Ecclesial Indigeneity and the Semantics of 'Self':
Assessing Critiques of Rufus Anderson's Indigenous Church Principles

C. S. Barefoot

Rufus Anderson's indigenous church principles constituted a major shift in missiology in the mid-nineteenth century and continue to influence missionary methods.[1] Anderson served as the general secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a Protestant missionary society in the United States. During the course of his duties as leader of the ABCFM, he began to recognize that American missionary activity often proceeded by means of cultivating Western civilization among native populations in ways that left local churches dependent on outside resources

[1] Anderson's principles of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation have become known almost ubiquitously as "indigenous" church principles, though Anderson primarily employed the term "native" to describe components of his ecclesiology (e.g., native pastorate, native ministry, etc.). Considering the pervasive use of the moniker *indigenous* within missiological discussions of Anderson's argument, however, this essay will continue to use that term to describe Anderson's principles, even though the term did not feature prominently in his writing.

for their ongoing maintenance.[2] In response to this issue, Anderson argued that missionaries, rather than pursue civilizing endeavors as the means of missions, should instead focus their primary attention on establishing local churches that are self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. Anderson's principles—which were also espoused in Europe by fellow missionary statesman Henry Venn[3]—proliferated widely in the missions community and have remained a formative influence on missionary church planting methodologies through the present day.[4]

These principles, though embraced by many, have met with criticism from others who have been leery of semantic implications associated with Anderson's indigenous church theory. Indeed, as missiologist Hans Kasdorf observes, "The problem of semantics is not easily overcome in a study of literature on the indigenous church principles. What seems to be positive in

[2] Rufus Anderson, *Memorial Volume of the First Fifty Years of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions* (Boston: ABCFM, 1862), 250; Regarding the issue of local reliance on foreign resources, Melvin L. Hodges, "Why Indigenous Church Principles?," in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1979), 9, notes, "In some places missionaries have labored for fifty years and still the local congregation is unable to carry on alone. Why is it that after ten, fifteen, or twenty years of missionary effort in a given area, we must still appeal to home churches for additional funds and workers?"

[3] Henry Venn, "The Native Pastorate and Organization of Native Churches. Second Paper, Issued July, 1861," in *Memoir of Henry Venn, B.D.: Prependary of St. Paul's, and Honorary Secretary of the Church Missionary Society*, by William Knight (London: Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday, 1882), 414–420. Venn and Anderson arrived at these principles independently of one another. The present essay delimits its scope to Anderson, whose ecclesiological and missiological sentiments, as a Congregationalist, more nearly align with Baptist conviction than do the sentiments of Venn, who wrote from an Anglican background.

[4] See, for example, J. D. Payne, *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 18–25; Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 68–70; Indigenous church principles also continue to play a formative role in the missiology of the International Mission Board. See International Mission Board, "Foundations" (2022), 55–59, https://store.imb.org/imb-foundations-digital-download/.

the terminology for one, is full of aberrations for another."[5] Terms like *self*, *indigenous*, *autonomy*, and *independence*—all of which feature heavily in missiological discussions of Anderson's indigenous church principles—assume different meanings for different interlocutors. On the critical side, negative connotations of these terms have led some to either dismiss or diminish the value of Anderson's principles of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation for missionary church planting.

Yet semantic critiques do not provide sufficient grounds for dismissing the substance and value of Anderson's indigenous church principles for missionary practice. Such critiques—which have remained largely unchallenged in missiological literature—often betray a misguided view of the prefix *self*, interpreting it in ways Anderson did not intend. This underlying misunderstanding becomes evident when viewing such critiques in light of the specifics of Anderson's argument. Ultimately, while semantics have contributed to both the misinterpretation and misapplication of those principles,[6] a recovery of Anderson's view of *self* can help reaffirm an enduring value for the three-self principles within missionary church planting today.[7]

Semantic Critiques

Semantic critiques of Anderson's principles derive from an apprehension toward the notion of *self* in those principles as stated. That is, some critics believe the prefix *self* carries unfitting implications. At least four such cri-

[5] Hans Kasdorf, "Indigenous Church Principles: A Survey of Origin and Development," in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1979), 86.

[6] Kasdorf, "Indigenous Church Principles," 86.

[7] Over the past century, missiologists have added yet other "selves" to these initial principles. See, for example, Alan R. Tippett, *Verdict Theology in Missionary Theory* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1973), 148–63; Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 193-224. Yet because this essay delimits its scope to Anderson's missiological thought, it will focus strictly on his three principles of self-support, self-governance, and self-propagation.

tiques have surfaced since Anderson began advocating for self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation. Various critics, one of the most prominent of whom was German missiologist Peter Beyerhaus,[8] have expressed misgivings with what, allegedly, the prefix *self* connotes, what it conceals, what it threatens, and what it projects.

