

# Eighteen Barrels and Two Big Crates

**How and why our "stuff" gets in the way of our witness.**

The most embarrassing moment in my missionary career occurred near the beginning, 33 years ago, when our baggage arrived in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Its arrival had been delayed for four months due to a dock workers' strike that paralyzed the port. When finally the long-awaited baggage came to the door it gave us mixed emotions.

My wife and I and our infant daughter had arrived on the field in early May. We moved into a house the national church had rented for us and we purchased everything needed in Colombo. Our furniture was made by local carpenters. The only imported items we purchased were fans, a small stove, a refrigerator and a water filter. Besides that we had only the contents of our four suitcases.

We were getting along fine, when word came that our baggage had finally been unloaded from the ship. As soon as it was cleared by customs, it was loaded into five bullock carts for delivery to our home. How well I remember the sight of the bullocks trudging slowly up the road. The combined load consisted of no less than 18 barrels and two big crates.

On the one hand we were excited, for it was like "Christmas in August", with bullocks instead of reindeer bringing wonderful things from the North. But on the other hand there was something terribly disturbing about it. We kept saying to ourselves, "We don't need all this stuff. Why did we buy it in the first place?"

## "Filthy Rich Americans"

Our neighbours turned out in force to see what the Americans were getting. As we opened the

crates and barrels by the side of the house, our neighbours stared in wonderment. How rich and important this young couple must be to be able to afford five cart-loads of marvelous things!

For four months my wife and I had been building relationships and seeking to identify with the community. Our blond baby daughter provided a natural opener for conversation and a jump start for new relationships. Neighbours could see that we were

not altogether different from other young parents trying to raise a child, solve everyday problems, and meet basic needs.

But then, suddenly, we were discovered to be what some probably suspected we were all along - filthy rich Americans who could fill their home with every conceivable comfort and adornment. A thousand sermons could not undo the damage done that day. It would have been better for our ministry if the ship had

# AFRICAN ENTERPRISE



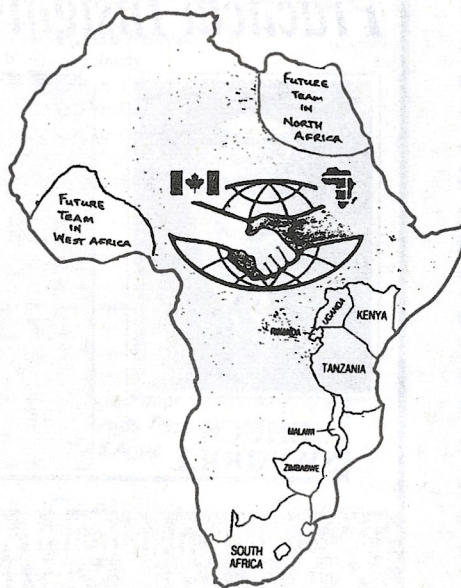
## AE INTERNATIONAL MISSION STATEMENT:

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dropped our barrels and crates in the Indian Ocean.

We had made our first major mistake before sailing out of New York harbour. We had listened to advice about all the things we needed in order to be properly "outfitted" for the mission field. As time moved on we would become more fully aware of the damaging consequences of that mistake.

My purpose in this article is to plead for a simpler lifestyle on the part of Western missionaries, and to increase awareness of the negative

effects that an inappropriate lifestyle can have on the progress of the Gospel. This is a delicate subject and I am aware that generalizations can be unfair. But we who are dead serious about world evangelization must be willing to examine honestly this sensitive area.

By lifestyle, I do not mean such things as smoking, the use of alcohol, or sexual behavior. I mean by lifestyle the way missionaries use money, the kind of housing they choose for themselves, the type of vehicles they drive, and the kind of

entertainment and recreation they spend money on. Missionary lifestyle includes everything about us that local people observe. When new missionaries cling to a lifestyle imported from the West, it becomes a serious barrier to bonding.

