Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 36 · Number 4 · October 2012

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
World Evangelical Alliance
Theological Commission

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2012) 36:4, 347-355

Is Mission Diverse, or is it all just Money? An Examination of Western Mission to Africa

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Keywords: *Dependency, vulnerable mission, money, aid, donations.*

I Introduction

That America itself, and American mission activities in Africa are diverse at the point of origin, cannot be denied. Theologically and practically, there is no doubt broad agreement that mission actions ought to be diverse, even though the gospel message is one. Pop stars, sportsmen, businessmen, economists—people from many walks of life (plus of course the mission-minded) are giving of themselves and their time to Africa. Mission organizations and individual missionaries are involved in various kinds of activities including building projects, theological teaching, clothes handouts, scholarships for study, evangelism and church planting, agricultural and other development projects. All of these examples—and many others—would seem to substantiate the common-sense notion that the contribution of western and American missionaries to mission in Africa is diverse.

A problem arises when that apparent diversity of ministries hides what in reality is being transmitted. We propose in this paper that the apparent diversity of mission activities in Africa actually conceals a peculiar kind of monism: all or nearly all of those diverse mission activities translate (for the African people) into one thing—money. This paper explores how and why this happens, and how it can be avoided. That is, how we may foster diversity in mission not only by senders, but also in a sustainable way for receivers. In other words, when we talk about diversity in mission, do we mean diversity at the point of origin, or do we mean diversity at the point of impact? The authors of this paper believe that diversity at the point of impact is at least as important as diversity at the point of origin.

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II Diversity from the Western Point of View

Figure 1 summarizes both the western and African sides of the apparent diversity in mission. For the moment, look only at the left side of the diagram, the part of the diagram most western churches and mission agencies focus on. They see the apparent diversity referred to earlier, diversity conceived as various kinds of ministries—all for the sake of the Kingdom! Literacy work, clinics, theological education, etc. are all worthy and needed programs, they presume. No one, for example, disputes that Africans could be, and should be, healthier and better educated. Of course, we all know that money must be raised to support these ministries, since Africans couldn't possibly fund ministries out of their own resources. It also stands to reason that some money must be transferred to Africans in the course of these ministries. But the main thing is the ministry itself, many westerners naively seem to believe.

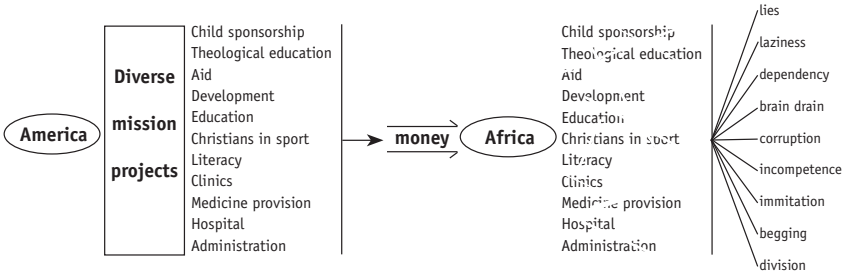
To be sure, debates on 'money in mission' are certainly raging. Jonathan Martin in *Giving Wisely* has explored the whole 'giving' issue. Despite exploring case study after case study in which 'giving' hurts, divides, injures or even kills churches in the Global South, he keeps telling us that we need to keep giving![1]

A similar debate occurred at a 2007 conference on short-term mission, attended by one of the authors of this paper. The thinking was that it was 'wrong' to go on a short-term mission trip and not leave money or things behind. A suggestion that short-term teams should not leave gifts was met by incredulous (yes, almost) horror! 'We must leave money' was the implicit retort.

To be fair to the western point of view, it should be mentioned that it is not monolithic. That is, there are differences of opinion among westerners about the right and wrong ways to help the poor. Corbett and Fikkert's recent book on alleviating poverty has an entire chapter entitled, 'Doing

1 Jonathan Martin, *Giving Wisely: killing with kindness or empowering lasting transformation?* (Sisters, Oregon: Last Chapter Publishing, LLC, 2008), 26 (and throughout the text).

