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The Characteristics of the Indigenous Church

An Indigenous Church is a church that is native to its surroundings; It is "of the soil." While the word "church" denotes a divine nature with regards to its character and unity, the word "indigenous" denotes a human cultural component, reflecting the "cultural milieu in which [the church] is planted" (Pomerville 186). God uses the indigenous church to reach his creation. While being a church, the indigenous church has some unique characteristics that some churches do not have. It is a church that is very sensitive and adaptive to the particular culture of the people surrounding it. It is a church that is self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.

The indigenous church is a necessary part in fulfilling the ultimate goal of missions--the glory of God (Pomerville 32). According to Isaiah 43:6-7, people were created for God's glory, "to be like God in some ways," reflecting His nature and character (Pomerville 33). However, Romans 3:23 says that all people "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (NASB). Therefore, people are not fulfilling the ultimate goal of life--to be like God-- when they are sinning because "the image of God in them is marred" and they are separated from His fellowship. "Only through redemption is the power of sin broken so that people by their faith in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit can become morally like God" (33). Jesus, desiring to glorify God the Father (John 17:4), accomplished the immediate goal of missions--the redemption of people--by his sacrificial death on the cross (33). Christians must cooperate with God by delivering the good news to others so that they can respond to the Holy Spirit's conviction. God is glorified only when people are redeemed and set free from the bondage of sin.

Jesus provided a strategy for missions by giving the Great Commission and emphasizing to believers that they must make disciples as they go to all the nations (Matt. 28:19). Pomerville aptly states that a new Christian "needs to hear Christian truth in terms of his particular world view, problems, and spiritual needs because he must learn to follow Christ in the culture where he lives" (161). Furthermore, "redemptive mission always requires identification with people in their arena of need," just as Christ was incarnated to truly identify with people on earth (162). To best attain the immediate goal of redeeming people in particular cultures around the world, the Holy Spirit must supernaturally raise up and enable an indigenous church to reach out and identify with its surrounding community.

The indigenous church is first and foremost a church, which denotes its divine nature. Pomerville pictures the church as a community of Christians being used by God as an instrument to carry out His saving purpose (175). The church is the basis and support "for the Great Commission's main goal of making disciples" by having "individuals who are related to the Christian community "going preaching, witnessing, baptizing, and teaching" (172). Pomerville continues, "individual witnesses need the maturing and equipping ministry of the body and they need each other (Ephesians 4:12). The church is the training base for evangelistic efforts. In the church, believers gain strength through fellowship" (175). The church's main role is evangelism that persuades people to become Jesus' disciples and to become responsible members in the church so that the church is built up and can continue the cycle of evangelizing the community and glorifying God (177). Therefore, "the church is both the means and the goal of evangelism" (177).

In addition to enabling the saints to mature and to see others come to Jesus, the church is responsible for evangelizing and planting other responsible, reproducing churches within its culture and in other cultures (Acts 1:8). While all churches may have the previous mentioned qualities, the indigenous church has some distinct characteristics.

The task of the indigenous church is "for God's people worldwide to cross the cultural frontiers of numerous peoples and tribes. This must be done in order to overcome cultural differences between peoples that prevent unevangelized people from receiving the 'good news' of Jesus Christ" (Pomerville 145). McGavran perceptively observes and defends the homogenous unit principle that "people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" (163). Wagner comments well in the preface of McGavran's book that the "principle is an attempt to respect the dignity of individuals and allow their decisions for Christ to be religious rather than social decisions" (x). McGavran concurs with Michael Novak that each ethnic group should retain its own identity (163). Pomerville states, "Missionaries' neglect of ethnic image in patterns of worship, roles of leadership, methods of evangelism, and even in architecture can create cultural barriers for people whom the Holy Spirit would attract to the church. A church with a foreign appearance has difficulty in penetrating society" (147).

