



Lean on Me (Part 1): The Problem of Dependency

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Dependency has become a divisive issue in North American missions. And it is a subject that merits debate. On one side we have the “self-reliance” camp. On the other side is the “interdependency” camp. In the past, it was necessary to gather information from various sources in order to piece together the major points of each side. Fortunately, we can now examine the writings of two authors who come down very clearly on each side of the debate.

Glenn Schwartz, with the help of *Mission Frontiers* magazine, has become the leading proponent of self-reliance. He writes a column in *Mission Frontiers* where he routinely confronts the dangers of dependency. Schwartz argues that foreign money for local ministries inevitably leads to unhealthy dependency. He combats what he calls the “dependency syndrome” in his book *When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement* (Schwartz 2007).

On the interdependency side is John Rowell, author of *To Give or Not to Give? Rethinking Dependency, Restoring Generosity, and Redefining Sustainability* (Rowell 2006). Rowell argues that North Americans’ reluctance to give generously delays the advance of the gospel and intensifies poverty for others. He writes, “If we believe God has called us to build church planting movements in unreached cultures we must get serious about facing our financial as well as our spiritual responsibilities as we lend a helping hand” (Rowell 2006, 66).

Rowell frames the debate with a question: In a world of enormous economic inequities, what is the wealthy neighbor to do, *To give or not to give?*

- Schwartz says repeatedly that foreign aid results in financial dependency.
- Rowell says to give generously and responsibly.
- Schwartz argues that history is on his side, and he points to mission-established institutions that are, today, hindered by dependency on outside funding.
- Rowell argues that missions and churches should move toward interdependency.
- Schwartz argues that the wealth-divide between the West and the Majority World makes it impossible to be truly interdependent.
- Rowell argues that the West should stop worrying about dependency among indigenous believers and start thinking about our complacency as affluent believers.
- Schwartz argues that local resources should support local ministry.
- Rowell argues that Western concerns about dependency reinforce a practice that effectively prolongs and intensifies poverty for others.
- Schwartz sees Western wealth as a problem to be mitigated.
- Rowell sees Western wealth as a gift to be shared.

As the first of two articles in which I attempt to frame the dependency/interdependency debate, this article sets the stage for the second, “Walk with Me: The Path to Interdependency,” by briefly presenting the main views of Glenn Schwartz and John Rowell. My purpose is not to review each author’s book, but to highlight the points most useful to the discussion of dependency and interdependency.

Schwartz’s Main Points

Glenn Schwartz’s aim is to help foreign missionaries and local Christians avoid and overcome unhealthy dependency. This is not only the purpose of his book but also his personal mission and that of the organization he started, World Mission Associates. Glenn Schwartz has made a career of describing the pitfalls of giving foreign money to churches and missions in the Majority World.

On the Problem of Dependency

Although Schwartz does not define dependency, he does describe a number of symptoms of dependency. Unhealthy dependency has occurred where mission-established institutions were built and sustained with foreign monies and where pastors’ salaries were paid by foreign sources. As a result, he says, there are churches and organizations that are bound today by a legacy of foreign subsidies. This is a problem because dependence on foreign subsidies has inherent dangers.

- Foreign funding tends to erode human dignity.
- It dampens local giving and stifles reliance on God.
- It hinders local initiative.
- Foreign money tends to isolate subsidized pastors from their peers and from systems of local accountability.
- It causes jealousy among local Christian leaders who vie for limited Western funds.
- It results in what Schwartz calls “shepherd stealing,” which occurs when Western organizations hire nationals to fill staff roles, in effect removing the most qualified lay workers from the local church.
- Foreign funding is often at the root of misappropriated money.
- It tends to produce institutions with no long-term sustainability.
- Long-term dependency fosters a sense of entitlement.

Schwartz presses the point that once unhealthy dependency has taken root it is difficult to weed out.

On Self-reliance as the Solution

Schwartz’s fundamental solution to the problem of unhealthy dependency is self-reliance. He defines self-reliance as making use of what God has placed close at hand rather than depending on resources from a distance (Schwartz 2007, 2). He argues that any church or institution that depends on someone else’s resources from a distance is not self-reliant, but is instead trapped in the dependency syndrome.

Schwartz is careful to explain that to be self-reliant is to be God-reliant. Trusting God to make the most of one's situation is essential to becoming a healthy, mission-minded church. Citing numerous cases, Schwartz shows how Majority World churches are overcoming the dependency syndrome through greater self-reliance.

Self-reliance is accomplished, Schwartz says, by keeping the simple rule of "geographical proximity." "The ideal," he writes, "is for local needs to be met with resources that are closest at hand. The problem occurs when global resources are used to meet needs that could or should be met with local resources" (Schwartz 2007, 146). The call for global help should come, if at all, only when local and regional resources are too scarce.