First, some have critiqued what the term *self* connotes—namely an unhealthy sense of autonomy, independence, and even isolation from others. For example, a report delivered at the 1952 World Missionary Conference at Willingen contended, "The accepted definition of an independent church, which has all too often been confused with a definition of an indigenous church, as a 'self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating' community, needs to be reconsidered.... [I]f self-sufficiency and autonomy are isolated ends in themselves, they lead to a dangerous narrowness of view."[9] This report thus associates the three-self principles with autonomy and independence and sees these connotations as harmful. Beyerhaus believes that the autonomy implied in Anderson's principles is incompatible with biblical ecclesiology.[10] He maintains, "An understanding of the three selves formula that would render a church completely independent and cut it off from the stream of spiritual life and mutual responsibility circulating through the whole body of Christ, could never be supported from the New Testament."[11]

A close association between the drive for ecclesial autonomy and national political independence movements of the mid-twentieth century did little to quell concerns related to connotations of *self* in Anderson's princi-

[8] Peter Beyerhaus, "The Three Selves Formula: Is It Built on Biblical Foundations?," *International Review of Mission* 53.212 (1964): 393–407.

[9] "The Indigenous Church—The Universal Church in Its Local Setting," in *Missions under the Cross: Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952; With Statements Issued by the Meeting*, ed. Norman Goodall (New York: Friendship, 1953), 195–200.

[10] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 399, 403–4.

[11] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 406.

ples.[12] Some worried that anti-Western political sentiment among developing nations would inculcate among Majority World churches a desire for isolation over ecumenicity.[13] China's promotion of a national Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) appeared to confirm such suspicion concerning national assertiveness within the church against outside influence.[14] The TSPM was a Chinese Protestant initiative of the mid-twentieth century that aimed to rid the Chinese church of its foreign character.[15] Daniel H. Bays claims that it was "created explicitly to sever ties with the Western churches."[16] Under Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party, the TSPM became an arm of the central government which sought to eliminate foreign influence.[17] Thus the notion of *self* in Anderson's principles became linked in various ways to notions of autonomy, independence, and even isolation.

A second semantic critique comes from Beyerhaus, who contends that the term *self* conceals prideful opposition to God. He notes that the human self has become corrupted by sin and that the New Testament thus calls for the denial and crucifixion of self.[18] This human situation finds an analogous

[12] On the parallel movements of ecclesial indigeneity and national political independence among Majority World nations, see Bengt Sundkler, *The World of Missions*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 42.

[13] See, for example, James H. Taylor, "Principles of the Indigenous Church," *Christianity Today* 6.13 (1962): 10–11; Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 405–7.

[14] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 396, maintains that communists of China "used the formula evolved by Anderson and Venn to inaugurate the 'Three Selves Movement,' demanding that the Chinese churches sever entirely and forever any connection with missions and churches overseas."

[15] Philip L. Wickeri, "Selfhood as Gift and Task: The Example of Self-Propagation in Chinese Christianity," *Missiology: An International Review* 13.3 (1985): 261–73.

[16] Daniel H. Bays, "Chinese Protestant Christianity Today," *The China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 493.

[17] Karrie Koesel, Hu Yizhi, and Joshua Pine, "Official Protestantism in China," *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 6.1 (2019): 73; Jieren Li, "Postcolonial Analysis of the State-Church Relationship in China," *Swedish Missiological Themes* 94.2 (2006): 191–92.

[18] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 403.

situation in the life of the Church, according to Beyerhaus.[19] He contends, "It is possible for a church to manage its own affairs, maintain its own economy and win quite a number of new members, without any of these activities meeting with God's approval. They could be nothing more than collective self-assertion for the sake of power, self-satisfaction, self-sufficiency and self-extension, and this is the very opposite of what Christ meant the Church to be."[20] Beyerhaus thus maintains, "The Church should therefore hesitate to apply to itself an ideal that stresses the affirmation of the self."[21]

Third, Beyerhaus also claims that the *self* in Anderson's principles threatens world mission. He argues that the Great Commission was given to the church as a whole, not to isolated apostles who would each focus on their own geographic areas.[22] Beyerhaus thus asserts, "The church which bears responsibility for missionary work in a certain area is not only the indigenous church on the spot, but—as was stated at Willingen—every Christian group in the whole world."[23] In other words, no singular church bears exclusive responsibility for missions in a given geographical area. The local church in that area should labor together on mission with the wider church. The implied autonomy of Anderson's principles appears, according to Beyerhaus, to imperil such relationships between local and foreign churches, and thus threatens the Church's mission by potentially cutting off local churches from vital assistance from abroad.

Finally, anthropologist William Smalley has claimed that the notion of *self* in indigenous church principles simply projects American individualism. He asserts, "I strongly suspect that the three 'selfs' are really projections of our American value systems into the idealization of the church, that they

[19] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 403.

