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# The Three-Self Principle as a Model for the Indigenous Church

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THE THREE-SELF PRINCIPLE AS A MODEL  
FOR THE INDIGENOUS CHURCH

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by

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## CHAPTER I

### THE INDIGENOUS CHURCH

Since the beginning of the mission of the church when the church began to extend itself beyond the confines of its original milieu in Palestine, the church has struggled with the question of how to present the Christian faith in a cross-cultural situation. What is the best way to present the Gospel so that the people will understand, believe, build a church, and tell of their faith to those around? In modern missions the question of how to build a church in a foreign country has been often discussed. This question is the topic of this paper. The term which has been applied to this endeavor is the "indigenous church." The concept "indigenous" was borrowed from the social scientists and meant a culture native to a particular place with its own institutions and folkways. According to Wilbert Shenk, both Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson redefined the concept within the area of Christian missions to mean that the indigenous peoples become competent to lead the institution along European standards.<sup>1</sup> This concept became so important in the modern missionary movement that Melvin Hodges identified the establishment of an indigenous church as the

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<sup>1</sup>Wilbert T. Shenk, "Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn: A Special Relationship?" International Bulletin of Missionary Research, V (October, 1981), p. 170.

goal of mission.<sup>2</sup>

However, it was probably not until Sidney Clark that the term, "Indigenous Church," and the concepts related to it became used. He first used the term at a paper presented to the National Christian Council of China in 1913. This paper was later made popular by the reprint of the World Dominion Press appropriately entitled, The Indigenous Church.<sup>3</sup> Sidney Clark emphasized the importance of the indigenous church in a later work.

We need not suppose that fruits we desire and are now striving to secure, more or less by foreign agencies and at foreign cost, will be more abundant, valuable, or enduring than those of indigenous growth. The reverse, I am convinced, will be the case.<sup>4</sup>

This picture of the indigenous church being compared to plant life is not unusual. Even today we speak of planting churches. T. Stanley Soltau expressed his view of the indigenous church as not being truly indigenous until it "becomes native to the country and grows there naturally, as part and parcel of the people among whom it has been planted."<sup>5</sup> This

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<sup>2</sup>Melvin L. Hodges, On the Mission Field. The Indigenous Church (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>John Ritchie, Indigenous Church Principles in Theory and Practice (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1946), pp. 13-14.

<sup>4</sup>Sidney Clark, Indigenous Fruits (London: World Dominion Press, 1933), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup>T. Stanley Soltau, Missions at the Crossroads (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1955), p. 20.

picture includes the idea of the indigenous church, like a plant, thriving without the help from a gardener and able to reproduce itself.

Many other definitions and emphases have been made to explain what is exactly meant by the concept of the indigenous church. Different individuals and groups have emphasized different aspects of indigeneity. The Madrad Conference of the International Missionary Council spoke of the church which "spontaneously uses forms of thoughts and modes of action natural and familiar in its own environment."<sup>6</sup> William Smalley, an anthropologist, emphasizes the society in his understanding of the indigenous church. Patterns must be based on the society around, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the people's lives and the society are transformed.<sup>7</sup> Alan Tippett emphasized that the "people of a community think of the Lord as their own, not a foreign Christ; when they do things as unto the Lord meeting the cultural needs around them . . . then you have an indigenous church."<sup>8</sup> The Jerusalem Conference of 1928 said that a church was indigenous

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<sup>6</sup>J. Herbert Kane, The Christian World Mission: Today and Tomorrow (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 185.

<sup>7</sup>William Smalley, "Cultural Implications of an Indigenous Church," Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity, edited by Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1979), pp. 35-36.

<sup>8</sup>Hans Kasdorf, "Indigenous Church Principles: A Survey of Origin and Development," in Kraft and Wisley, op. cit., p. 85.

when (1) the interpretation of Christ in worship and art incorporated worthy characteristics of the people, (2) the Spirit influences all phases of the people's lives, (3) it actively shares its life with the nation in which it is, (4) it is alert to problems and acts as a spiritual force contributing to the good of the community, and (5) it is kindled with missionary ardor and a pioneering spirit.<sup>9</sup>

More recently, a Nigerian expressed the idea that an indigenous church should bear the unmistakable stamp of the church of God in Nigeria. One can not simply replace Westerners with natives, like pouring "new wine in old wineskins." Rather the church should let people worship God in their own ways, using their own language and idioms. The church should be a home for the people where they can relax and not be under authority from abroad. Yet the church should be centered in the Lordship of Jesus Christ and live with the consciousness that the church is part of the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."<sup>10</sup>

With all of these definitions, the one that is recognized the most is still the one with which it was associated from the beginning. "In common usage, an indigenous church is

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<sup>9</sup>Chung Choon Kim, "The Church and the Problem of Indigenization," Korea Struggles for Christ, edited by Harold S. Hong, Won Yong Ji, and Chung Choon Kim (Seoul, Korea: Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1966), pp. 104-105.

<sup>10</sup>E. Bolaji Idowu, Towards an Indigenous Church (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 10-11.

defined as a church that is self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating."<sup>11</sup> This Three-Self Principle is the subject of this paper. Since the development of the Three-Self Principle more than a century ago, many other "selves" have been put forward as a means to developing the indigenous church. The most current of these discussions are centering on the indigenization or contextualization of theology. These discussions are outside the realm of discussion for this paper since the paper is focusing on the Three-Self Principle itself.

The concept of the Three-Self Principle has been present for more than a century. Normally, this concept would be a dead issue by now with proponents using it and opponents having long since discarded it. However a number of factors have arisen through history which brings the Three-Self Principle and the concept of the indigenous church into discussion frequently. After the Second World War, many nations which had been colonies began getting their freedom. With the independence movements and the feelings of nationalism sweeping the world, the church around the world and their respective missions began feeling these movements also. Missions went into decline for several reasons. The stigma of the colonial image was attached to them. The Christian worship which had been brought over with the missionaries

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<sup>11</sup>Soltau, op. cit., p. 20.



was basically Western. The need arose for a theology which spoke directly to the needs of the Third World nations rather than through the Western nations which had different problems. Christianity was foreign to these new nations. The resurgence of non-Christian religions was concomitant with the independence movements. The mission churches desired authentic self-hood to match their new-found political self-hood.<sup>12</sup>

With the opening of China in recent years to foreign scrutiny, the Western world began to learn about the Protestant Christian movement in the People's Republic of China, which had really been started through mission work. Since the Three-Self Principle is the cornerstone on which this movement is built, renewed interest in the principle soon followed.

At the Bangkok Conference of 1972-1973, one of the resolutions called for a moratorium on missions. Many reasons were given for this drastic statement. Missionaries had been in charge too long and had exported their own culture along with the Gospel. The local churches desired autonomy. There were special needs of the people to develop their own "ethno theology" to meet their own specific needs and to make it meaningful for the people in their own culture, but the missionaries tended to be theologically imperialistic. The West used church aid in a paternalistic manner, controlling by the purse string and often using funds in an unwise manner

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<sup>12</sup>Kane, op. cit., pp. 186-188.

because they did not properly understand the culture. The West is declining in leadership politically and in the realm of Christianity. The local churches do not want to go alone, rather they want mutuality by being regarded as equal partners. They have something to give as well as to receive. This moratorium of missions happened by means of voluntary withdrawal for political reasons (e.g., the United Church of Christ in Angola), voluntary withdrawal for administrative reasons as when the objectives have been accomplished (e.g., the Presbyterians in Mexico and the United Methodists in Uruguay), involuntary withdrawal for financial reasons (e.g., depression times, high cost areas), and involuntary withdrawal for political reasons (e.g., expelled by the government).<sup>13</sup> As a result of this moratorium, people involved in missions sought ways in which to make their mission truly indigenous and once again examined these issues.

