

Foreign Funding of Nationals:

A Plea from a Missionary

Forrest McPhail

Well, what do you think? Should foreign churches, organizations or individuals (whether American, Australian, English, Korean, Singaporean, etc.) support national churches or preachers in other countries? This question can evoke many different emotions. Some, motivated by a strong love and giving spirit, wish to do so in order to help the brethren in faraway lands. They see that the Scriptures plainly teach to give to the poor, especially to the brethren, and they thus conclude that supporting churches and pastors in other lands is a fulfillment of this command. After all, the Church is one global Body, is it not?

Others are motivated by business principles, some of which are biblical, but some secular. These are often people that have good business sense and know well how to be good stewards of God's money. These well-meaning folks add up the cost of sending their own people abroad, how much it takes to just get them to leave their own shores, and they conclude: "Is this necessary? Is there another way?" These same believers then realize that supporting a national pastor or evangelist already on the foreign field requires just pennies compared to the thousands of dollars it takes to send their own. After all, economic times are hard and we must be careful with our resources, right? The thought then comes: "Only \$30 a month can get us . . ." The old "more bang for your buck" argument begins to come to the fore.

Many wisely see that their own people, or any other nation for that matter, could not possibly fulfill the Great Commission alone. They understand that there is a need to work together with believers of other nations and peoples in order to get the job done. They realize that NT missions involved peoples of various ethnic backgrounds working together. These believers then call for "*partnership*"--usually meaning the financial support of national preachers or the building of facilities abroad. To these brethren, the failure to have such partnerships betrays an inequality with the national believers.

All three of these groups of people mentioned above are motivated in some way or another by biblical commands and ethics. However, when it comes to the application of these commands, such as to show the love of Christ, to be good stewards of our resources, and to work together for the Gospel, etc., many commit unfortunate mistakes. Some of the mistakes then lead them to fail to follow other biblical principles. Other mistakes result in great hindrances to the effective furthering of the Gospel.

As the title declares, the issue I would like to raise concerns "indigenous principles." Indigenous principles have to do with a ministry philosophy that acknowledges the need for national churches to be self-sustaining, self-propagating, and self-governing. Most who labor for the Gospel want indigenous churches to be the final result of their ministry. However, the timing of when these three "selves" are to take place becomes central to the application of this three-self philosophy.

One strategy for church planting missions is the foreign missionary should pastor a large central city church that is inherently non-indigenous so as to help start

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other truly indigenous churches. Along this line of reasoning, national evangelists can be paid by foreigners as long as they start churches that are indigenous.

Another strategy reasons that the foreign missionary should do everything for the church at the beginning and then slowly wean it from dependence over time. The same strategy is applied to supporting preachers.

A third option, and the one that I find to be the most biblically sound and thus most advantageous to the national church both spiritually and practically, is that of beginning the churches in an indigenous fashion, the only reliance on the foreign missionary being that of spiritual parenting in the faith.

This paper will focus on whether or not the increasingly popular method of supporting national preachers on foreign fields is biblical. Some who read this may find themselves surprised at how many biblical principles and considerations affect our thinking on this issue.

Though I have strong opinions about this matter, I realize that good men disagree. These matters are not systematically taught to us in the Scriptures. For this reason, there is, in a sense, room for disagreement. However, I believe that the gray area is not as large as some would have us to believe. I believe that it can be shown that those who participate in supporting nationals on foreign fields are committing a grave error.

This does not mean that God cannot bless non-indigenous efforts. God is so gracious His people. Praise the Lord that He does not limit His blessings to only those that do everything right! Who would then be blessed? Praise the Lord that He uses even heretics and false teachers at times to lead people to Christ! Those who create dependence on the mission field will see souls saved and churches started because God's Word does not return void. The bearing of some spiritual fruit does not prove a method to be right, nor is that it the most biblical one.

My perspective: I have been a missionary in a very poor Third World country, Cambodia, Southeast Asia, since 2000. The land in which I serve is one devastated by civil wars and international conflict. It remains riddled with incredible corruption. The economy is very dependent upon the World Bank, United Nations Funds, Chinese, Japanese, Australian, European Union and U.S. aid-- like many other Third World countries. There is a semblance of recovery now as infrastructure is rapidly being rebuilt and modern technology begins to take over. Believers from all over the world have responded to the recent religious freedom (since 1990) and have come to fulfill the Great Commission. I have observed every kind of missions work here as well as the ramifications of various competing mission philosophies upon the national church. It is from these experiences, as well as my understanding of the Scriptures that I write.

