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Foreign Money and Indigenous Ministry: To Give or Not to Give?

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Surrounded by the pungent odor of ethnic food, it was difficult to judge whether the wetness of his eyes was due to emotion or pepper. I listened to the story of his adventure-tour to an exotic foreign field. Garlands were given, speeches were made and the very best of food, travel and accommodation was provided. He felt special, needed and honored. Perhaps inside he was thinking, "At last I have found a group of people who can really appreciate my intrinsic worth to society." Or perhaps he thought, "I have been given so much and now, for only fifty dollars a month, I can change the destiny of one of these poor students." He shared of his visit to a school and orphanage full of barefoot candidates whose dark round eyes burned their hopeful gaze into their new "uncle's" memory. Toward the end of his visit, he was informed about opportunities to become a "partner" in the ministry. In retrospect, he also told of the heartbreak of choosing to sponsor one of the especially bright graduating orphans only to find that in later years this now adult student had manipulated this new foreign patron to side with him against the local administration. Consequently, much damage had been done and the young man continued to be a thorn in the side of the local administrative leadership. After several years, this donor's wounds were healing and the local ministry had offered fresh opportunities for further partnership. The question I waited to hear was: "To give or not to give?" This article will explore two factors which complicate this discussion: (1) varying concepts of indigeneity and (2) varying systems of economic exchange.

VARYING CONCEPTIONS OF INDIGNEITY

The answer to the question of whether or not to give is made more complex by the recent emphases promoted by various "just-send-nationals" organizations. The argument is that wise stewardship demands investment of kingdom money in ways that will receive a larger percentage of return through national missions. Following this "outsourcing" philosophy, many Western organizations have grown up to specifically raise and distribute Western funds to non-Western missions. In 1997, at a conference held in Wheaton, Illinois, which focused on supporting indigenous missions, 113 organizations were identified as being primarily involved in this channeling ministry. In another study, Daniel Rickett and Dotsey Welliver detailed fifty-one such organizations supporting sixteen thousand non-Western missionaries (1997). K. P. Yohannan may be the most vocal and well-known writer/fundraiser who characterizes the issue as being a choice between indigenous missionaries versus Western missionaries (1986, 1990). In fact, few mission field issues are as simple as either/or. Westerners long to find simple black and white choices when swimming in strange intercultural gray zones filled with pluralistic currents.

Take India as an example. Mission historians look back to (perhaps too exclusively) India as the founding field of the Western missionary movement and the home of the "father of modern missions," William Carey. When examined more closely, even from the beginnings of the foreign missionary initiative most evangelism and personal work was done by swarthicks, who were often unpaid, uneducated and under-appreciated. John Nevius' classic, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*, documented how in the 1890s the mind-boggling expansion of the Chinese Church began using this simple equation of a few foreign missionaries and extensive networks of what he termed "native assistants" (1958). If there has been a secret of success in any mission field, it has almost always been the mobilization of national workers.

I recall being in attendance at a conference organized in Western India some years ago to discuss the importance of missiological training at the doctoral level. Again and again our theorizing was disturbed by one dominant voice which rose up in that conference and refused to be quieted. This voice was heard coming from the papers, discussions, working groups and even from a film on how the gospel spread into a tribe of the Northeast. That voice kept insisting on the absolutely essential role that untrained volunteer local evangelists had played in most of the successful mission situations in Indian mission history. In other words, although the foreigners and theologically-trained Indians had played some undeniably important catalytic roles, it was the "native assistants" who did the majority of the work. This is reminiscent of the Thessalonians of whom Paul wrote, "You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you" (1 Thess. 1:7-8). The coin has two sides: without the foreign-sponsored missionary team, the national

movement may never have begun and without the local initiative of the untrained disciples, the missionary emphasis may have been quite limited.

Nevius was considered radical when he argued more than 50 years ago that indigenous ministry needs local support in order to be viable. In this perspective, "self-support" is one of three badges identifying authentic, successful ministries. Nevius' case studies of China and Korea clearly fall on the second side of the coin: "Paying them [the native evangelists] for their work would not increase their influence, but rather diminish it" (1958, 68). Nevius, Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, Robert Speer and Roland Allen are a few of the pioneers of this three-self tradition that continues to find expression among contemporary mission strategists and writers. It is remarkable that self-support receives far more psychological and written attention than its counterparts, self-governance and self-expansion. What does this indicate about our personal priorities and our suspicions of "the other?" Decisions regarding the use of foreign money for indigenous ministries are also complicated by the different cultural ideas about economics.

