

The Economics of Partnership

Partnerships in Pauline Perspective

by Christopher R. Little

I was not prepared for what I was about to hear from my friend after we finished lunch. He was the missions pastor of a megachurch who had invested a significant amount of time, energy, prayer, not to mention money, in a “partner” of a high-profile ministry overseas. This partner had even visited and preached in his church on several occasions. My friend had recently learned that this person had embezzled hundreds of thousands of dollars, been relieved of his leadership position by the organization he had served with for many years, been disgraced before his church and friends, but most amazingly, denied any wrong-doing. As I listened to my friend recount this story, I could sense he was deeply hurt and disillusioned. He honestly could not figure out what could have possibly gone wrong.

These incidents are unfortunately on the rise in the age of pax Americana which is presently riding across the world on the wings of the current experiment in globalization. In relation to this, Robert Wuthnow notes, “Christianity in the United States is becoming transcultural, responding to the realities of globalization by actively and intentionally engaging in activities that span borders. . . . A transcultural orientation connects local commitments with churches, communities, organizations, and individuals in other countries. Church leaders increasingly stress having a vision that transcends the interests of those who gather for worship each week at the local church building. . . . [Yet] Transcultural Christianity poses new challenges that are only now coming into view” (2009:6).

Introducing the IPM

Some of these challenges, as illustrated in the true account above, relate to a phenomenon already well researched and documented, namely, the International Partnership Movement (IPM) (cf. Little 2005:171ff). This designation refers to strategic relationships between Western and non-Western individuals, churches and/or organizations which involve the one-way flow of finances and not ones between Western entities. This movement promotes

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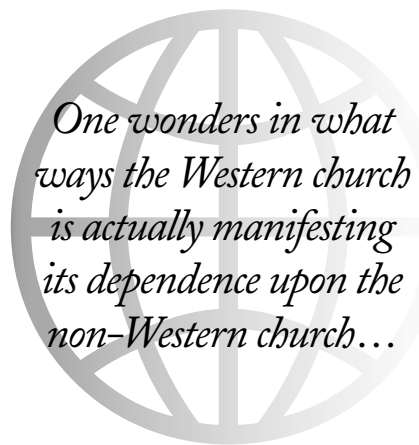
its own literature, endorses its own spokespeople, holds its own conferences (e.g. the annual meeting of the Coalition on the Support of Indigenous Ministries), advertises its own website as a by-product of the Lausanne 2004 Forum, and more recently, has crafted “A Covenant of Partnership” (Downey 2006:203).

The IPM has witnessed an increasing number of organizations join its ranks over the past decades. In 1964, there were forty-two agencies in the United States and Canada supporting nationals and their respective ministries. In 1976, that number rose to ninety-four. In 1986, it grew to 107 and in 2000, it climbed to 130 agencies. In 2004, the Mission Handbook reported 143 agencies specifically supporting ministries overseas (Welliver and Northcutt 2004:341–2, 506–7). To provide a monetary picture of this trend, the total amount of just four key organizations involved in the IPM for the year 2004 came to \$53,493,864 which among other things went to support a minimum of 22,093 non-Western personnel (cf. Little 2005:172). This is a powerful force operating in world missions today, and if it hasn’t already arrived, the IPM will soon be coming to a church near you.

The IPM appeals to at least six axioms to justify its *modus operandi*. First, the dynamic interactions within the Trinity sanction partnership in mission. Frampton Fox maintains, “This foundation in the nature of God . . . is the strongest biblical underpinning yet for the necessity of seeking partnerships in ministry” (2001:296–7). Second, the unity of the body of Christ provides the impetus for mutual sharing on a global level. Samuel Chiang states, “We believe in the principle of interdependence (Eph. 2:11–15; 1 Cor. 12:21–26) and its corollary that although diversity exists, the unity of the Body is paramount. . . . The concept of interdependence requires us . . . to share financially” (1992:288). Third, the financial partnership between the Apostle Paul and the Philippian church

encourages similar arrangements today. According to Luis Bush, the “basis of true Christian partnership is contained in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi. . . . [It] reveals the ingredients for successful partnerships in the twenty-first century” (1992:4). Fourth, the clear teaching of Scripture validates the activities of the IPM. Daniel Rickett asks:

If Christians are to avoid dependency, what are we to do with the command to carry one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)? What are we to say when we see our



brother in need and have the means to help (1 John 3:16–20)? And what are we to make of Paul’s collection of funds from the churches of Asia Minor for the suffering church in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1–3)? (2000:15).

