

“Discerning the Body” in Cross-Cultural Relationships: A Critical Analysis of Missional Partnership in Southeastern Europe

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If one were to ask national Christian workers in Southeastern Europe what they thought of Western missionaries, one would likely hear some version of Davor Peterlin’s assessment in his article entitled “The Wrong Missionary”: All too often, Western missionaries are “a liability rather than an asset.”¹ On the other hand, missionaries have also become disillusioned while working with nationals, eventually abandoning any co-operation for the sake of beginning their own independent projects. Such a phenomenon transpired, for example, in the International Mission Board’s involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the tumultuous 1990’s. These historical issues have resulted in negative “relational-memories,” leaving an unhealthy and detrimental residue in current partnerships. Although there has been some critique in both sectors, there has been little written or explored in terms of a way to move past critique and into a new way of relational understanding and enterprise.

In light of these “relational-memories,” this paper will address the central question: How can Protestant Christians partner in Southeastern Europe while being unequally yoked in both economic and relational power? In order to explore some of the foundational issues rooted in this question, this paper will critically analyze a Croatian case study—which highlights a past partnership between nationals and Western missionaries—through a missiological reading of 1 Corinthians 11: 17-34. In this passage, Paul critiques the privileged Corinthians’ relationship with the poor and disadvantaged—resulting in a misuse of the Eucharist. According to Paul, not “discerning the Body”—that is, acting indifferently to the poor (and vice versa)—is a sin which strips away the spiritual power behind the symbolic activities which were originally designed for the glory of God. Such form without content becomes detrimental to the function and mission of the Body: it creates a mockery of worship, prolongs suffering, and leads to fruitlessness. Paul suggests that an awareness and recognition for ‘those who have nothing’ and a purposed abstention from humiliating them is the path forward. The significance of Paul’s directives extends past the Eucharist and suggests profound insights for contemporary cross-cultural missions. Finally, the study will conclude by tentatively offering some ways forward which are relevant both to Southeastern Europe and to other contexts.

¹ D. Peterlin, ‘The Wrong Missionary’ in *Mission Studies* XII-2-24 (1995), 164-174; 165.