

OVERCOMING THE PROBLEM OF HIDDEN IDENTITY IN OUTREACH TO RESTRICTIVE NATIONS

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Authentic Lives: Overcoming the Problem of Hidden Identity in Outreach to Restrictive Nations
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Published by William Carey Library
1605 E. Elizabeth St.
Pasadena, CA 91104 | www.missionbooks.org

Melissa Hughes, editor
Sharon Edwards, copyeditor
Joanne Leong, graphic design
Rose Lee-Norman, indexer

William Carey Library is a ministry of
Frontier Ventures | www.frontierventures.org
Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 5 4 3 2 1 BP300

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Hale, Thomas, III, 1965- author.

Title: Authentic lives : overcoming the problem of hidden identity in outreach to restrictive nations / Thomas Hale III.

Description: Pasadena, CA : William Carey Library, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016034783 (print) | LCCN 2016035386 (ebook) | ISBN 9780878086344 (pbk.) | ISBN 087808634X (pbk.) | ISBN 9780878088973 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Missions. | Identity (Psychology)--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV2063 .H24 2016 (print) | LCC BV2063 (ebook) | DDC 266--dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016034783

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CHAPTER ONE

GOVERNMENTS AND THEIR GUESTS

Even an ambassador is only a guest.

We now consider more fully the reasons behind Almoria's attitude to and restriction of missionaries. As we will see, it is not only sent ones who are targeted, but other foreigners as well. We will then look at a biblical response to government opposition or restrictions.

EXPATRIATES ARE ALWAYS GUESTS

One source of difficulties is that too many expatriates have a wrong attitude concerning their role in Almoria. They easily forget that as foreigners they are guests in the country they have entered. Even an ambassador is only a guest.

In today's world, a visa stipulates some of the conditions for the invitation. We must never lose the perspective of ourselves as guests, unless we actually obtain citizenship in our adopted country. Bernard Adeney, author of a seminal work on intercultural ethics, puts it this way: "One of the worst things a guest can do is to take away the rights of a host to be the host" (1995:132). In other words, if we as foreigners have become so much at home and so much in control that we are running the show, we have taken away the host's position as host. Perhaps this is one of the tensions for those who have served in a particular place over decades: it becomes harder to act like a guest and to be perceived as a guest. Some Almorians might be tempted to ask, "Why doesn't this guest know when it is time to leave?" For some expatriates, there will be a time to transition from guest to permanent resident or even citizen; we will

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discuss that in Chapter 3, but for now we will treat all expatriates as guests.

The Kyrgyz people, who have a rich tradition of hospitality, have a saying that expresses their expectations of a guest. Expatriates in any country would do well to heed this ancient wisdom. The saying goes: "*Konok koidon josh*," meaning, "A guest is quieter than a sheep." The implication is that guests should not tell hosts how to run their household. Visitors with "all the answers" may find this a hard injunction to follow. They should work on their listening skills and withhold their answers until they have understood the local situation better.

The Bible does not give specific instructions about how we are to act as good guests—probably because the concept of a guest was well understood by people in biblical times. It did not need to be explained or stated. Nomadic culture is closer to biblical cultures than Western cultures are, so the authors of the Bible no doubt would have agreed with the Kyrgyz proverb above. A few biblical passages obliquely touch on the role of a guest, but only one of them gives useful information about guests in the context of the passage. This passage is Genesis 18, where three "men" (v. 2) visit Abraham.

As *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* notes, "In opening the narrative with the statement that the Lord 'appeared' to Abraham, the author leaves no doubt that in some (albeit unexplained) way the three men represented the Lord's appearance to Abraham" (Sailhamer 1990:142). Abraham immediately insists that they stay for food (vv. 3–5); in doing so, he is being a proper host. The three men wait while he arranges for the meal (vv. 6–8). Only after he brings it do they say anything to him at all, and their first order of business is to give a blessing: the promise of a son (v. 10). They do later confront Abraham and Sarah about her laughing response to the promise (vv. 13–15). At the very end, after some internal debate (vv. 17–19), God tells Abraham what will happen to Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 20–21). Abraham then engages in his famous

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dialogue with God about how many righteous people it would take to save the cities from destruction (vv. 23–33).

Woven into this passage, we see that even God follows the protocol for a guest in this instance. But not all guests are good guests, as we shall see.