Fifth, for the sake of kingdom impact, cultural systems of economic exchange should be adopted in order to redistribute wealth between international partners (Fox 2007:154–5; cf. Van Rheenen 2005:294ff). And last, the success of the IPM supports its agenda. With reference to partnerships, William Taylor comments, “For every bad case, I know of five good ones” (1994:238).

Dilemmas with the IPM

I want to make it clear that I do not question the sincerity of those involved in the IPM—I do however question the veracity of their claims for the following reasons.

First of all, Max Warren has pointed out that it is intrinsically problematic to employ the Trinity as a model for missional partnerships given the fallen and sinful state of humanity, including the redeemed portion of it (1956:39). Moreover, although the members of the Godhead eternally co-exist in one divine essence, they clearly have differing functions in creation and redemption (Jn. 1:3; 3:5–8, 16; 14:26, 28; 15:26). As Wayne Grudem notes, “The Son and Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father, but they are subordinate in their roles” (1994:249). Therefore, it is difficult to see how one can use the Trinity as a paradigm for partnership in mission unless some type of hierarchical arrangement among participants is arranged.

Second, for all the criticism of the Three-Selfs church model one thing is certain—New Testament churches were self-sustaining. As Melvin Hodges observes, “Paul was certainly aware of the oneness of the body of Christ, yet there is no hint of his requiring the church in one area to undertake the supplying of the operational expenses of the churches in another area” (1972:44–5). And in relation to expressing unity within the body of Christ through monetary sharing, Roland Allen surmises:

unity so maintained . . . is not Christian unity at all. It is simply submission to bondage for the sake of secular advantage and it will fail the moment that any other stronger motive urges in the direction of separation (1962:57).

Furthermore, one wonders in what ways the Western church is actually manifesting its dependence upon the non-Western church in accordance with the interdependence model. As Glenn Schwartz has noted (2007:38), this is not partnership but “sponsorship” (contra Lundy 2003:169), since resources are only flowing in one direction.

Third, the idea that Paul was a hired worker of the Philippian church during his missionary career reflects a selective reading of Scripture. Paul explicitly stated that while others had the right

to receive support from churches (cf. 1 Cor. 9:4–14), he himself had been placed under a divine “compulsion” to preach the gospel without charge (1 Cor. 9:16). As such, he considered his “reward” to be converts he won to Christ apart from payment (1 Cor. 9:18). This was his “boast” and he would have rather died than to make it “an empty one” (1 Cor. 9:15; cf. Little 2005:31–2). Once this is recognized, his relationship with the Philippian church comes into clear focus. Gerald Hawthorne explains: “Gifts caused him problems. It violated his principle of paying his own way by working with his hands, so that he might himself be free of depending on others, and so as to make the gospel free of charge to everybody. Consequently he swings suddenly from praising the Philippians [in 4:10ff] to informing them that he did not need their gift, that he had learned self-sufficiency” (1983:210). Therefore, his letter to the Philippians can be best described as “a careful reply that combined cautious gratitude with a gentle but firm demand that they not henceforth infringe on his own self-reliance” (Hawthorne 1983:195).

