

Wilkinson's Dream for Africa is Shattered

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Early in July 2005, after three years based in Johannesburg, South Africa, well-known American author and theologian, Dr. Bruce Wilkinson, moved to the land-locked kingdom of Swaziland, a former British colony, to give practical expression to his “Dream for Africa.” During his extensive travels on the subcontinent he was captivated by the plight of millions of unemployed, poor, sick and undernourished Africans who have very little hope on a better future without assistance from outside. He was particularly concerned about the more than one million children left orphaned by the AIDS epidemic – more than a hundred thousand of them in Swaziland.

As a very able, influential and wealthy man, Bruce decided to lend a helping hand and soon devised a grand scheme for the upliftment of destitute communities and individuals on the underdeveloped continent. He had a dream, a vision, an ambitious plan, to channel vast humanitarian aid from the US to communities in Africa where it is most needed. He selected the poverty-stricken, former British colony, Swaziland, as a role model for the rest of Africa on how to successfully change lifestyles and eradicate poverty and suffering. Swaziland has one of the highest infection rates of HIV in the world.

Bruce secured an extensive support-base among private companies and churches, and also received a large grant from the US government to combat AIDS in Africa. Many US and local volunteers also engaged in projects like Never Ending Gardens, to teach locals how to have two gardens per family to sustain them with nutritious vegetables. The dream of Bruce had all the necessary backing to become a practical reality, if only it was shared and accepted by the target communities.

As an anthropologist and the son of a former missionary in Swaziland, I took special interest in the endeavors of Bruce Wilkinson. I have studied development policies on the African continent and was aware of the reasons for the failure of many of them. Would the project of Bruce be among the many failures or the few success stories of Africa? I had my doubts, also from a biblical point of view, but never realized that he would encounter such resistance and quit so soon. He obviously made very serious mistakes and saw his dream shattered in no time.

What went wrong? On December 19th, 2005 the *Wall Street Journal* published a lengthy article on how the African dream of Bruce turned into a nightmare.

The article is titled: “Unanswered prayers: In Swaziland, US preacher sees his dream vanish.” In this article it is also related how Bruce acted against the advice of the US ambassador to Swaziland:

“In May, Mr. Wilkinson tried to win the Bush administration to his side. In a convoy of SUVs, he took U.S. Ambassador Lewis Lucke to the proposed site of the Dream Village. Mr. Lucke had served in Haiti, Jordan and Iraq, much of the time with the U.S. Agency for International Development. He admired Mr. Wilkinson’s enthusiasm and altruism, but was wary of groups with little overseas history claiming to know the answers for Africa. A few days later, Mr. Lucke showed up at Mr. Wilkinson’s door and told him he considered it unwise to move orphans away from their villages. ‘It’s laudable that you’re trying to do something about Swazi orphans,’ Mr. Lucke told Mr. Wilkinson... ‘but do it in a way that doesn’t conflict with Swazi culture.’

“Mr. Wilkinson felt the situation was so urgent that the time for cautious measures had passed. Mr. Lucke wasn’t persuaded, and he didn’t think the Swazi government would be either. ‘You’ll never get the land,’ he warned. The ambassador’s words seemed prophetic a couple of weeks later, when a Dream for Africa draft plan found its way into Swazi newspapers, turning public opinion sharply against Mr. Wilkinson. Under the headline ‘British Colony or Dr Bruce Colony?’ one op-ed writer in the Swazi News wrote, ‘Why can’t he simply tell us that he wants to be given the whole country so that he can gloat to his friends overseas that he owns a modern day colony in Africa called Swaziland?’”

A clash of cultures

The dream of Bruce, as well as the methods used by him to realize his Dream for Africa, were in direct conflict with Swazi culture. The following are the main mistakes that he made:

Ignorance about Africa’s own dream

The emerging African renaissance constitutes a return to Africa’s cultural roots, and is also a call to Africa to take responsibility for its own fate by cooperating towards the greater good for all. Africa has its own visionaries, politicians and philosophers who are determining national objectives and showing the way to a new future. It is very obvious why they wouldn’t be enthusiastic about an American millionaire’s dream for Africa. They would regard it as arrogance on the side of the overseas dreamer, as that would imply that they don’t have a dream and a plan of their own. Africa wishes to solve its own problems in its own way. Assistance is welcomed but not

independent programs in which the credit for achievements will go to foreign entrepreneurs and their international sponsors. That is one of the reasons why the dream of Bruce was so quickly rejected.

Ignorance about the nature of African politics

The national consciousness in most African countries is very strong. There is a new sense of pride in the attaining of full independence, and an absolute aversion against any form of neo-colonialism. Even though most countries desperately need some form of development assistance from rich countries, they are very sensitive to high-profile projects initiated and run by outsiders. The latter may claim the credit for certain achievements on a national level, thereby asserting unacceptable control over society. They may take the credit for achieving what the local government couldn't do. In the African approach, large development projects must be executed under the auspices of the national government, thereby ensuring black empowerment in whatever development projects are initiated. Bruce was not seeking to collaborate with the Swazi government on their terms, but intended to impose American-style social engineering on the Swazi people.

Ignoring the principles of NEPAD

The development model chosen by African leaders is that of NEPAD—New Partnership for Africa's Development. NEPAD is basically a pledge by African leaders to eradicate poverty and to place their countries on a path of sustainable growth and development. They are looking for partners to tackle the problems already identified by them. They are not looking for people to tell them what to do, or to do things independently of them. Bruce faltered in that he did not actively seek partnerships with African leaders and government departments; neither did he consult them about the feasibility of his dream. This dream definitely contained aspects that were unacceptable to them.