The central issue to be discussed in this paper is that the Three-Self Principle seems to still be valid for use in mission and continues to be helpful as a guide in mission activities. However, the principle does not go far enough to be able to stand by itself in the modern world and so can no longer be considered the goal of mission but can be considered a partial guide for the mode of operation of mission.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 176-183.

In order to demonstrate this position, the Three-Self Principle will be examined in terms of its history and its content. Also examined will be two examples in which the principles were put into actual use on the mission field, the first being the incorporation of the principles by John Nevius into the "Nevius Method" which guided the Presbyterian Church in Korea for many years, and the second being the example of the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the People's Republic of China.

## CHAPTER II

### THE THREE-SELF PRINCIPLE

The Three-Self Principle has, like the concept of the indigenous church, become an accepted part of the missiologist's vocabulary. For many years it has been taught as a part of mission schools. Perhaps one reason that these ideas are so popular is that they came into being as a practical solution to real, live situations on the mission fields. The Three-Self Principle--self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating--grew out of the personal experiences and needs of Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson as they administered their respective mission programs.

#### A. Origin of the Three-Self Principle

Prior to the time of Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn, some missionaries were more positive in their attitude toward non-Western cultures. Some sensitive missionaries had learned the importance of employing forms of the culture to communicate the Gospel and to plant churches. But often these efforts at indigenization were crippled by the attitudes of paternalism, ethnocentrism, unconcern, and fatalism which prevailed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley, Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity (Pasadena, California: Willian Carey Library, 1979), p. xxvi.

Anderson and Venn also were sensitive to the needs of the local churches and developed principles to help guide the missionaries. Each influenced the other's thoughts and writings, so it is impossible to determine who first conceived of the notion of missionary objectives in the area of administering, supporting, and propagating.<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. HENRY VENN (1796-1873)

Early in life, Henry Venn was a leader in the evangelical movement of the Church of England following in his father's path.<sup>3</sup> At the time he became Secretary of the Church Missionary Society in 1841, the Society was going through a financial crisis and a conflict with the High Church Anglicans. The conflict with the Anglicans lead to a compromise in which the Society agreed to hand over church-work to the local bishop. The financial crisis showed Venn the need to create a "native church" responsible for its own pastoral duties and independent of foreign support for its own spiritual health and financial security.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Peter Beyerhaus and Henry Lefever, The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 30-31.

<sup>3</sup>Wilbert R. Shenk, "Henry Venn's Legacy," Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, I (April, 1977), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup>Beyerhaus and Lefever, op. cit., pp. 25-27.

In contrast to many people of his age, Venn did not see missions romantically but practically. In his writings he was often paternalistic, but his paternalism was never a spiritual imperialism designed to perpetuate trusteeship over the new churches.<sup>5</sup> Missions at that time were operating on a pragmatic basis, without a theological or theoretical framework. Practically, Venn saw the need for a "science of missions." Consequently he worked inductively to find principles to help give the missions direction. He asked the question, "What gives the church integrity?" The answer upon which he arrived was that integrity comes with self-worth. Eventually he identified three aspects of self-worth: (1) a church led by persons drawn from its own membership, (2) a church which bears the burden of supporting itself financially, and (3) a church ready to evangelize and extend itself. These finally led to the Three-Self formulation. Tied with this he saw two conditions as being necessary for a successful church development, namely a self-reliant church and a responsive mission structure.<sup>6</sup>

After his death, the story was told of Venn that during the time he was searching for the principles of missions a merchant from Sierre Leone visited him. When asked why, with all his traveling, he did not contribute more to the support

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<sup>5</sup>Max Warren, ed., To Apply the Gospel. Selections from the Writings of Henry Venn (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), p. 51.

<sup>6</sup>Shenk, Legacy, p. 18.

of his own national clergy, the merchant is said to have replied:

Mr. Venn, treat us like men, and we will behave like men; but so long as you treat us as children, we shall behave like children. Let us manage our own church affairs, and we shall pay our own clergy.<sup>7</sup>

The central ideas in the Three-Self Principle were in Venn's thinking and writing a long time before the famous triad was actually coined. By 1851 he had already used the terms self-supporting and self-governing, but it was not until 1855 that self-extending was added. Even after that he did not often use the three together and sometimes he used self-supporting alone, apparently referring to all three. In his writings there was always an emphasis on the "native agency."<sup>8</sup> It was the practice of the Church Missionary Society to give newly consecrated missionaries a written set of instructions before they left for the field. Venn, as Secretary, was responsible for preparing these. It is in these writings that the development of his ideas were shown and made known to others.<sup>9</sup>

Venn considered a mission a success only when a responsible church emerged, a "native church." The Three-Self Principle was to help bring the young church to the point of assuming full responsibility and not remaining dependent,

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<sup>7</sup>Warren, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

<sup>8</sup>Wilbert R. Shenk, "Henry Venn's Instructions to Missionaries," Missiology, V (October, 1977), pp. 473-476.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 467-470.

Self-support had both practical and spiritual benefits, so the church should be taught from the very beginning to support itself. This did not appear unusual to Venn since every society supported religious individuals of some sort. Self-extension was helpful because a "native church" with its own ministry and mission work in the area frees up the missionary to branch out and break new ground. It was important for the missionary to know when to leave. A self-responsible church would not be an isolated body; it must never sever its ties with the church universal. But as the church evolved and grew it would become a "national church" and even would supersede its denominational character.<sup>10</sup>

The "euthanasia of mission" was also central to Venn's missionary principles. By steps the missionary should work himself out of a job so that he may settle in new areas. In his Memorandum of 1851, Point 10, he stated, "the settlement of a Native Church under Native Pastors upon a self-supporting system" was the chief aim of mission.<sup>11</sup> Being an Anglican, he was committed to the goal of setting up a native church with a native bishop. But it was better for the church to grow naturally from simple to complex than for a foreign bishop to be established with all its complexities. The bishop should be the crown and endpoint of church development. The key to

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 481-483.

<sup>11</sup>Beyerhaus and Lefever, op. cit., pp. 25-30.



all policy was the native church. The missionary must exercise some control at the beginning, but the foreigner must make himself unnecessary.<sup>12</sup>

The missionary society was simply an agency to enable missionaries to greater work by taking care of the administrative responsibilities. It did not interfere with the individual missionary's responsibility and action. The missionary was the agent whose role was to transcend the limitations of culture, surmount the differences between the missionary and the people, and be a pioneer going to new places rather than staying to pastor the young churches. The primary calling for the missionary was the Gospel.<sup>13</sup>

The major criticism levelled against Venn's missionary principles is that the missionary was to keep moving to "regions beyond" and not ensure that the new church did its missionary work in its own area. Did he guarantee the mobility of the missionary at the cost of a static church? Venn believed that the Holy Spirit would overcome the possible stagnation.<sup>14</sup> The major concern for the missionary after preaching the Gospel was building up the church. There was a danger of missionary paternalism if the missionary retained control. This did not necessarily mean that the missionary

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<sup>12</sup>Warren, op. cit., pp. 25-30.

<sup>13</sup>Shenk, Instructions, pp. 476-481.

