
TEACHING IN A
DISTANT CLASSROOM

Crossing Borders for
Global Transformation



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Agent 007

The Undercover Christian Teacher



Often when Christians decide to go outside their homeland to teach—especially to creative-access or missionary-restricted countries—family and friends ask, “If you can’t talk about Jesus in the classroom over there, how on earth are you going to be a missionary?” For the missions-minded North American evangelical, it’s a legitimate question. But the question is not what is troubling. What is more disturbing is the common response, “Oh, I’m going as a teacher to get into the country so that I can do my *real job* of evangelism.”

In this chapter, we will address why this undercover agent approach to missions lacks integrity and may actually hinder the teacher’s effectiveness and authenticity. We also raise concerns regarding Christians’ motives and purposes for teaching overseas. Finally, we challenge sincere and earnest Christians to reconsider this schizophrenic approach to overseas ministry and help them develop a sound and authentic vision for serving Christ in a distant classroom.

THE UNDERCOVER CHRISTIAN TEACHER

Teaching overseas is not merely a means to an end. Passionate followers of Christ should have no separation between the sacred and secular. For those of us who are in Christ Jesus, all that we do, say and are must come under his lordship. Therefore teaching in a distant classroom should not be just an excuse to gain access to a restricted country.

In a missions periodical on tentmaking, Peter Anderson (2001) wrote, "Could it not be argued that those who have a hidden religious agenda, while serving as professionals in a given field of expertise, are being dishonest? Are not honesty and integrity an essential part of our Christian life and witness? I believe they are" (p. 23). Anderson is right. This undercover Christian perspective can

Tentmaking is a term found in Acts 18 describing the work of the apostle Paul, Priscilla and Aquila as they used their skill and trade to be self-supporting in order to have an impact for Christ in foreign lands.

lack integrity and professional excellence. Once you view teaching as only an excuse, then you are not likely to teach well, nor model what is good. You are being disingenuous because you are in that nation teaching under false pretenses. This does not honor Christ.

C. S. Lewis (1995), referring to the importance of honesty and integrity in teaching for Christian professors, wrote, "[A] Christian should not take money

for supplying one thing (culture) [or we might say teaching] and use the opportunity thus gained to supply a quite different thing (homiletics and apologetics) [or we might say preaching]. That is stealing" (p. 221). The justification that one is simply volunteering at the university or institution still does not validate the undercover practice and attitude. Believers who volunteer their services to teach overseas should not take advantage of the opportunity to fulfill some hidden

agenda. It is wrong. We are not to use the classroom lectern as a pulpit. Anderson (2001) explains:

Those who go overseas to serve in their profession should see their job as the legitimate vehicle for their life and service and not just as the excuse for it. . . . They should be committed to their profession and through it demonstrate their commitment to Christ. (p. 24)

Commitment to your profession, whether at home or abroad, means seeing your vocation as an actual calling. Os Guinness (1998) warns Christians who attempt tentmaking without a sense of calling that

such “tentmaking” at worst is work that *frustrates* us because it takes time we wish to spend on things [we consider] more central [such as Bible studies and personal evangelism]. By contrast, whatever is the heart of our calling is work that *fulfills* us because it employs our deepest gifts. (p. 52)

Teaching should flow out of a Christian’s sense of calling. It should not be merely moonlighting. For the Christian educator, teaching in another land must be at the heart of her calling; it must be her *real job*.

Unfortunately in some cases, when Christians teach in another culture under false pretenses, they have actually discredited their witness. *The Economist* published a special report on Americans teaching English overseas:

At the beginning of summer, hundreds of western missionaries . . . flock to Kazakhstan to teach English at local universities for a few weeks without pay. Many universities, hard up and unable to meet the huge demand for English, gladly accept. While it is certainly convenient, it is also controversial. Although missionaries are tolerated, local authorities suspect that the line between teaching and proselytizing is not always observed. A few years ago . . . Baptists offered “Bible aerobics” at an Almaty

university. Whatever this was, it wasn't teaching English. (Faith, 2001, p. 37)

An authentic Christian witness is impossible when teaching is only a pretext for being in a foreign country. Such Christian educators are diluting their impact for Christ on students, colleagues and culture. This approach to teaching limits the concept of ministry to presenting the gospel, leading individuals in the right prayer, handing them Bibles and moving on to the next seeker. As a result all other work and activities, such as teaching, become less important.

