

Bang For Buck: Should We Support Missionaries or Nationals?

A new missions paradigm

A new paradigm about missionary support is sweeping through our churches. It resonates powerfully with businessmen who often dominate our mission committees.

Here's the concept: Instead of supporting American missionaries, let's invest in national workers. Bang for buck, it is more cost-effective. Americans require much more support. Salary, insurance, annuities, and administrative fees come into the picture. A national needs none of these.

The national already speaks the language. The missionary must go to language school with all the expense and time involved. Rare is the individual who is able to master all the nuances natural to a native.

The national avoids the cultural blunders foreign missionaries occasionally commit. They understand their own people.

The conclusion seems obvious. Take the money currently spent on missionaries and support national workers instead.

This paradigm sounds cost-effective, sensible, and innovative, a better stewardship of financial and personnel resources.

What a pity it is *ungodly*.

Ungodly? Isn't that word a bit strong? We spent several weeks looking for a better term. We're sticking with this one.

Why this view is ungodly

Why ungodly? It circumvents a central aspect of the Great Commission...cross-cultural missions. Jesus stood and spoke to eleven Jewish young men and said,

...go and make disciples of all nations, ...teaching them... Mt. 28:19-20

In Greek, the term "nations" is "ethnoi." Jesus was saying, "Go to all ethnic groups, including those different from your own." Jesus did not say, "Go into all the world and give money to national workers." He said, "Go."

The Great Commission is cross-cultural

The conclusion is unavoidable. Sending missionaries cross-culturally is inherent in the Great Commission.

The entire New Testament shouts "cross-cultural procedure." Were the Ephesians and Colossians Jews? Was the New Testament written in Hebrew? It is possible to read the New Testament without actually seeing it. Such a scenario can happen if we look at it through the lens of American business culture. Such a lens focuses on the bottom line. That turns it into a blinder. The Apostle John told us to support missionaries going to the pagans.

It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought, therefore, to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth (3 Jn. 2-8).

The word "ought" means what it says. It is a moral imperative, not optional.

Is it wrong to support national workers with foreign money? Certainly not. We support national workers occasionally when doing so avoids creating dependency or becoming counterproductive.

It is wrong to do that if the intent is to avoid supporting cross-cultural missionaries. Such an approach takes a knife and cuts out a central element of the Great Commission, ignores the Book of Acts, and eviscerates the New Testament model for missions.

Is the term "ungodly" really too strong for that?

What about the practicalities? The cost-effectiveness? The personnel expenditure? God is really stubborn when it comes to doing things his way. His will is the only practicality he recognizes.

Doing God's work God's way

Doing God's work God's way is the only bottom line. Even the very lives of his people are not the highest priority, as millions of martyrs could testify. If he is willing to spend millions of lives to accomplish his will, why would saving money be an issue?

Is God wasteful? It may seem like it occasionally. A lady poured on Jesus a box of ointment worth a year's wages. It could have fed many poor

nationals. Jesus clarified the expenditure was not the issue. What mattered was that it pleased him.

Mission committees indeed have the right to ask challenging questions about the missionaries they support. Are the missionaries training nationals to replace them? Will their people support those nationals? This approach also is central to New Testament procedure.

Some missionaries may be nesting. This issue is worse than any of the problems in cross-cultural missions. When it comes to bang for buck, is the missionary nesting or nationalizing?

Yes, difficulties are inherent in sending missionaries: the language and cultural barriers as well as the expense. These problems are there by design. God uses them as part of the missionary process. It's not just about working around them. Using them. He considers them necessary.

Some of the nationals with whom we have worked have learned a lot of patience and tolerance from us. Not that we meant to teach those virtues in particular, mind you. We could write a book on the linguistic gaffes missionaries have committed, some comical and some not.

Conclusion

Whether we understand the rationale in God's strategy is irrelevant. The real issue is whether we are going to do God's work God's way or follow business paradigms.

There is an exception, and there is a rule. The rule is sending cross-cultural missionaries. The exception is supporting national workers. Exceptions are acceptable but not at the expense of the rule.