

DEPENDENCY: THE CRIPPLER OF PEOPLE AND MOVEMENTS



BY RICK WOOD
EDITOR OF MF

Jesus has called every one of us who claims Him as our Savior and Lord to go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them to obey all that He has *commanded* us (Matt. 28:18-20). This is not optional for any of us. We have all been called to live on mission with God in obedience to His commands. Jesus says in John 14:21 (NIV), “Whoever has my **commands** and keeps them is the one who **loves** me. The one who **loves** me will be **loved** by my Father, and I too will **love** them and show myself to them.” Obeying Jesus’ commands, including the one to make disciples, is a key element in our love relationship with Him. Obeying Jesus and what He has told us to do is the way that we demonstrate our love and trust in Jesus. Obeying the Great Commission is also the way that we love others because the most loving thing we can ever do for someone is to bring them to Jesus.

As those sent out to make disciples, what is the goal that we want to accomplish in this world? Is it not to see

movements of discipleship and church-planting develop in every people group and region on earth until every person has access to the saving knowledge of Christ? If this is our biblical goal, then we need to ask ourselves what fruitful practices help foster these movements and what practices get in the way.

In this issue, we focus on how so many of our mission practices are creating dependency on the mission field and thereby killing existing Church-Planting Movements and preventing new ones from ever getting started. This is a serious matter. We need to take a hard look at what we do in church and missions so that we are working biblically in cooperation with the Holy Spirit to foster as many of these movements as possible rather than stifling them through practices that keep people immature and helpless.

Dependency is a Universal Human Problem

In every aspect of life, we are either growing in maturity, taking responsibility for and ownership of the choices we make or we are remaining child-like and immature, depending on others to provide for us and make decisions about the direction of our lives. We naturally start out in life dependent upon our parents to provide

for us and direct our lives. This is normal and good when you are six years old, but it is deeply troubling when someone remains dependent upon others well into adulthood.

A good parent should continually be working to guide their child towards ever growing responsibility and control over their own life. This is part of the natural order that God has set up. But this intended order can be violated by well meaning parents who in the name of love and compassion want to prevent their child from enduring the hard work and suffering that is required in growing up and becoming mature. Seriously, some parents keep their children helpless and dependent upon them well into adulthood because they want to spare their children the pain or “hard knocks” of life, yet this kind of “protection” is actually a form of child abuse because they are keeping their child from growing up.

There are direct parallels with our Christian life and mission. When a new babe in Christ comes to faith we can either put them on the path to maturity or perpetual dependency. When a person gives their life to Christ we can either mentor or apprentice them to obey Scripture and become confident and competent disciple makers or we can have them sit and

listen to hundreds of sermons and attend countless Bible studies with little accountability for applying truth to life. Maturity as a Jesus follower does not come from just listening to truth but rather from applying that truth to our lives through obedience.

Dependency: The Killer of Movements

The same is true in Church-Planting Movements. The sad reality of missions history is that we have often created dependency by staying too long and doing too much for people rather than equipping them to make disciples one generation after another and trusting the Holy Spirit to lead them to maturity as they obey the Word. We should never do for others what they can and should do for themselves. This is how you keep dependency from developing in every area of life and ministry.

The fact is that dependence on outside funds and missionary leadership by local believers on the mission field has a devastating impact on the development of Church-Planting Movements. It can cripple the mission-established churches from growing and naturally reproducing disciple makers one generation after another because the abundance of outside funds has robbed the local people of the initiative to support their own outreach and to discover that they have the ability and privilege of developing the local resources they need to support their own work as they depend on the Holy Spirit. Foreign funds can never be a substitute for the devoted, passionate involvement of committed local people using locally developed resources to make disciples and plant churches. Support from outside funds is also not a mission strategy that can be infinitely reproduced generation after generation of disciple making. Whatever strategy

or methods we use in missions must be infinitely reproducible.

The Three-Self Formula for Church Planting


These ideas are actually not new. Jesus and the Apostle Paul practiced them, and they were rediscovered over 150 years ago. But they are so regularly ignored in mission circles that it is required to continually emphasize their wisdom and importance for world evangelization. Robert Reece explains the Three Self Formula and how it developed. “It [the formula] states that a newly planted church is mature or indigenous when it is *self-governing*, *self-propagating*, and *self-supporting*. It was first popularized and implemented by a pair of mission executives who headed the largest mission agencies of their day. The Englishman, Henry Venn, headed the Anglican Church Missionary Society from 1841-72, while the American, Rufus Anderson, led the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions from 1832-66. They represented some of the best mission thinking of the second generation of leaders of the modern missionary movement; both men arrived at the formula independently of one another at approximately the same time.

“The thinking behind the formula derived from field experiences of the personnel of both agencies as well as from Bible study. The goal of the formula was simple: to speed up the pace of world evangelization by moving missionaries on to new places while the leaders of the churches they started would complete the task of local evangelization. Venn and Anderson gave missionaries a goal to work towards: the production of churches that were mature enough to function on their own without missionary help in their own locale.

Once that was achieved, missionaries could go to the “regions beyond,” sure in the knowledge that the churches they left behind could succeed without them. That, after all, was how the Apostle Paul proceeded in his mission work.”¹

As it would be in our day, the wisdom of this approach was also largely ignored in Venn and Andersen’s day. This led to the planting of dependent churches that the missionaries felt they had to lead indefinitely. Human nature is the same today as it was back then.

Reece goes on to explain, “Roland Allen reacted strongly to this state of affairs in his famous 1912 book, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?*, where he compared the mission efforts of that time with those of the Apostle Paul. Understandably, he found that Paul’s methods were far superior. He called on missionaries to have more confidence in their converts and to release control over them as Paul did, trusting that the Holy Spirit would help them learn how to work effectively in their churches, even through their inevitable mistakes.”²

If we are to get to No Place Left in our day, where all have access to the gospel, as Paul did in his, we will have to consistently use his methods instead of the ones that have failed repeatedly over the last 200 years of the modern missionary movement. 

¹ Robert Reece, “The Surprising Relevance of The Three Self Formula,” *Mission Frontiers*, July-August 2007, pgs. 25-27.

² *ibid.*

CONTACT

Rick Wood

rick.wood@frontierventures.org