

Raising Local Resources

Patron-Client Missions

Jean Johnson, guest author

In 1996, my colleague and I came up with a grandiose idea. We were missionaries in Cambodia and thought we could encourage a local Cambodian church by providing them with a medical team from America. The local church was excited to have American doctors and nurses partner with them in order to give them credibility in their community.

The USA medical team visited families in the community; they gave free check-ups, medicine, and vitamins. Cambodian members from the local church served as their interpreters. After these home visits, the medical team informed the local pastor which families had responded to an invitation to accept Jesus and committed to come to church. The following week, a local team from the church went to visit those specific families. Surprisingly, they experienced a chilly reception. People accused them of forsaking their own culture and religion. In addition, the families were disappointed that the Cambodians from the church did not bring medicines, and kept asking when the Americans were going to return.

Originally, the local church, my colleague, and I had thought that this medical outreach would increase the credibility of the Cambodian believers in their community, but it had the opposite effect. The most the Cambodian believers could offer the families was fruit, along with a smile and some companionship, which paled in comparison to the expertise and handouts of the visiting medical team.

The majority of North American missionaries practice what one might call “patron-client missions.” Patron-client relationships are based on social associations of unequal status. The patron is the protector, provider and defender within the relationship. In return, the client

serves and becomes obligated to the patron. The client often adopts the beliefs and values of the patron as part of his or her loyalty in the relationship. Patron-client relationships are part of many social and political systems around the world. In the above example, the visiting team from America had set themselves up in a role of *being needed*. More often than not, missionaries offer medical, linguistic, educational, or construction services that cause the local people (the clients) to need and depend on the missionary (the patron). The more social services and assistance provided, the more the missionary is perceived as the patron.

Some people see the patron role as worth capitalizing on, as it gives the missionary an edge to influence people for Christ. In actuality, the patron-client style of missions hinders multiplying disciples and movements for Christ for several reasons. First, local believers usually cannot duplicate patron-client methods with their own people and local resources. Sadly, this robs them of credibility. Second, many of the conversion experiences are superficial and readily forsaken when the patron-client role comes to an end. Third, this model looks very much like a cousin of colonialism. Fourth, the end result often produces churches in which the members view the mission as their patron. Finally, Western missionaries too often minister from a status of superiority rather than humility.

Dr. William Kornfield shares how patron-client roles distort evangelism:

In many cases the Western cultural transplant is reflected in large evangelistic campaigns, usually financed by North America or Europe. In some cases the only cultural adjustment is the direct translation from English into the receptor language, thus negating major cross-cultural factors

affecting decision-making. For example, Latin American evangelists trained in North America are usually people of a higher status—the upper middle class. The sociological lower class people of Latin America will often respond during an invitation—not necessarily because of the convincing power of the Holy Spirit calling them to repentance, but rather because their culture of courtesy obliges them to respond positively to a higher class person.

Someone writing anonymously about Bangladesh reveals how the patron-client mentality affects missionary outreach there:

For better or worse the ‘patron-client mentality’ has become firmly embedded in local Bangladeshi culture. Foreigners are often viewed as moneybags who must be praised and eulogized but manipulated shrewdly whenever possible. It has been said that a foreigner is like a faucet; he may not be flowing now, but if you stick around long enough, the money will eventually begin to flow. . . .

But in the long run, is patron-client evangelism reproducible for those whom we are seeking to disciple? Can they take the gospel to their nearby cities and villages without providing goods and services? Furthermore, is this approach even biblical?

Perhaps, we need to reconsider the paradigm of patron-client missions. ¶

End notes for this article can be found online at www.missionfrontiers.org.



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