Fourth, what the IPM invokes for scriptural support, upon closer examination, is tenuous at best. The Greek word for “burdens” in Galatians 6:2 refers to temptations of a moral nature, and as such, is asserting the obligation within the body of Christ to help one another overcome sin. In addition, to conclude that mission entails meeting physical needs within the body of Christ is to repeat the mistake of past generations. In 1967, R. Pierce Beaver stated: “The so-called world missionary enterprise is no longer much of a missionary operation but an interchurch aid system involving . . . the giving of subsidies” (1967:3). That is, mission was taken for member care within the church. This is what John Rowell advocates by calling for the implementation of “A Missionary Marshall Plan for the

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Twenty-First Century” (2007:169ff; see also Lundy 2003:172). In order to avoid this pitfall the church must define and pursue mission as “crossing barriers from church to nonchurch, faith to nonfaith” (Van Engen 1996:26). And in reference to the Gentile collection project for the Jerusalem church, what is commonly overlooked is that Paul bore gifts from the churches he planted as a demonstration of indebtedness for having received the gospel from the sending church in Jerusalem (cf. Rom. 15:27). If the IPM desires to be biblical, then this pattern cannot be ignored simply for the sake of expediency today.

Fifth, mission theologians and practitioners must remind themselves that not every cultural trait is compatible with Christian mission. The Apostle Paul recognized this. Although he adapted his ministry to fulfill the social category of an itinerant philosopher into Hellenistic world of his day, there were limits to his approach (Little 2005:33–5). For example, the Sophists charged for their teaching services and by doing so entered into a patron-client economic system of exchange. Cynics, on the other hand, either begged as a way to survive or worked for a living. Paul distanced himself from the begging Cynics but identified with those who supported themselves. He did so because he did not want to be confused with others who were “peddling” and “adulterating” the word of God (2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2). F. F. Bruce notes that Paul was motivated to behave in this fashion because Jewish tradition taught that religious instruction should not be a means of “personal aggrandizement” (1977:107; cf. 1 Tim. 3:8; Tit. 1:7, 11; 1 Pet. 5:2). As such, he refused to enter into cultural systems which contradicted higher priorities regarding the ethical spread of the gospel.

Given the fact that ecclesiastical crime is now in the \$32 billion range (Johnson, Barrett, and Crossing 2010:36), his methodology leaves that of the IPM wanting.

And last, using success as proof for the validity of one’s strategy is a dangerous affair. Just because something works does not make it true or right (cf. Geisler 1999:606). For example, there are cases in which churches have experienced tremendous growth in Africa. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that after the worship service missionaries were actually handing out money to those present. Thus, “Pragmatism cannot be allowed to overrule spiritual principles and blind us to the lessons of history” (Ott 1993:291). Also, the question needs to be asked: what kind of Christianity spreads itself and then requires foreign money to sustain it? Surely a sub-biblical and defective one. Hodges makes the well-taken point:

It seems to me that so long as [indigenous believers] are not prepared to sacrifice whatever is necessary to support their churches, this is convincing proof that the church has failed in its fundamental objective—to convince a people of the truth of Christianity, for surely it is true in this, as in all ages of all peoples in all countries, that the only real test of conviction is the desire and willingness to sacrifice (1976:75).

Indeed, Christian movements throughout history, from the early church, to Ethiopia, to Madagascar, to China, to Nagaland, have all flourished through personal sacrifice quite apart from outside investment.

Additional Dilemmas

There are other related issues that the IPM has not satisfactorily considered. No one involved in the IPM that I know of has ever addressed the reason

why the West has so much to give away in the first place. For example, Bob Finley who actually suggests that the Western church should give up on sending its own sons and daughters cross-culturally but instead serve as an endless “supply line” for the non-Western church, never broaches the issue (2005:245). Also, Paul Hiebert and Sam Larsen, in their otherwise excellent article “Partnership in the Gospel,” never deal with the subject (1999). Yet the truth is that the root cause for global economic disparities is unjust international trade practices (cf. Bonk 1993:61). Thus, the disturbing but unavoidable conclusion is that “the churches of the West have only been giving back to the Third World what has been taken in a context of injustice and oppression” (WCC 1980:20). So should the West just keep giving away what has been siphoned off others? Steve Saint, for one, declines the offer since: 1) it is difficult to appreciate something that costs nothing; 2) it alienates those who receive from those who don’t; and 3) it creates a need where previously there was none (2001:102). To grasp the import of what Saint is saying, all one has to do is contemplate what would happen if a foreigner started selectively handing out millions of dollars in Western churches.

