

# WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH ALL OUR MONEY?

## When Global Generosity Destroys Local Generosity



JEAN JOHNSON

/ Jean Johnson served as a missionary with the Assemblies of God in Cambodia for 16 years in the areas of pioneer church planting, on-the-job leadership training, and oral strategies. She is currently a co-director of World Mission Associates and teaches and coaches on church sustainability and multiplication. She can be reached by e-mail at [jeanjohnson@wmausa.org](mailto:jeanjohnson@wmausa.org).

**W**hen sitting down to talk with donors in a North American context, the question I am most often asked is, “What should we do with all our money?”

There is no doubt that the Bible promotes generosity and giving. The apostle Paul quoted Jesus’s very words: “It is more blessed to give than receive.” (Acts 20:35) But what if our generous giving actually conditions people to be habitually on the receiving end? In this case, won’t our generosity actually rob people of the blessing promised in Acts 20:35? This is not simply an academic question. Again and again, I have seen local churches and church members ignoring local generosity to both wait for and seek out global generosity. I don’t think people set out to paralyze local giving and generosity with global giving. Our intentions are good, but some of our logic may be flawed.

For example, we may think: “If we give long enough and generously enough, the recipients will take their turn.”

When churches are birthed and grow up depending on money from donors, they very quickly slide into a dependent mentality. This is human nature, and dependency is no respecter of persons. If somebody far removed from the context pays the bills, isn’t it more likely that the recipients will become accustomed to such rather than develop some internal longing to pay their own bills?

Some may be quick to say, “But new believers in Christ are like spiritual babes and need a season of parental help.” The problem is that we are not their parents, and they are not our children. While it is true that people may be new in their spiritual faith in Christ, they have been spiritually mature and responsible in their own contexts and religious practices. One way or another, Buddhist folks give food alms to monks, do their part in building pagodas, and so much more. There is a great danger in inviting adults to go backwards in the spirituality, giving, and responsibility already evident in their own families and previous religious practices. In other words, you may find the mindset of “Let us pay your clergy and build your churches for now” to be very counterproductive. I have not encountered a SE Asian who set aside his practices of Buddhism because he was too poor. Let’s not introduce that mindset into the Christian faith.


Often, with our generosity comes our version of Christianity.

St. Paul’s method is not in harmony with the modern Western spirit. We modern teachers from the West are by nature and by training persons of restless activity and boundless self-confidence. We are accustomed to assuming an attitude of superiority towards Eastern peoples, and to point to our material progress as the justification of our attitude. We are

accustomed by tradition to an elaborate system of church organization, and a peculiar code of morality. We cannot imagine any Christianity worthy of the name existing without the elaborate machinery that we invented. We naturally expect our converts to adopt from us not only essentials but also accidentals.<sup>1</sup>

I do not see any examples of Jesus, the disciples, or Paul giving out money to pay disciple or pastoral salaries, or to cover the expenses of the churches’ functions and/or structures. The apostles passed on Christ’s essentials while leaving out their accidentals. And yet no one would accuse them of being selfish.

Generosity does not exist in a vacuum. We must ask the hard questions. Is generosity really generosity if it ultimately causes the recipients harm? If we are forcing others into becoming eternal recipients, thus robbing them of the blessing of being generous—with their own resources—among their church community and neighbors, what have we really achieved? If North Americans outgive locals, will locals ever feel they can rise to the occasion? How can North Americans live lifestyles of sacrifice and generosity without destroying the same attitudes and actions in those on the receiving end?

What we should do with all our money is a fair question. But we must be careful not to use that line of questioning as a justification to destroy local generosity with global generosity, thus killing the spirit of giving and sacrifice in others—who have a God-given responsibility in their own context. 

<sup>1</sup> Allen, Roland 1962 *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?*. Grand Rapids: World Dominion Press, 6.