

Western Affluence and Missions

C. Philip Slate

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Introduction

- I. The affluence of Western churches constitutes a major missionary problem.
 - A. Normally, Christians regard the acquisition of money and property as gifts from God and evidence that He blesses his people. For that He is thanked. But the handling of what is placed in one's care (stewardship) can be a challenge. When churches begin to act internationally they can find abundant wealth a missionary problem.
 - B. The problem may be stated in terms of two pulls.
 1. On the one hand, since most of the money belonging to churches of Christ is found in their Western churches, viz. North America and secondarily Western Europe, it seems only right that those sanctified funds be used to advance the gospel in other parts of the world where funds are needed to do the job. It seems only fair and equitable. Two-thirds of our membership may be outside the USA, but likely 95% of our money is in the USA.
 2. On the other hand, the track record of Western funding of missions, for both Evangelicals and churches of Christ, is predominately disappointing. Examples of this will be given later. The question is, How may Western funds be used so as to *advance* the kingdom of God rather than *retarding* it?
 - C. Several people have written treatises on the subject, usually reaching the same basic conclusions.
 1. Jonathan Bonk, Canadian Mennonite who was brought up in Ethiopia by missionary parents and subsequently served as a missionary there himself, wrote a Ph. D. dissertation at the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) on this woolly problem.¹
 2. Russell G. Bell of the churches of Christ, who had made over 30 preaching and teaching trips to India, wrote and published his master's thesis at the Bear Valley Bible Institute of Denver.² Bell records the colossal blunders and gigantic wastes involved in the thoughtless use of Western money in India. The use of American dollars in India was the subject of the India Forum conducted in Searcy, AR.
 3. Both Gerald Paden, former missionary to Italy and later teacher at Sunset School of Preaching, and Charles Cook, another Sunset teacher and long a worker in India, have written position papers on the injudicious use of American dollars to advance evangelism and church development.
- II. Here we are dealing with matters of judgment, not faith, though the judgments we make may strongly impinge on matters of faith.³

¹ Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991). A very useful chapter on the subject by Bonk is "Mission and the Problem of Affluence," pp. 295-309 in Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission, edited by James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993.

² Thesis title is "God, Man and Money as it Pertains to the Work in India." The published version is God, Man - Money (Chennai, India: Timothy Publications, 2001).

³ Paul's discussion of building on the one foundation indicates that "how" one builds will have different outcomes in the welfare of the church (1 Cor. 3:10-17). We are obligated to do the best we can, even in matters of judgment. We have a moral obligation to pray for wisdom (Jas. 1:5; 2:13-18) and be as informed as possible in matters of judgment. God deserves no less than our best.

- A. Methods should be developed within the boundaries of faith guidelines and in terms of faith objectives. Biblically, we must ask the question, What do we understand that God wants in the long run?
- B. Rich sources of information may come from current research or analyses of what has happened in the past (history).

Body

I. Select historical events.

- A. Henry Venn (1796-1873) of the British "Church Missionary Society" and Rufus Anderson (1796-1880) of the "American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions" in the mid-nineteenth century.
 - 1. These Protestant missions leaders became aware that many of the missions efforts supported by their societies were fragile, dependent, and not growing. They isolated several causes for that situation and discovered the use of foreign money was a critical element of it. Missionaries, supported from abroad, settled in to "pastoral" roles without training local churches and leaders to do their own work. They were planting the wrong kind of churches and propping them up with foreign money and personnel.
 - 2. Almost simultaneously those two missions theorists and leaders developed the "three-self" approach to missions work, i.e., to plant churches capable of self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating (Venn used the term "self-extending"). Their idea was for missionaries to plan from the beginning of their work to develop churches that be "at home" in the local culture (rather than cultural transplants) with local leaders who could lead the people to support with money and energy the work they wanted and needed to do, and themselves to spread the message of Jesus Christ to both their area and at a distance.
 - 3. The "three-self" movement, while very valuable and a responsible attempt to get over gross dependency and fragility, did not solve all the problems. But it was a major piece of thought in response to mission work that resulted in dependency--spiritual and psychological as well as financial.
 - 4. Of course, the assumption back of this effort was that mission work should not produce churches which would still be dependent on outside sources after a hundred years or more.