[20] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 404.

[21] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 403.

[22] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 406.

[23] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 407.

are in their very nature Western concepts based upon Western ideas of individualism and power. By forcing them on other people we may at times have been making it impossible for a truly indigenous pattern to develop. We have been Westernizing with all our talk about indigenizing."[24] In other words, the principles of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation derive more from Western cultural sentiment than they do from either Scriptural precedent or sound missiological reflection, according to Smalley.

These critiques all reflect misgivings with the notion of *self* in Anderson's indigenous church principles and, per Beyerhaus, justify a dismissal of the three-self formula, at least as it has been classically stated. For one, Beyerhaus and Henry Lefever maintain that the notion of *self*—if unqualified—remains at odds with a New Testament view of the church. They contend, "The concepts of self-government, autonomy, or independence, are, by their literal meaning and their political, social, and ethical analogy, unsuited to describe the nature of the Church unless they are given an entirely new content. Taken literally, they presuppose that the Church as a social entity can exist by itself, an impossible thing according to the Bible."[25] Moreover, the practical outworking of that notion of *self* warrants a dismissal of Anderson's principles, according to Beyerhaus. While he recognizes merit in such principles, he nevertheless concludes, "[A]lthough the formula once served as an excellent strategical challenge, we can hardly continue to use it, in view of the fact that it has already been found to lead to an attitude of self-sufficiency and jealousy, incompatible with the ecumenical age in which we now live."[26]

---

[24] William A. Smalley, "Cultural Implications of an Indigenous Church," in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1979), 35.

[25] Peter Beyerhaus and Henry Lefever, *The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 112. This point of contention leads Beyerhaus and Lefever to affirm not the autonomy of local churches, but their "Christonomy"—that is, the rule of Christ in and over them. They assert, "[T]he church cannot but be 'Christonomous,' acknowledging Christ's rule of love as the principle of its life" (p. 113).

[26] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 407.

Anderson's Argument

These semantic critiques warrant an exploration of Anderson's promotion of indigenous church principles and a consideration of how he understood the prefix *self*. The historical and literary context of Anderson's advocacy of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation centers around the issue of civilization and its place in the missionary enterprise. A long precedent had existed in which Christian missionaries weaved together endeavors to evangelize with other endeavors that sought to build up social institutions which missionaries considered proper for a flourishing Christian society. Anderson noted, "Our idea of the Christian religion from our childhood has been identified with education, social order, and a certain correctness of morals and manners; in other words, with civilization."[27]

Anderson saw that the work of civilizing local populations thus often accompanied the propagation of Christianity. Anderson cited an example from the work of the ABCFM among the Native American population. According to an 1816 report, the aim of the mission to Native Americans was "to make them English in their language, civilized in their habits, and Christian in their religion."[28] One finds similar sentiments among missionaries to the Hawaiian Islands. Anderson noted that pioneer missionaries to the archipelago "were instructed 'to aim at nothing short of covering those Islands with fruitful fields and pleasant dwellings, and schools and churches, and of raising the whole people to an elevated state of Christian civilization.' "[29]

Yet Anderson questioned the place of such civilizing work among missionary endeavors. He pointed out, "A question often mooted at the outset of modern Christian missions, and sometimes mooted now, is, whether sav-

[27] Rufus Anderson, *Foreign Missions: Their Relations and Claims* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1869), 94–95; See also Anderson, *Memorial Volume*, 250.

[28] Quoted in Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 97.

[29] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 97.

ages must be civilized before they can be Christianized."[30] In other words, Anderson sought to clarify the relationship between the work of civilizing and that of evangelizing, and his conclusion went against grain of common missiology at that time.[31]

In his view, the work of cultivating civilization should not serve as a precursor or requisite accompaniment to evangelism. For one, such civilizing processes were ineffective for church growth. Highlighting the ineffectiveness of cultivating civilization to achieve spiritual ends, Anderson noted that one ABCFM mission gradually scaled back the incorporation of American mechanics and farmers in its work. He explained, "The honest aim in sending these secular helpers was to aid the preaching missionaries. But the means were found to be inappropriate. A simpler, cheaper, more effectual means of civilizing the savage, was the gospel alone."[32] Moreover, those locals who became most "civilized"—according to social and material standards—often remained closed to the gospel.[33]

Not only were civilizing processes ineffective in leading locals to embrace the gospel, but they also portrayed Christianity as foreign to local contexts. In reference to an ABCFM mission in Beirut, Anderson noted how this foreignness materialized in a local high school established by the mission. He explained, "The literature of Western civilization was taught through the English language, and the boarding, lodging, and clothing had a Western type. The pupils were faithfully instructed in the Scriptures; but it was found, that the tendency of their training, on the whole, was to make them foreign

[30] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 96. While this essay seeks, in part, to underscore the ongoing value of Anderson's indigenous church principles, Anderson yet does not stand above critique. For example, his use of the disparaging term "savages" here in reference to foreign peoples unfortunately betrays anthropological views that were then popular, but have since been debunked.