Figure 1. Diversity of Mission from the West to Africa



Short-Term Missions Without Doing Long-Term Harm'. Their criticism of short-term missions is worth quoting at length.

> Unfortunately, STM teams are generally in 'needs based' mode, bringing their knowledge, skills, and material resources to poor communities in order to accomplish a task as fast as possible. Indeed, there is not even time for the STM team to identify existing resources in the recipient communities. As a result, paternalism rears its ugly head, and we undermine local assets and increase poverties of being, community, and stewardship.[2]

The point the authors of this paper wish to make is not merely that when money is given, it should be given wisely. Who would wish to dispute that idea? Who wants to give money foolishly! Rather, the authors assert that *some* western missionaries should *not* be donors. That is, some western missionaries should not be giving outside finances to their key ministry.

III How Africans Experience this 'Diversity'

Let us return now to Figure 1, this time looking at the right side of the diagram. At first we see the same list of ministries that is located on the left side of it (although they are no longer written clearly to indicate that these things aren't actually happening properly): Child sponsorship, Christians in sport, etc. When we look still farther to the right, we see ten outcomes of these ministries, which are shockingly different from what is expected: Lies, dependency, incompetence, etc. How can this be?

Martin in *Giving Wisely* illustrates how this occurs. Orphans in Mexico sell gifts given to them by American churches to pay for the services of prostitutes.[3] Boys who are given biscuits end up scrapping and fighting.[4] Evangelists paid by the West are considered to be doing evangelism only for money.[5] Families are split apart by child sponsorship programs.[6] Donated money 'chops the legs out from under a man', Martin tells us.[7]

Perhaps most striking from Martin's book is the example given from the Karamajong in Uganda. We are told that giving gifts by short term mission teams created disasters. The solution, according to Martin, is that short term missionaries should have 'experts' (long term missionaries) to do the distribution for them. The missionary he mentions has 'taken [14 years]… to know how to do it right'.[8] But as he writes (eight months later) that missionary has yet to hand over the stuff![9] It seems even 14 years of mission experience do not teach an easy way to 'give'.

Even granting that short-term missions creates many unnecessary prob-

2 Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 169.

3 Martin, *Giving Wisely*. 12-13.
4 Martin, *Giving Wisely*. 124.
5 Martin, *Giving Wisely*. 94.
6 Martin, *Giving Wisely*. 38.
7 Martin, *Giving Wisely*. 102.
8 Martin, *Giving Wisely*. 128.
9 Martin, *Giving Wisely*. 128.

lems, it is evident that the solution to the problem of money in missions is not simply to say, 'Let the long-term missionaries take care of it.' Long-term missionaries often face the same difficulties as short-term missionaries. Having a more profound understanding of the difficulties associated with giving does not make them go away.

Let us try to imagine the situation from the point of view of 'poor' Africans. People are busy, Africans included. When something new comes, many people have trouble making time for it. They need to be convinced of its value; then they might appropriate it. But what if they are not given time to be convinced, but instead are paid to do 'it', whether they inherently value whatever 'it' is or not? Someone who is hard up may do whatever 'it' is for the money; and why not? The missionary is offering a way to earn desperately needed money. The rational point of the exercise then becomes to maximize financial profit. You are in it for the money, so make as much money out of 'it' as possible. You want the maximum amount of income for the least possible time and effort. It is very easy to see how dependency and corruption can be the natural results of these circumstances.

If someone is 'convinced' by the value of something, then they will make room for it (as far as they are able) in their normal lives. For example, if someone convinces me of the value of knowledge of Greek to read the New Testament, then I may put aside some of the precious hours in my life to study Greek. The situation changes if the person encouraging me to learn Greek is also offering to pay me to learn Greek. This is especially so if the rate of pay I will receive from Greek classes is *higher* than that which I am getting from my current employment—whatever that may be. I will obviously choose to study Greek. I will defend the value of Greek to the hilt (through fear that if I do not do so I may lose my generous donor). I will study it arduously, as long as the financial carrot is there. Take away any carrots, and I will stop. It is as simple as that.

