

# Culture Shock

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Cartoons by: Terrill Nelson – SIM.

## Chapter 3

### Cross-cultural Stress

[47] Adjusting one's lifestyle and thought patterns to fit a new culture is a very stressful experience. It is a process of making oneself vulnerable to disorientation and damage from many emotional storms. It is difficult for many who have never experienced such exposure for an extended time to comprehend the high degree of stress involved. This chapter will briefly examine some of the factors which contribute to cross-cultural stress and show that this stress results in a significantly reduced level of performance by those under its influence. This reduced level of performance produces feelings of guilt and subsequent loss of self-esteem, and if unresolved, results in maladjusted behaviour.

### Culture

First, it is necessary to understand more clearly what culture is. Philip Bock and Edward Hall describe it:

Culture, in its broadest sense, is what makes you a stranger when you are away from home. It includes all those beliefs and expectations about how people act which have become a kind of second nature to you as a result of social learning. When you are with members of a group who share your culture, you do not have to think about it, for you are viewing the world in pretty much the same way and you all know, in general terms, what to expect of one another. However, direct exposure to an alien society usually produces a disturbing feeling of disorientation and helplessness that is called culture shock.<sup>1</sup>  
"Culture determines the timing of interpersonal events, the places where it is appropriate to discuss particular topics, even the physical distance separating the speaker from the hearer, and the tone of voice that is appropriate."<sup>2</sup>



**Culture is what makes you a stranger when you are away from home.**

**[48]** Culture determines what is accepted as being proper. In downtown Bangkok, culture says that it is proper to brush your teeth while bathing in a polluted river; in downtown New York, such behaviour is totally unacceptable. Most people are not even aware that culture exists in their environment. If they have been exposed to only one culture, they believe that the only correct way to do things is the way that they have always done them.

### **Stress Factors in Cross-cultural Living**

Culture stress describes the destabilizing influence of the **[49]** radically new way of life in which the foreigner finds himself. The tourist in a foreign culture does not normally experience a great deal of culture stress. He may experience the shock aspect of the alien culture, but usually is insulated from extended struggle with it. He only enters the real world when he leaves his American-style hotel and goes shopping or sight-seeing. This can also be the case for summer and short-term missionaries. They know that their stay is not permanent, so do not abandon themselves to adopting the new culture.

Culture stress varies in intensity, and the more exotic or different the alien society and the deeper one's involvement in its social life, the greater the stress. Culture stress strikes the one hardest who is settling in to a community to make it his new home for possibly a lifetime. It is then that depression and disillusionment become real enemies.

***Change in social roles***

The new cross-cultural worker is like a child again, and must start learning appropriate behaviour almost from scratch. His whole value system is upset and must be reorganized. McElroy, in an article in *Latin American Evangelist*, describes the typical experience of the new missionary in a foreign culture:

Few candidates are prepared for the forces which will push, pull and mould them when they leave their familiar culture and language, when old props and supports are temporarily gone.

Just making a bank deposit can be a traumatic experience for the new missionary trying to understand unfamiliar procedures from tellers who speak no English. After similar experiences in the grocery store, on the bus, and at the church, he may develop gnawing feelings of disorientation and frustration.

His children, too, have problems adjusting to the new language and way of life, and need extra loving care and patience. Sometimes this internal stress produces physical distress as [50] well — crying about insignificant things, hives, extreme fatigue, asthma, allergic sensitivity, stuttering or frequent colds.<sup>3</sup>

One friend who served as a summer worker in Japan recounted an incident on a city bus. After his ride, as he was about to exit, he put what he thought was the appropriate coin into the machine. The driver quickly handed him three smaller coins in return. Thinking that this was perhaps his change, the summer worker started to leave. The driver grasped his arm and indicated that the fare was not yet paid, whereupon the American held out his hand with all his coins and let the driver select what was correct. With hat in hand and embarrassed over his ignorance of something so simple as paying a bus fare, he left the crowded bus.

I remember some of my own frustration as a new missionary. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, almost all streets are one-way. Normally the direction of traffic alternates from street to street, but not always. It was extremely embarrassing to keep turning down one-way streets headed the wrong way. Bolivian drivers, by their looks and their righteous pronouncements of blame, told me that any fool could drive better than I!

Through the above examples, it can be seen that what is being threatened most by entry into an alien culture is one's self-esteem.

McElroy also points out that part of the adjustment problem is due to a switch in social roles.

During the first week of language study the new missionary experiences "role shock." In North America he was a leader, successful and secure. Suddenly, he is a learner, with a high school graduate teaching him Spanish phonetics — and correcting, correcting, correcting him. If the missionary does not make the role switch, he feels insecure, self-conscious and threatened. The experience brings out the worst in some students: stubbornness, rudeness, withdrawal, and hypercritical-ness.<sup>4</sup> [51]

I can readily identify with this also. Before I went to South America as a missionary, I was a pilot in the U.S. Air Force. I had been looked up to, saluted, well-paid, admired and respected. Once in Bolivia, I was just one of several untrustworthy foreigners, and respect was a lot harder to find. Apparently, much of my sense of self-worth was based upon the respect and praise I received from others. There, in the new situation there was little of that, and I began to subconsciously question my worth and to try to prove that I was a good missionary.

### ***Change in language***

One of the earliest struggles the new worker has is in the area of language learning. This is a highly visible element of culture stress. William Smalley, one of the earliest writers to address the phenomenon of culture shock, has described the relationship between language learning and psychological struggles:

Language shock is one of the basic ingredients of culture shock. Because language is the most important communication medium in any human society, it is the area where the largest number of the cues to interpersonal relationships lies. As the newcomer comes into a whole new world where he knows no language at all, he is stripped of his primary means of interacting with other people, he is subject to constant mistakes, he is placed on the level of a child again. Even after weeks of study he is unable to discuss much more than the price of a pound of potatoes. He is unable to display his education and intelligence, the symbols which gave him status and security back home. He meets intelligent and educated people but he responds to them like a child or an idiot because he is not capable of any better response.<sup>5</sup>

The language learner has the uneasy feeling that people are laughing behind his back — and they are. His study is tiring, boring, frustrating.