While realizing my own sinfulness and proneness to error, I do believe that my experiences give me an advantage over many pastors back home who have never

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served as a foreign missionary, who have not been forced to learn the mindset or the challenges of the Third World, and who have not given their whole heart to searching out the methods and manners of foreign missions. The average pastor back home is therefore vulnerable to misunderstanding and may be more easily carried away by popular and well-marketed mission ideas being championed by someone he respects. Please read this article with an open mind, asking the Holy Spirit to lead you in His understanding, as you consider these thoughts:

1. The practice of supporting national pastors with foreign funds is not in the Bible. Knowing that one must be cautious when using an argument from silence as an absolute argument against any practice, the fact still remains that this is an important consideration. As we search the Scriptures for commands or examples as to how to go about world evangelization, we find no directive or hint of one towards the practice of believers in one land or culture supporting pastors or evangelists from others. If we search the book of Acts and scour the epistles, analyzing the methods used by the evangelists and apostles, we see no such practice. With this in mind, we must be willing to take a fresh, honest look at the issue, realizing that mistakes can easily be made here.

2. Only one example of churches abroad giving money to Christians of another nation is given in the book of Acts (which covers just over 30 years of earliest church history). This example, of course, is the giving of offerings by the Gentile churches for the church at Jerusalem. A careful inquiry into the details of that gift (found in Acts 11:27-30; Rom 15:24-28; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9) reveals various facts:

- a. This was a time of national natural disaster for the people of Israel. Therefore, the gift could be described as famine relief.
- b. There was also incredible tension between the Jews and Gentiles because many believing Jews were having a terrible time accepting the Gentile believers as legitimate brethren, equals in the family of God. This tension is described a number of times (Acts 11 and 15, for example). The Gentiles' offerings were to be a symbol of their love for the believing Jews, both as brethren in Christ and as spiritual fathers, in order to lessen and even erase this tension.

This example sanctions believers in one nation to send assistance to other believers in times of national disaster such as widespread famine, war, etc. This was not a continuous offering, but a one-time gift.

All believers, and thus all local churches, are commanded to give to the poor. This is one area in which many otherwise good churches are failing to obey a clear command of Scripture and are also missing a key element of what it means to be a light in the world. Texts commanding the churches to be full of charitable works abound (Matthew 5:16; 1 Timothy 5, 6:17-19; Titus 2:14, 3:1-14; James 1:27, etc.).

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In attempting to obey these commands within the context of foreign missions, many of the activities being pursued by Christians are actually destructive to the cause of Christ rather than being helpful to it. Many have a proper motive but an improper methodology. Some fall into a social gospel, elevating relief and development work in the Third World above evangelization. Others teach that the Gospel should minister to both body and soul equally. Many of these emphasize the need for global ministry that meets both of these needs. The way that this philosophy works itself out “on the ground,” as it were, is very destructive to the cause of Christ. Here are some examples: some groups have the idea that they should supply rice to all of the Christians who attend church regularly in a poor country; some pay church members who recruit people to come to church; others believe it is the church’s task to provide employment for Christians; some believe that all Christians should have proper and convenient places to worship; others think that all preachers of the Gospel should be full-time workers. All of these ideas begin with a biblical ideal but then deviate from Scriptures in their implementation. They simply fail to take into account the whole counsel of the Word of God.

One clearly Biblical way believers in a rich nation can help the poor in other lands is disaster relief. I thank the Lord for the Christian and Missionary Alliance and the Southern Baptists who labored to exhaustion in the refugee camps during the horrifying years of the Communist Holocaust under Pol Pot in Cambodia. These believers rescued literally hundreds of thousands of Cambodians from the jaws of death and led many to peace in Christ. The charity organizations that have built roads, schools, and hospitals have been a tremendous blessing to the people of Cambodia. Medical missions have also been an incredible light of the gospel throughout the world.