<sup>14</sup>Beyerhaus and Lefever, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

would have to get out of the church, only out of control positions.<sup>15</sup>

Venn paved the way for the mission of the church to become church centered. He left unsolved the problem of the relationship between the foreign missionary and the mission in the church overseas; he was simply against the patriarchal stage of missions. The churches planted in a given area is the organ of Christ's mission to that area. Any churches and Christians called to participate in Christ's mission in that area can only do so in the name of the church there. How this happens he did not answer.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. RUFUS ANDERSON (1796-1880)

By contrast, Anderson was an American Congregationalist and Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Up until this time, the spread of Western civilization and evangelization had always been closely associated. With one it was assumed that the people would always want the other. Anderson recognized that the idea was wrong the transformation of the civilization was the aim of mission. He was a person of his times and considered the European civilization best and a natural outcome of mission, but not as a goal of mission. In a sermon at the ordination

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<sup>15</sup>Warren, op. cit., pp. 85-86.

<sup>16</sup>Beyerhaus and Lefever, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

of a new missionary in 1845 he preached,

. . . that the missions have a two-fold object of pursuit; the one, that simple and sublime spiritual object of the ambassador for Christ mentioned in the text, "persuading men to be reconciled to God;" the other, the reorganizing, by various means, of the structure of that social system, of which the converts form a part.<sup>17</sup>

He was definitely a man of his times, yet R. Pierce Beaver claims that he recognized Western civilization to be a hindrance to missionaries by identifying Christianity itself with the social order and expecting the piety of new converts to be the same as in their own society. Rather he called them to a different direction, specifically to the spiritual mission of proclaiming the Gospel, winning souls, gathering them into churches, and enlisting them in mission.<sup>18</sup>

Through his study of the work of Paul in the New Testament as his model, Anderson came across nine characteristics of missions. Among them he noted the responsibility under the Great Commission to gather converts into churches. Paul's "grand means as a missionary" was forming local churches, each with its own presbyter for pastoral care.

Had not the apostolic idea of self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating churches dropped out of the

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<sup>17</sup>Rufus Anderson, "The Theory of Missions to the Heathen." A Sermon at the Ordination of Mr. Edward Webb as a Missionary to the Heathen (Boston: Press of Crocker and Brewster, 1845), pp. 4-5.

<sup>18</sup>R. Pierce Beaver, ed., To Advance the Gospel. Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 13-14.

Christian mind soon after the age of the Apostles, not to be fully regained until modern times, how very different had been the history of Christendom and of the world.<sup>19</sup>

In his work, Anderson resisted some of the trends of the American Board. He felt that educational institutions had been developed out of proportion to the local congregations and that missionary paternalism caused weaknesses in the local leadership. Independence and autonomy should be begun immediately to teach the churches while they are still young. The order of importance for Anderson was (1) self-propagating, (2) self-governing, and (3) self-supporting. Anderson's order of importance was completely opposite of Venn's order.<sup>20</sup>

The success of the local congregation and individual is a clear evidence of the religious life. This is not to be tested by New England standards, but by a change in the quality of life, by a reorientation towards Christ. The national ministry then is the basis of Anderson's theoretical system. The church is not an end in itself, but a self-contained institution with its own mission. The church is considered mature when it engages in its own mission. From his Congregational background, he held that each church has full freedom under Christ. Self-support frees it from missionary paternalism. The indigenous church is given a charter to be

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 14-16.

<sup>20</sup>Beyerhaus and Lefever, op. cit., pp. 31-33.

itself and to form its own government.<sup>21</sup> "The vocation of the missionary who is sent to the heathen, is not the same with the settled pastor." The missionary prepares new fields for pastors, and when they are prepared with competent pastors he moves on. The missionary is to keep free from entanglements with literature, science, commerce, church government, politics, and the social order. His object is preeminently spiritual.<sup>22</sup> To accomplish this, Anderson needed to train a national ministry as soon as possible. So he saw a seminary or a school of the prophets being raised within eight to twelve years. It must be in the midst of a strong body of missionaries who can be examples. The students must be trained to practical habits of usefulness. A female boarding school should be established nearby so they will be able to find suitable wives. Training national pastors he saw as being more efficient than sending missionaries.<sup>23</sup>

Anderson never promulgated ideas of "sending" and "receiving" churches; for him every church was to be a sending church. Nor did he encourage ideas of self-interest and self-sufficiency. These ideas for which he has been criticized actually came later. For him the churches were

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<sup>21</sup>R. Pierce Beaver, "The Legacy of Rufus Anderson," Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, III (July, 1979), pp. 95-96.

<sup>22</sup>Anderson, op. cit., pp. 5-7.

<sup>23</sup>Beaver, Selections, pp. 103-106.

never ends in themselves, but means to ends. Self-government and self-propagating were encouraged to help build the church as a whole. Missionaries tend to delay for too long the building of churches that stand on their own. They may not yet be perfect early in their growth, but bearing responsibilities makes for growth. Anderson is also accused of allowing an opening for missionary paternalism by allowing missionary control over the initial organization and association with other churches, and allowing them to function pastorally if national ministers were not available. He expected missionaries to be scrupulous and figured that self-support would free the churches from these problems. The national ministry is key to the working of his principles. He also gave the church a chance to be itself with freedom to alter its pattern. There is room within his framework even for cultural adaptation though he himself did not espouse cultural adaptation. He was very liberal for his time.<sup>24</sup>

The similarity between these two men is astounding. Besides both living at the same time, they both saw missions in a similar way. They recognized the task of identifying the underlying principles of missions and came to insights amid crisis situations. They scrutinized new developments which might throw light on the missionary task. They sensed the need for greater accountability on the part of missionary

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 31-34.

societies and workers. And they insisted on a clear definition of the goal of mission as the basis for evaluating the results. Both were aware of the stages of development of young churches and wrestled with the question of how long a missionary society should attend to the needs of a new church. The tension point for them was that though they accepted the Western culture as superior, yet all people are created equal and equally worthy to receive respect, grace, and self-worth. Without dignity and self-worth a vigorous community would never be established. The solution for them was to emphasize self-hood in the church and in the individual.<sup>25</sup>

How much they collaborated in developing the principles is another question. They met twice, in August 1854 and December 1855, and corresponded occasionally from 1852 to 1866. In a letter of 1854, Venn noted that under pressure from home, a missionary had put a national worker forward and then was surprised and satisfied at the result.<sup>26</sup> Other than such comments as these, the two seem to have worked out their principles independently of each other. They themselves placed little emphasis on the concept, but later generations remember this as their foremost accomplishment.

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<sup>25</sup>Wilbert R. Shenk, "Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn: A Special Relationship?" International Bulletin of Missionary Research, V (October, 1981), p. 11.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 168-169.

## B. Explanation of the Three-Self Principle

The modern mission movement originated in pietism. This movement initially failed to build up a national church and so was doomed to stagnation when the home sources dried up. Anderson and Venn developed their principles to try and overcome this problem. Sidney Clark, who popularized the notion of the indigenous church along with the Three-Self Principle, stated that there is

a growing feeling that there can never be established an indigenous church except on an indigenous basis. A new conception of the need for the three main principles essential in establishing such a church is now arising.<sup>27</sup>

Gustav Warneck warned that the formula could become a mere expression of independence and ruin the whole work of mission. He pointed out that some churches began well and later collapsed. The corrective he proposed was education. Roland Allen urged the Three-Self Principle alone and that missions should rely on the Holy Spirit as a corrective. The real danger to autonomy is the cautious and paternalistic attitudes of missionaries.<sup>28</sup> Peter Beyerhaus, too, admits the essential truth in the formula.