[31] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, ix.

[32] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 97–98.

[33] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 98–99.

in their manners, foreign in their habits, foreign in their sympathies; in other words, to denationalize them."[34]

Moreover, Anderson claimed that emphasizing such civilizing processes did not reflect the biblical—particularly the Pauline—precedent of church planting. He claimed, "In our undue estimate of the influence of civilization, as an auxiliary to the gospel in sustaining the higher Christian life among the heathen . . . the apostle's example has by no means had its proper influence. We have been slow to believe, that native churches, or native pastors, with forms of civilization so inferior to our own, or so very unlike it, could stand without foreign aid."[35] In other words, Anderson believed missionary methods that fronted civilizing processes rather than focusing on evangelism and church planting were at odds with biblical patterns of missions.

This civilizing approach to missions ultimately undermined the maturation of local churches, according to Anderson. He contended that a failure to follow the apostle Paul's pattern led to "the prolonged existence of mission churches with their centre and seat at the residence of the missionary. . . . They often had native preachers, indeed, stationed at some of the more important points in the district, but no native pastors; the whole church membership being long retained under the pastoral supervision of the missionary himself."[36] In such scenarios, local churches and believers lacked opportunities to grow in responsible leadership, for all such responsibility resided with the missionaries. Anderson yet argued, "The child will never stand and walk firmly, if always in leading-strings."[37] That is, younger churches will not mature if they never assume responsibility for their own lives.

[34] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 99.

[35] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 101–2.

[36] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 102.

[37] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 104.

Anderson thus sought a return to what he saw as the biblical pattern of missions—to the spiritual work of evangelism and church planting as primary missionary tasks.[38] He concluded, "Education, schools, the press, and whatever else goes to make up the working system, are held in strict subordination to the planting and building up of effective working churches."[39] He emphasized "the gospel as a converting agency,"[40] and sought to steer the ABCFM away from methods that sought to prop up the gospel by material means.

Against this backdrop Anderson began urging missionaries to focus their efforts on establishing churches—particularly ones that are self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. He claimed, "As soon as the mission church has a native pastor, the responsibilities of self-government should be devolved upon it. Mistakes, perplexities, and sometimes scandals, there will be; but it is often thus that useful experience is gained, even in churches here at home.... [A]nd the church should become self-supporting at the earliest possible day. It should also be self-propagating from the very first. Such churches, and only such, are the life, strength, and glory of missions."[41] In other words, Anderson believed that missionaries should establish local churches that are able to lead themselves, financially support themselves, and also serve as agents of mission in their locations. Such is the "first duty of a missionary."[42]

The notion of *self* in Anderson's three principles connotes freedom from undue reliance on foreign resources. Anderson was concerned that civilizing

[38] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 47, argues that the apostle Paul's "grand means, as a missionary, was the gathering and forming of local churches."

[39] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 113. Anderson did not altogether reject such civilizing endeavors. He simply believed that they remain subordinate to the task of establishing churches.

[40] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 95.

[41] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 112.

[42] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 110.

processes had undermined local initiative and caused local churches to rely on foreign subsistence for their ongoing life. He argued instead that local churches should be "self-reliant."[43] The implied polarity that frames this emphasis on ecclesial self-reliance is between local churches and the work and resources of foreign missionary societies. When Anderson emphasized self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation, he did so not in contradistinction to reliance on God—as if local churches were to trust in their own capabilities. Rather, Anderson's notion of *self* stood in contradistinction to excessive reliance on foreign funding, leadership, and evangelistic endeavors as they came from missionary organizations abroad.

Thus, one must understand Anderson's emphasis on *self* not as an endorsement of a church's spiritual self-sufficiency over the sustaining power of Christ, but as a reaction to what Anderson saw as an unhealthy missiological precedent. Anderson's notion of *self* served as a response to the civilizing focus of modern missions which tended, in his view, to denationalize converts, impede local church maturation, and stimy the advance of the gospel. It was part of his attempt to apply New Testament observations concerning the establishment of local churches to existing patterns of missionary work, by way of critique.

Semantic Clarity

What then can one say in reference to semantic criticisms of Anderson's indigenous church principles? The least forceful of the aforementioned critiques is Beyerhaus's claim that the notion of *self* conceals prideful opposition to God. Not only is Beyerhaus's analogy between the human self and the church questionable, nothing in Anderson's writing suggests that he espoused his principles as a means of buoying the church's sense of pride and self-accomplishment—as if the church could sustain itself apart from Christ. Rather, Anderson affirmed that local churches were to remain "under the su-

[43] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 111, 113, 117.

pervising grace of God."[44] While Beyerhaus points out the possibility of local churches operating for the sake of power and their own self-satisfaction, the term *self* does not automatically or necessarily conceal such a connotation, and it certainly does not in Anderson's writing.