THE TROUBLE WITH GUESTS

Even a good guest may bring unwanted change to his or her hosts: any interaction with people from different backgrounds brings that possibility. Newcomers may influence us in ways we did not expect. Change can be positive or negative, but in general cultures tend to be conservative and view most change negatively. Even when we want change, we want it on our own terms, in our own way. Guests, however, often bring change and new ideas on their terms. These changes may be cultural changes or changes to the structure of power and authority.

When people follow Jesus they will bring change to their culture; sent ones should do their best to ensure that these changes come from following Jesus and not from following the foreign culture of the sent one. It is next to impossible for sent ones to keep their own culture or worldview out of their message entirely. And whether a sent one does well or poorly at keeping the message pure, culture change may be puzzling and at times even painful for those in the midst of it. We need to understand this and be sensitive to this dynamic as it affects the Almorian government's position regarding foreigners. I came to this conclusion when new "freedom of religion" laws were introduced in various former Soviet countries in the years before 2010. These laws drastically reduced the religious freedom that had been enjoyed by former Soviet citizens after the breakup of the USSR. I did not support the laws, but I sought to understand the thinking and the concerns behind them. One of the concerns had to do with culture change.

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Even though culture change is a concern of Almorian authorities, foreign guests are not the sole agents of culture change. Change is a part of life, even for cultures that attempt to isolate themselves. It can come through the media or through food or clothing imports. Many countries have a love-hate relationship with American television and movies, for example. Their people may enjoy watching them, but the dominance of American popular culture is often seen as an invasion. Even such supposedly neutral parts of a foreign culture as sports or food can wear away at local culture. On various occasions, French farmers have protested against McDonald's, and American sports are on the whole less successful internationally than the English sports of cricket and soccer. While baseball and basketball may have noticeable "footprints" across the globe, American football clearly does not.

Religious change—to the extent that it is a worldview change and not just a change of rituals—goes to the deepest levels of a culture. For this reason, evangelism, conversion, and church planting raise objections from leaders of any group being targeted. Furthermore, evangelism is perceived as arrogant, evoking questions of this nature: *How can you assert that you are the only ones who have truth?* Conversion feels like betrayal by the convert of his or her people and family. Church planting feels as though cells of foreign agents are being established.

Such changes might be tolerated if it were just a question of one person sharing what is important to him or her. But anything that smacks of unfair advantage will surely create opposition. And missionaries, whether they are paid professionals or organized volunteers with special training, are seen as having an unfair advantage in a conflict of cultures. On a more surface level of culture, one of the reasons American culture is often resented is this sense of unfair advantage over local expressions. The economic power and military might of the United States make it difficult for other cultures to hold their own.

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Culture change can be brought by any stranger, even by people who do not think they are bringing it. This may explain the vicious response to aid workers sometimes exhibited by militants in the Middle East or Central Asia. When one recognizes that aid workers are inevitably bringing culture change as well as aid, then the militants' response is easier to comprehend. Expatriate foreign language teachers can be particularly active change agents, because they necessarily include cultural matters—including values—in their lessons. New learners need this cultural information in order to use their new language appropriately. But teachers would do well to carefully consider the impact that their culture lessons could have on the local culture. At the level of values, a Western teacher is likely to put a strong positive spin on the individualism found in Western cultures; for example, a teacher might encourage students to pursue their own dreams regardless of their family's approval or disapproval—an action that could have a huge negative impact on those families. At the level of cultural matters, a teacher needs to be careful about how to present holidays. If students from a conservative culture that separates young men and women start to celebrate Valentine's Day, for example, that could also draw a hostile reaction from their elders.

In his book *Under Solomon's Throne*, anthropologist Morgan Liu describes a situation where outside values entered a society through a foreign volunteer. A young Central Asian woman from a traditional family gets to know an American Peace Corps worker in her town. The woman's new acquaintance, writes Liu, "influenced her ideas about independence from her family." The American considered this a good trait, whereas the Central Asian family felt quite the opposite about it. The young woman, for her part, "resented the control her father sought to exert on her movements" (2012:122). Was the father's control an appropriate protection for a young woman or simply a manifestation of patriarchal oppression? The answer is not as simple as it may seem, because either choice has profound implications for society, and each choice has its drawbacks. The point is

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