

Subsidy, Self-Respect, Self-support and Personal Ownership

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We arrived in Taiwan as enthusiastic young missionaries with three preschool children. I had a fresh BA, M.Div. and fortunate to have a full year of pre-field training.

But nothing prepared us for what we encountered. The Communist takeover of China in 1949 unleashed a flood of over 1.5 million refugees creating poverty and chaos. Compassionate missionaries responded as they have always done. They planted churches, built worship centers, established training schools and trained men for the ministry to take over their churches. They had hearts of gold, loved their people, loved the Lord, and – held the purse strings (read: “power.”). After the 1949 collapse of China to the Communists, experts wrung their hands in despair, asking “where did we go wrong?” “What lessons can we learn?” Many books were published on “Lessons Learned from Mainland China.” As I studied their works, I slowly understood that “All we learn from history is that we learn little from history. “ We are stubborn students!

We were slow to learn that a high missionary presence can be an overwhelming and often crippling factor. Unwittingly, local believers mold themselves to our expectations. They became what Mao Tz Tung derisively called “*dzou gou*” or “running dogs,” – handmaidens of western imperialism who work for westerners to enjoy the largess that comes with it. Those who join

“western” churches were often referred to as “rice Christians.”


What was true then is still true today. Subsidy is accepted but too often privately resented. My first lesson was from a young pastor who took over a church from a missionary. The missionary had a heart of gold which was the problem! He never failed to help those in need. But, the national pastor was trapped. “They say I don’t have the “*ai xin*” (loving heart) of missionary xxx” he shared with me. Why? Because he could not provide the level of financial assistance the missionary had given. From that day I resolved to never humiliate a national colleague because of my access to money. My response to genuine need was to channel help through anonymous parties sworn to secrecy to avoid special recognition. I feared being “discovered.”

I did a lot of searching. I discovered that in our midst were large, growing churches with no missionaries and no foreign funds. Missionaries could not explain who they were or why they were growing so much more rapidly than ours. Nationals labeled them “sects” because they “are not one of us.” Churches like the “True Jesus” (A Pentecostal Church) and the “Assembly Hall” were indeed different. After collecting tons of data, interviews and notes from their meetings, I headed to the new School of World Missions at Fuller Theological seminary to analyze the data. I discovered that one-third of Taiwan’s Christians belonged to such churches,

all marked by their independence of any western organization and their consequent pride of ownership. The same had been true on the mainland of China and, they form a large part of the Christian community around the world. We just had never been aware of them! These were the last Churches to fall to Communist persecution, surviving long after western-backed churches had capitulated. These were truly “national churches.” And, they warmly embraced me for finally recognizing what God was doing in their midst.

They shared many similarities with the principles of Dr. John Nevius who, in the 1890’s was invited to Korea, a land just beginning to open to the Gospel. It was a fresh opportunity to introduce a “new method” for church planting. Nevius became a chief architect of one of Asia’s most dynamic churches. While other factors were also at work, “The Nevius Method” escaped the plague of dependency and reflected what I saw in the “independent” Churches. His method, in brief, included:

1. No church shall be built nor paid for by a missionary. All meetings begin in a home and expand from there. It is cheaper to enlarge a living room than to build a foreign church building.
2. When a group has the ability to support their own minister they chose a natural leader from their midst. Here, Nevius and other missionaries played a critical role by providing annual training for those leaders.
3. All finances shall be handled by the local believers.
4. All government is locally controlled.
5. Systematic bible study shall be a part of all fellowship groups.

A church was born void of the subsidy, management conflicts and missionary control issues that mark so much of world missions. The independent churches around the world can teach us much. 

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