

Dependence, Independence, and Interdependence

By

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“Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures” by David W. Augsburger provides some interesting insights into our attitudes about dependence and independence. A great deal of the written material in the areas of psychology and counseling come from a “Western” worldview. In this mindset, independence (an individual who has internal control and takes internal responsibility for his/her life) is considered healthy. Independence, assertiveness, and self-sufficiency are thought good and those who lack such traits are considered in need of diagnosis and treatment.

Within a more “Eastern” worldview, a different attitude is found. Solidarity with one’s social group is prioritized, so a more dependent person (an individual who accepts external control and accepts more of an external responsibility for life) is seen as healthy. Independence is seen as unhealthy.

Each of these descriptions of worldview is a gross simplification. But these simplifications still help us, for looking at the two idealizations, we can see problems. Since we are social beings forced to interact with each other without destroying each other, pure independence should not be seen as worthwhile goal. However, to completely place one dependent on social norms and traditions limits the awesome potential for the individual to grow and positively affect society.

This begs the question, “What is the Biblical ideal... independence or dependence?” A look at the model of the ideal (or Biblical) church provides insight..

The ideal church appears to model neither independence nor dependence. Rather, it describes a relationship of interdependence. We see this in several ways.

A. The description of the primitive church in Jerusalem. Acts 4:32-37 describes a body of believers with great cohesiveness. They offered from their abilities and accepted help in their lackings. Sharing was a basic characteristic of their interaction. The early church was an interdependent body.

B. The description of relationships within the church. One way this can be seen is in the “one another” passages in the epistles. How should members interact? They should...

Honor one another	Romans 12:10
Live in harmony with one another	Romans 12:16
Accept one another	Romans 15:7
Instruct one another	Romans 15:14
Agree with one another	I Corinthians 1:10

Serve one another	Galatians 5:13
Bear with one another	Ephesians 4:2
Submit to one another	Ephesians 5:21
Forgive one another	Colossians 3:13
Admonish one another	Colossians 3:16
Encourage one another	I Thessalonians 5:11
Offer hospitality to one another	I Peter 4:9
Be humble to one another	I Peter 5:5
Fellowship with one another	I John 1:7
Love one another	II John 5

These (and there are others) show independence, since they show capability to offer something to another. Yet they also show dependence since they show we have needs that must be met by others. This is an interdependent body of believers.

C. The body analogy of the church shows this as well. Reading I Corinthians 12:14-31, one sees the church as a body united yet made of individual parts or members. These members have abilities that the other parts of the body need. Yet no member is so capable that he/she can do without the other members. The church, in this analogy is an interdependent, interconnected membership.

If interdependence is the ideal, then perhaps there are flaws with both the Western and Eastern ideals. Take, for example, the Western ideal of independence. Where might this ideal have led us astray?

1. Consider church-planting. From Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, and John Nevius of the 19th century, the ideal for new churches is expressed in terms of the “3-selves”. New churches should be self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. Some add a fourth self, “self-theologizing”. On some level, this ideal is sound. If a new church maintains an inability to govern itself, to multiply itself, or support itself, it is dependent on others. This will hamper sustainability and growth. Certainly, dependence does not appear to be the Biblical ideal. However, it is quite possible that a genuine risk of the “3-selves” is the mistaken assumption that the capability to act independently implies that independence is itself an ideal. But perhaps the utilization of each others’ strengths (not just at an individual level, but at a church level) is a good thing.

2. Community Development. One of the major fears in community development is creating dependence in a community. Relief work tends to create dependence because it provides short-term help without skills and material transfer for long-term betterment. Many involved in “COMDEV” see their work within the community as the transitioning from a dependent community to an independent community. But perhaps, again, interdependence is a healthier goal, where different communities can share their strengths to support each other for the common good.

3. Missions. This is an area where interdependence has been growing. Years ago mission organizations often sought to act as strictly independent agents. In other words each organization has its own sending component, logistics component, literature component, member care component, and so forth. However, the sheer cost and redundancies created became unacceptable. Therefore, there has been a growing trend to specialize in areas of strength and work with likeminded groups that have strengths that complement their own. This is sometimes described as collaboration. Even if one ignored interdependence as a Biblical ideal, it certainly is an economic ideal.
4. Pastoral Care. The tendency to promote independence has its potential flaws.
 - a. Is it healthy to attempt to create independently minded individuals in a society that promotes social cohesiveness and, in fact, considers a high level of independence to be a mental or social malady?
 - b. Is it good to always assume that guilt or shame (motivators toward social norms) are unhealthy? Would a society that maintains itself only through punishment and reward maintain long-term viability?
 - c. Would it be preferable to develop people who feel an obligation to share from their strengths but be willing to accept help in their weaknesses? Wouldn't this be a healthy characteristic in almost any society?

Interdependence will always be the difficult goal. Independence is fairly simple to understand, as is dependence. But to develop bonds of giving and receiving moves one away from simplistic psychological model. It would challenge any culture, yet appears to be a worthy and biblical goal to strive after.

Resources

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