The contention here is that funds for charity work or relief projects must not enter the local church ministries of the national believers. Such evangelistic endeavors as medical work, orphanages, etc., must be separate from local churches if funded from abroad. There cannot be favoritism in charity work with believers benefiting over unbelievers. The best way that charity ministries can contribute to local churches is by winning people to the Lord and sending them into the churches. These efforts can show the love of Christ in ways which arrest the attention of the people and give them opportunity to consider the claims of Christ. However, large scale charity work is an area of witness that is secondary and outside the pale of the national believers’ ability to maintain or reproduce.

3. There are explicit commands throughout the NT for local churches to take care of their pastors. No exceptions are given. Some of these commands are given to the poorest of churches in New Testament times. Clearly it is God’s will that all local churches actively support their pastors (1 Cor 9:1-18; 1Tim 5:17; Tit 3:12-14; Rom

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15:24-28). Those who are ministered to spiritually are commanded to return the favor in a material way. There is no room for a one-way ministry in the local church. The believers must be encouraged in every way towards obedience to this command from the beginning. Nothing should be done to encourage disobedience.

4. Though it is clear that churches are to care for their pastors in a material way, nowhere is it expressed that a pastor must be a full-time pastor. The full-time pastorate is primarily a phenomenon of the prosperous Western church, particularly among large denominations and city churches. Where there are large congregations, the supporting of a pastor's family is not a real sacrifice for the people. Many churches in a Third World setting are small and most are relatively poor. It is impractical to demand of small flocks the full-time support of a pastor when the Scriptures do not ask this of them. They need to learn to operate in the context in which they have been called (1Cor 7:17-24).

5. Paul, a missionary evangelist, was a tentmaker. There were various reasons for this decision. He made it clear in 1 Cor 9:1-18 that he had every right to expect support from those to whom he ministered. One reason he did not accept such support was to avoid the suspicion that he was in the ministry for the money. There are many lost people in the Third World today who accuse Christian pastors of being in it for the money, especially when foreigners are involved as patrons.

Paul labored with his hands so as to not be a burden to those for whom he was laboring (1Thess 2:9). It was the new converts' responsibility to care for him as a missionary, and yet he laid aside this right so as to not be burdensome. He did accept gifts in some circumstances, but in others he turned them down to avoid misrepresenting himself to new converts. Paul's example should encourage evangelists in poor countries to support themselves to avoid suspicion of covetousness and placing an unnecessary burden upon their people. Paul did not appeal to rich believers elsewhere to meet his needs.

6. In Two-Thirds World countries, most people do not have a steady income (The "Third World" makes up most of the world's population, thus the name "Two-Thirds World"). For them, each day is a struggle. Stability, security, assurance of tomorrow's bread is the goal of all. If a pastor/evangelist has a monthly salary, this places him into the upper crust of society, especially in rural economies. Many of those who have salaries in these situations are government or charity organization workers. The supported national preacher often finds that his ties with the foreigners go a long way even if his salary is small--his children may find scholarships to study in nice foreign schools; he may be sent to live or study abroad; a foreign patron may come to visit him, see his relatively humble lifestyle and respond with great generosity (such as building him a house, motorcycle, vehicle, land for raising

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crops, purchase livestock, build a nice church building). This relationship with foreign patrons catapults the man into an envious position in the community and he then is often despised as a hireling.

In Cambodia, as in other places, a many of pastors/evangelists are hired preachers. Some are unsaved men milking the system only to leave it later with land, church buildings/houses, and money. Others are truly born again, but dependency upon foreigners is the norm--even expected. The nationals say that they are too poor, unwilling to help their own preachers, often because they know there are willing foreigners out there who will do their work for them. Besides, they are told constantly by the government and charity organizations that they are too poor for anything but receiving.

The Scriptures give fervent warnings about false teachers. Many passages demand that pastors live a lowly life and flee covetousness. Any system that breeds covetousness or encourages materialism among the nationals is fundamentally unsound (1 Tim 6:6-11; 1 Pet 5:1-3; 2 Pet 2; Jude).