Then there is the commercialization of Christianity. According to Gailyn Van Rheenen, the “Western temptation is to conceptualize and organize the missionary task on an economic level that can only be sustained by Western support and oversight” (2000:1). This has resulted in the development of mission strategies which are “money intensive” (Bonk 1993:61), signifying that one must have a lot of capital to do Christianity Western-style. On this very subject, Robert Speer lamented over a century ago: “It is inexpressibly sad to have the mission work reduced to this commercial basis, and to have all growth and enlargement conditioned on increased appropriations.

This makes Christianity’s appeal inferior to that of Buddhism or Mohammedanism” (1902:51). Some fifty years later, Warren added, those “concerned with the practical task of the Christian Mission certainly have to take seriously the embarrassment to partnership presented by the financial factor” (Warren 1956:91). Part of this embarrassment relates to what Ajith Fernando reports: “non-Christians ... say a new colonialism has dawned: ‘First the Christians came with the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other. Now they come with the



Bible in one hand and dollars in the other” (1999:442). This phenomenon has dawned despite the fact that no clear “correlation . . . between material means and spiritual goals” can be substantiated in mission (Warren 1956:91–2). Or as Donald McGavran observed: “There is seldom positive correlation between degree of aid and amount of growth” (1959:117).

Furthermore, there is the thorny topic of supporting nationals with foreign funds. That there is an abundance of evidence demonstrating the unfortunate consequences of such a policy is beyond question (cf. Wayne Allen 1998:176–81; Lo 1999:14–6; Garrison 2004:249ff). For example, in one Asian country it was discovered that

people [are] coming . . . with money and literally “buying” church leaders. They ask a church leader how much those other overseas people are paying them. “Oh, they give you

only \$35 a month. We pay \$50!” In one congregation of 300 members, there were 262 members in foreign pay. One house church movement had 80% of their pastors on foreign support. And what was even more disturbing is that following the [turn-over of the government], the church grew rapidly. That growth slowed considerably when foreign people and foreign money [later] poured in (Schwartz 2002:2).

Nevertheless, the Western church continues to plow ahead in supporting nationals as non-Western leaders plead for more and more assistance (e.g. D’Sousa 1999). In doing so, it is ignoring the wisdom which John Nevius articulated long ago when he observed that paying church workers: 1) “tends to excite a mercenary spirit, and to increase the number of mercenary Christians”; 2) “tends to stop the voluntary work of unpaid agents”; and 3) “makes it difficult to judge between true and false, whether as preachers or as church members” (1958:14–6).

There is also the conundrum of dependency. Rickett has gone on record as stating: “Let us be done with the debate over dependency” (2002:35). But many believe, including Scott Moreau, that dependency is a “perennial risk in missions” (Barnes 2006:41). As a case in point, Robert Reese has confirmed that the dependency syndrome, which has more to do with a debilitating state of mind than income levels (cf. Schwartz 2007:14–5), is alive and well given “the rise of short-term missions and overseas partnerships” (2005:1; cf. Little 2005:205). The plain truth is that no one should underestimate the disastrous effects of dependency because it creates addicts who “feel increasingly powerless” (Smith 2000:269); it undermines the recipient’s “personal sense of worth” (Keidel 1997:46); it thwarts “local initiative” (Schwartz 2007:54); it results in “the ease of others” (2 Cor. 8:13); it robs national churches of the Lord’s “good measure” (Lk. 6:38); and it furthers paternalism since “control inheres in

aid" (McGavran 1959:113). This last point is indisputable unless one wants to argue for a denial of donor responsibility as Finley and Rowell have done by stating that there should be "no strings attached" to Western giving (2005:232; 2007:238). Paul would have never gone along with such a scenario as all things are to be done honorably "in the sight of the Lord [and] also in the sight of men" (2 Cor. 8:21). And because more monetary wealth is passing from one portion of the body of Christ to another than at any time in history, one is left to conclude that the global church is presumably experiencing the most paternalistic age it has ever known. The fact is "Money gives power; power results in domination. [Consequently] True partnership between unequals, if not impossible, is extremely unlikely" (Bonk 2006:83). In other words, "Partnership and interdependence are not possible when it is assumed that one side is developed (has already arrived) and is now helping the other side to reach the same level" (Ramseyer 1980:33). It is therefore difficult to see how any amount of "fine-tuning" (Rickett 2002:28) or "giving more, not less" (Rowell 2007:242) will ever solve the practical impasses associated with financial partnerships between Western and non-Western entities (cf. Gupta and Lingenfelter 2006:199–202). This is undoubtedly why Vietnamese theologian Peter Phan continues to argue for the "usefulness and urgency" of the Three-Selfs model for the church in Asia today (2010:106).