Demands for land

Bruce asked for large tracts of land, and that really infuriated the Swazi government and public. Land is seen as a national asset in Africa. Traditionally, no provision was made for private ownership. A traditional leader is the trustee of the tribal land under his jurisdiction and he only grants occupation rights to individual families. The grazing areas are communal land. In most African countries there are still many farms and other patches of land that are possessed by private persons who are regarded as foreigners. Much pressure is exerted by black citizens on their governments to redistribute land on a more equitable basis. Under these circumstances, it was unwise of

Bruce to ask for a large piece of land, including control over a game reserve. Many people were angry because of these demands.

Inevitable clash with African social institutions

The orphanages (dream villages) that Bruce wanted to establish are at variance with African systems of kinship and the caring for their members. Traditionally, there were no orphanages and old age homes in Africa as every family is responsible for the care of its own members. In African cultures, a much more extensive system of kinship obligations is observed than in individualistic western societies, thereby ensuring that members do not become estranged from their families. Even though the parents of orphans have died, there are usually other members of their extended families, e.g. the brothers and sisters of the deceased, or even the grandparents, who will take care of the children. Bruce was not aware of this fact and wanted to bundle 10 000 orphans from different communities and tribal groups into a single home. This was quite unacceptable to the Swazi public and government, and they also indicated that the future land rights of such children would be in jeopardy if they were removed from their homesteads and extended families. In Africa, the caring for orphans should be done on a smaller scale in every community without estranging the kids from their communities of origin.

A wrong approach to development

The correct approach to development in Africa under the prevailing circumstances is an indirect approach aimed at grassroots development. Bruce should have followed this approach by training and empowering local (Swazi) pastors and other community leaders to take initiative in the development of their own communities. This would have averted the pains associated with efforts towards direct involvement in national projects. The collapse of Bruce's dream and the abandoning of his development projects have been experienced in a highly traumatic way by the pastors in Swaziland with whom he had already established a working relationship. They feel that they have been left in the lurch by Bruce after his grand scheme has failed to gain public approval.

Religious failure

Apart from the wrong approach and methods followed by Bruce there are also serious objections by evangelical Christians against his biblical views, priorities and methods. The following matters have been raised:

Humanitarian rather than Christian programs

In terms of the Great Commission, evangelistic work and discipleship must always take precedence over humanitarian aid and social welfare. If evangelists get bogged down in social welfare projects such as gardening, healthcare, poverty relief and the running of orphanages, evangelistic outreaches will be relegated to low-priority positions on their agenda. Bruce clearly relies more on socio-economic upliftment and sexual abstinence programs than on evangelization. As witnesses of Christ we are first and foremost called to evangelize the world. The unsaved must repent (Acts 17:30) and the saved must be sanctified and trained as disciples to go into Africa's remotest villages to preach the gospel of salvation to the lost. Then, and then alone, will the lifestyles and morality of people change in such a way that they will not expose themselves to contamination due to immoral, sinful behavior.

Reconstructionism

Since his arrival in South Africa, Bruce has actively engaged in the annual transformations rallies. These rallies are ecumenical in nature and aimed at reconstructing society in accordance with certain Christian and moral principles, as well as promoting a buoyant economy which will ensure a high employment rate. This is a kingdom vision for the world and therefore part of dominion theology. There must, according to this movement, be visible manifestations of God's kingdom on earth, which means that entire nations must be disciplined to become part of the kingdom. This is contrary to Scripture and therefore is a man-made vision that cannot work. We are strangers and sojourners in an evil world that lies in the sway of the devil (1 John 5:19). This scenario is not compatible with grandiose kingdom programs with their non-offensive messages and popular appeal, and rather calls for intensive evangelization in small group contexts.

Deceptive Jabez prayers

Bruce popularized an Old Testament prosperity prayer in which the name of Jesus obviously does not appear, and taught people to recite this 33-word prayer in 1 Chronicles 4:10 every day to receive great blessings in their lives. Bruce recited the prayer regularly during the past 35 years and credits this practice for the 22 million copies of his books that were sold worldwide. But he now says that he tries to come to grips with the miracle that didn't materialize in Swaziland despite his unceasing recitation of the Jabez prayer. Did it take him that long to discover the truth of Matthew 6:7? "But when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think they

will be heard for their many words.” A New Testament prayer must be prayed in the Name of the Lord Jesus and in accordance with God’s will (John 14:13; 1 John 5:14).

Association with Robert Schuller

It is disturbing to many Christians that Bruce participates in meetings of Robert Schuller’s Institute for Successful Church leadership. Schuller relies on psychological self-esteem programs to change people’s lives, rather than the gospel message which tells us that lost people must first be under the conviction of their sins, failures and lost state before God (the opposite of self-esteem) before they can be forgiven and saved. Positive thinking is of no value in evangelization as it keeps the preacher from proclaiming God’s judgements upon the wicked, and also induces him to neglect the very real danger of spiritual deception. Even outwardly successful Christians must humble themselves before the Lord, clearly follow His instructions on how to win the world for His kingdom which is not of this world, and always refrain from boasting of their own achievements (cf. (Rev. 3:17).

What has been said about Bruce Wilkinson in this review is said in the spirit of 2 Thessalonians 2: “A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses” (2 Thess. 2:24-26). “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

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