. . . the church that results from missionary work should take over such ecclesiastical authority as is vital to it, that it should promote the Church's mission in its

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<sup>27</sup>Sidney J. W. Clark, The Indigenous Church (London: World Dominion Press, 1928), p. 11.

<sup>28</sup>Peter Beyerhaus, "The Three Selves Formula--Is It Built on Biblical Foundations?" in Kraft and Wisley, op. cit., pp. 15-20.



own environment and even in the regions beyond, and that it is expected to carry out these duties without financial support from outside, though the acceptance of such help is not excluded.<sup>29</sup>

## 1. SELF-SUPPORT

The key to the Three-Self Principle for Venn was self-support. With self-support in place all the rest would follow. The reasons for self-support emphasized in mission are many. It is a biblical plan to encourage stewardship and even tithing. It is good for the spiritual well-being of the congregation. The pastors are then responsible to the congregation and not to the mission. The spirit of faith and sacrifice helps to develop a vigorous spiritual ministry in the workers. In the end the workers are better off financially. It places the national worker in an advantageous position with fellow countrymen. And it opens the door to unlimited expansion.<sup>30</sup>

For Sidney Clark self-support was also important.

No church can ever be so poor as to be unable to establish its work from the beginning on the basis of self-support. Indeed, the effort to advance educational and other forms of work at the whole or partial expense of a foreign mission, often results in a set-back to self-support in the case of the church itself.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>30</sup>Melvin L. Hodges, On the Mission Field. The Indigenous Church (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), pp. 66-76.

<sup>31</sup>Sidney J. W. Clark, Indigenous Fruits (London: World Dominion Press, 1933), p. 8.

Sidney Clark did make a distinction, though, between support of a church and of evangelistic work. Self-support in evangelistic work is not possible or else misunderstanding and confusion will follow.<sup>32</sup>

Self-support should be undertaken from the very beginning. National people are reluctant to raise money if the foreign missions have supplied it. The use of foreign funds may often be a barrier between the people and the missionaries. The origin of funds often determines who is the authority in a given situation. And self-support is essential to establishing a strong church.<sup>33</sup> Salaries and support of national workers should be decided and paid by the people. When missionaries pay it is a long time before the people take over. It is tempting to erect a building before getting the people, but this should also be done by the people themselves. When the church is dependent on foreign aid for the essential activities of the church, then it is not self-supporting.<sup>34</sup>

## 2. SELF-GOVERNMENT

From the very beginning of mission work, nationals should be advisors to the foreign missionary since they have a know-

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>33</sup>T. Stanley Soltau, Missions at the Crossroads (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1955), pp. 88-98.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 22-23.

ledge of the people which the foreigner does not have. As soon as possible, the nationals should take over the leadership. The form of organization should be adapted to the current situations. Officers should receive titles appropriate to the tasks to which they are assigned. Part of the task of self-governing is to set up standards of admission into membership, and this should not be too easy. Discipline also should be in the hands of national people as soon as possible, as well as the decision as to the appropriate standards for the culture.<sup>35</sup> Again Sidney Clark speaks to this.

It appears not to be necessary for us to concern ourselves overmuch with the organization of the church. If the church is living, then from within itself will grow the organization it will require at all stages of its development. Just as it is unprofitable to hang fruits on the tree, so it is unnecessary to impose upon it, from without, a foreign organization. In almost every foreign field a protest is now rising against over-organization, and ere long will rise against a Western organization, ill suited to an indigenous, Eastern church in the comparatively early stages of its growth. The organization of the church must grow with and come out of the church.<sup>36</sup>

The importance of self-government is that the people may gain spiritual responsibility and growth as well as have the sense of nationalism. It begins in the first church established with a very basic unit of organization. Then the added layers accompany the gradual withdrawal of the missionary.<sup>37</sup> Wrong

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-80.

<sup>36</sup> Sidney Clark, Church, pp. 33-34.

<sup>37</sup> Hodges, op. cit., pp. 17-34.

types of government have been imposed on people in the past, often resulting in a lack of progress in being able to carry on the work by themselves without the close supervision of a missionary. It is also necessary for retaining morale, solidarity and strength against the opposition.<sup>38</sup>

### 3. SELF-PROPAGATION

For Anderson, self-propagation was the most important of the threesome. It is a goal of mission that every new Christian also be an active witness, bearing a part in the church and sharing the responsibility for the spread of the Gospel. This is to become a normal thing for new believers.<sup>39</sup> The converts are then the seed for the further spread of the Gospel. In the extension of the church to outstations, a qualified national worker or lay preacher can be appointed to take charge and eventually a new church is born without a missionary. Bringing converts along on a tour of the area can also be helpful to the missionary as well as making evangelists of the nationals.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Soltau, op. cit., pp. 21-23.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., pp. 23-24.

<sup>40</sup>Hodges, op. cit., pp. 36-43.

## CHAPTER III

### THE THREE-SELF PRINCIPLE IN ACTION

#### A. The "Nevius Method" in Korea

The first of the actual situations in which the Three-Self Principle was put to work which will be examined in this paper is the Presbyterian Church in Korea. Presbyterian mission work first began in Korea in 1882, but the first resident missionaries did not arrive until 1884.<sup>1</sup> These new, young missionaries were just beginning a new field and wanted some direction from a missionary who had been in the field for a longer period of time.

John L. Nevius was a missionary in China. In 1883 he published several articles in the "Chinese Recorder" of Shanghai.<sup>2</sup> He also published the book, The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches, in 1885, based on the principles of Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn.<sup>3</sup> So Nevius was invited to travel to Korea to instruct the people there in missionary methods.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Allen Clark, The Nevius Plan for Mission Work (Seoul, Korea: Christian Literature Society, 1937), p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 84-85.

<sup>3</sup>Peter Beyerhaus and Henry Lefever, The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), p. 90.

In 1890, Nevius visited Korea for two weeks and taught the missionaries from his wealth of experience. The twelve missionaries there at the time adopted the "Nevius Principles" practically in toto as the policy for mission work and passed a rule that every new missionary must learn the methods.<sup>4</sup>

John Nevius wrote about the warm reception he had received and said, "If the missionaries there were not benefitted by our sojourn with them, it was not because they were not more than willing to profit by our suggestions and advice."<sup>5</sup>

The missionary principles that were used in Korea were codified into rules for the mission in 1891. These rules were really an adaptation of Nevius' Principle.<sup>6</sup> The growth of the church in Korea was remarkable. From no communicant members in 1885 and nine in 1886, the Presbyterian Church in Korea grew to 119,955 communicant members by 1936. In 1936 the total list of believers was recorded at 341,700.<sup>7</sup> Many people believe that the large numerical success of the church was the result of Nevius' Method which the missionaries had carefully followed.<sup>8</sup> Nevius' ideal of establishing indigenous,

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<sup>4</sup>Charles Clark, op. cit., pp. 84-85.

<sup>5</sup>Helen S. Coan Nevius, The Life of John Livingston Nevius (New York: Fleming Revell Company, 1895), p. 90.

<sup>6</sup>Roy E. Shearer, Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), p. 193.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Clark, op. cit., p. 320.

<sup>8</sup>Wi Jo Kang, "The Nevius Methods. A Study and Appraisal

self-supporting and self-propagating churches soon caught on and Koreans began establishing churches themselves with little or no support from outside. This strength helped carry them through the years of foreign domination and war.<sup>9</sup> However, much of the progress which had been made was lost during the Korean War and under Communist domination. North Korea was the strength and center of the Presbyterians, and this was submerged by the Communists. Many Christians fled to the South, many lost their lives, and many went into an underground church.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of the "Nevius Method" was to establish an indigenous church in Korea. Charles Clark summarized the entire method in ten separate points.<sup>11</sup>

(1) The missionary is to engage in personal evangelism with as wide an itineration as possible.

