

Commitment to a Wartime Lifestyle

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The Queen Mary, lying in repose in the harbor at Long Beach, California, is a fascinating museum of the past. Used both as a luxury liner in peacetime and a troop transport during the Second World War, its present status as a museum the length of three football fields affords a stunning contrast between the lifestyles appropriate in peace and war.

Brad Gill, my son-in-law, tells me that on one side of the partition you see the dining room reconstructed to depict the peacetime table setting that was appropriate to the wealthy patrons of high culture for whom a dazzling array of knives and forks and spoons held no mysteries. On the other side of the partition the evidences of wartime austerities are in sharp contrast. One metal tray with indentations replaces fifteen plates and saucers. Bunks eight tiers high explain how the peacetime capacity of 3,000 gave way to 15,000 on board in wartime.

How repugnant to the peacetime masters this transformation must have been! To do it took a national emergency, of course. The survival of a nation depended on it. The essence of the Great Commission today is that the survival of many millions of people depends on its fulfillment.

But obedience to the Great Commission has more consistently been poisoned by affluence than by anything else. The antidote for affluence is reconsecration. Consecration is by definition the “setting apart of things for holy use”. Affluence did not keep Borden of Yale from giving his life in Egypt. Affluence didn’t stop Francis of Assisi from moving against the tide of his time.

Will wartime priorities work?

The missionary tradition has always stressed a practical measure of austerity and simplicity, as well as a parity of level of consumption within its missionary ranks. But the same lifestyle is often seen as impractical among people back home. Widespread reconsecration to a reformed lifestyle with wartime priorities is not likely to be successful among homefront believers:

- so long as the Great Commission is thought of as impossible to fulfill;
- so long as we think that the problems of the world are hopeless or that, conversely, they can be solved merely by politics or technology;
- so long as our home problems loom larger to us than anyone else’s;
- so long as people enamored of western culture do not understand that Chinese and Muslims can become evangelical Christians without abandoning their cultural systems just as the Greeks did in Paul’s day;
- so long as modern believers, like ancient Hebrews, think that God’s sole concern is the blessing of our nation;
- so long as well-paid evangelicals, both pastors and people, consider their money a gift from God to spend however they wish on themselves rather than a responsibility from Gods to help others in spiritual and economic need;
- so long as we do not understand that he who would seek to save his life shall lose it.

Ours is a save-yourself society if there ever was one. But does it work? Underdeveloped societies suffer from one set of diseases: tuberculosis, malnutrition, pneumonia, parasites, typhoid, cholera, and so on.

Affluent North America has virtually invented a whole new set of diseases: obesity, arteriosclerosis, heart disease, strokes, lung cancer, venereal diseases, cirrhosis of the liver, etc. And we’re more than ever plagued with the social diseases of drug addiction, alcoholism, divorce, battered children, suicide and murder.

Take your choice. Our divorce courts, prisons, psychiatric offices and mental institutions are flooded. In saving ourselves, we have nearly lost ourselves.

How hard have we tried to save others?

The 20,000 members of the Friends Missionary Prayer Band of South India support 500 fulltime missionaries in North India. If my denomination (with its unbelievably greater wealth per person) were to do that well, we would not be sending 500 missionaries but 65,000. In spite of their true poverty, these Indian believers are proportionately sending over 130 times more cross-cultural missionaries than we are!

The statistics are always embarrassing: We spend as much on chewing gum annually as we do on missions. Our annual giving to foreign missions is equal to the amount we spend in a 52-day period on pet food. The comparisons aren't fair, of course, since fewer of our society are giving to the fulfillment of the Great Commission than are buying pet food. But the pattern of our society is clear we're much like Ezekiel's listeners:

"They come as though they are sincere and sit before you listening. But they have no intention of doing what I tell them to; they talk very sweetly about loving the Lord, but with their hearts they are loving money."

"My sheep wandered through the mountains and hills and over the face of the earth, and there was no one to search for them or care about them."

"'As I live', says the Lord God, 'you were no real shepherds at all, for you didn't search for them [my flock]. You fed yourselves and let them starve. Therefore,' the Lord God says, 'I will surely judge between these fat shepherds and their scrawny sheep, and I will notice which is plump and which is thin, and why!'"

Ezekiel 33:31; 34:36; 34:8,20,22b

God is speaking here of more than just food for the hungry; our whole lives may be "plump" while others are "scrawny". We must learn that Jesus meant it when He said, "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required." I believe that God cannot expect less from us in our Christian duty to save other nations than we in wartime require of ourselves to save our own nation. This means that we must be willing to adopt a wartime lifestyle if we are fair with the clear intent of Scripture that the people who sit in darkness shall see a great light. Otherwise, as Isaiah said, "I faint when I hear what God is planning." (Isaiah 21:3)

What do we do?

The essential tactic in adopting a wartime lifestyle is to build on pioneer mission perspective by a very simple and dramatic method. Those who are awakened from the groggy stupor of our times can, of course, go as missionaries. But they can also stay home and deliberately and decisively adopt a missionary level support level as their standard of living and their basis of lifestyle regardless of income.

This will free up an unbelievable amount of money so much so that if a million average Presbyterian households, for example, were to live within the average Presbyterian minister's salary, it would create at least two billion dollars annually. What a mighty gift to the nations if carefully spent on developmental missions!

To reconsecrate ourselves to a wartime lifestyle will involve a mammoth upheaval for a significant minority. But with ends as noble as the Great Commission, a wartime lifestyle is an idea whose time has come.

Contact your denominational headquarters or mission agency. Surprise them with your request for help in adjusting to a missionary-on-furlough standard of living right where you live. Many Christian organizations offer financial planning information to guide your giving program, and much of that information can be adopted to your goals of gradually shifting to a wartime lifestyle. The remainder of your family income can then be dedicated to the mission priorities of your choice.