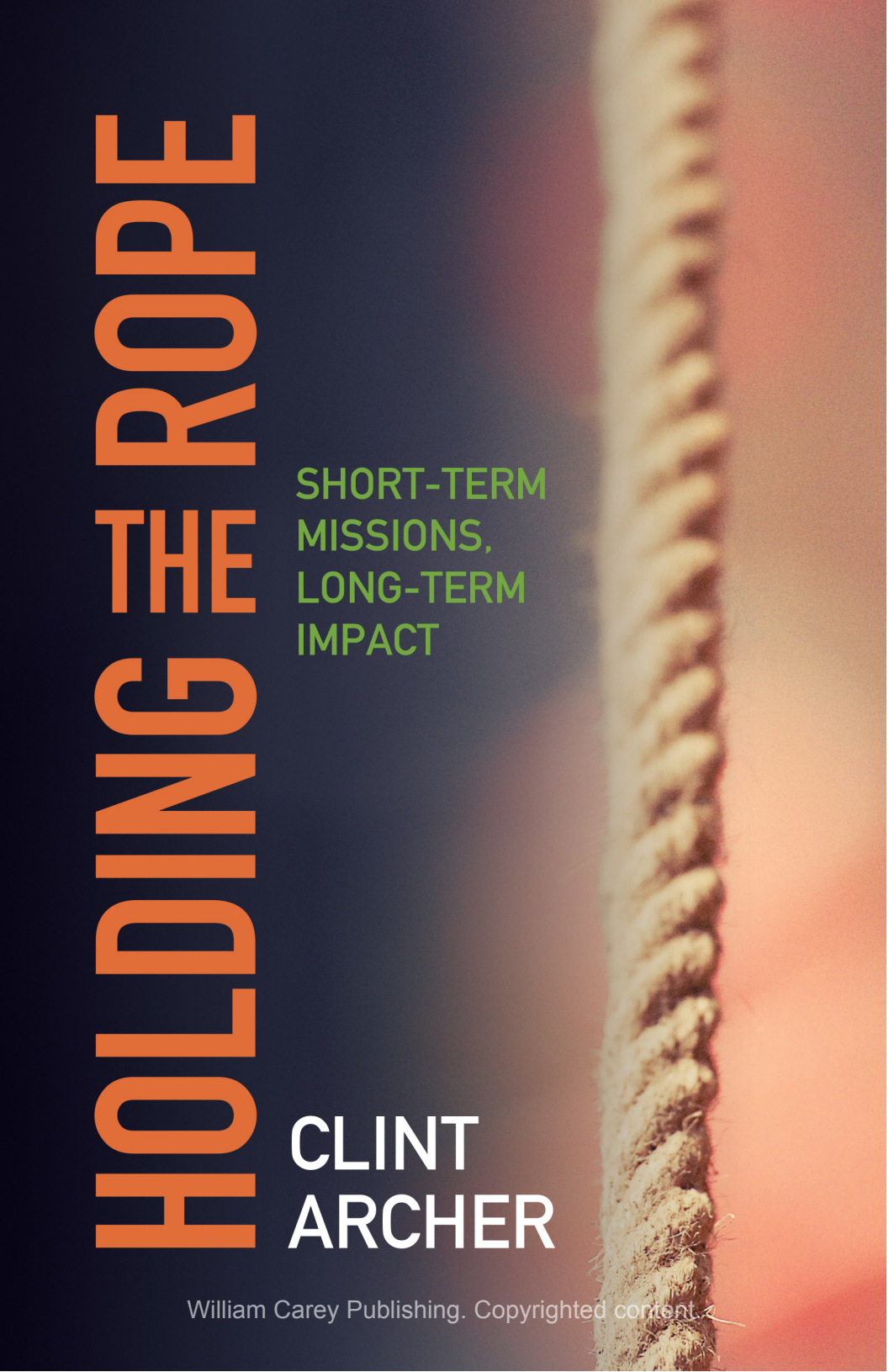


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Holding the Rope: Short-term Missions, Long-term Impact
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SHORT-TERM TRIP, LONG-TERM DAMAGE