(2) The Bible is to central in every part of the work.

(3) Every believer contributes to self-propagation by every believer being a learner and, at the same time, a teacher of someone else. By this "layering method" he sought to

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of Indigenous Methods," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXIV (June, 1963), p. 336.

<sup>9</sup>Won Yong Ji, Approach of Lutheran Church to Korea, Bachelor of Divinity Thesis (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Seminary, 1952), pp. 38-39.

<sup>10</sup>Bong Rin Ro, Division and Reunion in the Presbyterian Church in Korea 1959-1968, Doctor of Theology Thesis (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Seminary, 1968), pp. 18-19.

<sup>11</sup>Charles Clark, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

extend the work. He considered it a part of Christian living to evangelize, so every member was expected to bring in at least one other person prior to baptism otherwise his or her zeal was questioned.<sup>12</sup>

(4) Self-government: every group was under its chosen and unpaid leaders, and each leader was under a paid circuit leader who would later be replaced by a pastor. Circuit meetings were training sessions for people who would later be leaders. Self-government was a natural outgrowth of self-propagation and self-support. Since the Koreans were not used to governing themselves, this took the longest to learn and required training for the leaders. To accomplish this, Nevius suggested teaching people in situ so they would not get out of touch with their own people.<sup>13</sup>

(5) Self-support: all churches were built by the believers themselves and as soon as each group was founded it began contributing to the support of the circuit leader. Even the schools only received partial foreign subsidy. Pastors of single churches were not provided for out of foreign funds. Nevius stressed self-support and it became one of the cornerstones of his principles. When the Korean church leaders were paid by the Koreans themselves they never lost touch with the people. Though there were many poor people in the

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<sup>12</sup>Kang, op. cit., pp. 337-338.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 338-341.



church, yet they were trained soundly in systematic giving and often sacrificed to give. Courses were always offered in stewardship in his classes, and people often gave 15% of their income. This enabled the establishment of an autonomous church very quickly.<sup>14</sup> Nevius did not hold to this principle rigidly for he occasionally paid the salaries of his helpers. Simply withholding Western funds from the national church was not Nevius' method, rather his plan was intended to be practical and included the disciplined use of foreign funds for planting churches.<sup>15</sup>

(6) Systematic Bible Study for every believer under the respective group leader and circuit helper, and Bible Study for every leader and helper were mandatory. This Bible Emphasis Method is the dynamic underlying the whole method. When people get involved in the Bible as God's Book of Authority, the other principles will follow naturally.<sup>16</sup>

(7) Strict discipline was enforced by "Bible penalties." Setting high standards for believers were to make them distinct from the heather culture around.<sup>17</sup>

(8) Cooperation and union with other church bodies, or at least territorial division was necessary.

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<sup>14</sup>Beyerhaus and Lefever, op. cit., p. 97.

<sup>15</sup>Shearer, op. cit., pp. 153-196.

<sup>16</sup>Charles Clark, op. cit., pp. 270-271.

<sup>17</sup>T. Stanley Soltau, Missions at the Crossroads (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1955), pp. 53-56.

(9) No interference was allowed in lawsuits or any other such matter.

(10) General helpfulness was encouraged where possible in the economic problems of the people. In China Nevius brought in numerous tools, plants and fruit trees to help the people. Most of the experiments were failures, but eventually he established an orchard which was a success.<sup>18</sup>

Much criticism has been leveled at the "old method" of mission work. Because of the people's poverty, the missionary often felt he could not ask for the people's financial support. So he built churches, educated the children, trained the pastors and leaders in a foreign manner all paid by foreign sources. The problems this brought were that the young church's growth was limited by the supply of foreign resources, the church built by foreign sources were built to compare with churches in other countries, pastors trained abroad became used to living at higher standards of living, national Christians became dependent on missionary money-- called "rice Christians," and the salaries of the national workers often rose far higher than what the national people could ever afford to pay them.<sup>19</sup> Making paid agents of the new converts hurt the stations with which they were connected,

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<sup>18</sup>Charles Clark, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>19</sup>Floyd E. Hamilton, "The Self-Support System in Korea," *The "Nevius Method" in Korea*, edited by Thomas Cochrane (London: World Dominion Press, 1930), pp. 3-5.

and in the long run also hurt them personally. This system made it difficult to judge the true disciples from the false. The employment system invited a mercenary spirit among the Christians and tended to stop voluntary work by the unpaid agents. The old system lowered the character and lessened the influence of the missionary enterprise both in the eyes of the foreigners and in the eyes of the national workers.<sup>20</sup>

Roland Allen saw the Nevius Method as an unquestionable advance towards the true apostolic method. The old system lacked the faith to entrust the early converts with the doctrine and rites of the church.<sup>21</sup> The chief advantage of this new system was that the growth of the church was not limited to the foreign funds available. The whole system was elastic and would spread as fast as the missionary could serve. It combatted the idea of letting the missionary do all the work.<sup>22</sup>

As with the method proposed by Anderson and Venn, the Nevius Method was also dependent on a national ministry to be trained soon after the beginning of the work. As soon as the churches were organized, national pastors were needed. So the missionaries set up three negative and four positive principles to help reach the ideals of developing a national

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<sup>20</sup>Kang, op. cit., p. 338.

<sup>21</sup>Cochrane, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>22</sup>Hamilton, op. cit., pp. 8-9.

clergy in accordance with the methods of Nevius. These principles were all logically constructed and well accepted except for the third negative one which stated: "Don't send him to America to be educated, at any rate in the early stage of mission work." The goal of this principle, as well as the others, were that the missionaries wanted to develop a self-reliant Korean ministry, not one which was half-foreignized or mercenary. This caution had a good motivation, but when followed strictly had bad results. The national leaders were to be successors to the service of the missionaries. Therefore the intellectual training and cultural character of the Korean ministers should have been elevated to the level of the missionaries in order to avoid the contrast and wide chasm between the Korean pastor and the foreign missionary. It is strange that the missionary should have minimized the intellectual standard of the Korean minister. Why should the missionary be college and seminary trained and the Korean pastor be trained only a little above his parishioners? L. George Paik asserted that the Korean ministry did not receive the respect and prestige of the people. They were not very educated. And even with the extensive Bible Class Method, the Presbyterians were characterized as being contemptuous of learning.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>L. George Paik, The History of Protestant Missions in Korea 1832-1910 (Pyeng Yang, Korea: Union Christian College Press, 1929), pp. 204-205.