B. The Nevius Plan.

- 1. John L. Nevius (1829-1893), American Presbyterian, worked 40 years in China (1853-1890) in various capacities. He knew of the ideas of Venn and Anderson and thought them through in terms of China. He saw the effects of heavily subsidizing Chinese missions efforts and offered healthy criticism. But it is easier to be critical than correct. So he developed his own proposal.
- 2. He wrote Planting and Development of Missionary Churches, his version of the three-self approach, and it took this shape:
 - a. Christians should continue to live in their neighborhoods and pursue their occupations, being self-supporting and witnessing to their co-workers and neighbors.
 - b. Missions should only develop programs and institutions that the national church desired and could support.
 - c. The national churches should call out and support their own pastors/preachers.
 - d. Churches should be built in the native style with money and materials given by the church members.
 - e. Intensive biblical and doctrinal instruction should be provided for church leaders every year.
- 3. After Nevius worked 30 years in China, the Presbyterian missionaries who were just beginning their work in Korea invited him to speak to them (1890). They decided to adopt the "Nevius plan." It was six years (1886) before they had their first baptism, but by 1894

they had 236 members; by 1910 they had 30,000 members. That it was not Korea itself that made the difference is demonstrated by the careful comparison in that country of the Presbyterian work with the work of Methodists and others from the beginning until the 1960s. The Presbyterians, though radically divided today, have completely outstripped other groups in growth because of their methodology, their version of the three-self approach.⁴

- C. Roland Allen (1868-1904), Anglican missionary in China with the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts" from 1892-1904, was critical of the subsidy policies of most missions in China.
1. Allen also argued for churches which were more indigenous, "owned" and operated by local people.
 2. Allen explained his views in two principal books: Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours? (1912) and The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church (1927). The main points he made were these:
 - a. "All permanent teaching must be intelligible and easily understood that those who receive it can retain it, use it, and pass it on."
 - b. "All organizations should be set up in a way that national Christians can maintain them."
 - c. "Church finances should be provided and controlled by the local church members."
 - d. "Christians should be taught to provide pastoral care for each other."
 - e. "Missionaries should give national believers the authority to exercise spiritual gifts freely and at once."⁵
- D. Melvin Hodges (1909-1986), former missionary and later mission administrator for the Assemblies of God, wrote his widely used The Indigenous Church in 1953. .
1. He gave popular expression to the work of Venn, Anderson, Nevius, and Allen, and the Assemblies of God have grown rapidly throughout the world, producing self-sustaining churches.
 2. Hodges acknowledged the difficulty involved in moving from a subsidy approach to an indigenous approach, but he argued that it needed to be done.
- E. Allen Tippett (1911-1988), Australian anthropologist of Fuller's School of World Missions and Church Growth and Methodist missionary to the South Pacific, refined the previous views in his Verdict Theology in Missionary Theory,⁶ Tippett argued that while the three-self approach is valid, it is incomplete. Coming out of his academic background in anthropology and his considerable missionary experience, Tippett proposed six components of developing stable churches.
1. Self-image, seeing itself serving as Christ's church in its own right.
 2. Self-functioning, able to carry on all the normal functions of a church, such as worship, Christian education, edification, and so forth.
 3. Self-determining, making its own decisions before the Lord.
 4. Self-supporting, carrying its own financial burdens and paying for its own service projects.
 5. Self-propagating, seeing itself as responsible for carrying on the great commission of Jesus. It is taught to reach out itself.

⁴ Roy E. Shearer, Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966), chapter 9.

⁵ This summary is found in John Mark Terry, "Indigenous Churches," p. 484 in Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions, edited by A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000)

⁶ South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973. Pages 148ff.

6. Self-giving, endeavoring to minister to the social and spiritual needs of its own community.

NOTE: While there are some variations in these formulations they all have certain things in common. (a) The subsidy approach, as a rule, has demonstrably failed over time both to produce stable churches and locally generated evangelism. (b) Financial support from outside, unless handled very carefully, is normally translated into spiritual anemia; the local church does not take ownership of the work. (c) Over the long haul, they feel churches will grow more spiritually and numerically if they learn to support their own work, both financially and with their own human resources.

- II. If one argues that churches of Christ are different from these groups, then it is important to note our own history in these regards.
 - A. In post-World War II many church buildings were built in Germany with American funds. Usually, the Germans were not asked where the buildings should be located nor what they should look like. The Americans, with the best of intentions, provided the money and the decisions. An elder of the Broadway church in Lubbock told me in the mid-1960s that after twenty five years one of those congregations did not give enough to pay the utility bill for the building, and that another wrote to Broadway, asking for enough money to replace the sign which had fallen down in front of the building--that in Germany where, even then, they had one of the three strongest economies in the world! The culturally aggressive and enterprising Germans were *taught*, inadvertently of course, to be dependent. Bill McDonough helped to sell two of those buildings. Another was sold to the adjoining University of Frankfurt. On the other hand, Jack McKinney worked to plant and develop a self-supporting and self-directing congregation in Zurich, Switzerland which is still going, and even reaching out beyond itself.
 - B. Richard Chowning, Gailyn Van Rhee, Fielden Allison and a few others worked some fifteen years among the Kipsigis of Kenya. They trained the new converts to develop plans and fund their own buildings and ministries. No preachers were put on foreign salary. Elders were developed in several of the 130 or so churches begun during that time. Of course, indigenous financial support alone did not do the trick. They had a vigorous program of evangelism and post-baptismal training; they conducted leadership training programs.
 - C. The various programs of making converts, sending them to various types of schools within the country, and then routinely putting them on foreign salary just has not worked! In the 1950s the program was abandoned in eastern Nigeria because of its "fruits." A school in the Caribbean graduated some 62 students from a preachers' training school and put them on American support. After five years or so churches began to withdraw support in hopes the local churches would pick up that support. It didn't happen. When evaluated several years later, none of the men were preaching, only two were still in the church, and church growth was minimal. These stories are numerous, in one form or another.
 - D. In the Highlands of Guatemala a team of four couples, one a medical doctor and his wife, worked a dozen or so years (late 1960s into the early 1980s), planting and stabilizing churches. They conducted Leadership Training by Extension classes with the Indians. None of them were put on foreign financial support. The churches are still going.