The critique that the term *self* betrays an unhealthy sense of autonomy, independence, or isolation also appears wanting in reference to Anderson's argument. Beyerhaus and Lefever assert, "The concepts [of self-government, autonomy, and independence] can be used only in a particular and limited sense by which pre-fixes like 'auto'-, 'in'- and 'self'- refer only to human authorities and are alien to the nature of the Church."[45] In other words, they believe that the prefix *self* cannot refer to the church as it relates to Christ, but only as it relates to other human institutions—e.g., the foreign missionary organization. Beyerhaus and Lefever offer this critique as if Anderson and other proponents believe otherwise. Yet it is clear from Anderson's writing that his use of the prefix *self* stood in relation to foreign missionary stakeholders, not in relation to Christ and his reign. Thus, Beyerhaus and Lefever's contention here—at least as it relates to Anderson's case—amounts to a straw man fallacy; they reject the notion of *self* by claiming something with which Anderson would have readily agreed. Self-governing churches always remained, in his view, under the authority and direction of Christ.[46]

Moreover, Anderson's use of *self* did not imply local churches cutting themselves off from the wider church. Contrary to this sentiment, he claimed that the business of the missionary "is to plant churches, in well-chosen parts of his field, committing them as soon as possible to the care of native pastors; himself *sustaining a common relation to all*, as their ecclesiastical father and adviser; having, in some sense, like the apostle, the daily care of the

[44] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 49.

[45] Beyerhaus and Lefever, *Responsible Church*, 112.

[46] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 49.

churches."[47] Anderson thus affirmed a sense of ongoing outside influence in the life of local churches (albeit an influence that does not undermine local responsibility).[48] That the Chinese TSPM coopted his indigenous church principles to insulate itself was, according to missions historian R. Pierce Beaver, a "travesty of the concept."[49] Beaver concludes, "The three-self formula was originally devoid of many of the connotations later supposedly derived from it. A church which lived to itself would be abhorrent to Anderson."[50]

Moreover, while Beyerhaus saw the notion of *self* in Anderson's principles as a threat to world mission, Anderson understood self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation as aids to that mission. In reference to self-governance, he claimed that "native pastors form an essential element in native churches, to make them healthful, vigorous, self-supporting, and aggressive."[51] The aggressiveness to which Anderson referred was a missional aggressiveness—a posture of actively advancing the gospel throughout the world. He held such native missionary activity in high regard, noting that due to evangelistic activity among local believers, "many a beautiful Christianized group in the broad Pacific is now manned solely by native missionaries and pastors."[52] Further, the planting of self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating churches across the world would, according to Anderson, hasten

[47] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 112, emphasis added.

[48] Anderson, *Memorial Volume*, 252; Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 120, notes that the promotion of self-reliance among local churches does not preclude "the aid of judicious advice from their missionary fathers."

[49] R. Pierce Beaver, "The Legacy of Rufus Anderson," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3.3 (1979): 96.

[50] R. Pierce Beaver, "Rufus Anderson, Grand Strategist of American Missions," in *To Advance the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson*, ed. R. Pierce Beaver (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 31.

[51] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, x.

[52] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 140.

a situation in which "all men have it within their power to learn what they must do to be saved."[53]

Beyerhaus's concern that Anderson's principles would cut off local churches from missional assistance from abroad is understandable, yet not reflective of Anderson's argument and use of the term *self*. Not only did Anderson affirm an ongoing relationship between native churches and missionary outsiders—a relationship which is itself a form of missional assistance—Anderson insinuated that the prevalence of financially burdensome civilizing endeavors by missionaries had actually become an impediment to the spread of the gospel and growth of the church.[54] The question of whether such financial assistance from abroad serves to help or hinder local churches from engaging in missionary activity is a separate matter. The point here is that, in light of Anderson's writing, the notion of *self* in his indigenous church principles does not necessarily threaten world mission, as Beyerhaus believes. Rather, as Wilbert Shenk notes, Anderson (as well as Venn) offered his principles "as pointers toward the missionary goal of founding churches that would themselves become the means of missionary advance in the world."[55]

Finally, Smalley's suspicion that indigenous church principles serve merely as projections of American individualism likewise appears unwarranted in light of Anderson's argument. While Anderson was, in some ways, a product of his time, and while it is certainly plausible that Enlightenment tenets shaped Anderson's missiological vision, Smalley yet offers his critique without any corroborating support. If, as Smalley supposes, Anderson's notion of *self* was an illegitimate outgrowth of a Western value system that enfranchises individualism, then one would expect to find Anderson mishandling the text of Scripture accordingly. However, Smalley does not account

[53] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 117.