As for Greek, so for school in general; so for the playing of football; so for singing in the choir; so for boiling my water; so for preaching the gospel[10]—as also cited above. I will do all I can to continue doing all these things even amounting to producing a barrage of lies should anyone threaten the propriety of what I am doing.

To repeat our essential question: Is this diversity in mission? Or is it just money?

IV What is Important to Africans?

A Zambian association of churches in November 2001 interviewed one of the authors of this article in order to decide if he should be 'their missionary' for a year following the retirement of a North American. Sixty of their pastors were gathered. 'It seems this new missionary has no money', said the Zambian chair of the meeting. 'What use is a missionary without money?' he added rhetorically. No use apparently. The missionary was rejected.

Another example: one of the authors of this article has been ministering for many years in Kenya. Recently a new

10 Martin, *Giving Wisely*. 94.

government university college was opened in the area where he works and he contacted the Christian Union at the University and twice spoke to encourage them. Then 'I need to meet you urgently' were the words in a phone message from a Christian Union leader. It felt good to the missionary to be needed apparently as 'Christian older brother'. A meeting was arranged. Did the African need advice? Was he looking for spiritual counsel? Then came the explanation: 'I don't have enough fees. Can you help me find a sponsor?' was the request; money again.

A Bible training program was taking off in a small town. African church leaders formed the board with the missionary. In board meetings the missionary seemed to be the intended 'victim!' Every means was used to try to get money out of her. 'This cannot work if you do not put money in' was the final conclusion after about five, long, drawn out meetings. 'You can use our churches to teach in, but don't expect any more help than that' the missionary was told. Why; because she would not provide money.

These are not the isolated experiences of only a few missionaries. 'Westerners are people who appear to have ample resources that many Africans would like to have them share, but lack most other qualifications for meaningful relationships.'[11] It seems to some African Christians that Western missionaries are only as valuable as the money they carry.

The corrupting influence of money on Africans runs still deeper. There was a Nigerian businesswoman 'who believed she was saved because she was making great progress in her business … the danger here for a prosperity gospel (i.e. where material salvation comes to be seen mainly in terms of material prosperity) is serious'.[12] It seems that Africans have learned too well the lesson that the gospel and money are inextricably linked, for this linkage occurs even when Whites are not present.

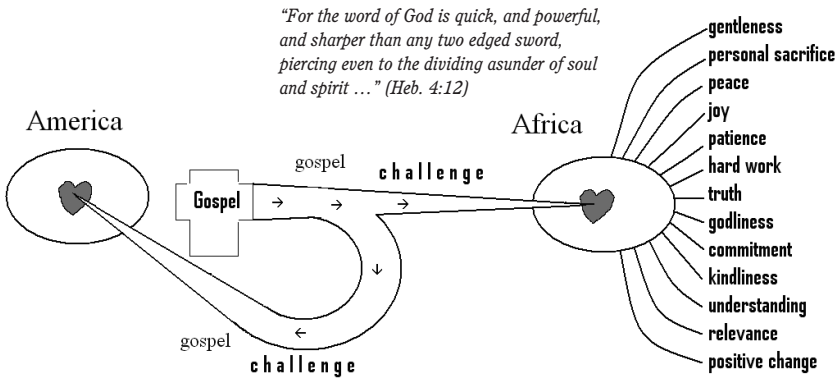
This to us may appear incredible. westerners appear to resemble lemmings that keep running over the cliff. Except, that is, it is not the westerners who fall to their death. It is the 'poor;' the Africans who have no chance of getting their act together under a constant bombardment of foreign goodies, and succumb as a result. The main value Africa is getting from western mission, it seems, is money. That hardly seems to be following in the footsteps of either Jesus or Paul. The Bible tells us that the gospel is like a two edged sword that penetrates the heart (Heb. 4:12). Meanwhile what it says about money is that the love of it is the root of all evils (1 Tim. 6:10). It seems that Bible scholars haven't always been paying enough attention to the Bible. Yet the western money-machine won't stop!

