



Avoiding Dependency

Should We Stop Sending Missionaries?

Principles for avoiding the corrupting power of money.

By *Robertson McQuilkin*

In an ongoing effort to deal with the important issues surrounding the use of Western money to support indigenous mission work, we are featuring the comments of Christian leaders from various backgrounds. Robertson McQuilkin recently expressed his thoughts on this subject in an article in *Christianity Today*. It is presented here in an expanded form and used by permission. *The Editors*

"Thank You For Not Coming" read the banner headline in a full-page ad in *Christianity Today*. It was a promotional piece urging us to send money, not missionaries. The rationale is clear:

In most cases, sending just a portion of our surplus \$50-\$100 each month will provide support for one full-time national worker. The typical cost to send an American missionary family overseas is over \$50,000 a year the same cost as supporting 50 or more national workers. Think of what that money could do for the Kingdom of God!

Admittedly, this rationale is appealing. Nationals have the language and the culture and they cost so much less. More than 140 organizations are now built on the premise of gathering and sending money, not people. One of the largest of the money-gathering agencies reports that it now supports 3,300 full-time workers in over 50 countries.

But what about the dark half of the world where there are no "nationals," no witnessing church? At least a billion of the lost live among a people where there is no evangelizing church movement, often no witness at all. For these, by definition, someone must leave home to reach them. If a foreigner doesn't go in from the outside they'll never hear the Gospel. The fundamental premise of the "send money, not people" movement is misguided because there are no nationals to reach these billion people even if money were sent.

We're told that the burgeoning Third World missionary movement can handle the rest of the job since God seems to be bypassing the North American church. We exult in the move of the Spirit to mobilize a heretofore untapped resource, even if only a fraction of those thousands of Third World missionaries are going to the unreached peoples. The problem is, though they now account for half the worldwide missionary task force, the numbers from all sources combined are wholly inadequate to finish the task. If present growth rates are sustained by the "new breed" it will take them at least a half century to complete the Great Commission. More likely, a full century.

It's not just that North American missionaries are still needed to complete the task, however; the North American church needs to send its own for the sake of itself, its own spiritual health. The sin of disobedience to the heavenly vision can't be atoned for with dollars, and the spiritual loss is highly visible in a self-centered, materialistically-minded people. The original mandate has never been rescinded the Pauline role of pioneering is still the primary mission of the church toward the world. Biblically, no church anywhere can claim exemption from the mandate until every person has heard with understanding the way to life in Christ and a church has been established in every community.

Perhaps the solution is to send both our sons and daughters and our money. True, but we're going to have to rethink how we send money because sending money to support the ministry of others is very hazardous for the receiving church. Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, puts it this way:

... it is a mistake to try to accelerate growth by an infusion of financial aid to build churches and support pastors. One thing inevitably occurs when North Americans subsidize the work of churches and pastors on the mission field: potential growth is stalled because of a mind-set that it can't be done unless an overseas benefactor provides the funds. ... Jealousy often develops among the pastors and churches

who don't receive assistance toward those who develop a pipeline of support from the United States. ... In the long-term, support breeds resentment, especially if the support is not sustained indefinitely, because it creates a patronizing dependency. ... People are deprived of growing in faith, learning to depend on God and discovering that He is sufficient for all their needs.²

The church or church leaders that secure a financial pipeline to the USA soon become mired in an ecclesiastical welfare state, because the send-money approach, rather than strengthening the souls of national churches, keeps congregations from becoming "self-governing" and "self-supporting." The recipients of these funds often suffer the following maladies.

Believers learn to depend neither on God nor on themselves. Because they have no need to give sacrificially of their own resources (however meager they may be), they never gain a sense of ownership. This postpones the day of true indigenization.

Leaders become preoccupied with raising North American funds. On a trip I took to India I was overwhelmed by the many who "worked" me for a dollar connection. Such a ministry orientation inevitably weakens faith, corrupts pure motives and compromises leadership integrity.

Those leaders who can't get to the "pipeline" become demoralized. They come to believe that the work can't be done without outside assistance, so why try?

Believers sue believers. In India, I was astounded to find few churches or ministries that weren't in the courts at war over property purchased using American dollars.

An independent and unaccountable higher class of Christian workers arises whose stylish life-styles are envied by "unconnected believers." It is little surprise that the motivation for "spiritual growth" is soon driven by something less than a hunger after righteousness. Should the donor seek to hold the recipient accountable for the use of funds to prevent such problems, the donor would be accused of reverting to the old paternalistic pattern and roundly condemned.