Christian educators are called to be just that—Christian teachers, instructors or professors who strive to impact their students' lives with truth, integrity and honesty. Undercover Christian teachers may have some impact, but it is limited and their impact is in spite of their motives, not as a result of them.

CHECK YOUR MOTIVES

Motives are the driving force behind our goals, objectives and even our behavior. Before any Christian decides to resign his job, pack up his belongings and head overseas to teach, he must critically and honestly examine his motivation for going. This is a vital step in getting ready to teach in a distant classroom.

Jon Dybdahl (Baumgartner et al., 2002) in *Passport to Mission*, provides examples of various motives that prompt both Christians and non-Christians to move abroad. He argues that everyone has a mixture of both religious and nonreligious motives for overseas ministry. Although none of these motives are necessarily bad, Christian teachers need to examine and test their motives for wanting to teach overseas. Table 1 lists various reasons individuals choose to serve overseas.

At first the idea of crosscultural living may seem romantic and exciting. Certainly missions in the twenty-first century is not your grandfather's idea of missions. When pioneer missionaries in the nineteenth century set off to work among tribes in Africa, they packed their belongings in a coffin knowing that they would never set eyes

Table 1. Motives for Teaching Overseas. (Adapted from Jon L. Dybdahl, "So Why Not?" pp. 32-36 in Baumgartner et al., 2002.)

Nonreligious Motives for Overseas Teaching	Christian Motives for Overseas Teaching
Desire to travel and see the world	Called by God and prepared throughout life with gifts and experiences
Need a new career challenge or adventure	Have a heart for the people and truly desire for them to hear the gospel
Need a break from school or work	Love for Christ (2 Cor 5:14)
Consider overseas teaching as "selfless" work and others will think I am a good person (hero)	Scriptural incentive (Mt 9:37-38): "the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few"
Developing an international résumé	The Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20)
Curiosity or desire to experience other cultures and learn a new language	To be used to expose, persuade and lead others to Christ (Rom 1:18-20)
Career or job considerations	Have a true love and heart for the lost
Pressure from a parent, friend or spouse	"Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people" (Mt 4:18-20)
Recruited by an organization and by default (not knowing anything better to do) decided to give it a try	I am going with an organization that enables me to use my God-given gifts
Escape from "the world" and isolate myself in a community not my own	The gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world (Mt 24:14)

on family or homeland again. For the majority of these early missionaries, going to a distant land was not about adventure or excitement; it was about duty—passionate, dedicated, sacrificial duty. But today a modern missionary can arrive overseas in less than nine hours, grab a Starbucks coffee before leaving the capital city, and begin a new life right at home among towns and villages with McDonald's, Pizza Hut and Hollywood movies. The Internet, air travel, satellite television,

Frank P., Ph.D., Physics, Cork, Ireland

My wife and I were always open to overseas missions. We struggled with what I could do with a Ph.D. in physics. As I investigated missions organizations, I also started applying for university jobs. That's when God brought the two wonderfully together for me—an opportunity to represent Christ at a secular university overseas while teaching the subject I love.

Life was good for us in California. I had a big, beautiful house and a good job. Our five children were thriving in their schools. My wife and I were involved in various Christian ministries and outreach in our community. Yet I couldn't shake the advice of a veteran missionary: "If there are others nearby who can do your ministry, then go where there isn't anyone else." That was the beginning. As we prayed together as a family about where to go, we kept thinking the Middle East or China. But God brought Ireland out of nowhere with a job posting that looked like it had been lifted off my CV. I applied and got it.

We were very happy to go, but being in Ireland is hard. There are huge cultural differences that have been fairly traumatic for our children at times. There is also a spiritual darkness here. It is a post-Christian culture, and many of my students and fellow faculty members have a "been-there-done-that-bought-the-T-shirt" attitude toward anything Christian.

Near the end of my first semester, I was encouraged by the physics department to accept a leadership position at the research institute

global cell phones, Skype—all these things make going overseas seem much less permanent.

The good thing about globalization is that it has made missions easier. The bad thing about globalization is that it has made missions easier. It's good because more and more evangelicals are obeying Christ's command to go. More unreached people groups are hearing the good news of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer. Globalization has made

loosely affiliated with my university. To the astonishment of everyone, the research I was asked to supervise was actually based on my Ph.D. thesis work! They were so excited to learn I was the author of many of the initial research papers. I think they must be the only group in the world to have read my work, and God brought me right to them. This recognition brought instant respect and credibility.