As if all this wasn't enough, the captivity of Christianity to Western culture persists unabated. In my short lifetime, I have witnessed "I Found It" crusades, Evangelism Explosion campaigns, "True Love Waits" seminars, and now, Purpose Driven Church workshops in various countries overseas. There is nothing wrong with these programs per se, the problem comes when they are transplanted

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in soil vastly different than the one in which they were germinated. In relation to this, the anthropologist William Kornfield notes, there is a

synergistic relationship between Western funding and the Westernization of the Gospel. By Westernization we mean the tie in between Western financing and a Westernization of the Gospel of Christ. Thus the materialistic and individualistic core value system of the West tends to override both the two-thirds world family/community core values as well as the biblical core value system. The net result is "another gospel"—not the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1997:5).

Nowhere is this more apparent than in theological education. Westerners donate to theological agendas, curricula, and institutions which make sense to them and by doing so unwittingly impose a culturally-specific construct of the Christian faith upon others. In view of the fact that such efforts are interpreted as tools of "Western cultural imperialism" (Tienou 1990:76), Wilbert Shenk has called for "the Western captivity of all theology [to] be broken" (2001:105) in hopes that the church in other contexts can embark upon the blessed task of self-theologizing. Accordingly, the manner in which partnership in mission is being envisioned today can hardly be considered "a non-negotiable mandate by God" (Downey 2006:202).

Pauline Orthopraxy: A Needed Corrective

Most if not all people involved in fulfilling the Great Commission today would affirm that the sole basis for Christian faith and practice is the Bible. Yet for whatever reason there has been a preoccupation with the former to the neglect of the latter. That is, the church has concentrated

on "orthodoxy," right or correct doctrine and thinking, to the exclusion of "orthopraxy," right or correct practice and action. This predicament is most discernible in the area of finance since, according to Herbert Kane, "no other one thing has done so much harm to the Christian cause" (1976:91). As such, it is imperative that the Western church recovers biblical models regarding the proper use of money in mission.

Scripture presents no better model on this subject than the Apostle Paul. His life merits close scrutiny because his methods gave birth to locally sustainable movements of Christianity whereas ours have woefully failed. Some would object at this point by claiming that Paul's missionary strategy should be taken as descriptive and not prescriptive for all ages. However, Allen begs to differ:

That however highly we may estimate St Paul's personal advantages or the assistance which the conditions of his age afforded, they cannot be so great as to rob his example of all value for us. In no other work do we set the great masters wholly on one side, and teach the students of today that whatever they may copy, they may not copy them, because they lived in a different age under exceptional circumstances and were endowed with exceptional genius. It is just because they were endowed with exceptional genius that we say their work is endowed with a universal character...

... it is said that methods must change with the age. The Apostle's methods were suited to his age, our methods are suited to ours... [U]nless we are prepared to drag down St Paul from his high position as the great Apostle of the Gentiles, we must allow to his methods a certain character of universality, and now I venture to urge that, since the Apostle, no

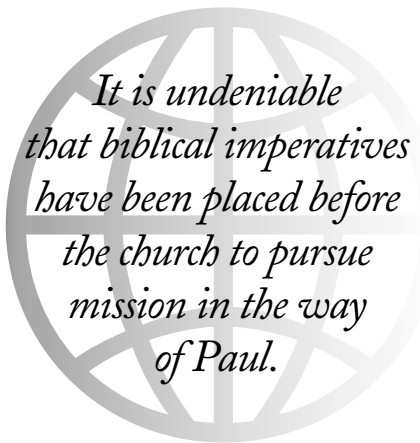
other has discovered or practised methods for the propagation of the Gospel better than his or more suitable to the circumstances of our day (1962:4–5, 147).