7. The receiving of foreign support is not just a matter of obtaining money in the mind of many nationals--it is also one of influence and power. Money, security, ties to foreigners, etc., can bring incredible prestige and power. A pastor from the West cannot begin to imagine the temptation and lure of power among the downtrodden in a corrupt society. Those with the ties and the money become very important people, very much resembling the politicians of their society. With this position comes the same corruption that pervades politics. A national who has risen to this prestige (which a Westerner probably would not even consider to be prestigious) will be sorely tempted to do whatever it takes to maintain this privilege (Prov 28:21). What is needed to prove his worth to the foreigners? Churches! If he has people to meet with in multiple locales, he is considered a success. He is especially successful if he has a big church. The more members he has, the more money. The more he impresses the foreigners, the more they will come and visit and spend money . . .

Some reading this will think this is an exaggeration. Far from it! This corruption occurs at a very depressing rate. It is so prominent in Cambodian Christianity that it is a joke to the lost and an assumption among the professing church. Foreigners support nearly all Cambodian Christian ministries. There is much infighting as nationals fight for position in the various groups trying to get to the money. The result is circumstances diametrically opposed to many commands in the NT. Ministers are to be men without strife and contention (1 Tim 3:3; Tit 1:7; 3:10).

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Those men who are faithful and love God have a sore trial in seeking victory over envy as they see men supported by foreigners getting land, nice church buildings, handouts for church members, vehicles, etc.

The pastorate is described in the NT as a position of humility and meekness, not a desirable position coveted by all for its material prospects!

Dependence upon funds from abroad also distorts the pastor-people relationship. The pastor's authority shifts from the spiritual to that of the material, quite the opposite of the NT example. In many cultures, where there is a patron (someone in authority with the funds), the people will gratefully become loyal clients. Faithfulness is guaranteed in these situations--while the money lasts. This is true in all reaches of the Third World. So many churches in Cambodia have been started with foreign monies and then have closed when the money is gone! In their wake is a group of false professors who return to their false worship . . . until the next patron comes by.

8. Paul made it clear that he esteemed national believers as equals, not spiritual weaklings. He expected great things from them. Paul believed that the nationals in other lands were equally indwelt by the Holy Spirit and gifted for service (Rom 15:14). When national believers are treated as poor, incapable people who cannot be used of God apart from foreign funding, a great blow is given to these believers' faith in the Holy Spirit and the provision of the Father for their ministry needs. They are taught to trust in the source of their funds instead of God. Many think that they can support preachers temporarily, hoping later that the nationals will take over that responsibility. That may seem plausible, but in reality this rarely happens. There are no examples in Cambodia of this kind of plan working, and I know that this same dilemma occurs throughout the Two-Thirds World. Nations that have had the gospel for over a hundred years still do not know how to support their pastors (India and Thailand, for example)!

9. The Gospel is for all men in all contexts. The Word of the Lord can spread and be glorified among any people at any time in any circumstance. No people need support from another people in order to see God bless. And yet, many, many national believers in Third World countries think that God cannot use them or work through them unless they are properly outfitted with all the foreigner can offer. God cannot help them without the foreigners. I have heard a number of Cambodian men tell me that **NO CHURCHES CAN BE PLANTED** apart from financial assistance from abroad! What does this mean? This means that belief in the power of God is being undermined by this practice. There is an urgent need to see God's power at work *within their context*. What will happen when the large world economies fail

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and the funds stop flowing? The nationals will not have faith in God's grace within the world God has called them.

10. It is common knowledge in many places that most national pastors who are clients of a foreign patron regularly deceive and lie to their patrons. This practice is acceptable among many nationals. The thinking runs like this: "Since the foreigners have so much money, it would be OK if they are tricked out of some of it to benefit us since we are so poor. God understands." Thus, when a foreigner comes to town, everyone who has ever been to church and many who have never been are asked to come and help receive the foreigner. Impressive crowds gather. As often happens, the foreigner, who cannot speak the national language, assumes that a great work of God is taking place and is moved by the fruitful work of the church. The foreigners then take their pictures, go home, and then use them in presentations to show how God is effectively using their missionary dollars!

Well-meaning pastors from abroad visit the nationals and are emotionally moved at the simple worship, poor housing of the preacher, good singing, fervent preaching, and the large crowds and assume they know what they are seeing. They understand nothing either culturally or linguistically. They rely on a translator and their own untrained eyes. Usually their visit is only hours or a few days. They think they know what is happening and are impressed. These return home seeking more funds to advance what they saw or felt was successful. Quite often they are deceived.

11. There is the faulty assumption that if a foreigner will support a national for two years, he will then start a church and be able to be supported by that church.