Can you imagine the impact this has on my colleagues daily to think that a scientist they respect is a follower of Christ? Perhaps they think it is just some kind of fluke, but they *do* think about it.

During my second year at the department, I was asked to work on an application for a large research grant. This took weeks. This grant would give us the finances needed to do some great research and put our program on the map. After long months of work and waiting we got word: We received the grant! The whole thing was a big deal to my department and to my university. Thank God for his favor in these matters. It is all a part of earning the right to be heard here.

God has called us here and shown his faithfulness to us through relationships with neighbors, a good house to rent, conversations with students and fellow faculty. But spreading the gospel in Ireland is hard. We pray, we ask, we expect and most importantly we rest because he who has called us is faithful and he will do it. What we have to do is remain open, prayerful and sensitive to opportunities he arranges for us. Someone else could have filled the physics position, but I'm grateful that God allowed us to be here. The work is hard, slow and sometimes discouraging, but truly worth it.

missions more feasible and the Great Commission a truly attainable goal and task. However, with this great convenience comes a drawback. A majority of individuals who decide to go overseas as missionaries do not fully grasp the cost and the sacrifice of living incarnationally among those whom they serve. Globalization has made missions too easy and simplistic.

In order to be effective as a true witness for Christ in the distant classroom, a teacher's purposes for going must be Christ-centered as well as Christ-honoring. Globalization or not, challenges and difficulties still occur in a crosscultural context. Will your motives hold up when dealing with the demanding challenges that expatriate teachers face? That's when Christ's calling and infusion of strength are of utmost significance. During difficult times of misunderstandings, confusion and even perceived danger, you must know without a doubt Christ has called you to that place.

Teri works with the International Institute for Christian Studies (IICS) as part of a screening team for individuals and couples who want to teach overseas as a Christian mission. At the start of every interview she always asks, "What sense of calling, word from God or Scripture verse will you cling to when the worst imaginable thing happens to you far from home and family?" She asks because the desire for adventure, the need for employment or living by default are not strong enough to sustain an individual when faced with heart-breaking crises in a distant land. God's calling, the Spirit's impelling or a solid conviction of the Great Commission is absolutely essential for every Christian who wants to work or teach overseas.

Homesickness, frustrations with government and university bureaucracy, harsh living conditions, cultures that believe lying is a moral attribute—all of these can knock the adventure and excitement right out of the Christian worker. When the dust settles all that remains are motives that center on Christ and his calling. Only these can be an anchor in the stormy seas of crosscultural work. Motivation such as prestige, adventure and employment are not enough to hold anyone to his or her post when the going gets tough. Consider

Danny M., Ph.D., New Testament, Jos, Nigeria

I received a phone call this morning at 6:45 from John L. informing me that he and Char had been robbed about 2:30 a.m. by armed robbers. Apparently two men forced off the security bars in the front part of the house after confronting the security guards and taking away their cell phones. The robbers climbed through the window and were in John and Char's bedroom shining a light in their eyes before they were even aware of a problem. They demanded American money. They got \$450 plus another 20,000 Naira (about \$135). They took all three of their laptops.

Thankfully, John and Char weren't touched during the robbery. John estimated that the robbers were only in the house about four or five minutes. They seemed to be professionals, knowing where to find things. They had what appeared to be a sawed-off shotgun, which they stuck in John's face. They fired the gun as they left the house. The college security guards don't carry any weapons, so this would have been a warning for them not to follow.

This is obviously traumatic for John and Char. It is an unfortunate reality that God's work often goes forward through difficult and painful circumstances. John and Char have joined the ranks of other IICS staff at this university who have paid a price for their selfless service to the students and future leaders of Nigeria. We're praying that God will comfort and heal them and help replace those things that were lost. Though this event has robbed them of their possessions, we pray that it will not rob them of the joy they have experienced in serving the people here in Nigeria.

the attrition rate of global companies and programs: Xerox has a 63 percent attrition rate (Wederspahn, 2002). The Peace Corps' attrition rate, 30 percent overall (Tarnoff, 2002), is as high as *50 percent* in countries such as Nepal (Hetrick, 1999). About 30 to 60 percent of all Peace Corps workers go home before their contracts are completed.

