

A Cure for Handicapped Churches:

Reflections On Dependency In the Christian Movement

Glenn J. Schwartz

Professor Alan Tippett used to remind us that *one can't understand missiology apart from biography*. If you know what I experienced as a missionary, you will understand why I am passionate about some things today and why some other things, however intriguing, do not grab my attention. The issue of unhealthy dependency in the Christian movement is something that gets my attention and has done so for the past several decades.

My first significant assignment in Christian service was to become a short-term missionary in Central Africa. During that time I learned to minister reasonably well in two African languages. When those two years were complete, I returned to the USA, finished college and then returned to Africa as a long-term missionary. Following the 1960s in Africa, I spent six years (1973-1979) as an administrator in the School of World Mission (SWM)¹ at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.

For the past 23 years I have traveled far and wide drawing attention to the inhumanity and immorality of fostering the birth of handicapped churches and then rationalizing that they are just as well off if they remain that way forever. *As westerners, we get such a good feeling from being their long-distance support that we cannot imagine them getting along without us.*² Furthermore, we believe we are rich, they are poor, and that is the way it always will be. May the Lord help us to see how unbiblical and unfair that assumption is! In fact, they do not need to be born



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that way, and the other good news is that there is a cure for such handicapped churches.

Much of the Western Christian movement has adopted a massive donor-driven missiology that continues to create and perpetuate handicapped churches. Little do the advocates of such missiology realize how much their efforts are producing unhealthy new churches; they do not realize that they are robbing new believers (and older ones) of the self-respect and dignity they deserve.

Very early in my missionary experience I had an underlying feeling that avoiding dependency and developing self-support were important in cross-cultural church planting. (This was long before I knew anything about John Nevius, Roland Allen or Donald McGavran.) Soon after returning to Africa as a long-term missionary in 1966, I found myself one day sitting under a small grass-roofed shelter, having a discussion with some Zambian friends. They had just made the decision to form a new congregation and were asking how to get the mission to provide funding for a building. I questioned them about their request for outside assistance. Although the long history of mission support for church buildings was on their side, about ten meters from where we were sitting was a locally-built, rural grocery store made with burnt bricks. I asked them how much money came from the mission to build that grocery store. They scoffed, as if to say, "None, of course." Even with my lack of training and awareness, I found myself in a conversation that was a precursor to what would become a major preoccupation for me.

It was my privilege to be involved in three different church-plantings during my time as a missionary. I sometimes wish I could have had a lifetime of church planting. In reality, as a young missionary, it is all I ever wanted to do. But the path for me was destined to be different. Now, 46 years after beginning missionary service in Africa, my heart's desire is to see churches be "born right" so that they

can learn to stand and walk on their own two feet – even from the very beginning.

It is all about assumptions

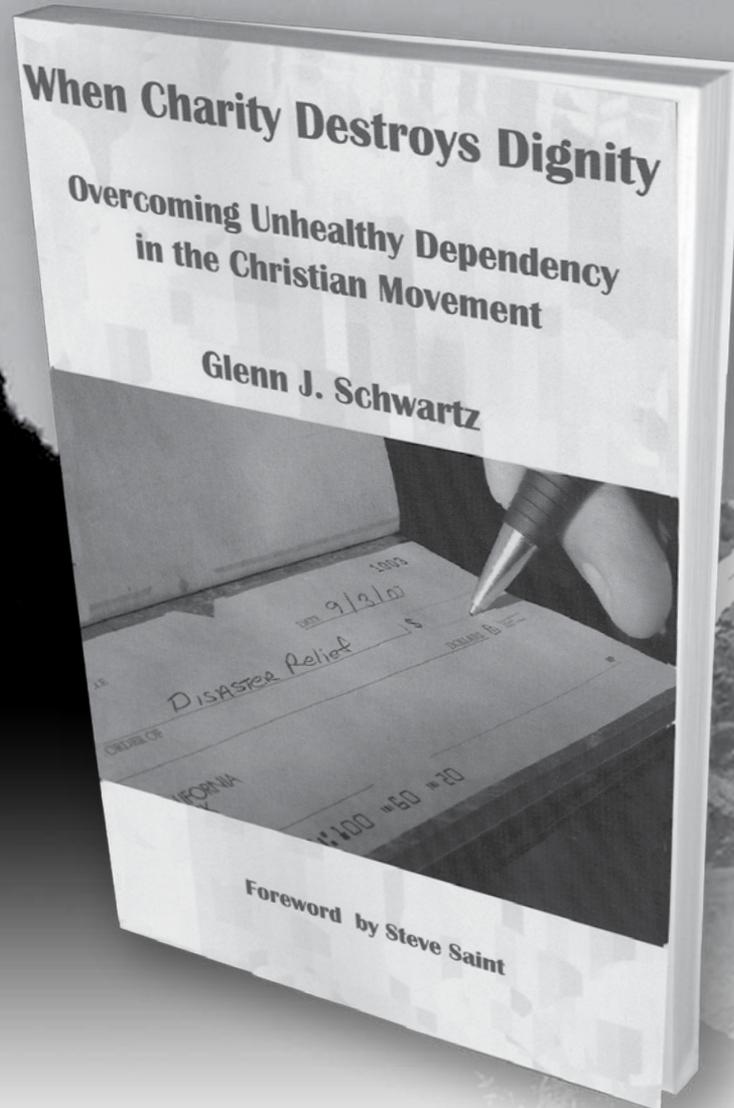
I learned a long time ago that the assumptions we make are a very powerful driving force at the center of our lives. As one reflects on the important matter of sustainability in the Christian movement, *getting those assumptions right from the beginning is critically important.*