VARYING CONCEPTIONS OF ECONOMIC EXCHANGE

Thus far the discussion has the nice duality that we find so attractive in Western thinking, whereby we have two clearly distinguished options from which to choose. However, mission reality is seldom this simple and orderly. Consider the following complicating factors.

Apart from the issue of national versus expatriate missionaries, the discussion is further complicated by the existence of different systems of economic exchange. Every society uses some primary system of economics or a combination of several identifiable economic patterns. "Economics" here simply means the way in which we acquire, use and transfer goods and services. Awareness of the system that we come from and the system that we are crossing into helps to reduce intercultural tensions. Economic anthropology identifies three broad patterns of exchange which help to inform this discussion. They are: market, gift and redistribution (Polanyi 1968).

1. Market exchange. In the West, market exchange is the dominant default style of economics. This shows up in money-based systems which are largely impersonal and based on contracts. For example, when you need a gallon of milk from the local supermarket, you are not looking for a lifelong friend—only fresh milk at a fair price. When "Tom the Termite Man" does not do his job properly, he is given a matter-of-fact phone call with a reminder that we still hold the paid receipt and that the phone number of the "Better Business Bureau" is handy. The private ownership of material possessions and individual responsibility for financial well-being are givens of the market principle. The assumption is that scarcity and demand control value and that the profit motive drives the system. This is the basic stuff of which capitalism and free market economy are made. In the West, we may look back nostalgically to a bygone era when dirt farmers traded potatoes for salt pork; however, in a system increasingly built on monetary exchange, these are largely memories.

We might relate this to the biblical example of Abraham, who insisted on a monetary payment (when it was offered as a gift) for the tomb in which he desired to bury his wife Sarah (Gen. 23). Either he was insisting on a contractual monetary exchange that did not leave him in danger of being accused of unfulfilled obligations or he understood that the offer of a gift was just an artificial overture disguising the expectation of immediate reciprocity. The record seems to applaud Abraham's business savvy. Oh, how we cross-cultural workers need help to make such culturally-appropriate judgments!

2. Gift exchange. Gift economics are characteristic of certain societies and were explored by some pioneer anthropologists (Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1967). In these sometimes colorful societies, reciprocity is the value that drives the system so that those who have goods and resources share in appropriate measure with those to whom they are obligated. As in Bronislaw Malinowski's study of the Trobriand Islanders, status (not profit) was the value; this ultimately controlled a complex system of inter-island exchange based on more distant relationships between giving partners. In Western societies, we may see this at work in some small form at Christmas or graduation time. This Western kind of generalized reciprocity uses gifts as expressions of closer relationships and not primarily as economic transactions. Some foraging bands survive by sharing the resources that are gathered or hunted for. Other types of reciprocity operate with various degrees of expectation of equal return and various degrees of relational involvement for gifts given. It is, however, difficult for those from capitalistic, modern societies to imagine that entire societies are organized around gift exchange as their foundational economic system. The type of reciprocity may vary in terms of relational closeness; however, sharing and giving in return—rather than contractual exchanges involving money—are the primary means of exchanging goods and services.

The exchange of armour between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18) is an example of generalized reciprocity whereby the closeness of the relationship was affirmed through mutual exchange, and the issue of repayment was inconsequential. However, the description of

substantial gifts brought to the court of King Solomon (1 Kings 10) are examples of giving that may have been somewhat impersonal "entrance fees" to enjoy the presence and advice of a super monarch for a few moments. Such gift exchange economics is complex and dynamic as the meaning attributed to the gift is often determined in the process of reciprocation. Westerners who give and receive gifts in cross-cultural encounters need to understand that the gift and their responses may be understood as far more than simple material exchanges or expressions of friendship.

3. Redistribution exchange. Redistribution is a third pattern of exchange where goods flow toward a central pool and are then shared through a system of hierarchy. Often, the flow of services is the basis for "stipends" that come from the center. This is the dominant idea that shaped patron-client systems that are historically evident, whereby landless laborers serve a landed gentry. The peasants serve and honor the nobility and then expect a certain amount of paternal nurture and sustenance from that patron. Paul Hiebert and Eloise Meneses describe such a system which was at work in many parts of ancient India. In this system, clients such as barbers, washermen and sweepers faithfully serve and honor the jajman, or landlord; in return they expect a portion of the harvest and emergency help (1995, 201). Such patron-client thinking remains a dominant influence in the economic perspectives of Indian Christian organizations and this is expressed in relationships to organizational hierarchy, to native fund-raisers and to foreign donors (Fox 2003).