Nothing seems to go logically or smoothly, because logic is identified with familiar ways of talking and [52] thinking. It is based on his language and academic tradition.

Many an overseas American who started out to learn a language has ended by rejecting it. The pattern of rejection sometimes means less and less study; the development of more and more English contacts. Sometimes it means illness, genuine physical illness.<sup>6</sup>

This difference in language puts a severe strain on the mental capacities. What were simple, subconscious mental procedures now require concentrated conscious participation. For example, when the new missionary first goes to church on Sunday, he finds the service picturesque and fascinating, but after several weeks, he finds that trying to gain spiritual nourishment from the sermon is extremely difficult. After ten minutes of intense concentration trying to understand one word in every five, his brain rebels and finds other things to do. Finally, after six months of strained mental concentration, he may get the gist of the message and be able to find Bible references easily, but worship is still a tiring and demanding experience.

As the new worker concentrates heavily on learning the new language, he begins to lose proficiency in his mother tongue. I remember this happening in my case, as I started learning Bible verses and trying to have devotions in the other language to speed up learning, I found that I could no longer remember some of the verses I had previously memorized in English. John 3:16 was a notable exception, but some of the lesser known verses seemed lost from memory. When writing letters home, I found it difficult to remember some of my vocabulary. The words seemed to be on the tip of my tongue, but managed to stay there. What happened was that proficiency in the old language temporarily diminished as my mind concentrated all its efforts on learning the new. After a sufficient time of study passed, proficiency in English returned to normal, but not [53] without some self-doubt. Figure 5 illustrates this phenomenon.

When the new worker cannot remember his verses or Bible details, he begins to doubt his suitability for missionary work: "what kind of a missionary am I if I don't even know my Bible?" His self-esteem is under attack.

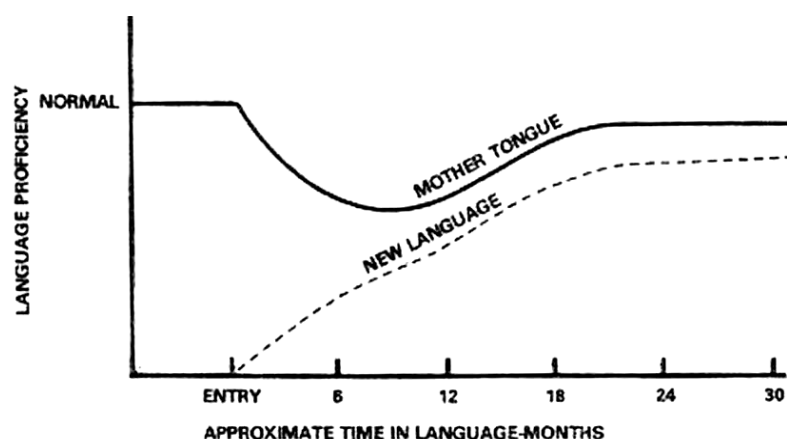


FIGURE 5. Language Proficiency versus Time<sup>7</sup>

### Change in routine

Inadequacy due to culture stress is felt in the menial duties of the home. Before living long in the new culture, the wife learns that she no longer knows how to cook. In most developing countries, no frozen foods or instant mixes are available. The only canned goods are imported, and the price far out of reach. Vegetables and fruits are not sprayed nor carefully packaged to prevent contamination, and therefore must be treated to kill parasites. Everything must be cooked from scratch, and purchases must be made every two or three days. Elisabeth Elliot humorously relates one of the problems associated with food preparation: [54]

Then there were the simple things which, for safety's sake, one ought not to overlook. They only take a minute. Like washing lettuce. "Avoid raw vegetables" is good advice for a tourist, but if you are going to live in a place (it was living we were aiming for, not mere tropical survival), you want raw vegetables sometimes. The book said to dip everything, lettuce included, in boiling water for a few seconds. This could be counted on usually to kill amoeba and always to kill one's zest for salad.<sup>8</sup>

It usually takes much longer to get anything done in a new culture. If one lives in the jungle, then eighty percent of his effort will go toward just plain survival — carrying and boiling water, trimming the banana trees, hunting for food, building and maintaining a house, washing by hand, cooking from scratch, making long trips to town for supplies, teaching the children, and bartering with the natives. If one is well organized, he may be able to devote half a day several days a week to

Bible translation, health classes, or evangelism. Spending so much time just to sustain life can be very frustrating. Elizabeth Elliot confessed her struggle with it:

None of us felt sorry for ourselves with having to cope with inconvenience. Inconvenience belonged to missionary life. The proportion of time, however, which was consumed with these temporal matters, bothered me. When I was fiddling with the stove, I felt that I ought to be working on the language, the real work I had come for.<sup>9</sup>

Inconvenience costs time, and when one's time is spent on what seem like unspiritual things, he feels wasteful and unsuccessful as a missionary. In the city, there is also a set of time-consuming activities to frustrate the newcomer. Just learning where to get off of a bus can take several circuits. In most under-developed countries, there are no supermarkets which sell everything under one roof: the [55] shopper must move from street to street instead of from aisle to aisle to accumulate the groceries for the family or the replacement parts for the car. Grocery shopping must be done much more often since most workers cannot afford the luxury of a freezer for keeping things on hand. Whether in the jungle or the city, these time-consuming ways of getting things done begin to convince the foreigner that he is incompetent and inefficient.

### ***Changes in interpersonal relationship formation***

Cross-cultural stress is increased in proportion to one's involvement psychologically within the culture. Involvement includes social relationships in study, business, recreation or ministry. Because involvement with a foreign community increases stress, people instinctively avoid it. Involvement is necessary to produce beneficial change, but as stress intensifies, the person feels the need to withdraw from social contact in order to be able to function. Yet, involvement cannot be avoided without seriously limiting the effectiveness of the missionary worker. Though personal social relationships are stressful, they are necessary for reaching missionary goals.

It is more difficult to relate to friends from another culture. The fear of being misunderstood militates against letting down one's guard and being open. Forming friendships is much less natural for the new person in a different culture. It takes longer for people to understand each other and to build genuine trust.

