

FREEDOM AND DEPENDENCY IN CHRISTIAN PARTNERSHIPS

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"No man is an island." Each of us is dependent on others. In fact, the Bible advocates mutual dependency. However, dependency can have negative consequences. Well-meaning missionaries have often created one-way dependency that has stifled local initiative. Our challenge is to distinguish healthy from unhealthy dependency.

DEPENDENCY, GOOD AND BAD

Some degree of dependency is inevitable in a new mission endeavor. However, modern missions practice has not always managed to avoid creating unhealthy dependency. For instance, when Western missionary efforts, with Western control of funds, results in Western control of the ministry, the result is unhealthy. It need not be so.

In pioneer situations, the very fact that I have the gospel to bring to you makes you dependent on me at least in the beginning. It is a one-way giver-receiver relationship. This is unavoidable. If you depend on me to bring you the gospel, you will usually need me to teach you. So I become a teacher and you a pupil. I become your trainer in preaching, in preparing and leading Bible studies, in how to organize a local church; in fact, for every new level of ministry-related knowledge I become the supplier. However, this initial one-way dependency often continues beyond its rightful limits. It is usually a subtle transition, precisely because the relationships are complex and the motives are well meaning. . But if we are aware of the danger, this process need not lead to a mind-set of one-way dependency nor spill into inappropriate areas.

INDEPENDENCE IS ILLUSORY

We can argue that independence is both an illusion and unbiblical. Biblically the church is a community in which gifts exist to be shared, as are burdens and needs. We are to carry one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. We are to contribute our spiritual gifts to the church so that everyone can be edified. Paul challenged churches in Asia Minor to provide financial assistance to the suffering church in Jerusalem. No ministry is totally self-sufficient. All depend on gifts and contributions from external sources, whether local or foreign. So, if dependency is both inevitable and biblically endorsed, why then do we feel uneasy with the concept? In great part this is because we have seen the harm unhealthy dependency can cause. But our misgivings have also been exacerbated by not making a distinction between healthy and unhealthy dependency.

One cause of unhealthy dependency which transcends the missions movement in itself , has helped to shape it. The missions movement in this century has developed in the context of broader sociological and economic changes. Mission in this century has generally flowed from technologically more advanced cultures to less advanced ones even while technology as a value was being exported to missions-receiving countries by secular agents. As a result, the recipient of missions, as a believer, desires the ministry-related knowledge, while as a member of a technology-hungry society he wants the technology. Conversely, the missionary, as a Christian, wants to generate spiritual growth in his disciples, and as a member of a technological society he will make use of technological advantages to impart that growth. So, the initial and acceptable one-way dependency in Biblical matters is reinforced

and extended beyond its proper limits by the one-way flow of technology. The missionary has access to vehicles, computers, videos and other equipment that makes ministry more efficient. This access to technology has created one-way dependency in nearly every significant area of activity. Such dependency is hard to overcome, even though the quality of machines and church buildings are irrelevant to the essence of the gospel.

SOME CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING UNHEALTHY FINANCIAL DEPENDENCY

Dependency in ministry, when it becomes unhealthy, begins to show some tell-tale signs. Here are a few indicators to watch for:

1. Are local believers being prevented from learning to give sacrificially?
2. Is the ministry failing to increase its income level from local/national sources?
3. Is the ministry losing local credibility because of foreign funding?
4. Is the ministry's goal-setting and decision-making unduly influenced by foreign funding sources?
5. Is foreign funding stunting the development of indigenous para-church structures?
6. Is the foreign funding agency unwittingly assuming moral responsibility for personal care of workers, such as their medical and retirement needs?
7. Does the ministry leader have exaggerated power and authority because he has access to foreign funds?
8. Is worker support level set by outside funding sources rather than by the worker's peers?

DEPENDENCY AND PASSIVITY

Some ministry methods such as Western-style mass evangelism, are heavily dependent on multi-media technology and professional entertainment, and may only be effective with large infusion of foreign resources and personnel. If this has been transmitted to the emerging church as the best way to do effective evangelism, that church will perceive that evangelism depends on resources from abroad. Since the missionaries always appear to know best and they have access to greater resources, it's easy to see how well-meaning locals would prefer to let the missionary take the initiative, either out of humility or a sense of impotence caused by not being able to match the expatriate's resources.

Passivity may be enhanced by the sense of alienation new believers often experience in cultures where conversion leads to rejection by family, friends and employers. When his pre-conversion support system collapses, the new believer sees himself as having little or nothing to contribute to the ministry, so he is likely to look to the missionary for guidance and moral support. Greed may also encourage passivity and dependency: a member of the host country discovers that the missionary has access to many desirable things. Pleasing the missionary often makes it possible to share in those things. To some the temptation to manipulate the missionary for personal gain is too great to resist.

Yet, passivity can be eliminated by its very opposite. The local believer can be invited and encouraged to be active in decision-making and leadership progressively. The missionary can voluntarily assume a progressively less assertive position, and practice scriptural submission.

