Indigenization:
The Fundamentals

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What is indigenization in Christian mission? The heart of indigenization is the conviction that churches that are the fruit of missionary effort should be able to carry out all the functions of a healthy church and be fully engaged in the missionary task both locally and globally, without foreign resources or control. This definition reflects the classic "Three-Self" summary of the indigenization movement in Protestant missiology: churches should be self-governed, self-financed, and self-propagating. Many would add "self-theologizing" as a fourth essential category. In summary, churches that result from the labors of missionaries should reach the point where local believers assume full responsibility for everything the church does, and local resources provide everything needed for that work.

The opposite of indigenization is unhealthy ongoing dependence on for-eign leadership or resources. The goal of indigenization is healthy churches carrying out all components of the missionary task without the need of outside help.

Indigenization is a process. Outside help is clearly needed at the start (hence the need for missionaries to begin with), but the end vision must always be to train local believers and churches in such a way that they can carry out entry, evangelism, discipleship, healthy church formation, and

leadership development on their own, thus enabling the missionaries to exit to partnership. The goal of missionaries is to work themselves out of a job.

Indigenization is closely related to contextualization, but they are not the same thing. Contextualization refers to the process of making the gospel message, gospel messengers, and resulting churches as much at home in a new cultural context as possible without compromising biblical standards. It is largely a matter of form, and it involves such things as singing songs and hymns in local musical styles, taking your shoes off and sitting on the floor in places where that is the local custom, building buildings (if you build buildings at all) that fit with local architectural styles, and other practices of that sort. For the missionary, it means giving up freedoms and adapting to local culture in areas of life that are spiritually indifferent so that if any offense is taken, it is the offense of the gospel and not the offense of foreignness. For the gospel message, contextualization does not mean compromising the content of the gospel but rather explaining the message in such a way that possible cultural misunderstandings are addressed and the radical impact of the gospel is fully understood.

Indigenization, on the other hand, refers to church authority, responsibility, and resources. The goal of healthy missionary activity is the establishment of healthy churches that are both indigenous and contextualized.

This idea is not new. At the very beginning of Protestant missions, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutshau of the Danish-Halle Mission, who went to India as the first Protestant missionaries to the subcontinent in 1706, articulated principles that anticipated the Three-Self formula. Among other things, they resolved that an Indian church with Indian ministerial leadership should come into existence at the earliest possible date.[1] Their work in Tranquebar developed slowly, and the Christian community in the area remained small, but they remained true to their principles. Over the

[1] Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 196.

years, the Danish-Halle Mission developed Tamil-speaking churches with local leadership.

William Carey and his colleagues expressed similar convictions in the Serampore Form of Agreement of 1805. These British Baptist missionaries (William Carey, Joshua and Hannah Marshman, and William Ward) articulated their philosophy and approach to mission in a document that included this statement:

> Still further to strengthen the cause of Christ in this country, and, as far as in our power, to give it a permanent establishment, even when the efforts of Europeans may fail, we think it our duty, as soon as possible, to advise the native brethren who may be formed into separate churches, to choose their pastors and deacons from amongst their own countrymen, that the word may be statedly preached, and the ordinances of Christ administered, in each church, by the native minister, as much as possible, without the interference of the missionary of the district.[2]

The British Baptist team in Serampore went on to establish a college, chartered by the king of Denmark, for training local leaders. That college still operates, although it has wandered far from the theology of its founders.

In practice, though, missionaries from Europe and North America often operated differently in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Church and denominational leadership was kept in the hands of foreign missionaries. Foreign money subsidized both churches and other institutions (such as hospitals and schools) on the mission field. The missionary task continued to be carried out by foreign missionaries or by local workers who were paid with foreign money. All of this was done from charitable motives, but the result was that local churches were practically discouraged from assuming

[2] "Read William Carey's Serampore Form of Agreement," article 8, Association of Baptists for World Evangelism, accessed January 3, 2025, https://abwe.org/blog/read-william-carey-serampore-form-agreement-online/.

initiative, responsibility, or stewardship in either church life or the further spread of the gospel.

Two men who noticed this issue and who sought to address it were Henry Venn (1796-1873) of the Anglican Church Missionary Society and Rufus Anderson (1796-1880) of the Congregationalist American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.[3] Writing in the mid-19th century on both sides of the Atlantic, they came to the same conclusions. They were the mission leaders who started using the term "indigenous" in reference to the strategy that missionaries should pursue, and they were the ones who articulated the "Three-Self" formula: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.

Neither of these men were missionaries themselves, but an American Presbyterian missionary to China put the ideas into practice in the late 1800s. John Nevius (1829-1893) was invited by American Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries in Korea to consult with them about strategy, and his visit in 1890 proved pivotal in the history of Christianity in that country. Among other things, Nevius recommended that missionaries should not establish institutions that the indigenous church could not manage or afford, that local churches on the mission field should have local pastors, and that church buildings should be built with local resources and in the style of the local culture.[4] Nevius spelled out his method in his seminal book, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches*.[5]

One of the most famous advocates for indigenous missionary strategy was Roland Allen (1868-1947), an Anglican missionary to China. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*, published in 1912, was a far-reaching critique of missionary control and missionary methods that fostered dependence. Allen framed his proposals in light of the missionary methodology observable in

[3] John Mark Terry and J.D. Payne, *Developing a Strategy for Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 105.