These changes in social role, language, routine and interpersonal relationship formation are only a few of the factors contributing to turmoil within the cross-cultural worker.<sup>10</sup>

### **Guilt Feelings**

Culture stress affects every foreigner. Missionaries are [56] not immune, even though they go in the Name and with the blessing of Christ. They cannot avoid physical and spiritual stress. Unfortunately,

The missionary easily sees all this stress and turmoil as spiritual failure, rather than as a conflict between his personality and the alien culture. He may write home to his Christian friends for solace. But instead of comforting him they express their disappointment, and chide him for not being victorious over his problems. In time his relations with the nationals and with fellow missionaries become greatly strained, and his sense of isolation deepens. Things that once seemed romantic and exciting — the different language, different sounds and smells, different ways of responding and thinking — now seem only strange and threatening. Yet he dare not be frank in expressing any of this: missionaries aren't supposed to have such feelings, he thinks. He feels he is failing as a Christian example, and guilt compounds the problem.<sup>11</sup>

The preceding quotation from *Eternity* magazine lucidly expresses the sense of guilt felt by missionaries when they cannot live up to everyone's expectations. If absolute cultural adjustment is the goal, then the missionary will feel frustrated; for no matter how much he may desire otherwise, he will always be considered a foreigner by the people.

### **Emotional Maladjustment**

When the conflict over lowered self-esteem and false guilt goes unresolved, individuals employ psychological defense mechanisms to an increasing degree. This creates tension in inter-personal relationships in the form of hostility, insults, resentment, anger, dishonesty, competition, blame-assigning, withdrawal, misinterpretation, phobias and depression.<sup>12</sup> In the early stages, the individual is often unaware that this is taking place.

To this point, the term "culture shock" has purposely [57] been avoided in our discussion because it is a misnomer. Most emotional and psychological maladjustment resulting from culture stress is not similar to traumatic shock. However, within the wide scope of reactions to culture stress there is a shock-type experience which is suffered by a

minority of people. It is a reaction to what is seen as repulsive within the alien culture. For example, it is the reaction of a middle-class westerner in a poor country to the sight of starving children, or to the sight of flies on all the food in the market, or the smell of excrement along the street (or the realization that the flies have been in both places). If a citizen of a poorer country comes to the West, it is his reaction to the excessive speed on the expressway, the height of skyscrapers, or the large mind-boggling supermarkets. This is indeed a result of cross-cultural stress, and it does resemble shock — a psychological jolt which makes the foreigner flee to the sanctuary of his hotel room. Nevertheless, the most devastating result of cross-cultural conflict is not a state of shock. Rather, it is a slowly advancing, nearly unnoticed psychological phenomenon which affects his whole way of thinking about himself and about others. The latter is usually more subtle, yet far more damaging. It often goes undetected, and the person thinks that he is functioning normally. For example, when a frog is tossed alive into a pot of boiling water, he will immediately jump out. However, if he is placed into a pot of water at room temperature, he will be content to stay there even though the water is heated gradually to a boil. Like the frog in the slowly heated water, the cross-cultural worker may not even notice that something is amiss until it is very difficult to do anything about it.

When most writers refer to culture shock, they are really referring to the latter reaction to cross-cultural stress. The definition given in *American Anthropologist* is; "The massive psychic reaction which takes place within the individual [58] plunged into a culture vastly different from his own."

A more descriptive definition by Dr. Thomas Brewster is also helpful:

Culture shock is a somewhat psychotic state that people get into when they are in a cultural situation whose cues are misleading because they have learned either responses that are wrong for the cues or no responses at all. It has been described as a "kind of vertigo such as one has never experienced before. One blames one's glasses. What is really changing are the glasses through which one's mind has looked at the world".<sup>13</sup>

For most people, the early experience within the new culture is one of fascination with the sights and sounds. Gradually this fascination gives way to dissatisfaction with the inconvenience caused by the culture, and eventually ends in one of four responses: (1) total rejection of the new culture, (2) total rejection of the old, (3) grudging coexistence, or (4)

healthy integration of the new with the old. Only in the latter are behavioural irregularities minimized and wholesome adjustment possible.

### Summary

Cross-cultural living imposes intense stress on the psychological being of the individual. The degree of stress varies in accordance with the degree of cultural difference between the home and host cultures. Because of significantly decreased achievement, workers tend to feel guilty for not living up to expectations. [59]

### References

1. Philip K. Bock. *Culture Shock: a Reader in Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Alfred Knopf. 1970), foreword.
2. Edward T. Hall, Jr. and William Foote Whyte, "Intercultural Communication," *Conformity and Conflict*, Eds., James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company. 1971), p. 217.
3. Richard McElroy, "The New Missionary and Culture Shock," *Latin American Evangelist* 52 (May-June, 1972): inside cover.
4. Ibid.
5. William A. Smalley, "Culture Shock, Language Shock, and the Shock of Self-discovery," *Practical Anthropology* 1(1963): 54.
6. Ibid, p. 55.
7. This language learning diagram is constructed on the basis of the author's personal experience and with confirmation from other workers. It is intended as an approximation of the phenomenon and not as an exact representation. People coming to the United States from other cultures have also confirmed this occurrence of temporary lowering of proficiency in their native language.
8. Elisabeth Elliot, *These Strange Ashes*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 41.
9. Ibid, p. 44.
10. For a more complete list of the external and internal factors in culture stress, see an article entitled "Likely Causes of Emotional Difficulties among Missionaries" by Dr. James A. Stringham in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Volume 6 (Summer 1970), pages 193-203.
11. Faith A. Pidcoke. "Can Missionaries Avoid Culture Shock," *Eternity* 24 (June 1973): 15.
12. For a more extensive analysis of missionary maladjustment, see "Decreasing Fatigue and Illness in Field Work," By Sally Folger Dye in *Missiology* 2 (January 1974), pages 79-109.
13. Thomas E. Brewster and Elizabeth S. Brewster, "Involvement as a Means of Second Culture Learning." *Practical Anthropology* 19 (1972):39.