[54] Anderson, *Memorial Volume*, 250–51; Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 96–108, 118.

[55] Wilbert R. Shenk, "Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn: A Special Relationship?," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 5.4 (1981): 171.

for Anderson's appeal to Scripture or attempt to demonstrate how the *self* in Anderson's principles is rooted less in the biblical text and more in American individualistic thought.

A careful reading of Anderson reveals that he consistently rooted his advocacy of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation in the New Testament—particularly the Pauline pattern of missionary church planting therein.[56] This pattern of missions served as the basis for his missiological agenda. For example, regarding the apostle Paul, Anderson observed,

> His grand means, as a missionary, was the gathering and forming of local churches.... Such was the apostle's custom. He thus in each place put in requisition the power of association, organization, combination, of a self-governed Christian community; and the churches must necessarily have been self-supporting. They were formed for standing without foreign aid. And that they possessed a singular vitality, that they were self-propagating, as well as self-governing and self-supporting, is evident from the tenor of the Epistles addressed to them by their founder.[57]

This pattern, moreover, "ought to be regarded as substantially the model for Christian missions to the heathen in all subsequent ages."[58] While scholars continue to debate the normative value of Pauline methods for today,[59]

---

[56] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 44–61.

[57] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 47–48.

[58] Anderson, *Foreign Missions*, 29.

[59] See, for example, Dean S. Gilliland, *Pauline Theology & Mission Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998); Christopher R. Little, *Mission in the Way of Paul: Biblical Mission for the Church in the Twenty-First Century*, Studies in Biblical Literature 80 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008); Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry, eds., *Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012); Robert L. Gallagher, "Missionary Methods: St. Paul's, St. Roland's, or Ours?," in *Missionary Methods: Research, Reflection, and Realities*, ed. Craig Ott and J. D. Payne, Evangelical Missiological Society Series 21 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2013), 3–22; Ross Frierson, "The Dynamic

it is clear that Anderson derived his notion of *self* from his reading of the NT. This fact undermines Smalley's unsubstantiated claim that the prefix *self* betrays a Western ideology at odds with indigenization.

Thus semantic critiques of Anderson's indigenous church principles do not cohere with the way Anderson himself understood the term *self*. Contrary to such concerns, Anderson's notion of *self* did not entail prideful opposition to God, ecclesial isolation, or a retreat from world mission. Neither does Anderson's explication of his principles reveal an excessive influence of Western individualistic philosophy. Rather, Anderson employed the prefix *self* to describe what he perceived as characteristic of churches documented in the New Testament. According to him, such churches took responsibility for their own governance, finances, and propagation, rather than outsource that work to foreign agents. This observation served for Anderson and the ABCFM as a critique of existing patterns of missions and a call to return to the New Testament as the formative basis of missionary practice.

Moreover, by misconstruing the notion of *self* in Anderson's indigenous church principles, semantic critiques tend to overlook the substance of Anderson's argument. He was not advocating a sense of self-sufficiency that would undermine the church's reliance on Christ or isolate local churches from a wider fellowship; he was simply urging missionaries to establish churches that would take responsibility for their ongoing life. As Robert Reese notes, "The word 'self' was not meant to indicate self-centeredness or absolute autonomy, but rather responsibility and maturity. It did not mean to exclude reliance on God, but indicated that these churches had no need to remain dependent on outsiders."[60] By quibbling over semantic associations

Nature of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God: How Acts Lays a Sure Foundation for the Mission of the Church," *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2.1 (2023): 1–9; David Paul, "Validating Pauline Emulation as a Missiological Hermeneutic in Second Timothy," *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 22.2 (2023): 61–79; J. Snodgrass, "The Work Missionaries Do: Itinerant Church-Planting," *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 3.2 (2024): 1–10.

[60] Robert Reese, "The Surprising Relevance of the Three-Self Formula," *Mission Frontiers* 29.4 (2007): 26. Reese only briefly addresses the semantics of self. The present essay has

unintended by Anderson, however, some critics dismiss the contemporary missiological value of Anderson' principles. Yet, as this essay has sought to demonstrate, semantic critiques—which have heretofore gone largely unchallenged—do not provide sufficient grounds for such a dismissal.

Conclusion

Whether one rejects the term *self* or opts to employ other terminology,[61] the substance and value of Anderson's argument remain the same: local churches should assume responsibility to govern themselves, financially support themselves, and bear witness to the gospel in their contexts. These principles are as relevant today as they were in Anderson's day. Issues related to self-support, for example, still beset the missionary enterprise. Some local church pastors in various areas of the world continue to receive salary stipends from foreign churches and mission agencies—a precedent that finds ongoing support in some circles despite compelling arguments against the practice.[62] Moreover, that precedent can undermine local church gov-

sought to further explore this issue of semantics in reference to Anderson's indigenous church principles.