AM I CALLED TO CROSSCULTURAL TEACHING?

What does it mean to be called to a ministry? Guinness (1998) defines calling in this way:

Calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service. (p. 4)

There is little doubt that God calls all of us to service. But perhaps not all of us are called to minister crossculturally. So when does God call people to long-term, foreign missionary service? How do you know if you have an overseas missions call?

Some Christians say, “If you don’t hear ‘no,’ then go.” Scripture does compel us to go. Missions exists because Jesus commanded us to go: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15 NRSV). But missions isn’t about *me* and about making *me* feel good. It is not about being fulfilled, finding a “purpose” or going on some great adventure.

Simply, *missions is about obedience*. Missions is about bringing glory to God and Jesus Christ. It’s about sharing truth and hope with those who are in desperate need. It’s about exalting God’s name among the nations. It is privileged participation in what God is doing around the world. The moment missions stops being about God and Jesus Christ and starts being about me, then disingenuous motives come into play and problems develop.

Mike has had many opportunities to counsel and listen to young adults. Some of his Christian students believe they are called to the foreign mission field. But when these students say that teaching in a far country would help them develop their résumés, he knows there’s a problem. Alarms also go off when young college graduates feel like overseas ministry is an obligation—something they should and must do. He always challenges his students to be honest with themselves and ask, “Why am I really going abroad to teach?” Here are a few questions that might help you determine the “why” of your going to a distant land.

QUESTIONS ABOUT MOTIVES

1. Why am I going overseas?
2. What do I hope to accomplish while I am there?
3. Have I said to myself, "If I don't like it there, I can always come home"?
4. Would I still be willing to go if I knew in advance that I would lose my life by going? Am I willing to give my life for this purpose?
5. How does my going affect what others think of me? How does their opinion of me affect my going?
6. If going to teach in a particular country made me somehow unemployable later in my life, would I still be willing to go?

QUESTIONS ABOUT TEACHING

1. Am I equipped to teach? If not, then what am I doing to become equipped?
2. Have others confirmed to me that I am a good teacher?
3. Have I taught before? If so, do I like teaching?
4. If I am not qualified to teach in my home country, then how qualified am I to teach in an overseas setting?
5. Has anyone to whom I am spiritually accountable (a pastor, a small-group leader or a Christian friend) confirmed to me that teaching abroad is a good fit for me?

QUESTIONS ABOUT GETTING THERE

1. What type of missions organization am I considering?
2. Does my chosen organization have high standards and requirements?
3. Are they good stewards of their finances? What do they require of me financially?

4. Do they provide adequate crosscultural training and preparation?
5. What kind of support, both moral and spiritual, do they offer me while overseas?
6. Is the organization focused on serving a particular people group with a clear vision for that group? (Talk with others who have been involved with this organization and do your homework to determine if this is a group for you.)
7. Do I have a strong prayer support base at home? (You must have a strong and faithful prayer support base at home that will intercede for specific prayer requests as well as for effectiveness in your work and calling.)
8. Do I have accountability in place in the setting where I will be serving? Is there a church, a group of Christians or another believer with whom I can worship and fellowship?

God calls us to give him our very best. When Christians accept teaching assignments abroad they must be committed to high standards, to being professionally prepared and truly committed to teaching well. Living a life of integrity and working with excellence are the crucial foundations of effectiveness in overseas ministry. If students and colleagues don't respect your teaching, or feel you lack professionalism, then they surely won't be interested in attending a Bible study in your home or hearing what you have to say about Christianity.

Frank Hawes and Daniel Kealey (cited in Elmer, 2000) did a study on crosscultural living and found these two basic generalizations to be true:

- Most people of the world do not separate the person from his/her work.
- If the host national values the work of the expatriate, then he/she will like the person as well.

I (Teri) was part of a team invited by UNESCO to train university faculty in Kabul, Afghanistan. The Ministry of Higher Education made it clear they wanted the laws of the land obeyed: no evangelism,

no proselytizing, no hidden agendas. The team went to Kabul knowing we might not have an opportunity to share our faith. We went anyway because workshops, seminars and interaction with faculty were all ministry, even if Jesus' name wasn't mentioned.

While I was conducting a workshop on higher education, a man stood up and said, "Dr. Teri, do you believe in Muhammad?" I paused and tried to think of a win-win response. "Of course. He is a historical figure with . . ."