## Chapter 4

### **Missionary Role Stress**

This chapter examines some of the stress which missionaries face as they try to live up to an unrealistic image. Many of the observations and comments contained here apply not only to those trying to fulfill the missionary role, but also to any Christian who is trying to measure up to an unrealistic standard of Christianity.

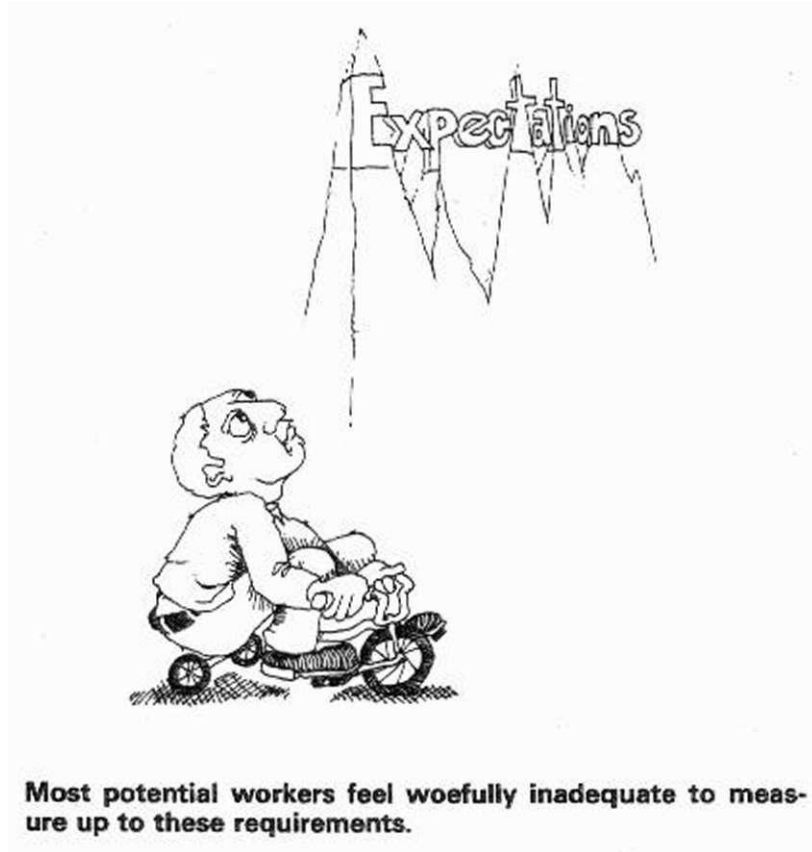
#### **The Problem of the Idealistic Missionary Image**

Not only do missionaries face tremendous stress due to the difficulty of the work they are trying to do but also because of the very high standards expected of them. Dr. David Hesselgrave of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School addresses this problem:

... there is the phenomenon of "rising expectations" which faces tomorrow's missionary. Recent descriptions of the kind of missionaries needed in the 1970s include the following: men of sterling quality, purposive men, dynamic men, men who are original thinkers, creative men, discerning men, flexible men, men who are resourceful, sensitive men, men who can produce, men who are well-informed, men who understand the times, prophetic men, men who make history, men who overcome all obstacles. If that is the requirement for the 70s, what will be required in the '80s and '90s in this rapidly changing and demanding world? In the judgment that these attributes are indeed desirable and, to a certain extent, necessary, I readily concur. But if we anticipate that some of the best men will answer the challenge, we can also anticipate that many good men will say "Who is sufficient for these things?"

Another author, writing in the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, [62] manages to intensify expectations even more with these words:

Language learning requires sustained hard work. Isolated posts demand extraordinary professional competence and self-reliance under pressure. The mission field is no place for lazy, undisciplined people. Or for those who have not done their professional homework. Educational and technical levels are rising all over the world, so that the one who aspires to be a missionary should have something to offer not available on the local market at much less cost and bother.<sup>2</sup>



[63] Such writing gives the impression that mission boards are trying to recruit people who are without flaws; persons who are adequate for every problem; human beings who are invincible in the face of any foe. This is very unrealistic. In reality, the missionary does not need to worry about whether or not he is adequate for all of the trials that will be set before him. His adequacy is from God (II Corinthians 3:5). However, that adequacy does not mean perfection. Even the great Apostle Paul was not perfect, as can be seen by his admission that he was with the Corinthians in weakness and fear and much trembling (I Corinthians 2:3). He had conflicts without and fears within (II Corinthians 7:5). Today, a candidate secretary might say "Sorry Paul, you cannot join our mission board: you just do not fit the image. You can't pass the physical. Besides, you have a prison record and have been known to incite riots."

In spite of Biblical teaching about God's use of the weak and lowly, we see that the demands on missionaries continue to intensify. Are the expectations really too high, or are cross-cultural Christian workers able to live up to them without suffering serious damage? To answer this question, four quotes from two little publicized missionary books will be

helpful. The first three are from the book *Stop Treating Me Like God* by Levi Keidel, a missionary to Africa. The last one is from the book *When All the Bridges Are Down* by Ida Nelle Holloway, a missionary to Japan. Both of these writers were extremely productive workers who were very successful by most standards:

Obviously, in terms of what I had understood a missionary to be, I was unqualified.<sup>3</sup>

Legal compulsion seemingly forced me to continually overreach my resources until eventually I was driven into a valley of despondency.<sup>4</sup>

I began to stand my various manifestations of un-Christlikeness up on a row to take a good look at them: bad temper, [64] chafing against unfavorable circumstances, enslaving myself to legalistic motivation, ill will toward those who impeded my program.

To these I added recurrent terminal exhaustion. My experience with psychosomatic illness was not the only manifestation of it. I remember the counsel of my pastor when we first left for Congo: "Now, Levi, you don't have to accomplish everything during your first term." Before I completed two years on the field I was taken to a hospital. Symptoms of insomnia and an itching swelling of my flesh were diagnosed as "emotional and physical exhaustion." Again, toward the end of our last term, I was as a bowl dipped empty and scraped raw by the ravenous appetite of demand.<sup>5</sup>

I was finding it harder and harder to communicate with God. I would lie on my bed through the long nights with my hands outstretched, crying, "take my hand, God, oh please, take my hand!"