The laws for equitable treatment of slaves in the Old Testament provide examples of how client loyalty was to be based on the expectation that the service and deference of the servant brought just expectations of welfare and protection. Likewise, when the prodigal son returned to his father's house (Luke 15:11-32), he was negotiating a willingness to step down from the superior position of son to become a servant in his father's house so that he could at least enjoy a non-monetary return of basic survival and well-being. Western donors need to properly analyze the deference and expectations they encounter in interactions with non-Western recipients. Non-western fund-raisers need to recognize that Western donors think in different categories in terms of what is moral and normative in giving-receiving relationships.

In the ancient cultures that surrounded biblical history, we may observe all three systems of exchange at work. Thus, we need to answer some questions: In the modern world, which kind of community is the Kingdom of God? Should kingdom economics as expressed in local churches and mission agencies be organized around market, gift or redistribution economics? The responsibility for Christians sharing wealth and resources within the kingdom community rightly sensitizes the conscience of the faithful to look for means of distributing wealth in ways that promote equity and alleviate human suffering. Could it be that there is no black and white answer to this question but that as the Kingdom of God spreads its spiritual rule to new cultures, it incarnates the truth of Christly values within a given culture and system of economic exchange? Thus, the injustice and corruption that touches all economics and power structures in every culture are called to transformation under the rule of the Lordship of Christ. Foreign funds may be given and used as long as they are used in ways that promote the kingdom principles of Christ within a given culture and economic system.

Even Nevius understood that there was a time, place and manner to use foreign funds for the expansion of national ministries. He was careful to emphasize that there are legitimate uses of foreign funds:

In the nature of things, pecuniary aid is an absolute necessity, not only for sending out and supporting well-qualified and accredited missionaries, but also for hospital and dispensary work, for the preparation and dissemination of a Christian literature, for establishing higher institutions of learning and for furnishing, as needed, grants-in-aid for primary or preparatory Christian schools. (1958, 91)

His argument was that if we could stop "spending money in ways not sanctioned by the scriptures, and experience, we shall have the more to use in legitimate methods" (91). What he criticized was that the "injudicious use of money and agencies depending on money have retarded and crippled our work and produced a less self-reliant and stalwart type of Christians" (91).

CONCLUSION

Here we return to my distressed friend who was posed with a giving opportunity. The sad reality is that even given the complexity of the situation and the painful sense of being used that this donor felt, he was still not asking questions. Instead, he was plodding on with his own very limited cultural frame of reference and his own sense of what had worked in his middle-class, suburban experience and therefore, should work in all economic settings. In such a case, the only safeguard is the character of the individuals who are receiving the donations. There is a dangerous sense of sophomore overconfidence that often attaches itself to westerners who gain some little experience abroad. After several forays into foreign lands on "mission vacations" they may begin to see themselves as experienced in intercultural matters

and able to make unguided decisions about the flow of foreign donations. Some worldly-wise fund-raisers are able to spot these "lone-ranger-philanthropists" and are quick to get them alone where they can be guided toward select opportunities. It is helpful to trust good people and to have confidence in the power of the gospel to transform value systems. However, to be simplistic and overconfident about one's ability to see into another culture and to make simple decisions about complex issues involving powerful amounts of finances is naive and can be detrimental. What is intended to be a blessing can easily become a curse. Expatriate workers and local leaders will testify to this detrimental effect of sincerely given, but misguided, donations. It is remarkable that in cases of financial misappropriation of ministry funds, Indian leaders consistently criticized the donors for their naiveté rather than the receivers for their duplicity. What then are some guiding principles about whether and how to invest in a mission ministry? There are four.

1. Seek the opinion of cultural insiders toward the ministry which you are considering. Insiders can get a perspective that outsiders find it difficult to perceive. These insiders can be expatriate and local friends.
2. Establish and nurture a network of mission-savvy friends both at home and in the country of interest, whereby you can benefit from their recommendations and assessments of giving opportunities.
3. Visit ministries or key people heading up ministries that you wish to support. Keep in mind that you are only seeing and hearing what they allow you to see and hear. Such personal visits may help you to develop the network of insiders who can advise you.
4. Develop a short list of characteristics that you are seeking in a ministry. For example, you can say, "The new ministries that I/we wish to support this year must be: (1) involved in holistic church planting, (2) well-respected by my/our circle of advisors, (3) connected to accountability structures and (4) developing local resources to complement foreign donations."

To give or not to give? The giving of foreign funds to support indigenous ministries is far more complex than the issues hinted at in this article. The point is to begin asking questions. Whether you are a giving individual, a mission pastor or a missionary on the field, if you are asking, then you are moving in the right direction since God's intention is not for us to simply be generous givers, but to be wise stewards.

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