The man interrupted, "No! I mean, do you believe he is the prophet of Allah?" I was stuck. Participants' heads went down; no one looked around. It felt as if it was just the two of us in the room.

"I defend your right to believe that," I responded and tried to steer the conversation toward democracy and freedom of speech. But the man was persistent. "Do you follow Muhammad or Jesus?" he asked.

I hesitated and then answered, "Jesus." He shouted back, "Muhammad is greater than Jesus!" I looked at him. He shouted, "Say it! Say that Muhammad is greater than Jesus!" I couldn't and prayed silently for direction.

Knowing Afghanis' respect for family, I replied, "If I said those words it would break my grandmother's heart. Do you want me to disgrace my grandmother and break her heart?"

The man was surprised by this response and stumbled a bit. Then an elderly, well-respected professor raised his hand. "Dr. Teri, may I say something?" Everyone in the room sighed relief. "Muhammad taught us that Jesus was a great and wonderful teacher. We know that Dr. Teri is a follower of his because she too is a great and wonderful teacher. To be quite frank, even our own prophet Muhammad would not ask Dr. Teri to say such a thing. The Qur'an teaches that God will reveal himself to anyone who seeks him, whether that be in a mosque, a church or a temple." He paused and said, "May I write that verse on the board, Dr. Teri?"

I handed him the chalk. Just about then the bell rang and everyone headed for lunch—except four men who waited for the classroom to empty. Then they asked, "Dr. Teri, we have always wanted to learn

more about Jesus. Can you help us? Do you have some literature or articles we can read that will help us to understand him and to learn more about him?” I did.

We don't have to bring Jesus into the classroom. He's already there. By praying and trusting God, walking in obedience and doing our work as unto him, the team in Afghanistan never had to break any rules, manipulate any hidden agendas or go against classroom protocol. And still God showed up.

Living a life of integrity means being authentic and genuine and doing all things well. It means giving your all in both preparation and task. Poor teaching hurts the Christian witness and the cause of Christ. We must take our teaching seriously and see our teaching as the true calling for our overseas service. When well-meaning friends and family ask us, “If you can't talk about Jesus in the classroom, how can you be effective for the kingdom?” we can wholeheartedly reply, “By doing my *real job* of teaching for his glory and in his name.”

GOING DEEPER, GOING FURTHER

Questions to Consider

1. What are your motives for overseas teaching? Develop a list and sort them into religious and nonreligious motives. Which are your strongest motives?
2. Consider how God has led you to this point in your life. What has he done in your life to prepare you for this calling?
3. What personal characteristics do you have that will help you be successful living and teaching overseas?
4. What are your goals for living and teaching in a distant land?

Exercise/Activities

Examining Your Call (Lee, 1996):

Are you truly called to teach overseas? The following steps can help you determine this call:

- Step 1: Begin with an open heart and open mind.
- Step 2: Examine the Scriptures. The following look at some specific missionary calls:
- Ephesians 3:1-13
 - Matthew 28:18-20
 - Exodus 3
 - Jeremiah 1
 - Jonah 1
- Step 3: Be open and listen to the Holy Spirit.
- Step 4: Read missionary biographies, country-specific information and any material that provides a global perspective (such as *Operation World*, Johnstone & Mandryke, 2001).
- Step 5: Seek wise counsel.
- Step 6: Talk with others who have overseas experience.
- Step 7: Pray specifically for clarity and direction.

God's call must not be based solely on feelings, but a balance between counsel, facts, promptings and yes, open doors.

Suggested Readings and Helpful Websites

Articles

- "The Academic Witness: Research and Scholarship As Unto the Lord," Jay Budziszewski, *The Real Issue*, September/October 2001
- "Ministry, Profits and the Schizophrenic Tentmaker," Steve Rundle, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2000): 292-300
- "The Two Tasks," Charles Malik, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23, no. 4, December 1980

Books

- Avoiding the Tentmaker Trap*, Dan Gibson
- Working Your Way to the Nations: A Guide to Effective Tentmaking*, Jonathan Lewis

Your Mind Matters: The Place of the Mind in the Christian Life, John Stott

Websites

<http://www.adventistvolunteers.org/Forms/Passport.pdf>

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<http://www.godisatwork.org>

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