In the daytime I was constantly asking, "Why can't I 'mount up with wings like the eagle'? Why can't I 'run and not be weary'?" Yet I was constantly, desperately tired.

It was as if the last bridge were crumbling. I could not even find the bridge to God. I felt lost in utter darkness. I felt condemned to total isolation. In times past when men had asked me my idea of hell I had often responded, "Isolation from God and love." I had arrived at that definition through mental gymnastics. Now I was proving it experientially. Surely this was hell.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, these are not rare, exceptional cases, though they may be examples of more severe problems than experienced by most. The problems are much more common than most Christians realize. They are often covered up to protect the individual, the mission board or the missionary image. When my wife suffered an emotional breakdown after our first term, I began to realize that hers was not a unique problem. I learned of a number of other [65] missionaries who had similar experiences. I found that Christian counsellors offered discounts

to missionaries and that missionary medical insurance commonly covered most expenses for psychiatric care. Dr. Larry Crabb, a prominent Christian psychologist, readily acknowledged in a personal conversation that not a few missionaries on furlough come to him for counsel.

### **The Common Response to the image**

The typical response to the inflated image is to work harder to try to measure up to it. Somehow the new missionary must close the gap if he is to maintain any sense of self-esteem. As his effort is intensified, he develops emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual problems. When he sees that he cannot measure up, he concludes that he is faulty and no longer acceptable for serving God.

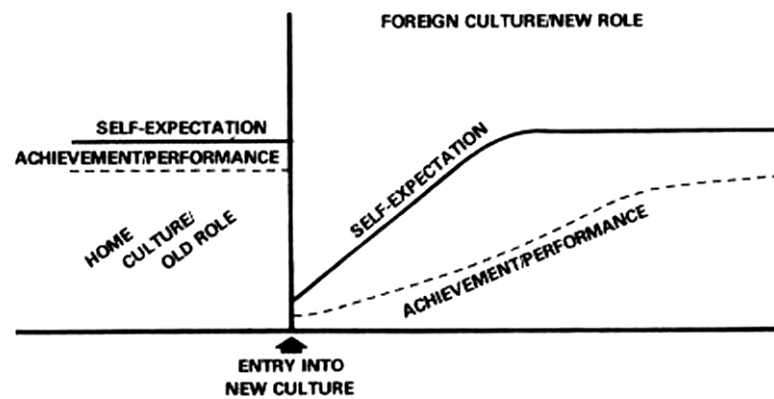
When people cannot live up to the cherished level, they put on a mask. They find ways of disguising their perceived failures. Human beings cannot be bedfellows with a worthless self-image.

Like other unresolved conflicts, the mask requires a lot of energy and leads to a host of problems besides fear, such as irritability, worry, anxiety, fatigue, excusing ourselves, blaming others, and, not infrequently, frank lying and deceit.

When we refuse to remove our masks, we not only create internal conflict and fatigue, but we also hinder our own growth and the growth of others. Individuals grow by relating to other genuine people and seeing how they deal with life's problems. Christian leaders must be willing to first remove their own masks before they can ever expect others to do likewise. Only as we Christians are willing to expose our feet of clay will others feel (and maybe only then) safe to expose themselves and their needs....

If a Christian leader is living a life of pretense it is most likely (despite the seeming results he may proudly point to) his life is accomplishing very little of eternal value. It may even be **[66]** hindering God's work in the lives of people around him. God's plan and desire is that we honestly and openly recognize who and what we are – imperfect vessels of clay.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most prominent causes of stress for the missionary is trying to live up to these inflated expectations. The typical experience is illustrated by Figure 6.



**FIGURE 6.** Expectation versus Achievement<sup>8</sup>

Usually, for the well-adjusted individual, self expectation slightly exceeds performance. This is normal and drives men to high achievement. However, in the new missionary role, expectation quickly outpaces performance. New workers believe that once they have become choice servants of the Lord they will automatically achieve more. In reality, because of culture stress, achievement is drastically decreased. As seen in Chapter three, one cannot produce at the same level in a foreign situation. Here then is the real problem — there exists a great discrepancy between what one expects of oneself (and is expected by others) and what one can actually achieve. This creates tremendous [67] internal conflict. If this gap widens greatly, the mind begins to employ defence mechanisms to protect the sense of worth. The individual moves farther and farther from reality, usually denying his lack of achievement. Next, he begins to blame others or his circumstances for it. He increases his efforts to succeed only to find that he is physically exhausted. Perhaps physical illness develops, and this provides the needed excuse for lack of achievement. The illness may continue indefinitely as a defence mechanism against the impossible demands of the missionary image.

As a result of the expectation/performance discrepancy, hostile, critical, irrational, tired, sick and neurotic missionaries develop, who are confused about their behaviour and who sometimes conclude that they are worthless. It normally doesn't occur to them to lower their expectations, because they believe that God is not pleased with them unless they reach a certain level of achievement. Most effort by the individual and by the mission board is devoted to improving performance, rather than to bringing expectation down to realistic levels.

North Americans have come to equate intense work with spirituality. Therefore, the Christian who is frantically busy in the Lord's work is considered the most spiritual. Leisure is viewed as sin for the Christian. However, this concept of work and leisure is unique to western society. In Latin, the word for work was "non-leisure." Work was thus secondary, defined in terms related to leisure. In Greek, the word for work also meant the absence of leisure. Leisure was understood as a time for growth and development.<sup>9</sup>

The reversed concept exacts a high price from Christian workers. "Pastors are experiencing burn-out at an alarming rate. The average pastor is a man who works seven days a week, has no hobbies, no regular exercise, and little quality time with his family."<sup>10</sup> In work there is little time for worship, especially if one is working only to gain approval from his [68] fellow man. When work interferes with a man's relationship to God, then it must be interrupted. Work must not be allowed to become a substitute for spontaneous worship. A good abiding principle is suggested by Elisabeth Prentiss:

If you could once make up your mind in the fear of God never to take on more work of any sort than you can carry on calmly, quietly, without hurry or flurry, and the instant you feel yourself growing nervous, and like one out of breath, would stop and take breath, you would find this simple common-sense rule doing for you what no prayers or tears could ever accomplish.<sup>10</sup>

### **Behind the Erroneous Image**

The present image of the missionary held by most Christians is unscriptural because the emphasis is put on *doing* rather than *being*. This is largely due to our North American society which places more value on performance than on character: here, it is performance which determines worth. For example, when a machine is no longer capable of meeting production levels, it is scrapped and replaced by one which can do the job. Likewise, when a person fails to perform at the level expected of him, he is no longer considered useful and is soon replaced. This attitude affects not only industry and business, but social structures as well. When a marriage partner no longer meets expectations, he or she is discarded for a more productive model. The west has become a disposable society and has transferred this performance-based standard over to its image of the acceptable missionary.