[4] Terry and Payne, *Developing a Strategy for Missions,*105-106.

[5] John Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (New York: Foreign Mission Library, 1899).

the work of the Apostle Paul in the Book of Acts and the New Testament epistles. The book became a missiological classic, which is still widely read today.

Allen followed up his first book with *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church,* first published in 1927. His subtitle, *And the Causes that Hinder It*, showed his overriding concern that missionary methods that create dependence also impede the spread of the gospel. Allen's books were not well-received in his own day, but that would change in the mid-20th century, and they are now regarded as standards in Protestant missiology.

As noted, Roland Allen based his methodology on the missionary practices of the Apostle Paul. Mark Terry and J.D. Payne observe that "all proponents of indigenous missions refer to Paul's missionary strategy. They seek to understand the apostle Paul's strategy and implement it in modern times."[6] This raises the question of biblical warrant for insistence on indigeneity. Does the Bible command such a method? The answer is mixed.

It cannot be said that there are clear biblical commands for all the tenets of indigenization. No scripture verse requires that the pastor of a church be a member of the ethnolinguistic people group that makes up the congregation, although scriptural teaching on spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12, Rom 12:4-8, Eph 4:11-16) would lead one to expect that God would raise up members of the church with shepherding and teaching gifts. No passage of the Bible requires that a church be fully self-supporting financially, although biblical teaching on stewardship would point in the direction of churches taking responsibility for their own ministry. When it comes to churches embracing the responsibility to be self-propagating, the Great Commission itself (Matt 28:18-20) would seem to indicate that this is the responsibility of all Christians and all churches.

Does the Bible give affirming examples of this methodology? The answer to this question is an unambiguous yes. It is true that not everything in Paul's

[6] Terry and Payne, *Developing a Strategy for Missions,* 104.

life and ministry parallels modern international missions.[7] However, it is also true that the apostle Paul did not move to a city, plant a church, and settle down as its pastor. In his missionary ministry, local men were raised up as elders/pastors. Paul did not offer financial subsidies to the churches he planted, nor did he exercise any financial control at all. Paul planted churches and moved on.

Paul's entire strategy depended on those churches continuing the work of the Great Commission where they were. Otherwise, he could not have boldly stated that he had fulfilled the ministry of the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Rom 15:19). He had not personally proclaimed the gospel to every individual in the northeast quadrant of the Mediterranean Sea. However, he had planted a strategic string of churches throughout that region, and he expected them to continue the work. The churches we see emerge from the missionary ministry of the apostle Paul were self-governing, financially self-supporting, and self-propagating.

Paul did not abandon the churches he planted, and abandonment is not intrinsic to indigenization. After he left a city, he stayed in contact with the churches he had started. When he could, he returned to visit them. When he could not, he sent coworkers such as Timothy, Titus, Priscilla, and Aquila to strengthen those churches. The very letters of the New Testament are missionary literature, as Paul wrote to address issues that emerged in these young churches filled with new believers. Paul was an apostle, and he possessed authority that was unique to his office. Modern missionaries and church leaders do not possess that same authority, with apostolic succession being not only extrabiblical, but biblically impossible according to the qualifications set out in Acts 1:21-22. Even so, Paul raised up and encouraged local leadership.

The example of missionary activity recorded in the New Testament, then, is consistent with indigenous missionary practices. This raises the

[7] See, Eckhart Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008).

hermeneutical issue of the authority of narrative texts in ongoing church practice. Examples of practices shown positively in narrative biblical passages, at the very least, are permissive in nature. In the absence of clear commands, they are not necessarily mandatory. However, when the example lines up with biblical teaching on related subjects, it sets a paradigm that we should be reluctant to ignore. The missionary methods of the apostle Paul line up with his teaching on matters such as congregational authority, spiritual gifts, stewardship, the responsibility of a local church to support its own ministry, and the obligation of local churches to engage in the work of the Great Commission. The New Testament gives us a clear and consistent paradigm of missionary work, and this paradigm lines up with New Testament teaching on the nature and functions of a local church. It also lines up with the principles of indigenization.

It is the conviction of the International Mission Board that biblically bounded contextualization and indigenization are not only permissible, but are necessary for church health and for the ongoing spread of the gospel.[8] Ongoing foreign control and dependence on foreign resources damage the health of churches and impede Great Commission effectiveness. It is our prayer that the articles in this journal spur believers in the 21st century to reflect thoughtfully on the example of the apostles and the wisdom of our ancestors in the faith, and to shape our missionary strategies accordingly.

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[8] International Mission Board, *Foundations*, 4th ed., (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2022), 55-59.

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