Mobilizing local resources is integral to the practice of development. It is widely accepted that development best occurs when people recognize their needs, envision their own solutions, and utilize their own resources to improve their lives. For decades, rural-development practitioners have emphasized mobilizing local resources, and it is the cornerstone of asset-based community development (Batchelor 1981; Corbett and Fikkert 2009).

Schwartz takes the principle further and applies it to the notion of interdependence. He asks (Schwartz 2007, 271), "Does anyone believe in interdependence?" Schwartz asserts that true interdependence cannot exist between two groups who possess unequal power. "Interdependence," he says, "works among those who are relatively equal" (Schwartz 2007, 38). By equal, he apparently means "subject to the same economic conditions." The principle of geographical proximity suggests that interdependence is possible only in situations where people live and work in the same region and within similar economic conditions. Accordingly, Schwartz promotes the idea of "local-local interdependence," where churches collaborate only with those who are close at hand (Schwartz 2007, 273).

The principle of geographical proximity is central to everything Schwartz says about preventing and reversing dependency. Among the several strategies he describes, four appear in a variety of ways throughout his book:

1. Decline to do for the local church what it should do for itself (Schwartz 2007, 83).
2. Teach and model biblical stewardship in the church (Schwartz 2007, 118).
3. Encourage local economic development (Schwartz 2007, 217).
4. Stop the flow of foreign funding for local programs (Schwartz 2007, 233).

Schwartz's position is unequivocal: foreign money for local ministry creates unhealthy dependency. He allows one exception, and that is in the case of absolute poverty. People living in absolute poverty may not survive without outside aid; therefore, outside aid is warranted. Otherwise, foreign subsidy should be avoided at all cost.

Rowell's Main Points

John Rowell calls for “a renewed sense of global stewardship and a radical redirection of resources to meet the chronic needs of the global poor” (Rowell 2006, 14). Rowell seeks to dismantle the notion that we can somehow help under-resourced believers by withholding from them. He finds the general position of the self-reliance camp to be at odds with the biblical emphasis of care for the poor and generosity toward fellow Christians. His underlying aim is to motivate the search for better ways to resource the task of reaching the world for Christ. Rowell's approach is to address three critical issues, as the subtitle of his book aptly summarizes: *Rethinking Dependency, Restoring Generosity, and Redefining Sustainability*.

On Rethinking Dependency

Rowell does not deny that dependency may occur. He recognizes the problems of dependency and in no way endorses circumstances that lead to unhealthy dependency. “By ‘dependency,’” he says, “I mean the unhealthy patterns of reliance on Western financial support that are presumed to be encouraged when missionaries readily offer support for indigenous workers, for ministry projects, or for facilities development in pioneer settings” (Rowell 2006, 15). He agrees that “whenever funds are provided at the initiative of cultural outsiders in a manner that limits local leaders’ freedom to act on their own vision, or when outside sources of financial aid are offered in a fashion that subjugates native workers . . . , unhealthy dependency can be the result. Whenever funds are given without regard to the capacity of nationals to manage, maintain, or multiply the investments made, or to make their own contributions along the way, dependency is a distinct possibility” (Rowell 2006, 15).

The problem of dependency is real, Rowell admits, but it seems to be more with us, North Americans, than with our national brethren. We are, after all, the rich man in the neighborhood. The problem of dependency is rooted more in North American tendencies of neocolonialism than in “indigenous propensities for seeking subsidy as a way of life” (Rowell 2006, 25).

Misapplication of the Three-“Self” Paradigm

In view of the massive economic disparities among peoples, Rowell questions the prevailing notion that less giving is an advantage to under-resourced brothers and sisters in Christ. He argues, “We manage to convince ourselves that we are somehow acting in the best interests of impoverished people by keeping what is ours, even as we observe their incredible needs” (Rowell 2006, 3).

The usual defense, he continues, “lies in the conviction that indigenous people and their churches should be *self-supporting* and that giving material assistance from outside sources creates unhealthy *dependency*” (Rowell 2006, 3). This, he regards as an impractical, unbiblical misapplication of the three-“self” paradigm. Three-self is the idea that churches should be *self-propagating*, *self-supporting*, and *self-governing* from their inception. Rowell finds fault not in the general idea of the local church being

self-supporting, but in the way the self-support principle is being applied. He sees Western missionaries' present-day application of the self-support principle to be rather convenient, if not self-serving.

In defense of his view, Rowell offers a brief historical survey of the three-self paradigm, showing that what once was intended to limit the abuse of colonialism now "serves instead to more generally limit the availability of outside assistance" (Rowell 2006, 35).