In regards to language and class barriers, McGavran sites as an example that English-speaking Anglo-Americans are much more likely to become Christians in an English-speaking church than in a Spanish- or Japanese-speaking church, especially in Los Angeles or San Francisco (166). Unbelievers are often hindered from understanding the gospel because of a difference in the messenger's "color, stature, income, cleanliness, and education. . . They prefer to join churches whose members look, talk, and act like themselves" (167). Although Christian congregations should have an attitude of accepting everyone from all backgrounds of life, unbelievers will often be reached only by their own kind. After a person becomes a Christian, a spirit of brotherhood can prevail amongst those who proclaim Christ as Lord, thus demonstrating the church's unity within diversity. The indigenous church "allows for diversity in the church's expression in the cultures of people. . . [yet] shows unity in the church's essential spiritual character" (Pomerville 188). The indigenous church has an aim of enabling unbelievers to come to Christ without having to cross many barriers, and therefore, they will be "much more effective than those who place them in their way" (McGavran 168).

Not all churches are indigenous. Some promote an exclusive Christian community that originates from a strong national-cultural identity that seems to disregard other people groups (Pomerville 186). Hodges describes, "a church that must depend on foreigners for its workers, that must call for additional missionaries to extend the work, that must plead for foreign funds in order to keep going, is not an indigenous church" (20). Hodges rebukes those who do not have an indigenous mind-set, "to proceed on the assumption that the infant church in any land must always be cared for and provided for by the mother mission is an unconscious insult to the people that we endeavor to serve, and is evidence of lack of faith in God and in the power of His gospel" (14). The apostle Paul "stayed a limited time in one area but he left behind him a church that could govern itself; that could finance its own expenses and that extended the gospel throughout the region" (Hodges 12).

Hodges declares, as Henry Ven and Rufus Anderson did in 1856, that "the three basic elements which make the church indigenous are: self-propagation, self-support, and self-government. Should any one of these essential elements be missing, the church is not truly indigenous" (22). It is not easy to start a church in a foreign country and to help it make a transition toward autonomy, but God has shown in His Word that He will equip His people to be self-

governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.

An indigenous church is self-governing. While there needs to be a period of time where the foreign missionary governs the affairs of the newly established church, he/she must relinquish this control and raise up responsible local individuals to provide the church's leadership, preaching, and teaching. Ephesians 4:11-12 says that God "gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (NASB). God will bestow upon native Christians the gifts necessary to administrate and govern the church (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12). The missionary must recognize the gifts from God in the local people and have a pastor chosen, followed by an election of deacons. If the church is young and lacking in spiritually mature men, a temporary board may be chosen to perform the duties of the office of a deacon. Hodges gives good advise saying that the missionary "will help occasionally with the preaching, but he should plan to withdraw more and more from the local affairs until he can leave them entirely in the hands of the nationals" (34).

The indigenous church is self-supporting. "The idea of self-support finds biblical basis in the church's stewardship and its dependence on God to meet all its needs (Matthew 6:25-34; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 4:10-19)" (Pomerville 190). While a missionary will probably begin the church with funds from his homeland, the foreigners must not depend on this money, but must learn to depend on God to provide through their own national resources. Hodges says that "under ordinary circumstances even the poorest can support a pastor according to their own standard of living if there are ten or more faithful tithing families in the congregation" (77). When the nationals contribute and sacrifice for their church, they will feel that they are a real part of its growth instead of being apathetic towards its needs.

The indigenous church is self-propagating. When people become Christians, there is a often a tremendous zeal that can be harnessed toward evangelizing others. A wise missionary will encourage and direct a new convert instead of stifling him or her (Hodges 42). With an emphasis on everybody witnessing and discipling converts in order for them to do the same, the church will be self-propagating without the sole efforts of a foreign missionary.

Additionally, an indigenous church could be self-theologizing by practically relating the Word of God to their own culture and experiences. As Hodges says, "it is vital that the converts themselves reach an understanding of the Christian life, based on the Scriptures, so that their faith is firmly grounded and they are able to 'give an answer to every man that asketh . . . a reason of the hope. 1 Pet 3:15. . . . The standard of doctrine and conduct must be an expression of the converts' own concept of the Christian life as they find it in the Scriptures" (27). An indigenous church that is relevant to its culture and autonomous in the areas of leadership, finances, evangelism, and applying the Scriptures will be glorifying to God and more effective than a church that does not have these characteristics.

Works Cited

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