



What Assumptions Are Driving What You Do?

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The Importance of Assumptions

A few years ago a bishop in Mozambique told a story about a woman who approached him to buy a Bible. He told her he did not have any left that she could afford. She was puzzled by his response and asked what he meant. His response was that he had some cheap Bibles, but they were all gone. All he had left were expensive ones. She reached into her pocket and produced enough money to pay for one of the expensive Bibles. Just by looking at her, he assumed she could not afford what she really wanted. He now says (with embarrassment) that he jumped to the wrong conclusion about what she could afford.

How many times have we looked at people and decided what they could afford? In terms of overcoming unhealthy dependency it is important to consider the assumptions on which we make our decisions. Our beginning assumptions will most likely determine whether unhealthy dependency develops and how long it will last.

Assumptions are like self-fulfilling prophecies. When they take root they tend to lead us in the direction they are pointing. To go a different direction often requires special effort, not only to change course, but also



to acknowledge that our beginning assumptions may need to be changed. This process requires wisdom, courage and, often, genuine humility.

Examples of Assumptions

One of the main assumptions behind the dependency syndrome is the belief that some people are poor, and always will be.¹ This may include no hope for change and therefore someone will need to subsidize them – possibly forever. In relation to those in need, they may also have a series of assumptions. They may feel they are victims of “fate,” a destiny over which they have no control. Their assumption leads them to believe that is the way life is and that it will never change. Both of these forms of fatalism can lead to unhealthy long-term dependency.

Several years ago I learned about a group of native North Americans who suffered from an unhealthy self-image which allowed others to do for them what they could have done for themselves. Someone did some research, trying to discover the root of the depression and discouragement they were experiencing. The researcher asked a fundamental question: “Was there ever a time when your people felt good about themselves?” The answer was a clear “yes.” The researcher then asked what they felt had caused the change. An elderly man responded by saying, “The change came after the government took pity on us and began providing for us. Before that we had a healthy self-image.” Sadly, when their dignity has been destroyed many such people turn to alcohol.

One must not conclude that there is only one factor behind that kind of group depression. But, it is interesting to note the role of the government’s assumption. What if the government had begun with the assumption that there were some roadblocks to development that needed to be removed, allowing those people to create their own healthy means of support? A change in the government’s basic assumption could have helped them to preserve their dignity and self-respect and develop optimism and hope for the future.

One of the negative effects of faulty assumptions is that a spirit of “entitlement” develops, and those in need become convinced that they deserve the help they are getting. More than that, their children see the entitlement mentality at work, and the next generation develops its own series of assumptions: “If our parents could not exist without the benefits of entitlement programs, then we will most likely need them, too.” Think about the series of assumptions woven into that mentality at several different levels.

Overcoming unhealthy dependency may mean challenging some of the most basic presuppositions held by both givers and receivers. Business as usual based on the old assumptions will not solve the problem. One way to think of it is that genuine spiritual transformation includes a shift in the assumptions we make about life. Think about your own conversion experience, and reflect on how many of your basic assumptions about life were changed (or should have been changed) in the process. f

1 We even quote the words of Matthew 26:11 where Jesus says the poor you have with you always. Interestingly, we are not quick to condemn ourselves to being poor forever.

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