For all the 'diversity' of ministries discussed by Martin there are some forms of ministry he apparently does not consider—and that is any form of ministry for westerners that is rooted

11 David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: observations from Africa* (Dallas: SIL International, 2001), 9.

12 Chiger Chike, 'Proudly African, Proudly Christian: the roots of Christologies in African Worldview'. *Black Theology. An International Journal. 6(2)* 2008. 221-240, 237.

Figure 2. The Gospel that Penetrates the Heart



in something other than western money. It is not only Martin but (almost) the whole western missions force to Africa that appears to fail to perceive this.

Are we really willing to say that money equals diversity? Figure 2 is an alternative model to what we find in Figure 1:

Many engaged in mission see themselves as practising Figure 2 (challenging the heart of a culture with the gospel), *by the means illustrated in Figure 1*. Martin suggests by his numerous examples that they are not. There are many reasons why this is the case, some of which we have articulated above, others we have not.[13]

V Another Way

There is a solution to the dilemma we have explained. As with many good solutions, it is both easy and difficult. Proponents of giving seem to assume that every westerner who goes to Africa must be responsible for the distribution of his/her own raised funds. That is, that every westerner's identity in the Third World must be that of donor. The question remains for them, as Martin clearly demonstrates, how to give. The question is always of how to give wisely, and never whether one ought to give (material things) at all! Should this be so?

Perhaps what concerns some Christians is the evident biblical command to 'give', and their own desire to help the poor. How can a Christian from the west live amongst the poor in Africa and not constantly be giving? Let us consider this case: Martin says that his church has a budget of giving to mis-

13 See also: Jim Harries, 'The Immorality of Aid to the "Third World" (Africa).' 23-40 In Jim Harries, *Vulnerable Mission; insights into Christian Mission to Africa from a position of vulnerability* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2011).

sion of almost $1 million.[14] If I, as a missionary, succeed in convincing Martin's church to give me $20,000, the result is that some other worthy cause will get $20,000 less. This means in effect that, should I not take $20,000 from his church to use in my ministry, I am donating $20,000 to another worthy cause. That is to say—giving away someone else's money that they have already donated to 'charity' is different from giving out of your own private income. This is because once money is in the 'charity' pot, it is only its allocation that remains in question. If 'I' do not receive it, then some other worthy (presumably) cause will instead.

The reason we do not consider the above to be the case is because we consider (by faith) the body of donors—and the amount they have to give—to be infinitely large. We assume that one person's fundraising at a certain church, for example, will not reduce the funds available to another. But is this the case in reality? To a limited extent perhaps, but certainly not entirely. In other words, for an individual westerner in the Third World not to be 'giving' does not mean that less will be given in total, but only that this individual will have less impact on determining the route that the giving follows.

Western Christians see money as 'help,' but often do not see it as an expression of power. Yet it is an expression of power. Telling every western Christian in Africa to be a generous donor is in effect to tell every one of them to be powerful in their impact on Africa. Such power on the part of a new missionary (or even a seasoned missionary) brings competition amongst nationals for one's time and favours. Nationals devise strategies for getting to the top of the pile of recipients. Thus our missionary power can unwittingly encourage lying and deception to keep the money coming in.

Ironically, it is western missionaries' pre-occupation with money and administration that curtails the possibility of their having an impact in almost any other way than through money and administration in Africa. 'The besetting sin of European missionaries is the love of administration.'[15] Very often a missionary who gives money also ends up having to administer its use.

Those westerners who are not primarily givers of money may be able to avoid the barrage of lies, deceit, corruption, jealousy and in-fighting that so often troubles donors. Instead they can relate to Africans like, well, 'normal' people who want to share something of what God has done for them and in them. They can give time and other things that are not money. They can work in a way that the African can understand, follow and imitate. They can share important things and be heard for what they are saying instead of in the interests of the money that will come with it. They can 'compete' on the level with indigenous people. This is why we suggest that some missionaries should work in their key ministry without themselves subsidizing that ministry.

Figure 2 illustrates something else that happens when the gospel is spread by persuasion rather than by money.