I felt called to Botswana. Actually I felt called to date this girl, and she was going to Botswana, so for me the call was just as clear. I was a freshman in college, a spiritual neophyte whose theology was limited to Christianese sound bites (justification is living "just as if I" hadn't sinned; atonement is the "at-one-ment" of man and God). This opportunity was for an all-expenses-paid trip—thanks to the widow's mites and other donations. Ten days of roughing it in Africa, including four days of overland travel in 4x4 Land Rovers. It was a Camel adventure for nonsmokers, a way to beef up my passport stamp collection, and a chance to serve God under the gaze of the girl I liked. I was sold. So, armed with four hours of training and the Roman's Road freshly memorized, I overpacked my knapsack and joined the band of brothers and

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sisters who would take the gospel to the unreached masses in the Kalahari desert. Whoever said being a Christian wasn't fun?

KALAHARI CONUNDRUMS

The adventure was not exactly the way I had pictured it. Four dusty days in a Jeep seems a less glamorous journey now that I've experienced it. Since none of the vehicles had air conditioning, I selfishly opted for the convertible. I soon discovered that the most underappreciated tool on my Swiss Army knife, which I affectionately dubbed "MacGyver," is the toothpick. I frequently employed it to exorcise from my teeth the legion of tiny bugs that lodged there as we zipped through the dunes like a brood of determined sidewinders. Incidentally, the journey home in the closed-roof vehicle was just as grueling. Frying in a steel box on wheels is only marginally less torturous than being force fed with fauna all day long.

The six days that we were with the missionaries were even more challenging to my city-slicker constitution. Water took forty minutes to pump manually and transport back to the compound. We bathed in a steel drum, the entire grimy team reusing the same water. During the day under the blazing sun we dug and hoisted, mixed and measured, in order to erect a corrugated-tin-roof shelter that would function as a gathering place for the six or seven local believers who met weekly with the missionaries. In our prayer letters we labeled that project "building a church," but it was so shoddy that I suspect it cost the missionary some personal funds after we left to tear it down and have it rebuilt in a way that didn't unnecessarily jeopardize the lives of his little flock.

The team members were not the only disillusioned foreigners. The missionary family's workload multiplied exponentially for the duration of our stay. They labored to cook for us, transport us, train and retrain us, and constantly did damage control with the locals as we committed one cultural *faux pas* after another. (I feel it should be noted that I was not one of those who giggled at the sight of the bare-breasted deaconess we met, though I was the only one who couldn't stomach the meal we were served that night, for which I blame the bug blitz for my loss of appetite.)

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The highlight for me was preaching the gospel to an attentive native tribe through a translator. I walked them passionately through the colors of the beaded bracelet we awarded to anyone who said they believed. Not surprisingly we made many "converts" that day. The exotic plastic beads were apparently worth changing religion for. The missionary wisely suggested that baptisms were only performed after a follow-up visit he would make the following week; i.e., when we were out of the way.

The lowlight was when I crawled into my tent in the midmorning to get more sunblock for me and the team who were cementing poles into the ground for the church we were constructing. Exhausted, I decided to put my head to the pillow for a mere minute of respite from the labor. I awoke four hours later facing the bitter glares of the rest of the team and, most significantly, the girl I had been trying to impress. I let down the team, the girl, the missionaries, and—I'm forgetting someone—oh yes, God.

The trip was undeniably a PowerPoint success story. We had secured a cornucopia of colorful photos with pithy captions to document our accomplishments. A tribe had heard the gospel, my preaching ability had been affirmed, and we delivered a sterling report to our supporters back home who had all been holding vigil, waiting for the bottom line: how many souls from Botswana will be in heaven because of our cash?

Sadly, I never heard from anyone in the team again. We were not from the same church, and so we moved in different ecclesiastical circles. And the missionaries never heard from me. I cannot for the life of me remember their names, or how many kids they had. But I do remember feeling sorry for them that they had to bathe in that steel drum, and because they had no friends.

MORE HARM THAN GOOD?