Recipients become ungrateful. The ingratitude can take a number of forms: "Sure, you gave us something, but look how much you still have;" or, "It's not yours anyway; you owe it to us." When I was president of Columbia International University, I knew something was bothering some of the African pastors studying with us. We discovered it was money. Though none could have been there without great generosity on the part of some sponsoring mission and the school, several recounted how they were owed so much more. One pastor said, "Actually, you should not only fully support us now, you should support us for the first 5 or 10 years after our return since you have dis-fitted us for ministry in our homelands."

Perhaps the missiologist most knowledgeable about the hazards of the just-support-nationals movement is Glenn Schwartz, founding director of World Mission Associates. In an interview with Mission Frontiers (January-February, 1997) he says:

We believe that churches in the non-Western world can do what God is calling them to do with the resources which He has put within their reach. ... I don't think anyone would support that approach ("just support nationals") if they had gone out as a missionary to plant churches cross-culturally according to healthy principles of self-support and then had someone come along and entice away their best leaders with foreign money. That is what I call "shepherd stealing." The "just support nationals" people are doing it shamelessly and on a very large scale (p.17).

The editor of Missions Frontiers, Rick Wood, puts it even more strongly:

Many churches in the U.S. have bought into this scheme as a way of getting more "bang for their missions buck." But what they don't realize is that this "bargain basement" approach to missions is going to blow up in their faces creating a dependency on the mission field to foreign funds that is deadly to the vibrant, reproducing church planting movements that we want to see within every people. Every church and every people has the God-given privilege and responsibility of supporting its own ministry and cross-cultural outreach. Foreign money robs these peoples of the incentive to give of their lives and resources to support the ministries of their own churches.

Remember that your giving should always encourage "psychological ownership"... never do for others what they can do for themselves. Avoid dependency like the plague that it is (p. 7).

A number of non-Western church leaders quoted in the same issue of Mission Frontiers agree with Schwartz and Wood. Bishop Zablon Nthamburi of the Methodist Church of Kenya said, "The African Church will not grow into maturity if it continues to be fed by Western partners. It will ever remain an infant

who has not learned to walk on his or her own feet" (p. 18).

One leader in the Friends Missionary Prayer Band, a leading Indian mission, said, "It's sad to say that foreign money has caused more harm than good in Indian missions. The result is culturally irrelevant, pseudo-Christian leaders and organizations that have long forgotten their roots" (p. 23).

Atul Aghamkar, an Indian specialist in urban ministries, said, "Western money continues to make the national church dependent on the West. It creates a sense of rivalry, greed and competition. It often robs the national church of its natural potential. When the easy money from the West is available, very few want to explore indigenous ways of fund raising" (p. 23).

There are, then, great hazards in giving and receiving. We have not yet discovered how to use North American funds to assist non-North American ministry without negative spiritual fallout.

For years I have resisted addressing the issue because I haven't had a clear-cut solution to offer. But searching for the key to unlock this, the greatest puzzle in the current missions enterprise, I have become convinced that the approach needs to be measured against the following four Biblically-based principles concerning giving and receiving.

Does the giving win the lost?

Paul was willing to become anything to anyone for his single-minded objective: to win the lost, to win as many as possible, as widely as possible. Everything he did even to risk-taking and imprisonment was measured in Great Commission terms. So today, one test for any missions approach should be its evangelistic effectiveness. Does money invested promote or retard long-term church growth and evangelism?

The incredible story of the church in South Korea is instructive. From the outset, it was the showcase for the Nevius method of establishing self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating churches. That may have meant slow growth at first, but today a third of South Koreans name Christ as Lord and the church has sent out a missionary task force of thousands! There are other factors in the growth of the Korean church, of course, but the foundation of independent dependence on God is cited by many as the chief factor.

Does the giving encourage true discipleship?

While evangelization is the controlling objective of the missionary enterprise, it is useless if it doesn't produce Christ-like character in both the giver and the receiver.

So we must ask if the giving arrangement nurtures generosity, humility, unity, and compassion on the part of the giver. Is the church being truly generous if it is willing to send money, but not its own sons and daughters to the mission field? Like Jesus coming to earth, does the giver feel a solidarity with, a responsibility for the brother in need, as Jesus did? Are gifts given from the stance of a benefactor, or of a servant? "I am among you as one who serves," said Jesus.

I know an American missionary who, burdened by the corrupting power of the American dollar on giver and receiver, has chosen to live among the poor of Calcutta, along with his Indian colleague, on \$50 a month for livelihood and for ministry. The balance of any gift income (unsolicited, by the way) is invested in a poverty-chained people. That isn't the only legitimate approach, of course, but it is an approach that models our God's incarnational, personal giving in Christ. I call that incarnational.

The same question of discipleship must be asked of the receiving church. Do giving arrangements produce in the receiving church a spirit of sacrificial giving, of responsible ownership of the ministry, including the cause of world evangelism, a greater reliance on God, and an attitude of genuine gratitude among the recipients? If these are not the results, the money is actually more a taking than a giving.