God is not against work or performance when it is a product of character, but for Him, work is always a secondary consideration. In Exodus 3:14, God said, "I am who I am." He did not say "I do what I do." His character determines His action and not vice-versa. In John 6:29 when the disciples asked what they could do to work the works of God, Jesus replied, "This is the work of God; that you [69] believe on Him whom He has sent." Scripture clearly emphasizes heart character above performance as the thing that pleases God.

As mentioned earlier, the problem of an unrealistic image is not unique to the missionary. Pastors, other full-time Christian workers and even many Christian laymen are intimidated by it also. Even in other less stressful societies we see Christian workers attempting to win recognition by measuring up to a larger than life image. An example from an African brother William Nagenda illustrates this:

I remember years ago when I went to work as a missionary in Ruanda, that a dear man of God had died a few months before, a man who had done a great work. It was at a time when we thought the work was just beginning. He was full of zeal and full of the Holy Spirit. He died so quickly, and God called me to go and take his place. As I prepared to go my thoughts were full as I thought of what I was going to do. I was keen to go. I wanted to see souls saved, but deep down in me there was the feeling that I wanted to be a wonderful missionary. I wanted to do something greater than what that man had done. I was preparing myself with that spirit. "I'm going to become somebody; I'm going to be a great evangelist; people are going to talk about me." That was the spirit. You could say that it was ambition, but deep down in me was pride. I was looking for my own glory. There is such a thing as walking and tearing clothes every day, but really it is done so that we may become better known and more popular. There are times when we think we are suffering for the Lord, but really deep down we are trying to build up our own name and become a great man.<sup>11</sup>

So, though it is more prevalent in our society, it is present in all societies, because it is a manifestation of self-centeredness and sin. All men try to live up to an image because they believe that by so doing they will win the approval of God and men. Tim Hansel, in his book *When I Relax I feel Guilty*, refers to the North American version of the image as a myth:

**[70]** This myth is humorously referred to as bionic Christianity. It describes the super Christian who is, at least in appearance, above reproach. He has been redeemed, even of his humanness, and he

works hard daily to earn his righteousness. Each of his answers is quick and precise, and his time is managed with calculated economy. Above all else, no time should be wasted on such frivolous things as laughter and play when there is so much to be done in the world. Heavily laden with guilt and tension about each of the minutes he might be wasting — stiff, fussy, meticulous, and incurably religious — the Bionic Christian simply does not have time to be happy. Irony of ironies, his commitment to Jesus Christ has become a prison rather than a blessing. So blinded by religious observations and reservations, he fails to see the festivity that was so central in the life of Jesus. He forgets that Jesus, despite the sad world he inhabited, was the prime host and the prime guest of the party. Jesus let Himself be doused with perfume. He attended to wedding wine and wedding garments.<sup>12</sup>

### Summary

Stress in the missionary role is caused by a discrepancy between expected and actual performance. This leads to false guilt and low self-esteem. The high level of expected performance is caused by an erroneous image of the missionary worker which is based on unbiblical principles. It is very important for new cross-cultural workers to have a realistic standard toward which to aim, and a proper understanding of their limitations as human beings in a foreign environment. [71]

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## Chapter 5

### **The First Term: Life Change Stress**

**[73]** Any honest missionary will tell you that the first term involves considerable stress; this stress comes from three different sources. The first is culture stress and the need to re-learn acceptable behaviour. The second is the stress imposed by the idealistic missionary image and the resultant pressure to achieve. The third is the stress of normal life change events taking place with the initiation of a missionary career. Among these life change events are changes in occupation, geography, language, and marriage or childbirth within a two year period before or after entry into the culture. This chapter explores some of these life changes commonly taking place which affect the new missionary.

#### **Typical Life Changes**

##### *Occupation*

Normally, when we change jobs here in our western society, it is somewhat of a traumatic experience. Several months to a year pass before we get the hang of things and feel competent and capable again. Our self-esteem is under pressure until we can convince ourselves and others that we can adequately perform in the new role.

##### *Geographical move*

Another trying experience is that of moving to a different geographical area. Even if the husband maintains the same type of job with the same company, and the wife continues in a role as housewife and mother, it can take a long time to pack, move, unpack, organize, decorate, make new **[74]** friends, find out where to shop, where to go out to eat and where to go to church. Though they may not be aware of it a year later, they are still newcomers in many ways and are still settling in. Thus, a geographical move to a new place usually brings much stress into people's lives:

Another specific depression is induced by moving to a different residence. Even rearranging furniture and redecorating can result in a feeling of loss; one feels uprooted and is acutely aware that one's home, the four walls one knew so well, are missing.<sup>1</sup>

##### *Language*

When a person begins to work in another language, he is under great stress. Many people become very anxious and upset when their firms purchase electronic computers and they need to learn computer language. It takes six months to a year for normal adjustment even

though the usage of the computer language is limited to the job and is not involved with basic life activities such as how to cook or repair the car. Though it directly affects only a portion of one's life, it very often causes emotional and psychological difficulties in the whole person. Even more traumatic is a change in language which affects nearly every area of one's life.

### *Financial status*

Of course, when one receives a raise or a cut in salary, it has a forceful effect on him. He needs to revamp his financial thinking and alter his lifestyle to compensate for the difference.

