

Lessons from a Veteran Missionary

By David Gross – BaptistMissionary.Info

Having spent several short-term trips on the mission field, I have had the privilege of spending time with and gleaning wisdom from veteran missionaries. These “10 Commandments” for missionaries make up the body of advice that was given to me by a veteran missionary I had worked with in the past. He has been on the foreign mission field since 1993. Time has only solidified in my heart the veracity and gravity of these words of wisdom. These are in no particular order but all worth your reading.

1. Love the nationals and treat them as family. New American missionaries can often times arrive on the mission field with a subconscious pride that sets the nationals on a sub-level of importance and intelligence. Some of this comes from the American “we’re number one” ego. In observing this veteran missionary, I have seen a love and a life of sacrifice for his people. He has given up his time, his money, and even friendships with other American missionaries in order to protect and love the people to which God has called him. One of his closest friends in ministry, a national, ended up immigrating to America after ministering with this missionary for many years. It was not the loss of another slave or servant, but of family and friend. Be sure to treat the people with love and respect as fellow labourers in Christ.

2. Learn to sacrifice the temporal in order to gain the eternal. Christ told His disciples, “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 10:39). Each time that the missionary receives the monthly support, a decision must be made on how it will be used. If we are not careful, we will end up thinking that “we deserve a little more” since we are serving Christ. Each time that I think of the many churches who are sacrificing in order to give to missions, I am humbled and reminded of my need to sacrifice, too. This veteran missionary lived a life of sacrificing the temporal in order to gain the eternal. He lived a very modest life in his material possessions and had previously lived in less than desirable conditions. In order to see nationals saved, he has given of his own self, sacrificed money that could have been set aside for retirement, and expended himself for Christ. His focus is not setting up treasure on earth, but in heaven.

3. Who you marry will have the largest influence on the extant of your ministry. During my first summer in Moldova, I was introduced to the importance of who one marries. The missionary told me that in the first eight years of being on the field, he has seen over twenty missionary families come and leave, usually due to the wife. Many of the wives (and sometimes the husband) could not let go of American life and conveniences. Any man in ministry knows the large influence that his wife has on the ministry. A wife who is submissive, has a servant’s heart, and encourages her husband strengthens and helps him continue during the hard times. When a wife complains, has unreasonable expectations, and focuses on herself, the husband is drained and finds it near impossible to stay on the field. This veteran missionary’s wife only exemplified the perfect help meet for a missionary. She loves the people, does not complain, and humbly seeks to serve her husband and in any other capacity. A wife will either be a help or a hurt.

4. Take time to vacation. There is a popular saying that you can burn out, foul out, or drop out but the fact is ...you’re out! Unfortunately, missionaries are a rare commodity today. Sometimes the only reason for a missionary not having a long, extended ministry on the field is his own self. Take time to get away and rest. Jesus would not have even told His disciples to “Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while:” if it was a sin to do. You, your family, and your ministry need you to take a vacation. The veteran missionary, from experience, learned the need to take a vacation each year. Neither the missionary nor the ministry has suffered from that decision.

5. When criticized or attacked, respond like a lamb, not a lion. During one of my summers on the field with this veteran missionary, I saw the kinds of personal conflicts and attacks that a missionary can experience. A young, single, Romanian preacher came to Moldova to preach. During his time in Moldova, he became “smitten” by one of the single young ladies in the ministry and sought to get her. The problem was that the young lady was already engaged to another young man. This veteran missionary, knowing the carnality, selfishness, and lust that this young preacher was having towards this young lady, sent him back to Romania to cool off and think things through. Shortly afterwards, this veteran missionary began receiving vulgar, threatening emails from an American missionary in Romania who was a mentor to the young Romanian preacher. The veteran missionary, instead of reacting like a lion, responded once in an email in a godly way. Even if accusations are false and hurtful, a missionary must let God deal with the attacker.

6. Trust God instead of worrying. Any missionary knows that there are plenty of opportunities to worry on the mission field. I have seen this veteran missionary deal with opposition from the government, have his ministries threatened, and face physical illnesses that could have cost him his life. Overall, his testimony is that of faith and not fear or worry. Trusting God is the easiest thing to do, but it is the hardest thing for us to do.

7. Let nationals make mistakes and let them learn from them. Missionaries must be careful not to have control of their ministry. They must give nationals responsibility and involve them in the ministry. They will make mistakes and may not be able to do certain things as well as you currently, but the ministry will not progress until the people are doing the work. This veteran missionary did not follow this in the beginning. He would become frustrated whenever the nationals would “mess up.” Over his many years of ministry, he has learned to let them make mistakes and to let them learn from them. It has only helped to mature the nationals and strengthen the ministry.

8. Be loyal to God, not a college, camp, or organization. It is sad how many fractions of independent Baptists exist today. A missionary’s character and effectiveness is sometimes judged by what college he attended. What about doctrine, being Spirit-filled, and being faithful? Unfortunately, I have seen missionaries experience political pressures even while on the field. This veteran missionary experienced opposition from a school because an evangelist he had preach in the country was not in their “camp.” “Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?... For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?” (I Corinthians 1:12-13; 3:4). Is this not the same issue today? I learned from this veteran missionary that a man should be loyal to God and not to a college, camp, or organization.

9. Bible degrees cannot replace being Spirit-filled. I used to think that if someone had a “Dr.” behind his name he was very intelligent and more equipped for God. My times on the mission trips convinced me otherwise. A man who had an earned doctorate came to preach in the country. Much to my dismay, this man failed at giving the most basic teaching of the Gospel! He was pretty good with magic tricks, eschatology, and chalk drawings, but the Gospel message was not much more than “ask Jesus into your heart.” I also had the unpleasant and embarrassing experience of travelling back to the States with him as he was rude and demanding towards those at the airport and hotel. I respect those who have done the work for a doctorate, but I do not associate it with what is most important... Being a Spirit-filled servant of Christ. This veteran missionary taught me that without the Spirit leading and working, there is no ministry.

10. Let go of your earthly citizenship and grab hold of your heavenly one. Letting go of what is American is a challenge to do. Humanly speaking, Americans must give up a lot to live in most countries around the world. This veteran missionary taught me that we must not just leave America, but we must also let go of America. We cannot be thinking about what we used to have or used to live like. Our focus must shift from being an American citizen to a citizen of heaven. When we do that, it will not really matter what country we serve Christ in since our citizenship was never really here anyway. Let go of America and lay hold of creating more citizens for heaven.