Does the giver honor the role of the local church?

The New Testament pattern of giving was church-centered, whether sending people or funds. People gave to their churches from which Paul received the offering (II Cor 8,9). When these funds were for the poor, not for the support of his own missionary team, he then delivered the offering to the church for distribution. The authority Christ invested in the church is lost when giving or receiving bypasses the church. The traditional independent mission or the contemporary money-gathering agency needs to exercise great care, especially when investing in something other than its own missionary team, not to bypass the supervisory authority of the church at both ends.

Does the giving nurture generous givers?

God's people are to give compassionately, generously, sacrificially, joyfully (see II Cor. 8 and 9). Because this spirit of generosity serves as a fundamental test of the quality of spiritual life, Paul's admonition to "excel in the grace of giving" is not for the wealthy alone. There is a special obligation of the wealthy to give (I Tim 6:17-19), but Paul commends the poor of Philippi for having given generously for the needs of the poor in Jerusalem.

Though this generosity principle should govern giving, I list it last because the other three are much more dominant in the commands and examples of Scripture. And yet many "send money, not missionaries" advocates are, I believe, in danger of operating from this principle alone to the exclusion of the other three principles.

The primary commands and examples for giving money in the New Testament center in one group: the poor. The astounding offerings of propertied people in the church of Jerusalem were to aid the poor (Acts 4:34-35), and the offerings Paul gathered from the "missionary churches" were also for the poor in Jerusalem, the home church. There is a reference to giving to support Paul's missionary team on the part of the "younger church" at Philippi (Phil. 4:10-19), and there is the incident of Paul asking for financial assistance for another missionary (I Cor 16:11). But I can find no instance, let alone any command, to give toward the ministry of another church.

One reason for this is evident. There were no church buildings or institutions like hospitals or schools, and local ministers were bi-vocational. If the early church is any model, it seems that paid ministry, buildings, and institutions emerged only as the church was able to afford them. From the beginning the small groups were self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. Apparently the spiritual strength derived from this independent reliance on God was more important, in the mind of the Apostle, than was any kind of external subsidy to move things along more rapidly.

Scripture is clear, then, that those who have material resources are to share with those who lack them. In the New Testament this was providing the physical needs of the impoverished, what today might be called "relief" or "development" projects. But when we take the principle to mean assisting others in their spiritual ministry, we have no Biblical command or precedent. If we justify the practice on the fourth principle of the need to exercise generosity, we have yet to find a practical way to do so without spiritual damage to giver and receiver.

Money is power, it is said, and power corrupts. These Biblical principles should prove a helpful antidote to that corruption. Note the order of importance. If we begin and end, as many seem to do, with the single principle that the haves are to provide for the have-nots, we shall inevitably be corrupted. At the least we will slow the progress of the Gospel to the unreached. But we shouldn't be surprised. The church has been through this before.

The church at Jerusalem focused on its own needs so much that God had to bypass them for Antioch as the missionary sending church. The dark ages were dark at least partially because the church was introverted. The Reformation wasn't mission minded and never created sending structures.

But most instructive, following Edinburgh 1910 the missions juggernaut of the nineteenth century was sidetracked into focusing on ecumenical unity. The mainline historic church began to concentrate its attention on interdenominational and cross-racial unification with financial assistance from North America, and the evangelistic mission shriveled, in at least one major denomination to nothing at all.³ If we shift the missions focus from reaching the unreached to demonstrating the unity of the body with financial aid, how do we differ from the ecumenical mission of the twentieth century?

So, do we send money or people? Certainly we send people and keep on sending them to cross the frontiers till the task of proclaiming the Gospel to every person within every people is completed. And we send money to assist the poor and disenfranchised in our worldwide family. Beyond that New Testament pattern, I not only find no justification for supporting the ministry of other churches but also great hazards in doing so. Sharing financial resources in a way that is spiritually empowering and Great Commission-completing for both donor and recipient remains our greatest unsolved problem.

1. Bob Emery, president of Global Opportunities for Christ in Great Commission Opportunities Guide, 1998, p. 17.

2. The COMMISSION, August 1997, p. 53.

3. Of course, there were underlying doctrinal reasons for this shift as well. And many contemporary evangelicals are beginning to follow in that same direction, too. For example, the redefinition of who is lost and how salvation comes. This article is part of an ongoing emphasis in Mission Frontiers on the issues of dependency and self-reliance.

For more information you may contact Glenn Schwartz of World Mission Associates at: E-mail: [Glenn Schwartz@msn.com](mailto:Glenn.Schwartz@msn.com) or on the Web: www.wmausa.org

Robertson McQuilkin served as president of Columbia International University in South Carolina for 22 years, was executive director of the Evangelical Missiological Society from 1994 to 1997 and is author of The Great Omission.