There are many problems with this assumption. *First*, those countries with a welfare mentality will not see their need to support a pastor/evangelist since they believe that this is the foreigner's responsibility. *Second*, this assumes that a pastor or evangelist must be full time. *Third*, there are precious few success stories of such a system. *Fourth*, this presumes upon God, assuming that He will work according to our timetable. *Fifth*, this idea fails to take into account that some cultures have no problem with being permanent clients of a foreign patron (most Two-Thirds World cultures according to what I have read). *Sixth*, there is also the assumption by many foreign workers that they will reach many in the middle class or upper class. These laborers are then forced into being respecters of persons as they strive to get folks into the churches that have the money in order to carry the ministry.

12. There is a growing sense of nationalism in many nations. In these places, Christianity is seen as a sneaky attempt by the USA or EU to infiltrate their country. Others see it as colonialism. When they see that the national Christianity is funded and sustained by foreigners, and not the nationals themselves, it is seen as foreign and politically threatening. This is a very real problem and the cause of unnecessary

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persecution. Our methods must be indigenous. The church of Christ must be seen as a people movement, not something driven by foreign interests.

13. The “prosperity gospel” is a heresy that is running rampant in the Third World.

Foreign funds are often seen as God’s blessing on those who believe this false doctrine. Its believers brag at how they got saved and gave themselves to the Lord, and look—they now have a great job with the foreigners! You can have this success as well if you will just believe! I have heard this kind of talk numerous times. Because false religion in the Two-Thirds World promises prosperity and good luck to the faithful, Christians are pressured to prove that becoming a Christian brings this same prosperity and good luck, thus making the gospel attractive. The problem here is that Jesus taught just the opposite! His Gospel was one of taking up His cross, of loving God above all things, and being willing to lose all, even die, for Him!

14. Part of the problem with this issue is the clash between the Bible and American culture.

Americans want efficiency, results, and numbers—the capitalist mindset. This attitude in America provides great temptation for pastors in the States to fall into many forms of pragmatism and use marketing strategies for church growth. It is the “whatever works” mentality. It finds its way into the mission field as well. We reason, “What is the fastest way to get the results in church planting that we desire? Supporting national pastors!” *The Bible does not portray God as ever sacrificing biblical principle to achieve His ends.* His plan is carried out in perfect holiness. He is never in a hurry. He seeks true worshippers, not just professors. When nationals are supported by foreigners, they find themselves pressured into this success syndrome in order to obtain or keep their support.

15. True and lasting ministry partnership cannot form when men are not treated as equals.

If the foreigner is the patron and the national the client, then an employer-employee relationship is always in force. The employee is tempted in many different directions as a result. If he falls into sin, he cannot confess without fear of losing his job or prestige. There is the inability to disagree. There is the inability to be completely honest about ministry success and failure. There is the inability follow one’s conscience before God. A true brother-to-brother relationship in the Lord is impossible. True partnership means we must become as they are, not they becoming like we.

16. Pagan religion teaches that those who become teachers are supported by those who benefit from their religious services.

This is true also of Biblical ministers. Why then, do national Christians defy the NT and think that they are no longer required to worship their God with their increase? They did this with their false gods before! They are taught by foreigners that financial responsibility towards

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God is forgiven them because they are poor. How sad! In the NT, the poor churches outgave the rich churches! One of the greatest fruits of the Spirit, love expressed in giving, is then discouraged in them. All churches are commanded to be full of good works. None are exempt. There are no freeloaders in the Church of Christ.

17. By allowing the nationals to start churches and sustain them within their means, we encourage them to discover their self-dignity before God. In most cultures, it is largely the poor who come to Christ. These poor are often degraded, despised, and hated by the upper classes. They know only oppression. Their former religion rolls out the red carpet for those with the money and then looks down upon the poor. In Christ, they are seen as equals. They have a mission, a responsibility towards God and their fellow men. They are worth something. They have hope and a value that God has for them that they never knew before. When the foreigners come in and emphasize their poverty and assume their inability to obey God, they never realize their calling in Christ. A welfare mentality sets in, much like that which has plagued certain segments of American society, and which is nearly impossible to reverse. *What we are actually doing, without realizing it, is limiting the potential of the national churches to experience the grace of God.*

Does the welfare system work in America? How many reading this paper today thinks that the welfare system in America is a success? Did it work for the former slaves in America? Did it work for the American Indians? Some seem to think crossing a faraway border will transform an ineffective, unbiblical system into one that works. Why can we not realize what does not work here will not work there either?

Much joy is lost to the nationals, as they never realize their potential in learning to give biblically and obey the Great Commission with sacrifice. Shall we rob them of their joy? Shall we teach them to rob God of their tithes and offerings?

18. The foreign support model is not reproducible by the nationals. What we do as foreigners creates models for the nationals to follow. They will want to be able to do what we do. If they see that they cannot reproduce what we have begun, there begins to be a sense of inability to fulfill the Great Commission. After all, they do not have the resources. The nationals cannot be led to falsely believe that the spread of the gospel is dependent on foreign resources. If we ourselves believe that it is dependent on foreign funds, then the nationals will also believe it and be rendered unable to do what God has called them to do. Foreign believers should be encouraging the nationals to obey their calling.

19. The thinking that suggests that nationals cannot evangelize their nation without foreign aid reveals a theological problem. God gave to every believer the

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command to evangelize. He gave to every believer and to every local church His Holy Spirit to enable them to accomplish this task. He gives local churches the gifts they need to function properly. Everywhere it is assumed that God's people are equipped to keep His commands, regardless of the culture or economic status of the country. The Holy Spirit is the key. The Holy Spirit is all that is necessary. He can move His people to evangelize their own culture. It is He who stirs hearts to give and support their spiritual fathers. To support national pastors and evangelists seems to be a denial of this central reality within the local church.

20. The support of national evangelists and pastors is short-sighted

Why support nationals? For many it is a desire to get the gospel to as many as people as quickly as possible. What can be better, they reason, than avoiding the raising and sending of our own laborers, and just wiring money to nationals who know their culture better than we? What time would be saved! What a better return on our investment, and so it goes. Is this good judgment? Is this the answer to world evangelism? Is this good stewardship? I think not. Far better is the patient waiting for God's Spirit to move His people in that land to action and obedience and thus seeing a genuine zeal for evangelism! When they see that they can do this by God's grace alone, then they will be able to repeat the process again and again by faith. When the evangelism of a people is propped up by foreign funds, the commitment of the nationals to missions is slackened and they are led into disobedient dependence upon aid from abroad. We must take the long-term approach and avoid the temptation to try to "jump start" God's people with money. We must pray and wait for His moving among them.

It is true that supporting nationals gives a semblance of quick results. It is like the Cambodians government that allows the rapid deforestation of its jungles for quick cash. The only thought in mind is the immediate gratification of a perceived need. The future is not even a real consideration to them. For believers, the popular motto "win as many as possible as quickly as possible" falls short. The Great Commission sends us to make disciples. This means disciples making disciples at home and in other places—starting churches—in obedience to God's command. This must be done God's way. Only this is pleasing to Him. His word emphasizes that God does not accept all worship, even some worship properly motivated. He judges deviant worship. We must keep God's commandments His way. In our zeal to keep one commandment, we cannot nullify another. If missions is done God's way, and He chooses to bless, a grass-roots movement of church planting will take place without foreign aid, strategies, organizations and manipulation.

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Conclusion with a Challenge: As we reflect on these many biblical principles, we cannot escape the fact that the case against the practice of supporting nationals is far stronger than that of its opposition. We must recognize that good men with biblical motivations can come to wrong conclusions. Just as it is important to know God's commands, it is also important to know how to apply those commands. This application process is not easy. It requires much prayer, labor over the Scriptures, and an examination of other believers' experience in applying those principles.

I believe this matter of supporting nationals is one of the most important issues facing the Church of Christ today as it seeks to obey the Great Commission. The negative impact of mistakes made in this area of funding is far reaching, far more than most foreigners can begin to realize. I would like to pose a challenge: if you disagree with my conclusions, please seek out sound biblical reasons for it; effectively discount these 20 different reasons that I have given for discontinuing this practice. If you can do this, than I would see your position as a viable alternative for the church of Christ to follow.

I trust that this paper will provide some stimulus for thinking through various biblical principles and practical implications that otherwise may not have been considered. May God help each of us to better understand our role in global missions.