

Foreign Subsidy Under Scrutiny

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[Note: this article ends a two-part series on the unfortunate consequences of foreign subsidy and offers suggestions for avoiding them. The material is excerpted from the second chapter of the author's book, *Polemic Missiology in the 21st Century: In Memoriam of Roland Allen* (Amazon Kindle, 2013). For more information, including bibliographic data, please refer to the original monograph.]

Part II:

So why do individuals, churches, foundations, organizations, and governments persist in their seemingly altruistic labors not only to continue financially subsidizing others in the global village, but even to expand upon those subsidies? The answers are not too difficult to discern. The first reason is because of subpar exegesis. With regard to 2 Corinthians 8:14, Ronald Sims argues that Paul's goal in the first century church was to achieve "economic egalitarianism," and John Rowell contends, "the abundance of one member is intended to meet the need of another so that a measure of equality can be maintained among believers." But the Greek word for "equality" (*ισότης*) can also be translated "fairness," as seen in the ESV. Hence, Paul is referring not to the global redistribution of wealth to achieve economic equality within the church, but to the fact that it is only reasonable to request that the Corinthians contribute to his collection project since they had initially received the gospel from the Jerusalem church (cf. Rom. 15:27).

Secondly, there is the hangover of the Enlightenment paradigm in theories of human progress. One leading economist,

Jeffrey Sachs, has clearly been affected by these social philosophies in his work to eradicate global poverty. But according to Robert Reese, Sachs fails to address the underlying flawed paradigm: "The powerful in worldly terms are still in charge of deciding what is best for the 'weak'. The West is joined by westernized leaders of other nations to plan social improvement (or general mission strategy) for others. The same kinds of people who ruled during colonialism continue to rule by making decisions for the marginalized without accountability for their decisions. Just as in the colonial period, the methods advocated continue to create debilitating dependency."

Third, there is the belief that the "one-size fits all approach" is the best way to operate. But Dambisa Moyo writes, "Although the idea of aid to Africa was born out of the success of the Marshall Plan in Europe, in practical terms, the two are completely different. Pointing to the Marshall Plan's achievements as a blueprint for a similar outcome for Africa tomorrow is simply wrong" because: 1) European countries were not wholly dependent on aid in the first place; 2) the Marshall Plan had a limited time frame of five years; 3) Europe had an infrastructure prior to WWII, but

Africa is still a developing continent; and 4) whereas the Marshall Plan was targeted toward this infrastructure, aid to Africa permeates virtually every aspect of the economy.

Fourth, maintaining the existing disposition toward international aid rather than confronting and changing it is extremely appealing. As Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkett point out, “one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame. The way that we act toward the economically poor often communicates—albeit unintentionally—that we are superior and they are inferior.” Indeed, “we have been evaluating our charity by the rewards we receive through service, rather than the benefits received by the served. We have failed to adequately calculate the effects of our service on the lives of those reduced to objects of our pity and patronage.”

Last but not least, there is the little-known fact that the compassion industry is financially very profitable. One disturbing truth that appears in the literature on this subject, and which is never broached, is that those who promote on-going

foreign subsidy are not unbiased or impartial, since they stand to gain monetarily from it. As a case in point, what happened in the wake of the earthquake in Haiti in 2010 provides an excellent picture of how NGOs operate in the context of disaster relief: “From the very beginning, the disaster in Haiti was looked upon as a business opportunity.” In addition, the “U.S. farm sector and the maritime industry are the biggest supporters of the current [aid] system. The program soaks up surplus farm production, and shippers get lucrative contracts to transport donated grain for sale in needy regions.” The conclusion is unmistakable—the aid industry generates economic activity and prosperity for the West, while the rest reel with its repercussions.

If the status quo is intolerable, what can be done to change it? People in the business of distributing resources from the wealthy to the less-wealthy parts of the world must come to the conscious realization that more and more aid going overseas will not solve the problem. This is not a simple request, given the deeply entrenched views on the subject. For example, Mary Lederleitner asserts that “choosing to do nothing about those in need around the world does not seem to be an option for those who say they love God and are followers of Christ,” and John Rowell contends,

“I believe ‘the right thing’ means . . . giving more, not less.” However, when one learns that “Africa won’t be ‘saved’ by aid, but by the ingenuity and determination of its own people,” and should be allowed to “stand on its own two feet,” that the India Missions Association is now advocating that “all mission organizations . . . become self-reliant with fund generations from their area,” and that the Lausanne Issue Group on Funding recommends the “core corrective to this issue of dependency that so often accompanies the giving-receiving transactions is the development of local funding for all ministries,” then it appears that the only Christ-like response would be to honor such requests.


Another step which must be taken is articulated by Jim Harries: “The syncretism of Northern Christianity is grossly evident from the South. Many mission activities, from Northern medicine to numerous projects, are hybrids with secular culture. . . . To resolve this situation, I suggest that . . . Northern Christians should either ‘desecularise’ themselves or acknowledge the secular beliefs that influence them. . . . An open recognition of Northern Christianity’s syncretism with secularism could easily be followed by a renewal of Christianity.”

Furthermore, it is important to reiterate that “our template

for Christian missions, as for any Christian practice, must remain the early church.” For much of the modern missionary era, the goal was to establish Three-Self churches: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. However, this formula has been criticized for being a “Western pragmatic and individualistic construct” and built upon the cultural value of “independence.” It is true that Henry Venn developed the formula during a severe financial crisis in the Church Missionary Society, but in contrast, the historical record shows that Rufus Anderson came to his convictions as a result of studying “Paul’s missionary methods.” Thus, “it must be affirmed that the general desire behind the three-self formula must be accepted and accentuated.” There is consensus with this viewpoint by non-Westerners as well. Yet some still maintain that “There is only one way to move, and that is toward interdependency in the

global church.” However, the global church has been attempting to make interdependent partnerships workable for decades with little success. The reason for this is not difficult to surmise—it is practically impossible “to have a truly mutual relationship when the two parties possess unequal power.” Consequently, the better way forward is to realize that “the resources for God’s harvest are in the harvest field” since “every Christian is a maturing steward” who mobilizes “local resources.”

Finally, if those concerned about the poor really want to improve their quality of life, the poor should take “The Oath of Compassionate Service” by committing to: 1) never doing for the poor what they have the capacity to do for themselves; 2) limiting one-way giving to emergency situations; 3) striving to empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements; 4) subordinating self-

interests to the needs of those being served; 5) listening closely to those in need of help; and 6) above all, doing no harm. To this list, one should add the need to develop exit strategies in order to avoid “perpetual hemorrhaging of foreign aid”; the importance of abiding by the “principle of geographical proximity” so that economies closest to the point of need can benefit the most; and the necessity for any recipient of aid to always be given the chance “to return the gift or some equivalent in order to remain his own respectable self. Otherwise, he will begin seeing himself as inferior to the giver; his personal sense of worth [will be] downgraded, and instead of being grateful, he will be bitter.” 

Bibliographic information for this article can be found in the second chapter of Little’s book, Polemic Missiology in the 21st Century: In Memoriam of Roland Allen



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