

## Reviews

WE ARE NOT THE HERO: A Missionary's Guide to Sharing Christ, Not a Culture of Dependency. By Jean Johnson. Sisters, Oregon: Deep River Books, 2012. 321 pp. Paperback. \$15.99

In this book Johnson looks at what missions in different cultures can be. She was a missionary for many years in Cambodia. She is fluent in the language, having served Cambodians in the Twin Cities for six years. In Cambodia she discovered that, along with Jesus, she brought her own culture with her. She recognized that Western-style mission work brings baggage along with the Gospel, which isn't necessary and can even be harmful. Her new approach mirrors how Paul went about mission work.

A line near the very end of the book made me think and wonder. On page 320, Johnson writes, "God is not an absentee God. Missionaries do not bring God to a people. God is already present there working. Our role is to find out how and to join the conversation."

Missionaries often bring along resources to inspire people to join in the ministry. Johnson found out the hard way that she was creating a dependency. Here are her words on page 76: "When I use resources and methods local believers cannot easily reproduce, I create a roadblock for them. I make them feel powerless because they cannot do ministry 'like Jean.' As a result, local believers will often give up or find a missionary to do the work."

Johnson also writes about her findings regarding how to begin new congregations or groups of believers. Instead of bringing the one's own music, liturgy, and worship style to the new culture, missionaries should ask questions according to the Bible about how to worship in a God-pleasing way in that culture. On page 12, she shares some questions to facilitate believers:

- According to biblical examples, in what ways did faith communities or people worship God?
- According to biblical examples, what attitudes did worshipers exemplify?
- According to biblical examples, how did worshipers displease God?
- According to Cambodian culture, how do you show respect and adoration?
- According to the Bible and Cambodian culture, how do you want to worship?
- What gifts and resources do you have within you and around you that you could use to worship?

We often want to give quick answers and easy solutions to get a ministry moving faster, but doing so puts us in charge. Asking questions, encouraging, and giving support permits congregations to be in charge of their own ministries from the beginning.

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Johnson shares a lot in the book about avoiding dependency and working toward sustainability. When all the giving is one way, besides making people dependent, it makes them feel poor and incapable. As Johnson was learning, she read the following from a mission report: “Don’t assume that we are poor and have nothing to give. When you do that, you insult God and diminish our ability to participate.” (p. 132). It is possible that when the missionary does a lot of the main work, local people may come away thinking they can never do it as well as the missionary.

Another section of the book stresses that many cultures are oral cultures. If pastors deliver sermons in Western-style lectures, many people in different cultures have trouble listening. They would, however, be able to listen to stories or music or poetry or proverbs or drama. Does it really matter how Jesus is shared? The message should be clear, understood, and further spread. We want the message of Jesus to be remembered and shared with others. To do this, the message must be appropriate for the culture and people. On page 154, Johnson shares the following: “If we are to affirm and equip the approximately four billion oral learners through the world, we need a good dose of missionaries who intentionally understand and prepare their communication strategies for oral cultures. This is the only way we will truly fulfill the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations.” More of our pastors, even in the US, need this. When people in oral cultures hear a story about Jesus and maybe even repeat it together, they will be excited to go out and share it more. This is called discipling and easily follows storytelling.

On page 180, Johnson notes the importance of new believers staying in their home communities. That is what Jesus told the young man in the Bible who wanted to follow Jesus. He was told to go back and share with his community and family. If a person becomes too Western, he or she may not be trusted by the community. If that person believes in Jesus and shares stories about Jesus without the cultural baggage, discipling can happen. On the same page, Johnson writes, “For many, becoming a Christian is interpreted as forsaking one’s nationality to become a different nationality while still living in one’s homeland.”

Johnson writes about an indigenous theology on page 227. One example she uses is that in Western thinking, persecution is something that we Christians often think it is good to avoid. People in many indigenous cultures, however, see the biblical truth that persecution for a Christian is unavoidable and should be anticipated. Johnson notes that in Matthew 5:11–12, “Jesus says that the persecuted are blessed and should rejoice for the honor.” It makes sense that people looking in the Bible see persecution as a given.

This book gives much food for thought. Johnson wants the message of God’s love in Jesus, not material blessings, to bring people to faith. She also doesn’t want people to lose their culture in order to be able to worship God. It took her many years to understand missions in another culture and that everything done on day one makes a

difference. There is much to learn and talk about in this book. It is good to remember again that this is all God's ministry, and He was there before us, getting it all ready.

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