Globalization and Missions
By Robert Reese

“The world is flat,” declares Thomas Friedman, indicating that technological innovations have enabled businesses to operate from anywhere with multinational workforces. He cites this as the newest wave of globalization. Since Christian missions are also global, globalization is bound to have an impact on missions. If globalization is good or neutral from a Christian point of view, should missions seek to join forces with it? If globalization has flaws, should Christians try to correct these in order to use it? If globalization is neither neutral nor good, what should missions’ position toward it be? Already, globalization is driving some mission methods, so answering these questions is not academic.

What is Globalization?
Briefly, globalization is the current movement toward a single world economy. Characterizing the process of globalization as “McWorld,” Tom Sine says, “We already have now a ‘new one-world economic order.’” This movement has greater significance since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, leaving the United States as the sole superpower. There is now a widespread assumption that not only capitalism, but also American values will capture the entire world. Thus, globalization carries cultural and political overtones along with economic ones.

Jeffrey Sachs, an economist who advises the United Nations as well as many developing nations, points out that globalization is not really a new phenomenon. The first wave of modern globalization was the European colonial era, “globalization under European domination . . . [with] the infamous ‘white man’s burden,’ the right and obligation of European and European-descended whites to rule the lives of others around the world.”

This raises an important question: Is globalization a period of neocolonialism with an American face instead of a European one? Or is it a period of history that promises to end global poverty through increased international cooperation?

Sachs suggests that current globalization offers hope for fairness and justice to prevail, provided that western wealth is used for positive gains in the developing world. He cites the Marshall Plan that helped to rebuild Europe after World War II as a model for how the United States should now use its resources to improve conditions where poverty in entrenched.

Calling for “Enlightened Globalization,” based on the ideals of human progress through the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Sachs believes that international globalization will even limit the United States’ tendency toward establishing its own empire.

Why the Growing Disparity between Rich and Poor?
Despite hopes that globalization will end poverty, the issue that currently troubles both politicians and economists is why there is such growing disparity in wealth between the West and developing nations. Just when capitalism seems triumphant, the gap between rich and poor is widening. Peruvian economist, Hernando De Soto, says, “The hour of
capitalism’s greatest triumph is its hour of crisis.”⁷ Since the fall of the Berlin wall, “capitalism stands alone as the only feasible way to rationally organize a modern economy.”⁸ Yet, De Soto concludes, the efforts of developing nations to adopt capitalism “have been repaid with bitter disappointment.”⁹

Sachs admits that whereas “all parts of the world had a roughly comparable starting point in 1820 (all very poor by current standards), today’s vast inequalities reflect the fact that some parts of the world achieved modern economic growth while others did not.”¹⁰ He classifies one billion people as “the ‘extreme poor’ of the planet, . . . all fighting for survival each day.”¹¹ An additional 1.5 billion are relatively poor, experiencing “chronic financial hardship and a lack of basic amenities.”¹² This combined sector of extremely and relatively poor people encompasses 40 percent of global population.

Friedman understands that the initial phase of modern globalization began in 1492, with the voyages of Christopher Columbus to the New World.¹³ Considering that global capitalism has been operating for a long time, why this unequal distribution of wealth? Various reasons have been proposed, as summarized below:

1. Rich Nations Need to Donate More Money
Sachs thinks that the western world has not given enough resources to combat global poverty. He urges every western nation to give 0.7 percent of gross national product to official development assistance in line with the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals.¹⁴ He sees the United States as the chief culprit in lack of foreign aid, with only 0.14 percent of gross national product donated in 2004.¹⁵

2. International Capitalists Desire to Keep Developing Nations Dependent
Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a leftist sociologist from Brazil, blamed dependency for the failure of Latin America to develop. His “dependency theory” was a Marxist explanation for the strategy of capitalist imperialists to keep developing nations dependent.¹⁶ Ironically, Cardoso later joined forces with globalization and became President of Brazil.

3. Prehistoric Differences of Geography Created an Uneven Playing Field
Geographer Jared Diamond delved into prehistory to show that different parts of the world began with vastly different natural resources, climates, and patterns of migration. He undertook this investigation to answer a question posed to him by a New Guinean: “Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?”¹⁷ Diamond concluded that there were prehistoric natural explanations behind today’s disparities, which have little to do with ethnicity, culture, or religion.