NOTE: Missionaries of churches of Christ have followed both approaches, as have Evangelicals, and both groups have experienced the same set of outcomes.

- III. The informed verdict from the past: as a rule, DO NOT PUT NATIONALS IN OTHER COUNTRIES ON USA SUPPORT! Here are the details.
 - A. Here I shall draw from many brothers (Gerald Paden, Charles Cook, and many others; plus my own observations) a list of some of the details of the **disadvantages** and **demerits** of putting national preachers on salary from churches in other countries. The case is the same whether preachers in Africa, Papua New Guinea, Latin America or India are supported by churches in Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland or North America. When the preacher is

culturally and geographically separated from his supporters it is easy for the maladies to occur that have been so frequent in the past. The following list is really a report from history, both ours and others'.

1. Cultural differences usually mean there are poor understandings of each other on the front end. The supporting church expects—but often does not express it—the national preacher to develop a good, stable church that eventually can continue on its own. Usually no mention is made of how long the support will last, and the national preacher will often assume (wishful thinking?) the arrangement to be permanent or indefinite. When support is eventually withdrawn, even gradually, the outcomes are very negative.
2. Faulty worker selection. At times a church begins supporting a man to do the work of a preacher when it does not have sufficient evidence he can do what is expected of him. This is built-in failure for the preacher and disappointment for the supporters.
3. Often the support level is too high and the preacher is alienated from the very people he is there to serve. He is spoiled and at times viewed as doing his work because he is paid handsomely by foreigners to do so.
4. The flip side of this is that preachers are at times supported so meagerly that their families suffer. At times these men are genuine servants of God, and they just will not ask for more support lest they jeopardize their position. The supporting church is insensitive to the man's real needs, and both he and his family suffer.
5. The foreign supported preacher rarely develops responsible leaders in his congregation or in his area. Several things may account for this. (a) He may not want to develop people who can do what he is doing lest he lose his position and support. (b) It may be an ego trip; he may enjoy the position of prominence (perceived as the "pastor") in the church. (c) He may not know how to develop leaders at the informal level, even if he is disposed to do so. Do national preachers in the USA know how to develop leaders just because they are nationals?
6. The preacher has no local accountability since he feels he is answerable to the church that pays his salary rather than the local church. He becomes a "little lord" in the church; no one dares to cross him since he is the preacher, the leader, and the source of financial benefits to the church. This position often leads to numerous other problems.⁷
7. Foreign support tends to bring out the worst in the national preacher. (a) It tempts him to falsify about the *amount* of his work. He may be lazy, or at least wants to appear busier than he is. (b) He may falsify about the *results* of his work. He may not know how to do what is expected of him. National preachers do not automatically know how to grow and develop churches any more than preachers in the USA or Canada know how to do so just because they are nationals.
8. Usually the distant supporters know very little details of the man's work. That is partially the worker's fault and partially the supporters' fault for not making visits or otherwise gathering information about the work. The distance between the two is a hindrance.
9. Related to # 3 above, jealousy arises and complicates relationships when national workers receive different levels of support from abroad.
10. Often, when the supporting church decides to withdraw its support, no matter what the explanation, the national becomes bitter, quits preaching, and at times ceases to function as a Christian.
11. The preacher is often perpetually worried about the uncertainty of his support, even though he would like to believe it to be permanent. A worried preacher does not do his best. He is often tempted, as stated above, to falsify about his work and its results in order to assure continuation of his support.
12. It tends to have very negative influences on the development of the national church. It is very exceptional for the national church to thrive and grow when its preacher is supported directly from another country. Here are some of the common negative outcomes:
 - a. The church rarely becomes evangelistic itself.
 - b. New converts fail to develop, even where conversions continue.
 - c. The church develops no ability to assess the preacher or its own development, chiefly because it never has any say-so about him, his work, or the church's activities. The preacher guides everything.