### *Childbirth*

Having a baby is a beautiful experience for a couple, but when a little one drops into a household, things never get back to normal. With a first baby, it seems like the need to [75] adjust and compensate begins and never ends. Dr. Collins states, "In one study, 83 percent of the couples interviewed reported that the first child's coming brought 'extensive' or 'severe' stress even though in almost all cases the pregnancy was planned and the child was wanted."<sup>2</sup>



### *Marriage*

In any culture, marriage is extremely stressful. Granted, it is usually a positive stress because it is chosen, but it nevertheless taxes one's ability to cope and adjust. To survive, the newly-wed needs to learn new ways of squeezing the toothpaste, scrambling eggs and spending money. [76]

### *Living conditions*

It is commonly believed that life on the mission field is much easier today than it was in the pioneering days, and therefore new workers should be able to adapt. Dr. J. Herbert Kane has ably pointed out the error of this belief:

We usually think of the missionary pioneers as making a great sacrifice when they went to Africa and Asia in the nineteenth century. This is not altogether true. When Hudson Taylor arrived in China he didn't find any indoor plumbing, central heating, electric light, or telephone service. So what? He didn't have them back in England either. Where then was the sacrifice? I dare say that the economic gap between England and China in 1853 was not as great as the gap between China and the United States today. There is a sense in which today's missionary candidates make greater material sacrifices than their predecessors a hundred years ago. This should be borne in mind when we are tempted to criticize the younger generation for their reluctance to forego the amenities of Western technological civilization....

One should bear in mind that the wear and tear of life is far greater on the mission field than here at home. Plenty of people in the United States crack up every year, among them not a few Christians. In many countries personal hygiene is unknown and public sanitation is poor or nonexistent.<sup>3</sup>

### **Total Stress Level**

If it is realized that the new worker is experiencing many of these stressful life events simultaneously when he becomes a missionary, it does not take much imagination to see that there is severe strain placed on his psychological person. Stress could be the by-word for the missionary's first term. It can be minimized, but not eliminated, and the candidate must be prepared to tangle with it.

In chapter one, the table of life change units by Dr. Holmes was reproduced. It is enlightening to sum up the [77] points for the average first term missionary.

## Loss – Culture Shock

Change in financial state	38
Change to different line of work	36
Change in living conditions	25
Revision of personal habits	24
Change in work hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in recreation	19
Change in church activities	19
Change in social activities	18
Change in number of family get-togethers	15
Change in eating habits	15
Change in language used in daily activity	50 (author's insertion)
	299
Additional changes possible:	
Marriage	50
Gain of new family member	39
Personal injury or illness	53
Change in health of family member	44
Wife begins or stops work	26
Begin or end school	26
Change in schools	20
Additional Points Possible	258

Of the 258 additional points possible, the average first term missionary worker is probably involved in changes adding up to 100-150 points. Therefore, we can say that the normal first term missionary worker is running at or above 400 LCUs. Still, many of the stressful events involved in cross-cultural transition are not included in the table.<sup>4</sup> As was seen in chapter one, a score over 300 indicated an eighty percent chance of a major health change (disease, surgery, accident, or mental illness) in the next two years. The stress a new missionary [78] faces due to life change alone is very high. (Missionaries on furlough are also subjected to very high levels of stress. Compute from Holmes' table in chapter 1).

### **How Much Stress Should the First-term Worker Be Expected to Bear**

#### *The experience of Paul*

The Apostle Paul did not undergo nearly as dramatic social and cultural adjustments as most new missionaries today. He already knew the Greek language. He was a Roman citizen and grew up in Roman culture. Most of the cities to which he traveled were Roman colonies and had Jewish synagogues where he found some common ties with

his Jewish past. When he went with Barnabas on the first missionary journey, they went first to Cyprus which was Barnabas' homeland, and then to the Galatian and Phrygian region which was just over the mountains from Tarsus, Paul's home city. Only when they went as far as Asia Minor, did they evidence the first symptoms of culture stress (II Corinthians 1:8). Later, in Macedonia where there was an even greater cultural difference, they experienced internal conflicts and depression (II Corinthians 7:5,6).

### *The problem of selection*

Mission organizations realize that the first term is stressful and make some allowances for adjustment to it. Often, however, when the new workers act irrationally, seem insubordinate or develop emotional problems, field leaders blame the home office for improper candidate screening. "These flaws in the candidates should have been discovered by accurate psychological testing and better references," they may comment. Or, they may say that the individual should have had more training. "Send him back to seminary, or put him in a three year internship before you [79] send him out to us again." In reality, the problem seldom lies in selecting the wrong people. The following excerpt from *The Overseas American* makes this clear:

Virtually every major organization that maintains people overseas has joined in the search for the ideal pre-selection test to eliminate the misfits and assure a congenial and effective team in the field. The results so far have been far from impressive. The Civil Service Commission selective procedures, developed after studies costing several hundred thousand dollars, have not been widely used by the Federal agencies for which they were developed. The Creole Petroleum Corporation has had second thoughts about a whole battery of psychological tests on the ground that there did not seem to be any discernible connection between what the tests indicated and how the employees later performed in Venezuela. The mission boards have also been distressed by the prognostic uncertainties of social psychology. Everybody seems to feel that with all our modern scientific lore about man and society, it should be possible for a simple test to be devised that would separate the potentially successful from the potentially unsuccessful before their wives, children, and furniture are moved across the seas at great trouble and expense. But nobody has yet devised that formula.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, it seems like the recruits which the home office puts on the plane at this end are different from the ones who get off at the other. Mission boards want to recruit better candidates, but there are no

better. These are the best, and the vast majority of them are capable of making it victoriously. What is needed is not a "higher pressure hose" which can handle the pressure. Rather, what is needed is to monitor and control the pressure so it stays within the limits of the "hose." Field leadership must not expect new candidates to be spiritually finished products who can handle any amount of stress. Missionaries are people in process, and it is necessary to exercise patience with them while the Lord continues their development. [80]

#### *Realistic first term expectations*

If new workers are not perfect, what should realistically be expected from them in the first term? The late Fred Renich, past director of Missionary Internship, has suggested the following as normal expectations:<sup>6</sup>

- 1 A good foundation in the language (possibly proficiency, depending on the person and the language involved).
- 2 Satisfactory adjustment to the climate, customs, culture and people on his field.
- 3 A thorough working knowledge of the mission.
- 4 A realistic understanding of the field, its problems, demands and potential.
- 5 Some realistic awareness of his gifts and place in the work.
- 6 A deepening confirmation of his call as a result of a growing sense of "belonging" and a consciousness of being useful.