4. Cultures Determine Whether Nations will Become Wealthy or Poor
David S. Landes, an economic historian, thinks that cultural values are the key to the prosperity of nations. “If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference.”¹⁸ Landes accepts Max Weber’s premise that linked the Protestant work ethic to the rise of capitalism.¹⁹
5. Poor Nations Already have the Capacity to become Wealthy
De Soto thinks that the developing nations need a legal system that allows the poor to have clear title to what they already own so that they may legally borrow using their property as collateral.²⁰ C. K. Prahalad, an Indian business management specialist, thinks that global wealth disparity will evaporate once multinational corporations learn how to include the world’s poor in their strategies. He assumes that the poor are already entrepreneurial with enough resources to be consumers; their only lack is to be included in the world economy. He asserts, “Four billion poor can be the engine of the next round of global trade and prosperity.”²¹

With this diverse set of claims about the origins of and remedies for the wealth disparity between rich and poor parts of the world, one is tempted to agree with anthropologist Richard A. Shweder, “I think we must admit that we do not really know what causes economic growth.”²² From a missionary perspective it is difficult to sift through claims by economists with any certainty. The point is that some of the assumptions behind these claims are driving current mission methodologies. A common assumption in mission circles today is that economic issues are the key to Christian mission.

What Drives Mission Methodologies?
American Christian missions have long been known for pragmatism. It is not surprising, then, that mission strategists should seize on globalization as an opportunity for missions. Missionaries have reason to be more concerned than politicians and economists about global wealth disparity because of the Scriptures’ abundant teaching on wealth and poverty and because of their compassion. Relatively wealthy North American missionaries are increasingly uneasy about the contrast between their possessions and those of people they minister to in developing countries.²³

In light of these issues, some of the current responses to the issue of globalization and missions are as follows:

1. American Christians Should Fund Evangelists in the Developing World
Some see this type of partnership as a new model for postcolonial missions to replace the outdated Three-Selfs formula. Gary Schipper stated, “The Western church has money, the non-Western missionary needs money. If ever there were a call for partnership, this is it.”²⁴ He claimed that “red flags” such as “the sacred ‘three selfs’ principles, . . . have paralyzed us for too long. The time is ripe for creative experiments.”²⁵ K. P. Yohannan championed just such an experiment, touting it as a new postcolonial model for missions that could complete the task of world evangelization in a short time. He proposed that wealthy North American Christians fund evangelists in other countries for as little as $30 to $50 per month, “because the native missionary works more economically than foreigners can.”²⁶ This approach is the equivalent of Jeffrey Sachs’s proposal of a Marshall Plan to end poverty, but this is a “Marshall Plan” for missions.

2. Globalization Fosters Healthy Interdependence
A slight variation of the first response is the call for global partnerships in mission. Luis Bush and Lorry Lutz assert, “Refusing to partner, particularly with Two-Thirds World
churches and agencies, may mark the end of our own effectiveness in the world.”

They insist that interdependence is the new paradigm for the postcolonial world of missions. This means partnership between equals: “Partners desire to be recognized as equal in selfhood and potential for maturity in Christ. . . . Partnership avoids dominance of one over the other. . . . Dominance encourages dependency. . . . Dependency robs people of opportunity to exercise their gifts and leads to apathy.”

3. Globalization Promotes Opportunities for “Kingdom Business”
Ken Eldred defines kingdom business as “for-profit commercial enterprises in the mission field of the developing world through which Christian business professionals are seeking to meet spiritual, social and economic needs.” He understands this as superior to simple wealth redistribution by giving from rich Christians to the poor because it creates wealth in a sustainable way. Steve Rundle and Tom Steffen agree with Eldred’s position, stating, “We believe that globalization is a continuation of God’s plan, first revealed to Abram, to bless all nations and peoples of the earth (see Gen. 12:3).” They see this happening through “Great Commission companies.”

4. Globalization is a Mixed Blessing
Tom Sine warned, “The very greed that makes the free-market economy work so brilliantly in efficiently producing goods and services is what undermines its capacity to work justly on behalf of the poor and the marginalized.” He noted that the economic benefits promised by globalization could mislead people: “The rapid movement of peoples into a new one world economic order is shaping their aspirations and values in ways that are often at counter-point to the aspirations and values of God’s kingdom.” Furthermore, the rapid increase of wealth in the West has not strengthened western churches: “The rapid spread of this global culture of consumption could undermine the vitality of the church in the two-thirds world as it is doing in the church in the one third world.”

5. Globalization Contains Much that is Evil
Some see globalization as a continuation and extension of colonialism. Jane Collier and Rafael Esteban call globalization part of the western culture of economism, which “imposes the primacy of economic causes or factors as the main source of cultural meanings and values.” This view sees globalization as trying to reduce humans to mere economic beings. “Globalization is the visible manifestation of the obsessive drive for economic growth . . . to an extent unparalleled by any other imperial thrust.” Furthermore, Collier and Esteban see Christian missions as largely complicit in this drive for economic domination, since missionaries used colonialism in this way. Justo Gonzalez likewise sees globalization as a period of neocolonialism extended up to the present. Globalization is merely more of the same pattern of western dominance now spread out over a few more nations who control the destiny of humanity with their strong economies.