[61] Charles Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey* (Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994), 89, for example, affirms indigenous church principles and asserts that one might refer to them as "Christ-sustained" activities.

[62] For example, GFA World (formerly called Gospel for Asia) raises tens of millions of dollars each year from Western countries, in part, to fund national Christian workers in various Majority World countries. GFA World is hardly alone in this endeavor; many Western organizations exist to financially support national ministers overseas. Although such workers are sometimes labeled "missionaries," they often function more truly as pastors of local churches, and the support they receive serves as de facto support for the churches they lead. For a rationale behind such ongoing financial support, see Bob Finley, "Send Dollars and Sense: Why Giving Is Often Better than Going," *Christianity Today* 43.11 (1999): 73–75; For compelling, though dated, critiques of this precedent, see John Ritchie, *Indigenous Church Principles in Theory and Practice* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1946), 26–30; Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes Which Hinder It*, 2nd. Ed. (London: World Dominion, 1949), 14–15; Following similar reasoning of such critiques, the International Mission Board, "Foundations," 59, has stated, "We strongly encourage the use of local resources to meet local church needs in order that those churches might learn good stewardship, experience the joy of sacrificial giving,

ernance, as those who control the funding typically retain a measure of power and control over the affairs of those churches. Such realities warrant a fresh consideration of the value of Anderson's principles for contemporary missions practice.

In fact, despite Beyerhaus's dismissal of the formula as classically stated, he himself recognizes value in Anderson's claims. He acknowledges that Anderson and Venn's principles contain "essential truth in that, according to the New Testament, 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 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."[63] That Beyerhaus nevertheless dismisses Anderson's stated principles underscores the unnecessary confusion that semantics have sown in this missiological conversation. While one could argue, as Beyerhaus does, that it would be better to affirm not the church's "self" but its "responsibility,"[64] such a change in terminology does not impinge upon Anderson's basic argument; if anything, it reaffirms the enduring value of his claims.

Those missiological claims of Anderson, moreover, stand squarely in line with Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonian church. Paul urged the church "to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before

---

and present a more credible witness in their locations. Many missionaries and local leaders have witnessed the harmful effects of dependency on planting and multiplying churches. Dependency occurs when a local church requires resources from outside of its own members in order to carry out the core biblical functions of a church under normal conditions. Funding from foreign sources often comes from the best of motives and from very generous hearts, but the unintended consequences can be harmful to church health and multiplication. Therefore, we as an organization will not use foreign funds to pay the salaries of pastors or to build church buildings, and we will not be conduits of such funds from well-meaning churches and Christians in North America."

[63] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 402.

[64] Beyerhaus, "Three Selves Formula," 404.

outsiders and be *dependent* on no one" (1 Thess 4:11–12, emphasis added). Dependence here for Paul referred not to dependence on Christ, but an undue dependence on others.[65] Similarly, the kind of independence Anderson advocated through his three-self principles stood not in contradistinction to reliance on Christ, but rather an overreliance on foreign resources which, in Anderson's view, tended to denationalize converts, inhibit local church maturation, and undermine the advance of the gospel. Thus, while indigenous church advocates are not above critique,[66] and while Anderson's theory certainly does not embody the fullness of biblical ecclesiology or missiology, the substance of Anderson's indigenous church principles remains valuable today, even in the face of semantic critiques that claim otherwise.

[65] Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984), 86, notes regarding these verses, "Paul's words may mean 'that you may have need of nothing' or 'that you may have need of no one'; either gives a good sense. Those living on the charity of others needed to be told not to depend on men. But Paul may mean that anyone who works constantly will find ample provision for all his needs; he will have no lack of anything. Either way, he insists on the importance of being independent."

[66] For a helpful critique of indigenous church theory, see E. Luther Copeland, "Indigenous and More: Toward Authentic Selfhood," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 11.3 (1974): 501–13; Regarding an apparent lack of cultural perspective in the three-self formula, Reese, "The Surprising Relevance of the Three-Self Formula," 26, notes, "Cultural anthropologists objected that the Three-Self Formula describes 'indigenous' churches in terms of church policies rather than in terms of the culture itself. As missionaries became more aware of anthropology, this appeared to be a major deficiency in the formula." Further, when proponents of ecclesial indigeneity did consider the issue of culture, they often did so from the perspective of structural functionalist anthropology, with its emphasis on traditional cultures as static and monolithic. This precedent gave rise to an emphasis on "contextualization" within the World Council of Churches, which sought to move beyond prior understandings of indigenization by recognizing the dynamic and contested nature of cultures. See, for example, Theological Education Fund, "A Working Policy for the Implementation of the Third Mandate of the Theological Education Fund," in *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment*, by Bruce C. E. Fleming (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1980), 86.

Bibliography

Allen, Roland. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church: And the Causes Which Hinder It*. 2nd. Ed. London: World Dominion, 1949.