The success of the work in Korea has many explanations. Some say the methods of Nevius had much to do with the success. But others find many social factors which have to be recognized as well. The Chinese-Japanese war was taking place at that time forcing Korea to face the outside world. This caused a period of readjustment and reappraisal with many people figuring there was something to the Western culture since Japan had some success with it. Korea never had strong or militant religions, though many had come from Japan and China. At the time of the initial Protestant missionary thrust all of the other faiths in Korea were weakening. The people had a psychology which was receptive, which Charles Clark labelled "docility." Politically they were weak and had a history of having to follow, though this must not be exaggerated since 98% of the people did not follow into Christianity. Many of the people were longing for relief from poverty, oppression, and distress and were hoping that the missionaries would help them. At the beginning the missionaries had the king's favor, though his major contribution was in not molesting for opposing the church. The women had a lower status and Christianity may have been seen as a way for them to be liberated, but in that situation only the men could have made the decision to change over into Christianity. Korean women could not have built a church. Some people may have become Christians as a symbol of patriotism in order to further the interests of the homeland,

particularly after the Japanese occupation in 1910. At the beginning it may have been a novelty, a new religion. Some may have come in order to get a good education since the government had only begun to build schools. The people were literate people and so were able to read Christian literature. Christianity was a comfort to the wounded spirits in days of hardships which accompanied the annexation by Japan. There was much fetish and spirit worship extent which gave the people a common ground with the biblical world. The people had a desire for peace. All of these factors had some effect on the success rate, but most of these factors were held in common with other mission fields in Korea. The one unique factor was the Nevius Method.<sup>24</sup>

One final critique, Dr. Chon Song-chon criticized the Nevius Method for evangelizing the middle class in a bourgeois society.<sup>25</sup> This criticism is interesting in light of the complaint by L. George Paik that the Korean clergy were looked down on as uneducated.

#### B. The Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement

As the name indicates, the Protestant church in the People's Republic of China is based on the Three-Self Principle.

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<sup>24</sup>Charles Clark, op. cit., pp. 255-270.

<sup>25</sup>Chon Song-chon, Schism and Unity in the Presbyterian Church of Korea, Ph. D. Thesis (New Haven, Connecticut; Yale University, 1955), p. 20, quoted in Ro, op. cit., p. 15.

This church has had a varied history. In the nineteenth century China was the pride of the missionary movement. More missionaries were sent to China than any other field, and by more groups.

Western missionary presence in China began in 1807. At first there was little success. But after the Opium War of 1840, many Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox missionaries served the Western interests and rode the wave of colonialism in order to reach the far corners of China. This colonialism provoked a continuous resistance from the Chinese people, the most famous being the Yi He Tuan (Boxer) Rebellion in 1900.<sup>26</sup> American missionaries took part in drafting many of the unequal treaties with China, for which there is much supporting evidence. They gained special privileges by aiding the imperialistic endeavors of the West which enabled them to spread the Gospel to a wider region. In 1906, Rev. Yu Kuo-chen proposed a church independent of Western control, but this never happened.<sup>27</sup>

When the Communists began threatening to take over, the missionaries spoke out against them and encouraged the Chinese

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<sup>26</sup> Donald MacInnis, "The North American Churches and China, 1949-1981," International Bulletin of Missionary Research, V (April, 1981), p. 52.

<sup>27</sup> Wallace C. Merwin and Francis P. Jones, ed., Documents of the Three-Self Movement (New York: Far Eastern Office, Division of Foreign Missions, National Council of the Christian Churches in the U.S.A., 1963), pp. 86-87.

Christians to support the Nationalist government against the Communists even though the Nationalist government at that time was corrupt and had lost the support of the people. Even before the fall of the Nationalist government, some of the Christian leaders began looking for and preparing for a change. They were disillusioned and saw hope in a new situation.<sup>28</sup>

At first there was uneven treatment of the Christians in China which caused great confusion not knowing whether or not the new government would tolerate religion. Y. T. Wu consulted with the Communist leaders in Beijing in order to alleviate the problem and begin working for a church based on the Three-Self Principle. He also established two-way communication with the leaders so their policies could be brought to the Christians and so that the problems of the churches could be brought to the leaders. Five leaders were chosen by the government as representatives and were assured of the government's cooperation. The church geared up for some major adjustments.<sup>29</sup> Since the Communist party is officially against religion, there was some question as to what the Chinese Communists' policy toward religion would be. It seems that their major aim was to rid Chinese religion of the foreign element which they viewed as a continuation of

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<sup>28</sup>Richard J. Bush, Jr., Religion in Communist China (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), pp. 170-171.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 171-176.



imperialism.<sup>30</sup> Liu Shao-ch'i, an official at the time, spoke about the safeguards of religious belief of the citizens. Though the policy was to safeguard the beliefs, they still punished the traitors who donned the cloak of religion in order to continue counter-revolutionary activity.<sup>31</sup>

At first with the Communist takeover, the missionaries had no trouble. They were allowed to remain in service positions but not in administrative. No new missionaries were allowed to come into the country. But with the Korean War the problems increased. Accusation meetings were held in which the missionaries were charged with various charges of opposing the revolution, usually cultural aggression or espionage. Many were given lengthy prison sentences and deported. They were never just simply deported, but always charged with some crime. By 1951 most of the missionaries had departed. They left not only because of their own problems, but also because they became an embarrassment to the Chinese Christians. There had been a steady drive toward an indigenous church in China, so even though the exit may have been premature it was not necessarily a defeat.<sup>32</sup>

The Chinese Christians worked with Mao toward three goals: to liquidate the missionary enterprise, to cut off dependence

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 38-40.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 40-48, 61-64.

on foreign churches, and to set up a new organization which would equate support of the new regime with patriotism. By 1951 most of the missionaries were gone or ineffective. The Edict of December 19, 1950, cut off foreign support. But the establishment of the Three-Self Movement took longer. The stages of accomplishment were: (1) the Manifesto of May, 1950, which blasted missionary imperialism, (2) the meeting of Christian leaders with Chou En-lai in April, 1951, and the appointment of a Preparatory Council to serve until a proper governing body could be established, (3) the National Conference of July, 1954, in Beijing, which set up the National Three-Self Committee, (4) the enlarged meeting of the Three-Self Committee in March, 1956, by which time the opposition had been silenced, (5) the unification of worship in all denominations in 1958, and (6) the Second National Conference which demonstrated continued work by the Christians in spite of the organization into communes, the Great Leap Forward in industry, and the regimentation of all labor which took up everyone's time.<sup>33</sup>

The Christian Manifesto was really considered the beginning of the Three-Self Movement. Its primary message was anti-imperialistic, associating missions with imperialism by their seeking to maintain the dependency of the churches. It was then necessary to break this dependency.

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<sup>33</sup>Merwin and Jones, op. cit., pp. iii-iv.

Christian churches and organizations in China should take effective measures to cultivate a patriotic and democratic spirit among their adherents in general, as well as a psychology of self-respect and self-reliance. The movement for autonomy, self-support, and self-propagation hitherto promoted in the Chinese Church has already attained a measure of success. . . . At the same time, self-criticism should be advocated, all forms of Christian activity re-examined and readjusted, and thoroughgoing austerity measure adopted, so as to achieve the goals of a reformation in the church.

And this was to be accomplished by, among other things, working out a plan so that in a short time all groups relying on foreign personnel and financial aid would be self-reliant and rejuvenated.<sup>34</sup>

Protestantism was in good shape in China by the mid-1950's. Some churches were reopened, some repaired, and a few new buildings erected. Some ordinations, baptisms, and church mergers took place. The churches were urged to get in line politically, and a few dissenters such as Wang Mingtao were repressed because they did not submit to government policy and join the Three-Self Movement, even though their refusal to join may have been on theological grounds. The period of 1955-1959 was the period of greatest freedom.<sup>35</sup> Up until 1966, financial support for the churches came from rental income on church buildings, contributions, church operated farms and small industries, and government subsidies. Church workers were often forced into secular employment to

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 19-20.