DEPENDENCY AND THE DEFINITION OF RESOURCES

As long as the mission enterprise is defined primarily in terms that value Western methods, technology and money, unhealthy dependency in partnerships will be hard to eliminate. We must

redefine ministry in ways that acknowledge the resources that non-Western churches contribute, such as personnel, language fluency, cultural identification, and accessibility to target groups. These resources are almost always more valuable than technology or money. I propose the following working definition of resource:

"Resource is anything without which the intended goal cannot be achieved."

OUTSIDE VERSUS LOCAL FUNDING

When we advocate financial independence in missions, what we usually mean is independence from Western sources, and for good sociological reasons. Local funding requires local relationships. Foreign funding may lead a ministry to distance itself from the local Christian community. Local funding places ministry leaders within the scrutiny of their own peers. Outside funding may discourage development of local responsibility, since funds often continue to flow even when local peers question or disapprove some aspect of the ministry. Furthermore, the lost accountability at the local level can seldom be effectively replaced by foreign supervision. However, dependency on local sources is not always better than on foreign sources. Creativity and initiative can just as easily be stifled by dependency on local sources. Ministry leaders often dread the political in-fighting over local funding, or the compromising of principles they are tempted to make to secure funds at home. In short, we may indeed make some generalizations about the benefits of local as opposed to foreign funds, but we must not do so indiscriminately.

DEPENDENCY AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

The local church, by its very nature, must be self-sustaining and self-propagating. Therefore it should not be dependent on outside resources, whether national or foreign, except, perhaps, at its formative stage. The church, in its local expression, must be able to survive under any circumstances, since it is a spiritual entity—a fellowship of believers—with or without an organizational infrastructure. If it is of God it will exist under the most hostile and deprived conditions, as it does today in China and in the Middle East, for example.

DEPENDENCY AND PARACHURCH ORGANIZATIONS

This self-sufficiency of the local church does not necessarily apply to para-church organizations. These may exist to help establish new churches or to strengthen existing ones. But they are not themselves local churches. If the churches they generate or assist are autonomous and progressively stronger, does it matter if parachurch organizations are dependent on foreign funding? For example, let's look at a parachurch organization that has started several local churches. It is neither a local church nor a church denomination. The churches it has helped start are now autonomous and financially self-sufficient. As long as the parachurch organization continues to effectively perform its ministry and is autonomous in its agenda and decision-making authority, some financial dependency on foreign funds is not a major problem.

Is long-term dependency on foreign funds unacceptable for a para-church organization if the local churches it establishes are self-sufficient and free from the problems of outside control and stifled

initiative? We should arrive at an answer not on the basis of independence as an immutable principle but on the basis of strategic and practical considerations in relation to our goals and objectives.

DEPENDENCY AND CONTROL

Dependency is often associated with loss of control: the missionary supplies resources and also controls the ministry. This indeed happens often, sometimes even intentionally. But it is not inevitable. None of us has control over all the essential elements of life. If I say that I will supply the materials for you to build a church building but only if it is built the way I want it, I am exercising undue control. But if I learn that you have a plan to build a church building and offer to help provide the materials for you to build it as you see fit, no unhealthy control is involved. It is only undue control when I insist that you do things my way in order to get my help. If the giver can give without the need for control, and if the receiver can receive without being stifled, financial dependency ceases to be a problem. Dependency is more closely aligned with Biblical teaching than independence. No one is alone in the church, no one can claim, "I am an eye, I have no need of the ear." How can we carry one another's burden without being dependent? Could we not be inadvertently undermining the work of the church when we make self-sufficiency an absolute value? We may set time limits to our assistance as a means of encouraging development of local resources. But if by ceasing our assistance we cause an effective ministry to fail—or greatly reduce its effectiveness—we will have gained nothing.

HOW LONG?

Even if a dependent relationship is healthy at the beginning, it may become unhealthy over time. The passage of time may reduce initiative and creativity. In a long term relationship, for instance, there is likely to be a change of leadership. It is also possible that the first generation of leaders may successfully avoid unhealthy dependency, while the new generation may have entered into the relationship precisely because of the perceived assurance of continued access to foreign resources. But can we not say that, as long as certain spoilers are avoided, duration of dependency need not alter its basic goodness?

DECISION-MAKING

Perhaps the greatest indicator of healthy relationships between agencies is the autonomy to make decisions. In the end, control over the decision-making process determines who is really in charge. Who sets the goals and agenda for the ministry? Is it the local leadership, or the funding agency? Is it possible for the funding agency to avoid undue influence in the decision-making process of the recipient agency? I believe it is, and have been involved in several experiences that demonstrate it. But for that to happen, the burden is really on the funding agency to actively remove real and potential causes of influence.

CONCLUSION

The issue of dependency is really not as intractable as it first appears. Avoiding unhealthy dependency is a realistic goal. But it does require that all those involved be aware of the dangers and take effective action to construct the kind of relationship that preserves the autonomy of the

recipient agency. The process toward healthy relationships starts with putting all relevant issues, including dependency, clearly on the table for discussion from the beginning.