Anderson, Rufus. *Foreign Missions: Their Relations and Claims*. New York: Charles Scribner, 1869.

———. *Memorial Volume of the First Fifty Years of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*. Boston: ABCFM, 1862.

Bays, Daniel H. "Chinese Protestant Christianity Today." *The China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 488–504.

Beaver, R. Pierce. "The Legacy of Rufus Anderson." *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3.3 (1979): 94–97.

———. "Rufus Anderson, Grand Strategist of American Missions." Pages 9–38 in *To Advance the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson*. Edited by R. Pierce Beaver. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967.

Beyerhaus, Peter. "The Three Selves Formula: Is It Built on Biblical Foundations?" *International Review of Mission* 53.212 (1964): 393–407.

Beyerhaus, Peter and Henry Lefever. *The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964.

Brock, Charles. *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey*. Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994.

Copeland, E. Luther. "Indigenous and More: Toward Authentic Selfhood." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 11.3 (1974): 501–13.

Finley, Bob. "Send Dollars and Sense: Why Giving Is Often Better than Going." *Christianity Today* 43.11 (1999): 73–75.

Frierson, Ross. "The Dynamic Nature of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God: How Acts Lays a Sure Foundation for the Mission of the Church." *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2.1 (2023): 1–9.

Gallagher, Robert L. "Missionary Methods: St. Paul's, St. Roland's, or Ours?" Pages 3–22 in *Missionary Methods: Research, Reflection, and Realities*.

Edited by Craig Ott and J. D. Payne. Evangelical Missiological Society Series 21. Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2013.

Gilliland, Dean S. *Pauline Theology & Mission Practice*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998.

Hiebert, Paul G. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985.

Hodges, Melvin L. "Why Indigenous Church Principles?" Pages 6–14 in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*. Edited by Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley. Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1979.

"The Indigenous Church—The Universal Church in Its Local Setting." Pages 195–200 in *Missions under the Cross: Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952; With Statements Issued by the Meeting*. Edited by Norman Goodall. New York: Friendship, 1953.

International Mission Board. "Foundations." 2022. https://store.imb.org/imb-foundations-digital-download/.

Kasdorf, Hans. "Indigenous Church Principles: A Survey of Origin and Development." Pages 71–86 in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*. Edited by Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley. Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1979.

Koesel, Karrie, Hu Yizhi, and Joshua Pine. "Official Protestantism in China." *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 6.1 (2019): 71–98.

Li, Jieren. "Postcolonial Analysis of the State-Church Relationship in China." *Swedish Missiological Themes* 94.2 (2006): 185–206.

Little, Christopher R. *Mission in the Way of Paul: Biblical Mission for the Church in the Twenty-First Century*. Studies in Biblical Literature 80. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

Morris, Leon. *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984.

Ott, Craig, and Gene Wilson. *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.

Paul, David. "Validating Pauline Emulation as a Missiological Hermeneutic in Second Timothy." *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 22.2 (2023): 61–79.

Payne, J. D. *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009.

Plummer, Robert L., and John Mark Terry, eds. *Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012.

Reese, Robert. "The Surprising Relevance of the Three-Self Formula." *Mission Frontiers* 29.4 (2007): 25–27.

Ritchie, John. *Indigenous Church Principles in Theory and Practice*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1946.

Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.

Shenk, Wilbert R. "Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn: A Special Relationship?" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 5.4 (1981): 168–72.

Smalley, William A. "Cultural Implications of an Indigenous Church." Pages 31–51 in *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*. Edited by Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisley. Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1979.

Snodgrass, J. "The Work Missionaries Do: Itinerant Church-Planting." *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 3.2 (2024): 1–10.

Sundkler, Bengt. *The World of Missions*. Translated by Eric J. Sharpe. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965.

Taylor, James H. "Principles of the Indigenous Church." *Christianity Today* 6.13 (1962): 10–11.

Theological Education Fund. "A Working Policy for the Implementation of the Third Mandate of the Theological Education Fund." Pages 83–87 in *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment*. By Bruce C. E. Fleming. Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1980.

Tippett, Alan R. *Verdict Theology in Missionary Theory*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1973.

Venn, Henry. "The Native Pastorate and Organization of Native Churches. Second Paper, Issued July, 1861." Pages 414–20 in *Memoir of Henry Venn, B.D.: Prependary of St. Paul's, and Honorary Secretary of the Church Missionary Society*. By William Knight. London: Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday, 1882.

Wickeri, Philip L. "Selfhood as Gift and Task: The Example of Self-Propagation in Chinese Christianity." *Missiology: An International Review* 13.3 (1985): 261–73.

C. S. Barefoot (PhD, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) serves with the International Mission Board in South Asia, where he labors alongside nationals to make disciples and plant churches. He is also the author of Hermeneutical Community: Pursuing Local Theology in Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective.