

BOOK REVIEW *GIVING WISELY?*

by Jonathan Martin

(Sisters, OR: Last Chapter Publishing, 2008)

Jonathan served as a missionary in Asia for a decade, mostly working with Muslims. Now he serves as the Global Outreach Pastor for Good Shepherd Community Church in the Portland, Oregon area. This book thus benefits from the perspective of both missionary and pastor; recipient and disburser. When on the mission field he was in position to observe both unwise and wise giving practices. The subtitle of the book points to what he saw: *Killing with kindness or empowering lasting transformation?*

The author lays a solid foundation of the basic biblical principles of generous giving. If the reader has encountered Randy Alcorn's book, *Treasure Principle*, he will be pleased to know that Jonathan highly recommends that book; indeed an approving blurb from Alcorn graces the cover of the book.

The book is a quick read at just about 200 pages and is well-salted with fables and true stories. The true stories are potent in challenging many of our deeply-held American notions about money. One such notion is our cultural bias that sending lots of money overseas solves lots of problems. In many cases, it causes significant damage and is terribly inappropriate in the receiving culture. One of the most powerful insights here is: *The good news is spread by people in relationships. And it's the power of the Holy Spirit that brings it home.*¹

We send money to people we think are poor, but in their own cultural context they are not poor at all. We need to reexamine what true poverty is. The Bible is a good place to start; the poor include the widows, orphans (startling numbers today fueled by AIDS in Africa), refugees/aliens, and the oppressed. We often send money to help people but in the end create dependency, poor work ethics, and no economic improvement. The author cites an article claiming that Africa is worse off economically than it was in 1949 despite the infusion of 500 billion dollars over the past fifty years.²

The prescription for wise giving involves four foundational, biblical principles: 1) Relationship First: there is a mutual relationship of trust and respect. According to II Thessalonians 3:7-9, Paul supported himself until he had established relationship with the people. 2) Accountability: Paul insisted on this in I Corinthians 16:1-4 and II Corinthians 8:18-21. We should only give to individuals through a financially accountable organization. 3) Indigenous Sustainability. The author poses powerful questions: *if the program cannot ultimately function in a given culture without outside help, how is it appropriate to the people? How can it grow to disciple the whole clan, tribe, and nation? Why should locals give to a pastor or ministry that's fully funded?*³ 4) Equity: We may unwittingly elevate a national Christian worker high above his colleagues, and thus harmfully set him apart. These four principles are distilled into the acronym R.A.I.S.E.: **R**elationship and **A**ccountability. **I**ndigenous **S**ustainability and **E**quity. The heart of the book dedicates an entire chapter to

¹ Page 41.

² Page 58.

³ Page 64.

each of these principles. Here's a sampling of values the author's church has adopted in alignment with the four principles: They prefer to support people who go out from their own congregation at higher financial amounts. They then expect those missionaries to spend proportional furlough time at Good Shepherd. They do not support national workers except through a reputable organization. Money and work teams for projects must always involve *coming alongside of*, not *coming in place of*. An American team funded and built a church building for a Mexican congregation. As soon as the Americans left, the Mexicans dismantled the building piece by piece and rebuilt it how and where they wanted it.⁴

What about the widespread child sponsorship programs? All the principles of R.A.I.S.E. should be employed in choosing a program to support. Some programs have created the unintentional "welfare" outcome of wives sending fathers away so they could get foreign dollars as "single moms." What about disaster relief? It should always be done with a development model so that when the foreign workers leave, the work continues through the local churches and volunteers that have been trained and empowered. Especially eye-opening is a *Der Spiegel* interview transcript that reveals the damage caused by Western relief dollars sent to Africa. Kenyan economics expert, James Shikwati pleads, "*for God's sake, please just stop.*"⁵ What about Bible College and Seminary training in the US? *There's a simple rule: If you want a person to reach his or her own culture, don't take him out of it.*⁶ A high percentage (80 percent according to one seminary dean) will so acculturate to the standard of living here in the U.S. that they will not return to their homeland. Therefore we should support in-country training models, particularly the *Periodic Model* which features a trimester system with one-month away-from-home academic modules and three-month practicums during which the students go back home and train twelve others in all the things they have learned.⁷

Chapter 15 applies the R.A.I.S.E. principles to U.S. local church giving in their own stateside communities. The acronym morphs in home soil and yields a new local church acronym, R.A.T.E.: **R**elationship, **A**ccountability, **T**ransformation, **E**quity. Applications are made for handling drop-in homeless people, high-need church members who regularly seek financial help, and the legitimacy of self-funding your own mission.

Giving Wisely is a must-read for Christian givers to missions, local church mission leaders, missionaries, and mission agency leaders. It is an *urgent* must-read because the Law of Unintended Consequences is widespread and destructive. These are God's resources we are handling. They merit the wisest stewardship.

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⁴ Page 122.

⁵ Pages 146ff.

⁶ Page 165.

⁷ Page 168.