⁷ See Russel Bell, [God – Man – Money](#) for the "big man" syndrome in India.

- d. The church tends to adopt a “laity” mentality since the preacher functions as the “pastor.”
- e. The church is orphaned if the preacher is cut off. It does not know how to function without its “chief.”
- f. Leadership development is stifled.
- g. The local churches with which such men work tend not to accept responsibility in terms of finances or leadership. It thus robs the church of its opportunity to give sacrificially and accept ownership of the work and its building.

B. Observations on this list:

- 1. Other religious groups, especially individual churches, have the same experiences with this that churches of Christ do.
- 2. In many cases, these outcomes are found when missionary societies support national preachers. The “Three-Self” movement (self-support, self-governance, and self-propagation) was developed by two men who were head of Protestant missionary societies, one British and one American.⁸
- 3. Much of the problem arises from a failure on the part of financial supporters to understand the missions process—what it takes to win people to Christ and weld them into maturing congregations.
- 4. But since most of the money among Evangelicals and churches of Christ is found in North America, insofar as money is often involved in carrying out missions, one wonders whether there are ways in which that money can be stewarded that will have positive effects rather than negative ones?

IV. Suggestions on judicious uses of North American funds to assist in spreading the gospel of Christ with long term effectiveness.

- A. Financially supporting church planters and developers, as well as advance level teachers from the West are still needed and appropriate.
 - 1. Those workers should avoid displays of affluence as much as possible. There is no single answer to this problem.
 - 2. Those Western workers need to know from the beginning about the problems of using Western funds in their work.
- B. Funding from the West schools (of all sorts), clinics and other medical services, agricultural training programs, and the like does not seem to produce dependent churches in those areas if the situations are properly managed.
 - 1. However, those services that should be regarded as benevolent works or Christian service, tend to attract local people who want well-paying jobs with them. Schools, etc. seem more attractive than churches.
 - 2. It is often wise operationally to separate in some way the churches from the benevolent entities.
- C. While rural churches should be able to fund their own work, buildings and all, from the start, that is not true in most urban areas.
 - 1. It is conceivable that limited assistance (don’t rob its initiative) may be given to an urban church as it starts up, and then teach it to plant other churches and assist them.
 - 2. The question is: Does this use of money produce financial, emotional and spiritual dependency in this church? In some cases consider loans.
- D. It is conceivable that money from the West can help to support national evangelists as *evangelists*.
 - 1. It is one thing to support a national to evangelize; it is another thing to support him as “the preacher” of an existing church that should be able to stand on its own.
 - 2. As long as the man is effective in producing churches that can stand on their own and then move on to plant another church and another, this may not have a negative effect, *providing that*
 - a. His salary scale is culturally appropriate.
 - b. He does not live at a level that distances him from those whom he should serve.
 - c. Assurances are made that his support will cease when he ceases to evangelize.

⁸ See articles and books by and about Rufus Anderson (USA) and Henry Venn (British).

- d. He is answerable to a good local church (if one is available).
3. There is the long-range problem here: If his work life has been supported by foreign funds, how will he live once he is no longer able to evangelize?

Conclusion

- A. This material is first a warning about a very common but unfruitful practice of putting (often) novice workers on salary from another country. The evidence is abundant and clear that great caution should be used.
- B. There may be some circumstances in which funds from one country may be used for salary purposes and Christian services in another country with good results, but such practices must be circumscribed by a number of provisions and conditions. Remember, money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10); it will corrupt abroad as it does at home. For example, the North Boulevard church (Murfreesboro, TN) is coming to the end of a five-year experiment of partnership with a church in Accra, Ghana for the evangelization of nearby Mali in West Africa. The Accra elders were asked to select the workers, set their salary scales, supervise and evaluate them; while NB furnished the funds and prayer. Theoretically, this approach should circumvent many of the inherent problems involved in the process.
- C. It is much wiser but often harder to follow well-established methods that are calculated to produce both congregations and individuals who love God and want to serve Him, using their own resources, ingenuity, and talents.
- D. Stewardship is a serious business for both churches and individual Christians. Often the big offenders in misusing Western money are traveling individuals who mean well in making promises of support. They need to be taught.

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On the issue of "dependency vs. independence" check the various sources on Glenn Schwartz find
Web Page: www.WMAUSA.org The articles, and his video series as well, are very useful blocks of
information and insight.

C. Philip Slate, D. Miss.
Missions Consultant and Author
822 Bradford Place
Murfreesboro, TN 37130
Home: 615-217-1438
Office: 615-893-1520
E-mail: cpsmissions@juno.com