

The Temptation of Paternalism

by Grace Tazelaar, MS, RN

For healthcare professionals who desire to advise, protect, and help others, paternalism can be a temptation. Paternalism is defined as “a system in which someone in authority advises and helps people but also controls them by not letting them make their own decisions and choices” (Macmillan Dictionary).

As nurses, people come to us seeking advice on various ailments and to learn how to take care of their health. We may fall into the trap of saying, “*What you’ve got to do is...*” But telling people what to do does not mean they will do it. In fact, when someone tells me what I must do, I usually bristle and think, “What right does that person have to tell me what to do?” The challenge is to help others make good decisions for themselves.

The Latin root of paternalism is the word for “father.” Fathers are meant to care for their children and to want the best for their offspring. Being a good parent, however, leaves no room for paternalism that neglects individual choice and personal responsibility.

When my sister was raising her children she said, “My job is to raise adults who can function on their own. I have to keep that goal in mind as I teach them and discipline them.” Raising children is probably one of the most difficult assignments anyone can take on.

The Bible tells us that we are God’s children. He is our loving Father. In the Bible, he teaches us the best way to live our lives based on the way he created us. But he is not paternalistic. God doesn’t demand that we do what he wants. He loves us. He allows us freedom in our choices while lovingly caring for us and desiring our best. He has provided a model for us to follow in our relationships with our children, our families, our friends, and those whom he sends across our path.

The history of missions is filled with paternalism. In the zeal to share the good news of Jesus, Christians can become prideful with the knowledge that God has chosen us, blessed us, and forgiven us. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit living in us. These are wonderful gifts, but they do not make us inherently better than other people.

We have often confused the cultural practices of our birth with the correct way to practice our faith. In the Church of Uganda, I saw that women sat on the left side and men sat on the right side as they gathered for worship. Churches were built just as they were in Europe and America. Hymns were sung as in England. The culture had been imported along with the gospel. But now, the Uganda Church is discovering ways to worship that reflect its unique culture and identity.

Ugandan Christians are also gaining a vision for sending their own missionaries. My Ugandan friend, Sam Opolot, said, "We've always received missionaries; but no one has taught us how to send them. It's time that Uganda sends missionaries." They are working with professional schools and preparing healthcare missionaries for God's Kingdom work around the world.

As I mentor nurses and nursing students who desire to serve God in missions, I seek to avoid my paternalistic tendencies to prescribe a path for them. Rather I want to follow the example Jesus gave us for making disciples. I want to help nurses and nursing students make wise decisions to follow Jesus and to use the gifts he has given them.



[Grace Tazelaar](#) is a veteran missionary nurse who offers wisdom from years of experience serving God cross-culturally. Find more resources, best practices, and what you need to know about missionary nursing at [NCF Missions](#).