14 Martin, *Giving Wisely*. 28.

15 Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods—St. Paul's or Ours?* (London: World Dominion Press, 1960), 120.

That is, the two-edged sword comes back and pierces the heart of those who have sent the missionary! When one does mission by using money, then one has paid in full and can live in the contented knowledge that 'I gave'. Mission done by persuasion is different. The act of persuasion challenges the whole life of the person persuading and his/her church, not only their bank balance. When persuasion is successful, the actions of those persuaded further challenge the originators of the message to pull up their Christian socks!

Cross-cultural workers should convey a biblical message in a way that is understandable to its recipients. They are to be living models of Christ-like behaviour. As the believer matures in Christ, ministry should more and more come out of who the cross-cultural worker is; out of his own real spirituality. Some followed Jesus simply because of the miracles he performed, which were expressions of his power. However, there was more to Jesus than the miracles he performed. There should be more to a missionary than the money she can give.

Close association with missionary colleagues who are operating as donors will result in suspicion. It is quite likely true, that the missionary who does not have resources to give out is nevertheless influencing another missionary's allocation of resources. This is an indirect way for that missionary to be giving out resources. This is why missionaries (and the same applies of course to nationals) who intend their ministries to be rooted in something other than the power of money must keep a distance from donor-oriented missionaries working with those who they are reaching.

The kind of missionary who works by persuasion, who maintains friendly but slightly distant relationships with his 'donor' colleagues, can be involved in diverse ministries. Such missionaries can promote football, chess, healthcare, singing, brick or tile making, agriculture, business, and you name it. Their ministries and approaches can be extremely diverse. The only requirement is that instead of buying people into these activities, they have to persuade them (as missionaries anyway used to do before the modern era) or pray for them to be convinced to join them by the Spirit of God.

That life in Africa is highly politicized is widely known. According to Maranz, Africans talk for money but Americans work for it![16] One reason Africans do this, as already indicated, is that for many, acquiring money is best achieved by relating to westerners. Much effort is expended on finding lucrative ways of relating in the interests of gain.[17] Whatever 'ministry' a missionary has can easily be valued as a means of access to that money.

Ironically, this relational reality may block a more fully indigenous expression of the faith. Because relationship is primary and access to money vital, offending the missionary by appropriating what he/she has into contextual clothes, is to be avoided if possible. Not being locally clothed, what is brought by the missionary may not acquire local roots.

Another reason that Africans may talk for money rather than work for

16 Maranz, *African Friends*. 23.

17 Maranz, *African Friends*. 137.

it is that African communities, who were introduced to money as recently as one hundred years ago, have not necessarily learned internally how to handle it, and continue to see it as something brought to them by others. While it is true that there are some people in almost any community who are less adept at handling funds, many African people excel in this. At least two factors are at work to create this situation. Traditional African culture that is often still being lived out arose in the absence of money. Also, being poor, many African people do not have opportunity to learn how to handle it. Handling money well requires practice, which the poor simply do not get.

In contrast, consider again the situation of missionaries who carry no financial inducements. Their ministry will be rejected for its foreignness[18] unless or until it is adapted to the local context. Once adapted to a local context, it can take hold. Alternatively, people may be so impressed by the long-term gritted determination of missionaries so as eventually to take them seriously even when the message they bring clashes with the local context.

VI Conclusion

This article describes some hidden ways in which the church in Africa has been built on a foundation of dependence on western money. What is prescribed here is not merely that missionaries use money wisely, but more importantly that some do mission on the basis of persuasion, witness, and the power of God, instead of on the foundation of money. The apparent diversity of mission based on foreign money could quickly collapse if funding were withdrawn. Having some western missionaries operate in their ministries without the support of western money could enable sustainable and diverse elements of mission from the west to take hold in appropriately contextualised ways. Then mission would be truly about God and not primarily about the West and how to make money.

For more information on this topic see vulnerablemission.org. *The Alliance for Vulnerable Mission* advocates that some missionaries to the non-West operate using local languages and local resources. This essay has articulated some of the reasons for the need of the latter. It has not considered language issues.

18 George Steiner, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation* (3rd Ed) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 315.