

Roscoe Reporting

Date: Thursday, January 10, 2019

Website: <https://roscoereporting.blogspot.com>

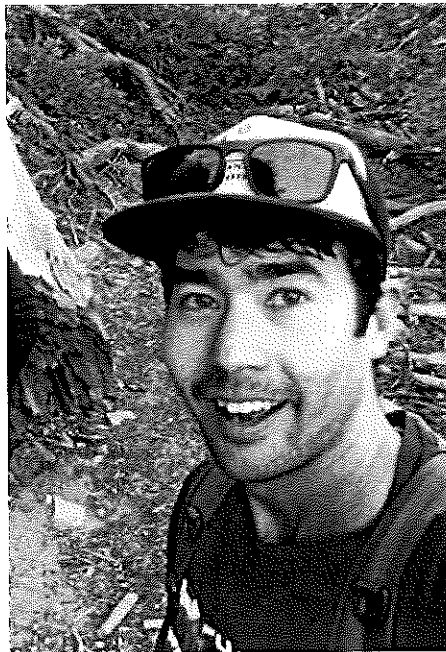
OPINION

Wrong Turn: The Short Happy Life of Missionary Adventurer John Allen Chau

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John Allen Chau
Image from Instagram.

The death of John Allen Chau was a tragedy that may have been avoided had he followed the clear teachings of the Bible.

The 26-year-old, described as a missionary, adventurer, and thrill-seeker, died on Nov. 17, 2018, when he visited North Sentinel, an island in the Andaman Sea. According to news reports, he wanted to share Christ with the Sentinelese. It is believed that he was killed by the Sentinelese who shun all outside visitors.

Chau's death has generated new questions about foreign missions, as well as criticism and praise by people in the United States and across the globe. Well-meaning Christians are

comparing him to Jim Elliot, whose story is told in the book, *Through Gates of Splendor*. Many, it seems, are ready to recognize him as a martyr. Some, not surprisingly, see him as an inspiring example of courage.

I believe that such adulation of this man is unwarranted. Even more, it is unbiblical. Based on current news reports, and the testimony of witnesses, it seems that Chau may have been compassionate, but overzealous and foolhardy in his missionary venture. He may have had good intentions, yet he put himself at risk by breaking the law and going to a place that was forbidden to outsiders. At the same time, he endangered the Sentinelese by possibly exposing them to diseases that could wipe them out.

Chau, in his efforts to reach the people with the gospel of Christ, exhibited no signs of maturity, discernment, or even respect.

Those factors, among others, lead me to believe that his death was unnecessary. Furthermore, I am convinced that had he followed the clear teachings of Christ, he could be alive today. Christ instructed us to be wise and harmless when sharing the gospel. When our message is rejected, Christ said we should move on to other people. After all, we cannot force anyone to receive the gospel.

While I can lament the loss of his life and the terrible impact it will undoubtedly have on his family and friends, I cannot join the chorus of voices that are singing his praises. Neither can I support those who have promoted him to sainthood.

In a November 2018 post on LinkedIn, I shared the following:

To be honest, I'm not convinced his priority was sharing the gospel. It could have been an ego trip covered in Christian jargon. I don't know. Like others, I thought of Jim Elliot and the book, *Through Gates of Splendor*. But I'm not ready to call this young man a martyr or place him in the same category as Elliot. I'm reminded of the words of Christ: **"Be wise as serpents and HARMLESS as doves"** (Matthew 10:16).

Christ also stated, **"If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet"**(NIV, Matthew 10:14).

A dear reader took exception to my comments. She challenged my suggestion that the endeavor may have been an "ego trip." She explained that people would not risk their lives in this manner because of an ego trip. She also noted that he stated his intentions in his diary.

I respectfully disagreed with the reader. In fact, I reminded her that people engage in high-risk activities all the time and that some are called daredevils. I also explained that I did not believe everything I read. In other words, people can write whatever they choose in their diaries whether it's true or not. Statements in a diary aren't necessarily true because they appear in a diary.

Also, I might add, even when people express themselves with much clarity in their diaries, we're still reading a book -- and not their hearts. Only God knows a person's heart. Chau might have been telling the truth in his diary. Or he might have wanted a certain legacy ... to be remembered in a certain way. I don't know. My gut feeling is that he was sincere but misguided, something to which I can relate. I was the same way when I was his age.

But let's suppose for a moment that he wrote the truth. In that case, I believe he was still in error. Had he come to me for advice, I would have kindly referred him to Matthew 10. The chapter is an account of Christ sending out his twelve disciples. In addition to verses 14 and 16 as noted above, I would ask him to consider verse 23: **"But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another."**

Consider what John MacArthur had to say about that passage. In *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, he presented the following:

Persecution is never to be sought or endured for its own sake; nor should we intentionally bring it on ourselves, supposedly for Christ's sake. We have no right to provoke animosity or ridicule. And Christ here urges escaping persecution when doing so is expedient and possible. We are not obligated to stay in a place of opposition and danger until we are killed, or even imprisoned. **Whenever they persecute you in this city, Jesus says, flee to the next.**

MacArthur explained that the above model is what Paul followed and what every other minister and missionary should follow. In Paul's case (Acts 12-14, 17), he noted:

When persecution became so severe in one place that he could no longer minister effectively, he left and went to another. He was not afraid of persecution, and many times he was severely beaten before he left a city. At least once he was stoned and left for dead. But he did not try to test the limits of the opposition. He endured whatever ridicule, reviling, beatings, and imprisonment were necessary while he ministered. But he left a place when his effectiveness there ceased.

There are other passages of Scripture that address the issue, but I think the ones mentioned here are enough to support my position. That said, I can only wonder about the advice Chau received from his church.

To some people, I should note, the term "persecution" is not adequate or accurate in describing Chau's case. The reason? The Sentinelese oppose all outsiders regardless of their beliefs. Even so, I think the biblical directive to "flee" and move on when rejected is still applicable here.

As I close, I want to be clear about my assessment. I want to stress that it is not my intention to sound harsh and uncaring in my commentary. Also, I do not condemn the young man for his actions. Quite the contrary, I respect his courage (if we can call it that). But I question his judgment, even as I was heartbroken by his untimely demise.

Chau's death was painfully tragic, but I hope it wasn't in vain. Perhaps if we're listening and doing our due diligence in studying the Bible, we can still learn something from this mission that sadly took a wrong turn.

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