

Monthly Missiological Reflection #2

"Money and Mi\$\$ion\$¹"

In the study of Missions it becomes apparent that the use of money is like a two-edged sword: It can empower missions on the one hand while hindering or destroying it on the other. Money can empower missions by (1) supporting effective missionaries to open new areas of the world to the Gospel, (2) partnering with developing national churches to train and oversee effective national leaders, and (3) developing media and materials to strengthen specific local ministries. Money can hinder missions by (1) creating unhealthy dependence, (2) controlling churches which should be self-supporting, (3) creating jealousy between those supported by the West and those not supported, (4) unknowingly attracting leeches and con-men who hope for benefits, support, or a chance to study abroad, and (5) over-support of missionaries who physically separate themselves from the people among whom they hope to minister.

Probably the wisest use of money for churches just developing their missions programs is the support of American missionaries who have the biblical and missions training to open up new areas of the world to the Gospel. These church-planting missionaries minister by planting the first churches, nurturing new Christians to maturity, and training lay leaders for ministry. These developing movements should then select, under God's mighty hand, their own local leaders who have proven themselves through Christian ministry. When these movements come to maturity, sending churches might begin to partner with mature churches--having authentic, godly leaders--to evangelize other areas of the world adjacent to the first church-planting movement.

In this age of international contact missions leaders' vision is frequently skewed by their experience with the poor. They are almost always shocked as they see hundreds of people crowded into poor apartment buildings or shanty towns of urban centers or living in clap-board or mud-walled, thatched-roofed houses cooking food over an open fire. What frequently grips them on these first forays into poverty-stricken areas is not the lostness of people without the Gospel or the power of the Gospel to overcome the bondage of sin but the great disparity between the rich and the poor. *Missions thus is increasingly driven by a response to poverty rather than by an understanding of lostness.* The American response, inbred by a pragmatic heritage, is to naively cast small doses of money to new converts to help and encourage: Local preachers are quickly put on American salaries, service ministries created which can be maintained only by Western economic help, and Western-style training institutions developed. Money then becomes the tool by which Western control is superimposed over missions churches. Increasingly, missions leaders operate as superintendents of missions workers, making decisions about issues that they can only partially understand from afar, while leaders in new churches learn to be subservient to those who pay them.

Charles Taber encourages missions leaders to develop "a truly interdependent brotherhood of Christians in missions" rather than hold on to patterns that uphold dependence and perpetuate paternalism. Assuming that they "know what the task is and what the goals are," Westerners frequently establish control from the outset (Taber 1997, 65, 67). As J. Merle Davis writes, "The Western Church has made the mistake of girding the Eastern David in Saul's armor and putting Saul's sword into his hands. Under these conditions the Church on the mission field has made a brave showing, but it is reasonable to expect that it will give a better account of itself by using its own familiar gear and weapons" (Davis 1947, 108; in Taber, 68). *The Western temptation is to conceptualize and organize the missionary task on an economic level that can only be sustained by Western support and oversight.* Thus the Western "bedazzlement with money and expertise has from the start subverted the true indigeneity in the church" (Taber 1997, 70).

The problem is not just one of the West's "donor mentality" but also the "receiver mentality" of many missions contexts of the world (Bosch 1997, 58). Ogbu Kalu, an African leader, describes the "Peter Pan syndrome." Peter Pan is a story of a boy who never grew up. In much the same way many missions churches never grow up but remain as dependent children (1975, 15-29).

End Notes

¹This heading is borrowed from the title of Jonathan Bonk's book *Mi\$\$ion\$ and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (Orbis Books, 1991), which shows that affluence, although "enabling the Western church to engage in numerous expensive, efficient, and even useful activities overseas, has an inherent tendency to isolate missionaries" from the people among whom they are ministering (1991, xix).

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