to African culture, and serve” (Borthwick, 150).

Another recommendation I would offer is for short-term missions trips to strongly encourage relational connection with believers in the community, rather than a “needs-based” model where the goal is to accomplish tasks as quickly and efficiently as possible. One way to practice this relational approach may be to connect STM volunteers with immigrants and international students in their country of origin as a part of pre-trip and post-trip training. Haddis



points out that, though there are almost a million international students in the United States each year, eighty percent will return to their countries never having received an invitation to an American home, and only ten percent of international students are reached by US ministries (Haddis, 15). These details are rather concerning, especially considering Priest's findings that no statistical correlation exists between the number of STM trips abroad and current interethnic relationships at home. According to Haddis, "a church that turns a blind eye to her neighbors but travels across the world to feed the 'poor' is not only hypocritical, but actively hurting the Great Commission" (Haddis, 21). If it is true that the Church has been called to a self-sacrificial love of others where she must love her neighbor as herself, the current STM model is failing to represent this well in our highly interconnected world.

One final recommendation would be for teams to understand the economics that are at play that may inhibit relationships in a short-term mission setting at worst or create transactional relationships at best. This first requires trip participants to pay for a portion of expenses from their own income, as this is a priceless learning experience that should involve a level of economic sacrifice for teams to take it seriously (Corbett, Fikkert, 166). STM participants should also be aware of the obvious and subtle economic differences that arise when Westerners go to Global South for a week or two to serve philanthropically, blissfully unaware of what that generosity entails for the receiver on the field (Haddis, 128). Rather than taking a STM trip, one may inquire about the best ways to fundraise for already established missionaries and missions organizations with the same funds that would have been raised for a short-term experience. As we uncovered previously, the money that would have been spent on one of these trips could likely pay an indigenous leader's salary for a year and would likely be better managed in this way. Churches can also consider additional options to cultivate longevity in their international

missions projects that they hope for STM teams to participate in. Haddis suggests microfinancing as a more ethical approach to both confront the challenges of poverty in developing countries while also allowing for the participation of Westerners. In this system, people with low incomes receive loans in order to start small businesses and be released from debt and cycles of poverty (Haddis, 128). However, short-term missions workers must understand that poverty-alleviation efforts must be multifaceted in order for systems like these to work and thrive, meaning that our aim should be to view all people as spiritual, social, psychological, and physical beings in order to bring about holistic transformation and impact (Corbett, Fikkert, 57).

The practice of short-term missions raises significant ethical concerns that need to be carefully considered by both Western believers and the global Church. While the desire to fulfill the Great Commission and make disciples of all nations is admirable, it is crucial to assess whether STMs align with the biblical principles and values exemplified by the early missionaries, like Paul the Apostle. This paper has explored the ethical shortcomings of STMs, shedding light on how they often fall short of their intended goals and may even create more harm than good. One of the fundamental issues with STMs is their departure from the long-term, selfless, and culturally adaptive nature of true mission work, as demonstrated by Paul and other early missionaries. Short-term mission trips, typically lasting from one week to two years, often prioritize quick, tangible results over genuine relationship building. This results in a transactional approach to mission work, where volunteers aim to construct a sense of moral self through their service, focusing on the outcomes rather than on building deep connections and understanding of the local culture. Economically, STMs present a troubling scenario. Despite their good intentions, they divert significant financial resources that could be better allocated to support long-term missionaries or local indigenous workers. The high cost of organizing and

participating in STMs can have a detrimental impact on the very communities they aim to serve. Research has shown that STM participants may not increase their long-term financial commitment to missions or further missions engagement, and this economic imbalance can foster dependency, devalue local communities, and dehumanize the receiving culture. Perhaps the most critical ethical shortcoming of STMs is the lack of relational mutuality. Genuine mission work should be characterized by shared experiences, understanding, and an exchange of benefits between those who go and those who receive. However, STMs often fail to engage in meaningful relationships and can perpetuate power imbalances. The "us versus them" mentality of mission tourists can hinder true mutual understanding and connection, ultimately preventing the growth of intercultural relationships both abroad and at home.

While it may be challenging to change deeply ingrained practices, recommendations for mitigating the damaging nature of STMs have been proposed. First and foremost, prospective STM participants should take the time to become informed tourists by studying the target culture and community before their trip, allowing for a more contextually sensitive approach. It is essential to shift the focus from tasks and accomplishments to building genuine relationships with the local population, prioritizing shared humanity over a sense of moral self-satisfaction. Moreover, the economics of STMs should be reconsidered, with participants contributing personally to the expenses and, when possible, allocating the financial resources to support indigenous leaders and long-term missionaries. Microfinancing and holistic poverty-alleviation efforts should be explored as more ethical ways to engage with developing communities and foster sustainable transformation.

While the short-term missions movement has its advantages, it is imperative for Christians to reflect on its ethical implications and consider more intentional, sustainable, and

culturally sensitive approaches to fulfilling the Great Commission. True mission work should aim to spread the Gospel while also fostering mutual relationships, addressing economic disparities, and respecting the dignity and humanity of all individuals involved. By doing so, the Church can better align with the values and principles of early Christian missionaries like Paul and strive for a more ethical and impactful approach to missions in today's highly globalized, interconnected world.

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