#### **Disillusionment, Resignation and Dismissal**

"If there has been satisfactory progress in the areas discussed above, the end of the first term should see the missionary inwardly at peace regarding the whole basic direction of his Christian service."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, this is not occurring in many cases. Instead of being more committed to career missions, the first-termer actually loses a great deal of his enthusiasm. Ron Iwasko cites the problem of decreased motivation of Assembly of God first-term workers:

But of concern is the sudden drop of those who strongly favor career commitment from 75 percent for candidates to 40.5 percent for first-termers. Furthermore, there is a constant shift toward a more pessimistic attitude with increasing terms on the field. This suggests the possibility of a rather severe shift in attitude — and thus internal turmoil — of first term missionaries.<sup>8</sup>

One of the reasons for this disillusionment is that the new worker sees that veteran missionaries do not measure [81] up to the cherished missionary image. Older workers don't sacrifice everything at every turn to save a dying world. Instead, once in a while, they allow themselves the luxury of a night out at a restaurant, a long vacation at the beach, a new vehicle, television set or diesel generator for electricity. The veterans don't seem as spiritual as the men portrayed in the biographies of C. T. Studd and Hudson Taylor.

Also, the new worker becomes disillusioned when he sees that he himself cannot live up to the image. Instead of being like his concept of the Apostle Paul, he finds that he is more like Jonah, who had limited motivation to sacrifice himself for the heathen Gentiles.

### *Resignation: a way of escape*

Too many first term workers resign and go away bitter toward their fellow-workers or mission boards. One interviewer made the following observations after interviews with twelve first term missionary couples who had recently resigned:

For all the emphasis upon external conditions, organizational changes, lack of leadership, theological variations and sending council deficiencies, very few missionaries with problems are looking within themselves for the cause or perceiving themselves to be potentially part of the problem.

Specifically, there is evident very little humility, especially as each seems to consider himself the final authority on what should or should not be done or as each seems to make little attempt to see his opponent's view in its best light or his own view in an objective light. Tensions are as great between missionaries as between missionaries and the church. Very little grace or trust is evident.

In some cases there was little or no evidence of an understanding of the Biblical principles of authority, submission, discipling, being responsible to another person and of working joyfully and selflessly with others, even those with less or different understanding of truth.

[82] Resentment, guilt and anxiety are frequently evident, as well as rationalization and the covering of real unresolved spiritual issues. Self-concern is often more evident than total commitment to Christ. "How does it affect me?" seems to take precedence over "How does it affect what God is doing here?"<sup>9</sup>

Is it surprising that these negative traits are the same ones mentioned earlier as consequences of excessive stress and damaged self-esteem? The workers interviewed above are employing defence

mechanisms to keep their island of self-esteem afloat. If it sinks, then for them, life has no meaning: no reason for continued existence. When the *raison d'être* of a person is threatened with extinction, a hostile reaction can be expected toward whatever is perceived to be the cause. The person believes that admitting that the cause lies within himself would mean that he has no worth whatsoever. That conclusion is wholly unacceptable if there is to be continued survival.

### *Dismissal: disposal of the unsuccessful*

Most often, the blame is not exclusively that of the worker or of the organization. Withdrawal of missionary workers represents a failure for both the worker and the board. Several excerpts follow from some workers who quit missionary service after their first term. These are drawn from the survey by the Missionary Research Library:

The reason for our withdrawal — I felt at the time that to draw salary and do the little I was doing was just not good stewardship — also the fact that a new house had to be built for us .... just seemed out of place.... I see now that what we were doing was probably just what was needed at this time. I believe that one thing we could have used on the field would have been a pastor for the missionary. There was no one outside of a friend to whom you could speak .... It is a difficult role to play today — that of a missionary — and unless the missionary understands his calling and work, it is that much **[83]** more difficult.... I never did receive a letter in reply to my resignation from the secretary of our Board.

Our board asked us to resign. We had made some blunders during our first term but were aware of what these were and were looking forward to a second term in which we could correct these and improve the quality of our work.... I think more counseling should be done during a missionary's term rather than waiting until the end for a review of the work.

This way a missionary could be confronted with errors and correct them as he goes along. I think a rehabilitated missionary who knows his mistakes can be of a lot more value than a new missionary.

We were dismissed because no one really cared enough to see why we did not fit into the proper pattern of a missionary. I am greatly disappointed that our mission had so little provision to help those who had problems.... If a mature Christian had even once counseled with us, this missionary casualty would have been prevented. We were young, inexperienced and unhappy. We lived too close to other missionaries, eating, sleeping, etc., to be able to release the normal tensions even with a deluge of tears.

Forty-four percent of the missionaries felt that the Board or Mission could have done something that would have resulted in their continued service.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps nothing was done because these first-termers were no longer wanted. They were now disposable since they failed to serve as expected.

Fortunately, God doesn't work on a disposal basis. When people fail, He does not reject them. For example, Jonah was a dropout, but never a reject. The Lord could have gotten a new man, but instead He decided to re-educate the one He had. Even when His man finished the assigned task with a critical, ungrateful, hostile attitude, God did not harshly rebuke him. He did it with gentleness and tact.

### **[84] Summary**

There is considerable stress inherent in the experience of the missionary first term, due to numerous life changes taking place at this time. This stress is in addition to the stress of the different culture and of trying to measure up to very high expectations. It should come as no surprise then that new workers experience spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical struggles as a result of this stress. Unfortunately, many mission supervisors do not understand how these stresses influence people, and so are not able to administer proper help.

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