**Analysis of Current Responses**
The first three responses to globalization seek to cash in, literally, on America’s dominant position, wealth, or brand of capitalism to aid world evangelization. At the same time,
they desire to overcome the wealth disparity between the West and developing nations by putting American money to work either by investing it in businesses or by simply giving it away. All three positions recognize the huge economic gap between industrialized nations like the United States and unreached peoples in nations where Christians are poor and evangelists are underfunded. They assume that American Christians are in the best position to do something about diminishing this gap. Some cite Scriptures that command rich Christians to help the poor and biblical examples of international aid from wealthier parts of the body of Christ to more needy parts of the body. Beyond the humanitarian aspect, however, these positions also seek to make American wealth the lynchpin of strategies to complete world evangelization. What is wrong with these approaches?

First, American Christian wealth need not signify God’s blessing or spiritual strength. From a Christian perspective, the vast disparity of wealth among churches can be a sign that western churches have capitulated to the prevailing culture of economism. This would signal, not the beginning of a new American-funded mission era, but the beginning of the end of American dominance in Christianity.

Second, the emphasis on western funds could indicate a tacit acknowledgement that American Christians are no longer willing to put their bodies on the line in Christian discipleship. While the people of the world may be impressed by American wealth, Jesus was unimpressed by the big donations made by the wealthy in the temple; rather he singled out one poor widow as the best example of giving (Luke 21:1-4). She alone gave in a way that showed she had committed her whole life to God.

Third, since the center of gravity of world Christianity is already shifting away from the West, attempts to keep America as the central driving force for world mission amount to clinging to outdated Enlightenment mission paradigms. Sachs, as a secular economist, acknowledged that his dream of eradicating global poverty through American money rests on the ideals of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment embraced human progress through human ingenuity apart from the God of the Bible. Shweder called this view of the future “The West is Best and Will Become Global (or at Least It Should Try to Take over the World).” He commented, “Basically, this is the Western ‘enlightenment’ origin story universalized and projected into the future.” Tom Sine warned, “The aspirations and values driving globalization are a product of the Enlightenment and modernity and are in many ways directly counter to the aspirations and values of God’s new global order.”

Fourth, attempts to make the United States the bank for world mission create unhealthy dependency. Dependency is a relic of colonialism and the “white man’s burden,” yet advocates of American Christian wealth being the engine for world evangelization may unwittingly continue to promote dependency. How does this happen? By suggesting that the best postcolonial mission paradigm consists of western money combined with non-western manpower, two problems occur: first, westerners assume the role of paymasters as if colonialism were continuing; second, non-westerners may assume that they need only receive and not give. American churches and Christian organizations bypass local indigenous churches to fund evangelists who are then not accountable to their own
churches. In this scenario, the widow with two mites is not encouraged to give at the temple because the wealthy have everything covered. The problem arises because of the wealth disparity and the continued distinction from colonialism between the privileged and the underprivileged. In the church of Jesus Christ, however, there are no underprivileged members and wealth is not measured in terms of money alone.

The “kingdom business” approach is more aware of the possibility of creating dependency and seeks to avoid it by creating sustainable businesses where Christians can earn money through the dignity of work.

By providing employment and enabling local Christians to improve their economic condition, Kingdom business efforts can help to break the dependence on foreign assistance. Christians in developing countries can learn the principles of giving... Instead of relying on Western funding, local churches can become economically self-sufficient and sustainable through their own members.43

On the other hand, global business itself may be a disguise for promoting western values. Eldred betrays this bias when he cites kingdom business as an extension of David Livingstone’s proposal in a speech at Cambridge University in 1857: “Those two pioneers of civilization—Christianity and commerce—should ever be inseparable.”44 Eldred sees kingdom business as “an opportunity to bless a nation in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and a migration toward the basic living standards of the First World is the objective.”45

Fifth, the call for greater interdependence often masks an underlying dependency. The goal of interdependence is certainly desirable in missions, but it must take into account the colonial period of dependency from which missions is still emerging. Stephen Covey if often cited as advocating interdependence as the most mature form of interaction.46 Covey stated:

On the maturity continuum, dependence is the paradigm of you—you take care of me... I blame you for the results. Independence is the paradigm of I—I can do it; I am responsible; I am self-reliant... Interdependence is the paradigm of we—we can do it; we can cooperate.”47