So, while the three-self paradigm may have served well to help end foreign control over national churches, the time has come to reexamine assumptions about self-support. Rowell believes a reassessment of the self-support principle will put the sharing of resources into proper perspective and restore generosity to its proper place in the life and witness of the church.

On Restoring Generosity

For Rowell, the problem is less about dependency of indigenous believers and more about the complacency of North American believers to give generously to the advance of the gospel among the world's most spiritually and materially impoverished peoples.

Generosity is restored, he argues, when we have a biblical view of wealth and poverty. Even a cursory reading of Scripture will lead to the conclusion that God requires compassion and justice for the poor and generosity toward fellow believers. After scanning representative texts from the Old and New Testaments, Rowell concludes that the emphasis in Scripture is on maximizing giving rather than on minimizing it (Rowell 2006, 55).

Restoring generosity, however, does not mean promoting perpetual handouts to national workers or their churches. There are ways to give wisely without engendering dependency, and Rowell addresses those principles extensively throughout his book.

Rowell's approach to giving across borders is informed, in large part, by two authors, Jonathan Bonk and Marvin Olasky. Bonk speaks to the challenge of Western missionary affluence (Bonk 2006). He argues that, with rare exception, Western missionaries live privileged lives among the poor. Such privilege poses a host of problems, not the least of which are ethical questions that challenge rich Christians in the face of profound poverty. In reviewing Bonk's work, Rowell finds ample ground for giving generously and supporting indigenous missionaries, even as we would our own sons and daughters (Bonk 2006, 139).

Olasky proposes a return to seven principles of compassionate conservatism, which characterized early American history (Olasky 1992). Although Olasky addresses domestic policy, the main principles align with current approaches to Christian community development. The seven principles are presented in an acrostic that Rowell refers to as "the ABCs of wise giving patterns" (Rowell 2006, 146).

On Redefining Sustainability

Traditionally, sustainability is defined as the ability to maintain financial and other resources to ensure projects will continue. The assumption is that a ministry should eventually be able to support itself with resources close at hand. Rowell argues that this idea of sustainability is rooted in the concept of business profitability rather than in the work of the gospel. Financial sustainability makes perfect sense when building a business. The principal goal is profitability. In the ministry of the gospel, however, profitability is not the primary goal. The main goal is to make disciples and advance the gospel. These and other nonmonetary outcomes reflect the success or failure of a ministry. Money is not the most important outcome of ministry and, therefore, should not be a principal measure of ministry effectiveness. Instead of thinking of sustainability in monetary terms, Rowell proposes that we think in terms of “sustainable impact.” What ultimately matters are outcomes reflecting changed lives, the nonmonetary outcomes of people living in right relationship with God, with others, and with creation.

Rowell’s ideas about dependency, generosity, and sustainability coalesce in what he refers to as “the 123s of covenant relationships” (Rowell 2006, 155). Together, the ABCs of wise giving and the 123s of covenant relationships, he claims, are indispensable tools for giving generously and wisely.

Schwartz and Rowell Agree

While Schwartz and Rowell disagree on a number of points, they do agree on several important principles. The following are only a representative sample.

- Whenever funds are given at the initiative of outsiders and in a way that limits local leaders’ freedom to act on their own vision, unhealthy dependency can result.
- The best source of help for people in need starts at home and reaches outward.
- It is unproductive to do for others what they can do for themselves.
- “It is not helpful simply to throw money at people we know only casually in an effort to solve a problem we understand only minimally” (Rowell 2006, 167).
- The initiative for ministry should always be with the local church rather than the foreign missionary.
- An emphasis on biblical stewardship is an important part of any church or mission relationship.
- “A healthy partnership is one in which everyone contributes meaningfully to a project, and the best are ones in which money is not the central issue” (Schwartz 2007, 38).
- A good use of outside money is to foster local enterprise.

The challenges of dependency and, more importantly, interdependency deserve careful reflection. Has Glenn Schwartz overstated the case for self-reliance? Has he misapplied the principle of self-support? If self-reliance is, as Schwartz defines it, the best solution to dependency, what does that say to how Western missionaries are funded? Should Western missionaries rely more on local sources of funding?

Has John Rowell underestimated the problem of dependency? Has he misjudged the gravity of the problems caused by the wealth-divide? Is interdependency across the wealth-divide a noble but impossible dream?

Both Rowell and Schwartz offer valuable insights into the challenges of dependency. Anyone genuinely concerned with acting as true brothers and sisters in the global neighborhood cannot read Schwartz without also reading Rowell and vice versa.

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