What happens if we do not get the assumptions right from the beginning? It is likely that those assumptions will color the thinking of the people we are trying to reach. When we introduce a distorted view of how things are, others might begin to accept them as being normal.

Imagine what would happen if those presenting the Christian gospel began with the assumption that, when people come to Christ, they do not expect to receive handouts from those who preach the Gospel. Should one give them the impression that they cannot be rightly aligned with God unless someone gives them material assistance?³

A good example of these conditions would be the church in China in the 19th century. Missionaries began and carried on their work with a series of assumptions which included the following: *Churches can become self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating from the very beginning.* Reflect for a moment on the simplicity and long-term implications of that short series of assumptions. How did those assumptions pay off in the long run? Within a hundred years, through no fault of their own, the missionaries were forced out of China and local believers were left with those principles, which came
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The alternative to business as usual in missions...



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to be known as the “three-selves.” The result is that the million believers they left behind in 1951 grew to a hundred million or more over the next 50 years. Consider for a moment what would have happened if those missionaries had begun with a different series of assumptions.

Where do faulty assumptions lead?

One recently-published book on mission giving⁴ says the opposite of what I am saying here. That book begins with the assumption that westerners are wealthy, and that if we want to cure poverty in the rest of the world, we simply need to mobilize a massive “Marshall Plan” of missions giving that will redistribute money to the rest of the world. The

book advocates raising funds in large amounts with the purpose of paying pastors and evangelists to do the work of God with outside resources, not those of the people among whom those pastors and evangelists live and work. The writer also concludes

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that such a massive amount of funds be given with no strings attached! Presumably if local pastors and evangelists choose to enrich themselves while their people remain less well off, that is no concern of those providing the funding.

Consider for a moment the assumption behind such a donor-driven missiology. It is assumed that it is western money with no strings attached that will cure poverty in the rest of the world.⁵ If that system were found to work, then Haiti should be a shining example of development in our world. I believe if that “Marshall Plan for missions giving” is launched, it will not only perpetuate unhealthy dependency in the Christian movement, but will create more “Haitis” in other parts of the world. One has only to look at places like Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union to see examples of very dependent churches. Some of these are new places showing similar symptoms to the economic deprivation of Haiti. When mission practice is driven by dollars rather than sound missiological principles, what else can one expect? Obviously, it is not outside dollars that will cure poverty. Dollars alone will not create healthy churches. Money in massive amounts will only convince many in our world that they are poor and need outside assistance in order to play an active part in the Kingdom of God.

What is the alternative?

To put it simply, the alternative to donor-driven missiology is a change of assumptions on which missionary church-planting is done. Except in areas where humanitarian aid is essential for survival, outside aid should be given careful consideration in order to avoid becoming a potential obstacle to healthy church planting. I am aware that some consider principles of self-support to be passé and that they should be discarded. But such principles were the foundation of sound missiology in the past, and I believe they still are today.

The alternative to massive amounts of outside funding (which often destroy local initiative) is to advocate that those who come to the Christian faith can do so without financial incentive. And when they learn to know about the right relationship they can have with the God of the universe, they can also learn that it is their privilege to give back to Him something of what He has given them. When that happens, one begins to grasp the essence of the Christian gospel.

For those who wish to learn more about the issues I am dealing with here, I commend my new book, *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement*. In it I advocate church-planting that is not dependent on significant amounts of outside funding. The book can be ordered on the website of World Mission Associates (www.wmausa.org). For information on bulk orders and other questions, send an e-mail to wmabookinfo@wmausa.org. Mission agencies and others ordering in bulk shipments may qualify for up to 80% discount. 🌐

End Notes

- 1 The school is now called the School of Intercultural Studies (SIS).
- 2 The compulsion to give without regard for the long-term consequences is where donor-driven missiology originates.
- 3 I am not referring here to places where humanitarian assistance is required for people to simply survive. Most of the places where unhealthy dependency has a foothold, people live in relative poverty, not absolute poverty, and actually have something to give back to God if they are told that is part of coming into right relationship with God.
- 4 The book is entitled *To Give or Not to Give?*, by Dr. John Rowell. It is published by Authentic Publishing: Tyrone, GA. 2007
- 5 This reminds one of the Millennium Plan proposed by Jeffrey Sachs, the economist who calls for a massive redistribution of wealth for the elimination of poverty in the next several decades. For further information on that, see Sachs, Jeffrey D. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*. New York: Penguin Press, 2005.