He added, “Interdependence is a choice only independent people can make. Dependent people cannot choose to become interdependent... They don’t own enough of themselves.”48

Much of what is today called interdependent partnership in missions is in reality a co-dependency. Luis Bush and Lorry Lutz described partnership in this way: “Western agencies need overseas ministries in order to justify and maintain their existence. And the non-Western agency or church needs the help of the Western agency to expand or reach out to new areas.”49 Is this partnership or co-dependency? Robert Ramseyer wondered whether there could be real partnership between “rabbits and elephants.”50 He added, “Obviously partnership and interdependence are not possible when it is assumed that one
side is developed (has already arrived) and is now helping the other side to reach the same level.” True interdependence can only take place once steps are taken to eliminate mission methods that continue to contribute to dependency as the norm left over from colonial mission approaches.

**Conclusion**

While the world has moved to some degree into a postmodern, post-Enlightenment, post-Christendom and postcolonial era, Christian missions continue to operate with colonial models. They then link these outdated paradigms with globalization and call it a new paradigm. Alan Kreider listed eight categories in the early church’s shift from pre-Christendom to Christendom, several of which continue to define mission methods that use globalization as their starting point. Six of the relevant categories stated by Kreider are as follows:

1. “The Christendom shift moved the perspective of Christians from the margins of society to its center.” Those who pragmatically link globalization to Christian missions seem to want Christians to be at the center of global capitalism as its best representatives.

2. “The Christendom shift buttressed Christianity’s appeal with imposing incentives, thereby changing the nature of its attraction.” Those who see American wealth as the key to world mission success add the incentive of a prosperous American lifestyle as part of the attraction that the gospel offers.

3. “The Christendom shift moved the church’s reliance from divine to human power.” Economic globalization operates under human power as much as any movement conceived by the human mind; therefore, it cannot really embody the gospel message of the crucified Savior.

4. “The Christendom shift caused Christianity to be at home in society, so that it lost the capacity to make a distinctive contribution to society.” Making globalization the current movement that Christian mission hitches its wagon to simply supports the status quo in human cultures. Everyone wants American wealth and standards of living.

5. “The Christendom shift transformed worship from humble gatherings that edified Christians to grand assemblies that attempted to evangelize outsiders.” Christianized globalization creates the impression that all Christian assemblies and edifices should be up to the developed world’s standards.

6. “The Christendom shift altered the focus of the church from mission to maintenance, except on the fringes of the ‘Christian’ territories.” Supporters of Christian globalization continue with Christendom motifs. We feel good about ourselves because we are economically developed and Christianized, while the mission field is those parts of the world where poverty is endemic. With humanitarianism as the new gospel, Bill Gates and Jeffrey Sachs then show us the way as our role models, yet these men are not even Christians. With this scenario, mission continues from the developed world to the underdeveloped as it was in the colonial era. There is little recognition that many of the
global poor are actually contributing more to world missions than the “Christianized” West. There is little recognition that many of the global poor are more “Christian” than affluent western churches. There is little recognition that the gospel has enough power in itself not to need the wealth of the world’s superpower.

C. K. Prahalad spoke of the fortune at the “bottom of the pyramid,” meaning the hidden economic power of those considered poor. Similarly, the gospel has already taken root in many cultures and holds a hidden treasure that has nothing to do with economic globalization. If not overwhelmed by the desire of both Christian and non-Christian humanitarians to spread American wealth and values around the globe, people who are considered poor may prove to be rich in generosity and love so that they spread the Christian faith as the pre-Christendom church did. Christian mission cannot afford to tie its fate to globalization, which is a phase of world history linked to Enlightenment values that see no need for either God or Christianity. Even if Christians wish to take advantage of opportunities offered by globalization, they must exercise enough discernment not to propagate colonial methods and models. The poor widow must once again be permitted to give her two mites so that God gains the glory and not mammon.

2 Tom Sine, Mustard Seed versus McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 50.
4 Ibid., 341-2.
5 Ibid., 358.
6 Ibid., 359.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Sachs, The End of Poverty, 29.
11 Ibid., 18.
12 Ibid.
13 Friedman, The World is Flat, 9.
14 Sachs, The End of Poverty, 218.
15 Ibid.
16 Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, Dependency and Development in Latin America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
19 Ibid., 178.
20 De Soto, The Mystery of Capital, 7.
25. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 50-51.
30. Ibid., 262.
34. Ibid., 355.
36. Ibid., 32.
41. Ibid.
43. Eldred, *God Is at Work*, 262.
44. Ibid., 143.
45. Ibid., 160.
48. Ibid., 51.
51. Ibid., 33.
53. Ibid., 62.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 63.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 64.
58. Ibid., 66.