WRESTLING WITH ONESIMUS 3: DEPENDENCY

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Category: Africa

This is the nextÂ instalmentÂ of my long series interacting with Onesimus' postÂ Â When Missions Becomes Toxic; or, Um, They Donâ€™t Need Us Anymore.

Onesimus gives three reasons why he believes that it is time to draw Western missionary involvement in Africa to a close. This post looks at the first of these and starts off with a long quote:

> *First, our continuing presence as mission organizations actively facilitates a church-killing dependence among the Christians we are supposedly trying to help.Â In the churches of sub-Saharan Africa that I am most familiar with, many if not most Christians have never learned to give in a way that enables them to support a local church that is actually sustainable.Â We in the West never let them.Â For the most part, we dictated what their churches would look like, what their leadership structures should look like, what their ministry programs should look like, what their staffing needs should look like, what their theological education programs should look like, and as long as we were around, we could make it happen.Â But take Western money away and all these components collapse of their own unsustainable weight.Â And so we rush back in with our â€˜resourcesâ€™ (read money and â€˜freeâ€™ staff) and thereby keep the plates all spinning until the local churches can keep them spinning on their own (according to our standards of how fast they should be spinning, of course).Â But notice in all of this, we from the West simply assumed what was needed and then imposed it on the nascent Christian movements of the non-West.Â In the spheres of politics and economics, this is referred to as colonialism.Â This sort of intervention has long been understood as disastrous for the economic and political development of sub-Saharan African countries.Â Itâ€™s time to acknowledge that the ongoing uncriticalÂ spiritualÂ colonization of Africa is having just as devastating effects on the long-term health and viability of the African Christian movements.Â The problem is, too many African Christians have developed a taste for Western Christian money and programs and education and the local status that comes with being associated with such money, programs and education.Â We have created institutions that are perceived by those involved with them as being â€˜too big to failâ€™, as well as created an entire class of dependents who would be destitute were we no longer around to pay the salaries or provide the scholarships or fund the aid programs.*

Once again, it is difficult to argue with what Onesimus says. Many others (including myself - for a list of posts click here) have written about the way in which missionaries can create dependency amongst those they are supposed to be serving. Perhaps some of the best treatments of this subject are contained in Glenn Schartz' book When Charity Destroys Dignity and from a secular angle, Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for AfricaÂ by Dambisa Moyo.

However, the fact that mission work can (and does) create dependency does not do away with the

responsibility of Christians to help and support one another. In particular, those of us who are rich (and if you live in the West, that means you) are called upon to help and support those who are less well off. Our response to the distortions caused by the current way of doing things should not be to throw the baby out with the bathwater and to stop supporting others altogether; we need to find a new way of working. One which avoids the problems that Onesimus rightly notes.

It is also important to note that while the issues that Onesimus raises are real, they are not universal. Missionary work does not inevitably create dependency. One size does not fit all.