<sup>35</sup>Bush, op. cit., pp. 209-219.

support themselves.<sup>36</sup>

In 1966 the Cultural Revolution began which changed many things in China. It was a reign of terror in which the Christian church suffered a great deal. The current leaders of China denounce this as the work of the "gang of four," and make every effort to dissociate themselves from that period. It is only in the past few years that the church has been freed again and is able to communicate with the outside world. Donald MacInnis summarized his understanding of the church in China today and the Western world's proper relationship with it in a set of fifteen theses. In these he stated that since the church is only a few years out of repression, the West still does not fully understand the true and whole situation in China. The true history is only now being revealed and it is still impossible to draw conclusions or pass judgments. The West must take seriously the accusation that Christian missions were linked to Western economic and political power and exploitation. There is no separation of church and state in China, yet the church appears to be independent and authentic. The church in China must be recognized as self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating and in the best position to carry on the Christian work in China. Conventional forms of mission work are no longer possible

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<sup>36</sup>Donald MacInnis, Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China (New York: MacMillan Company, 1972), p. 157.

in China. Our relationship with them should be humble service, open and honest. The church in China is small and has limited resources, therefore the West must not overwhelm them with generosity. And the West should be sensitive to the process of reconciliation.<sup>37</sup>

The keystone of the Three-Self Movement, at least during the early part of its development, was its dissociation with anything imperialistic and its association of the missionary enterprise with Western imperialism. The theme was constantly repeated that American missionaries were tools of imperialism. The leaders were able to quote many examples such as Elijah Coleman Bridgman, the first missionary to China in the modern missionary effort, who said, "As for us Christian missionaries, it is truer to say that we are here for political reasons than for religious reasons."<sup>38</sup>

Closely associated with this was the foreignness of Christianity in China. The Chinese people, who themselves are anti-imperialistic and anti-colonial, could not then accept Christianity because of its association with colonialism and Western ways. People who joined Christianity became an appendage to Western aggression. So the saying arose, "One more Christian means one less Chinese."<sup>39</sup> Mr. Han Wenzao

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<sup>37</sup>Donald MacInnis, "Fifteen Theses About China, the Church, and Christian Mission Today," International Bulletin of Missionary Research, V (April, 1981), p. 77.

<sup>38</sup>Merwin and Jones, op. cit., pp. 34-40.

<sup>39</sup>K. H. Ting, "Retrospect and Prospect," International Review of Mission, LXX (April, 1981), pp. 26-28.

said the missionaries infected the Chinese Christians with their ways so that soon the Chinese Christians were "not able to breathe as one with the popular masses, sharing the same fate." Christianity was a "foreign religion" and people were against its use for invading China. Since it was labelled a "foreign religion," Christianity could never gain much foothold and prior to the liberation never had more than 700,000 Protestants.<sup>40</sup>

The Christian movement in China had to demonstrate its love for China in order to break the stigma which had been attached to it. Thus the Three-Self Principle came to be important at a certain stage of the Chinese church history.<sup>41</sup> This was also demonstrated by their patriotic loyalty, and their rejection of the missionary enterprise and imperialism in general.

The Three-Self Principle was interpreted by the Chinese for their own purposes. Under self-government, some disagreements were taking place which purportedly perpetrated disagreements which had been caused by the imperialists. Since connections with the imperialists had been broken off, Christians should show helpfulness and love in building up the church. Some churches ran into difficulty, so committees had

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<sup>40</sup>Yap Kim Hao, "The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) Consultation with Church Leaders from China," China Notes, XIX (Spring and Summer, 1981), pp. 158-159.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 159-160.

to be set up to deal with the problems caused by self-support. In self-propagation much work had to be done in order to get rid of the "imperialist poison" and preach the true Gospel.<sup>42</sup>

Yet the Three-Self Principle was not enough in itself. Dr. Ng Lee Ming tells of a church in Beijing which was Three-Self and self-built besides, but it was not truly indigenous. Its message was not in tune with the culture. The Three-Self formula is a favorable pre-condition for effective preaching of the Gospel, but that is only a means to an end. Independence does not guarantee indigeneity.<sup>43</sup> The Three-Self Principle is not only financial and organizational independence, it also has a spirit behind it. The Chinese circumstances forced them to be self-reliant, but they had to struggle to come to that point. Only when they wanted to remain spiritually free did self-propagation become propagation of the Christian message incarnated in their lives. The Chinese Christian movement is compared to churches in Hong Kong, many of which are self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating, yet do not have the same fierce independence. Often in these churches strings are pulled from the West or the pastors and church leaders have internalized many cultural values and lifestyles from outside.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Merwin and Jones, op. cit., pp. 93-94.

<sup>43</sup>Hao, op. cit., pp. 159-160.

<sup>44</sup>Peter K. H. Lee, "Hong Kong Receives Protestant Leaders from China," China Notes, IX (Winter, 1980-1981), pp. 147-149.

In the much publicized "Fourteen Points" of K. H. Ting, the situation in China is laid out concisely. Since religion was exploited by the colonialists and imperialists in their aggression against China, the policy decisions of the church remain wary of this. On the basis of its past history, the Three-Self Principle is now necessary for the Chinese church. The Chinese cannot return to being a "foreign religion." They are trying to grow from being a self-governed, self-supported, and self-propagated church to being well-governed, well-supported, and well-propagated. Foreign missionaries will not be invited back. Spreading the church is now the task of the Chinese Christians. Let the church take root in China today so that it will blossom later. They are a small church with many responsibilities and few resources which they are devoting to their domestic work. Though desirous of outside contact and mutual learning, they must be selective. When donations do come in from the outside, they must be careful so as not to cause dependency or disparity.<sup>45</sup> Three-Self should not mean isolation nor total reliance on one's own resources. Relationships must be set up first which will not impede progress. Limits are being continued on the foreign influence on the church in China for its own protection.<sup>46</sup>

The Chinese Christians have made significant progress.

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<sup>45</sup>K. H. Ting, "A Call for Clarity: Fourteen Points from Christians in the People's Republic of China to Christians Abroad," China Notes, IX (Winter, 1980-1981), pp. 147-149.

<sup>46</sup>Hao, op. cit., p. 160.



They have made Christianity patriotic, which is a good word. They have changed the countenance of Christianity in China, cleaning the church of old ways. And they have helped people in China gradually change their impression of Chinese Christians so that Christianity is no longer a "foreign religion." The Three-Self Principle has helped. During the Cultural Revolution they had the people's sympathy.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Ting, Retrospect, pp. 26-31.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS

The first question to be dealt with is the viability of the concept of the indigenous church today. Much criticism has been raised against the use of the word itself. The word has fallen into becoming little more than an advertising cliché.<sup>1</sup> Others claim that indigenous is not the most appropriate word since, by definition, total indigeneity would be total conformity to the culture and Christianity always comes from outside. This position claims that total indigeneity is not what is meant. Rather the goal is for Christians to feel as though their church is an original work of their own culture.<sup>2</sup>

The other problem with indigeneity is that it concentrates too much attention on the individual congregation or local church and its independence. Mission activities must be seen within the world mission of the church, and part of this includes inter-church aid. The ecumenical nature of the church points out that a church does not only live for

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<sup>1</sup>John Ritchie, Indigenous Church Principles in Theory and Practice (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1946), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Kasdorf, "Indigenous Church Principles: A Survey of Origin and Development," Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity, edited by Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1979), pp. 88-89.

itself, its own nurture, and its own fellowship, but it lives for the whole. The indigenous church concept, on the other hand, centers in on the individual church.<sup>3</sup>