What Allen is describing, although not naming it as such, is the pedagogical paradigm of “Pauline orthopraxy.” That is, the manner in which Paul went about spreading Christianity serves as a trustworthy guide, an educational tool, and an authoritative standard for the missionary exploits of the church in subsequent generations. Although there are solid theoretical, historical, strategic, theological, and missiological bases for the orthopraxy of Paul (cf. Little 2005:75ff), there is space to only touch on the biblical basis here.

Paul’s orthopraxy in mission draws support from the *imitatio Pauli* theme presented throughout his epistles: “I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me” (1 Cor. 4:16); “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1); “Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us” (Phil. 3:17); “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thes. 1:6). However, the most comprehensive statement regarding the binding nature of Paul’s ministry is Philippians 4:9: “The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things.” Notice, it is not just what people have “heard” from Paul, namely, his doctrine, that they are to “practice,” but also what they have “seen” in Paul, specifically, his entire ministry. Furthermore, Paul says to Timothy: “you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance” (2 Tim. 3:10). In doing so, he places his “teaching” on the same level as his “conduct” in ministry (cf. Little 2005:116). Thus, in Paul’s mind there was no dichotomy between orthodoxy and orthopraxy—both served as a legitimate and necessary

means of instruction to others in mission. It is therefore undeniable that biblical imperatives have been placed before the church to pursue mission in the way of Paul. As Speer put it, “The first missionary marked out for all time the lines and principles of successful missionary work” (quoted in Sanders 1984:105).

So what were Paul’s methods, particularly with reference to foreign subsidy of local Christian movements? Three facts are clear: 1) he gave no inducements to either convert to or serve Christ (cf. Speer 1902:263); 2) he



never transferred funds from churches in one area to pay for the ministries of churches in another (cf. McQuilkin 1999:41); and 3) he expected churches to step out in mission using local resources (Ac. 19:9–10; 20:33–35; Rom. 1:8; 16:19; 1 Th. 1:6–8). In light of this, Dean Gilliland notes that if Paul “were among us today there is no question . . . he would expect new churches to provide the financial basis for their own lives” (1983:255). To be more specific, he would labor resolutely to dismantle the dependency syndrome which presently characterizes much of the relationship between the Western and non-Western church, he would concentrate on the development of local resources to grow the church, and he would emphasize localization over globalization as the means to guarantee a productive future for indigenous Christianity (cf. Little 2005:235ff).

Appeal for Local Sustainability

The stark reality is the “subsidization of the church has been a mistake from the beginning. The damage which subsidies have done has far outweighed any good which they have accomplished. . . . In this situation, not a moratorium on mission, but a moratorium on chronic subsidies . . . is not only justified but essential for the responsible maturity on both sides of the relationship” (Ramseyer 1980:38). The Western church is thus urged to embark “upon an era of planned weaning” through the implementation of “indefinitely reproducible” patterns (McGavran 1970:310) in order that the non-Western church will one day be able to contribute “a reasonable proportion to world evangelization” (McGavran 1959:118). Indeed, as George Verwer asserts, “the future does not lie” with more sums of money going overseas (2000:100).

This challenge does not imply a death blow to struggling Christians in the non-Western world. Quite the contrary. Just as respected economists are discovering that governments in the majority world can best grow their economies apart from foreign aid (Easterly 2006:37–59, 341–7), nationals are expressing confidence that indigenous Christian movements can and should be sustained through local resources. For example, with reference to the church in Kenya, planted over a century ago but heavily subsidized to this day, MacMillan Kiiru feels there is “great willingness” to pay for its ministries with local funds. “Support is guaranteed” if the Kenyan church is simply taught sound principles of stewardship so that the sixty percent of Christians who presently do not tithe will begin to do so (2002:iii, 17). May God bless such efforts and all those like them for the benefit of His mission through His church for the glory of His name! **IJFM**

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