I couldn't help feeling that we had got more out of the trip than the missionaries. We had been a burden on them. We didn't leave them with any tangible benefit (that church roof was a real hazard to the community). We didn't foster deep relationships with them. And there was no talk of the team going back, or of personally becoming supporters of their ministry financially.

I think we might actually have done some long-term damage. We left a few natives thinking they were saved because they nodded at the right time

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and were issued with a colored bracelet, which for all I know became another idol in their pantheon. I learned later that a diamond mining corporation regularly delivered food supplies and alcohol to the tribe in exchange for them peacefully relocating and staying off the land that rightfully belonged to them. This crippled their society by removing any incentive to work. The problem was compounded when eager, white college students showed up and erected buildings, did manual labor, and then disappeared, leaving gifts and supplies behind for the missionaries. Just like the diamond mine representatives. The missionaries struggled to set an example that hard work was a virtue. This effort was subverted by teams like ours.

I was plagued by the question, why would the missionary even consent to a team, let alone request one? In later years I discovered how missionaries are often forced to work the system in order to get ministry done. For example, let us say the missionary needs $5,000 to complete a church building. This money will go to hiring local labor, paying them generously and providing incentive for them to work. It will create a community project where natives will work side by side with the missionaries, where they will develop relationships, camaraderie, and a sense of accomplishment. There is no time limit to the project, so the missionary can use the time to teach the men how to lay foundations, mix cement, and other skills that they could use to improve their own community. He can also interrupt work to tend to other needs in the community or to discuss spiritual matters with his building crew. What the missionary needs is cash, and perhaps a skilled builder to help train the locals. What he doesn't need is ten college students who take a week off between their accounting classes to crank out a project they have no experience in, divorced from the local community, and leaving nothing but a rushed structure that the locals view as yet another foreign intrusion into their community.

But if the missionary requests $5,000 cash for a building project, they will be denied. "Funds are scarce, and you already get a fixed amount of support. We want to bring on more missionaries so we can have more flags on the world map at our mission display table." And yet if the missionary shrewdly requests a Short-term Missions (STM) team to do the project, the church leaps into the excited enthusiastic support of a trip that will cost potentially ten times as much if airfare is needed. But this is in line with their image as

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a missions-minded church, so the fund-raising machine kicks in and pops out another ineffective STM team.

I didn't realize all this at the time. But after my return from Botswana I knew there had to be a better way to do STM trips than this. I stopped short of making a rash vow to never go on another STM trip, but I learned enough about myself and about STM that I knew I would think long and hard before signing up for another one. It would have to be a very profitable trip, and have someone very special, for me to consider another foray into the Kalahari, or anywhere they didn't have hot water.

THE GHOST OF STM PAST

Fast-forward four years. I had matured somewhat, learned the real definition of justification and other cool words like infralapsarianism. I did date that girl, but we parted ways through a series of increasingly messy breakups (that had nothing to do with STM, but a little to do with my irresponsibility evidenced by things like naps I took at times I should be working), culminating in me moving overseas to go to seminary. It was in seminary that I was confronted with STM again, in a most unlikely and providential way.

I was serving in the college ministry of a ten-thousand-member church. They had a vast STM program, which I knew nothing about and had no interest in, until one fateful day. Although the church supported over sixty missionary families and sent out about twelve trips a year, there was only one part-time intern who ran STM single-handedly. In an attempt to help this overworked fellow survive, the church created a position one rung below intern. On a literal ladder this rung is actually the ground. What job is below an intern that is paid next to nothing? I think people call it a "gopher" (go for this, go for that), errand boy, or lackey. The church, in an attempt at instilling dignity in the job title, called it "Volunteer Assistant to the STM Coordinator." The job came with no business cards, and no pay, but it did come with a spot on an STM team, fully supported by the church.

As a dirt-poor international student, a free trip home to visit family and friends seemed like a gift from God I couldn't ignore. Before I knew what happened, I raised my hand and signed up for a year of work in exchange for a plane ticket and a three-week trip to South Africa with two friends who

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