This brings the discussion down to a question of what changes a group of converts into a church? This question has been answered by pointing to an organization as a link between the members, by pointing to the church as all the Christians in a given geographical area, or by pointing to the ministry as essential for the church. In any of these, the function of missions is only temporary until an autonomous church is established. However, this autonomy is limited not only by its obligations as a part of the historical and universal church, but also is limited by the leadership of the missionaries who come out of particular backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> In conjunction with this, indigenization also suggests a reaction to the foreignness of the missionary in his witness and work. The aim of indigenization is not so much changing the exotic nature of the church as of changing its parasitic character. However, the idea of being self-supporting is pragmatic and not imperative. The principles of the indigenous church should be tested by the final purpose of mission, not making converts to denominations but making people disciples

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<sup>3</sup>Peter Beyerhaus and Henry Lefever, The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 11-21.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 58-61.

of Christ. The principles of the indigenous church are sound, but several important details require changing.<sup>5</sup>

The implications of the concept of the indigenous church are that the Bible should be seen in cultural perspectives. New Christians should be brought to the Bible which is preached as a "supercultural message," and they well then have to make a decision for themselves about this message. But the missionary is often embarrassed by the different cultural values. The missionary would typically prefer the mission to be an outstation of the home church rather than an indigenous church. The missionary can make no cultural decisions for the Christians. Further, it is impossible to "found" an indigenous church. Such churches can only be planted. The missionary is often surprised when such churches do grow. The indigenous movements are often not the direct result of foreign mission work. Perhaps it is the result of a Christian's witness, but not of the witness of foreign personnel. The West is too culturally removed from other cultures to be very effective in this area.<sup>6</sup>

Though there are admittedly problems with the concept of the indigenous church, the concept must remain and be used for lack of a better word. With this as the ideal, many hindrances become apparent as missionaries try to carry out the

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<sup>5</sup>Ritchie, op. cit., pp. 23-30.

<sup>6</sup>William Smalley, "Cultural Implications of an Indigenous Church," in Kraft and Wisley, op. cit., pp. 36-42.

work in the practical situation. Problems arise such as the missionary's failure to adopt native psychology and methods because he is bound to the Western ways. The missionary does not always understand his work in proper relation to the converts, that the true measure of success is not what is done while he is on the field, but the work which still stands after he is gone. He introduces foreign aid which results in a dependent church. He lacks faith in God for the development of spiritual capabilities of the converts and hesitates to place responsibility on the young Christian's shoulders.<sup>7</sup> In order to combat these problems which arise too easily in our human nature, certain principles must be drawn up to guide the missionaries.

The principles which have traditionally been used to guide the mission in its goal of indigeneity was, as has been shown in this paper, the Three-Self Principle. The next major question to arise is whether the Three-Self Principle is still valid for today.

The major criticism against the Three-Self Principle lies in its emphasis on the "self." There are ambiguities in the term. It can mean affirming identity and working on one's own resources, or it can mean isolation and ceasing to be influenced and supported by others. Rufus Anderson and

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<sup>7</sup>Melvin Hodges, On the Mission Field. The Indigenous Church (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), pp. 12-15.

Henry Venn meant the self subject to God, but it is possible to fall back into the self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction which fails to see the need for God. The problem is that human pride is opposed to God. Ecclesiastical independence can be severing a unit from the whole of the church whereas basic unity has priority over the local church and its ministry since the church is interrelated and interdependent. Also the world mission of the church can be threatened by each local church going its own way. The church is called to jointly bring the Gospel to the world. Rich, established churches should not be limited to where they can work while a young, struggling church is expected to evangelize its whole area. Consequently the Three-Self Principle can never be the only goal of mission since the goal of mission is the proclamation of the kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the Three-Self Principle is accused of being too simplistic as an overreaction to the earlier joining of civilization and evangelization. Evangelism is defined too narrowly and leaves no room for social service and social justice. Anderson and Venn did not question the superiority of the Western culture and failed to see the need for a thoroughgoing adaptation of the young churches to the foreign culture.<sup>9</sup> These criticisms are valid and truly reflect the

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<sup>8</sup>Peter Beyerhaus, "The Three Selves Formula. Is It Built on Biblical Foundations?" in Kraft and Wisley, op. cit., pp. 25-30.

<sup>9</sup>R. Pierce Beaver, "The Legacy of Rufus Anderson," Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, III (July, 1979), p. 96.

weaknesses which result from the world view of the originators of the Three-Self Principle. However, these criticisms do not invalidate the principles themselves, Rather they show the need to add to the principles since the principles do not go far enough.

The basic concepts of the Three-Self Principle can be misapplied. Self-support is often considered the basis on which the indigenous church is to be founded. It is advisable and the soundest method of church economics, but it is not always possible. Receiving gifts by a younger church will not necessarily infringe on the indigenous character of the church. It all depends on how the funds are handled. Even if a church is self-supporting it is possible to be controlled by foreigners.<sup>10</sup>

A self-governing church is not always indigenous. Many churches are run under Western patterns of leadership even though all of the governing may be done by the nationals themselves. On the other hand, it is possible for a truly indigenous church to be governed at least in part by foreigners.<sup>11</sup>

The most clearly diagnostic of the three principles seems to be self-propagation. But this is not always true for in some places the foreignness of the church attracts

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<sup>10</sup>Smalley, op. cit., pp. 33-35.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 32-33.

people, and then self-propagation only leads to a non-indigenous group. Perhaps the Three-Self Principles are projections of the Western value system placed into idealizations of the church. Perhaps they are based on Western ideas of individualism and power. By forcing them we may not allow an indigenous pattern to develop.<sup>12</sup> However, in the past this has not been the case. Usually the problem has been that the Westerner has wanted to retain power rather than force it on an unwilling people. As was shown earlier,<sup>13</sup> the issue since World War II is that the peoples of the world have wanted the equality and respect which comes with selfhood.

The issue then is whether the Three-Self Principle is truly characteristic of the indigenous church. Several missiologists have stated that simply because a church follows the Three-Self Principle, it does not automatically follow that the church is indigenous.<sup>14</sup> In order to solve this problem, different concepts have been suggested to add to the Principle to make it more adequate. Alan Tippett has extended the list of "selves" from the original three to a total of six. These he says are the marks of an indigenous church when the church does them of its own volition.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>13</sup>Supra., p. 4.

<sup>14</sup>Kasdorf, op. cit., pp. 88-89 and Smalley, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

<sup>15</sup>Alan R. Tippett, "Indigenous Principles in Mission



It follows that the Three-Self Principle is still valid if interpreted correctly, but that by itself it is not enough. As has been shown, each of the applications of the principles which have been successful have added their own distinctive character to the method. Anderson and Venn were living in an age before cultural awareness and cultural bigotry were considered very significant. However, their principles have survived simply because they are applicable to a much wider range of significance than they ever imagined. Thus in Korea, John Nevius could apply the principle to the mission work there and make it more effective by adding the concepts of Bible Study and discipline. The Chinese could make the principle effective for themselves by adding the dimension of patriotism which has often been left out by the missionary who remains patriotic to his home country.

Wi Jo Kang affirms this conclusion by saying that the success of the Protestant work is not due to its method, but to the adaptation of the method to the situation. The method must be adaptable and bring good results. In Korea, John Nevius did not apply the principle of self-support rigidly, nor did he separate the missionary from the ordinary life and welfare of the people. Included in his program was the improvement of the temporal life as well. So the principle exists to aid the mission. Mission work can never be used

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Today," in Kraft and Wisley, op. cit., pp. 60-64.

to defend a principle. Rather principles have to be adapted and adjusted.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Wi Jo Kang, "The Nevius Methods. A Study and Appraisal of Indigenous Mission Methods," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXIV (June, 1963), p. 341.

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