## What About The Crocodiles?

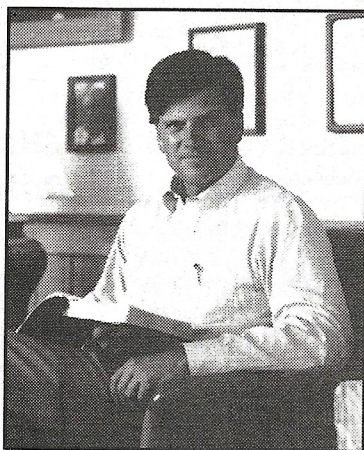
Lifestyle includes leisure time activities. Not long ago I visited a group of young missionaries in an African country. I was impressed with their ability to speak the local language and the contacts they were making in the villages where they lived. But then they told me about their water skiing on the river. Their mission work required the use of boats and powerful outboard motors, and someone back home had sent them water skiing equipment. On Saturdays, the missionaries enjoyed the use of this equipment by water skiing up and down the river between their ministry points.

It does not require much imagination to draw a mental picture of what it must look like on a sunny afternoon, with the outboard motors roaring up and down the river and strong, robust foreigners skimming over the water past Africans in dugout canoes. "What about the crocodiles?" I asked. The answer, which I am not sure was serious, was that they hired villagers to scare the crocs away.

Please do not misunderstand me; I love and respect those young missionaries. Compared to their counterparts back home, they are sacrificing a great deal. They are living under stressful conditions, and by their mastery of the local dialect, they show that their motivation is high.

But in one area of their lifestyle, they have not reflected hard enough on the impression they make and the kind of barriers they erect when they don their colourful bathing suits, fill their boats' gas tanks with expensive fuel, and entertain themselves with American-style water skiing in view of poor African villagers. Missionaries in cities make similar mistakes when their lifestyle

## Who is My Neighbour?



Franklin Graham • President

Two thousand years ago when Jesus Christ told the expert in the Law that all of the Law is fulfilled in the statement

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
and love your neighbour as yourself,"*

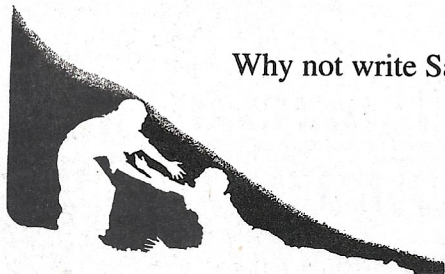
the man responded by asking  
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becomes a barrier to relationship-building and identification.

Most evangelical leaders have long ago resigned themselves to popular demands and expectations, and they no longer challenge the consumerist mentality of church members. Likewise, most of the missionaries sent out by Western churches have been enculturated since childhood to take for granted a very high level of physical comfort and an array of gadgets to entertain and make life easier. To be deprived of even some of these is considered great sacrifice.

What is the unspoken message that Western materialistic values translated into missionary lifestyles convey? Or to state the question personally and point the finger at myself, what message did our 18 barrels and two large crates communicate to our Buddhist and Hindu neighbours? What invisible barrier did our possessions erect? Did it have anything to do with the fact that in the years that followed, none of our converts came from our immediate neighbourhood, but all from places some distance away?

When Jesus said to the crowd, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15), he issued a warning and addressed a basic question. It was the question of what should be our relationship to material possessions. Jesus was saying that material possessions should never become major concerns in his disciples' lives. They should never be allowed to impinge upon Christian witness.

When Christian people whose basic needs have been met continue to accumulate possessions and add to their physical comforts and pleasures in sight of people who are suffering and in need, they are making a statement. They are communicating a message about their values, priorities and the deep affections of their hearts. And that message contradicts the Gospel.

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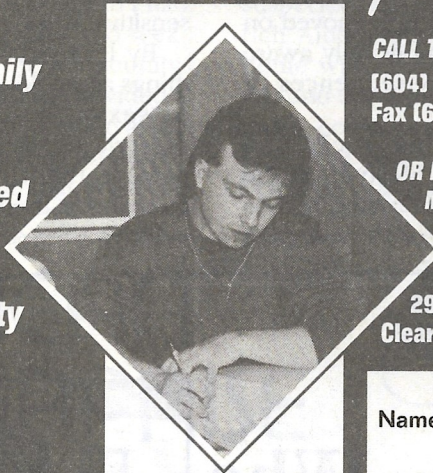
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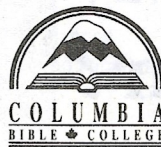
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