

# Developing Indigenous Churches – the Scriptural Principles Involved

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The place is a mountain top somewhere in Galilee; the time sometime after the resurrection. Present are the disciples, perhaps even the “five hundred brethren at once (1 Cor. 15:6).” Suddenly the risen Lord appears. As he draws closer to speak to them, all doubts disappear. It is their risen and ruling Lord, standing there and speaking to them. From His lips comes a command which has put His disciples on the march ever since. “All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth,” He says, “go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world.” (Matt. 28:18-20).

Why turn to these words in a paper entitled “Developing Indigenous Churches The Scriptural Principles Involved”? Simply because they remind us that in the work of the Church we need to properly understand divine commands before we can profitably utilize human concepts. Only as human concepts comply completely with and fully unfold God’s directives are they something we can put to use in our kingdoms work. With this reminder we look at what Scripture says about developing indigenous churches. The first point we consider is that we are to

## Sow Sound Seed

“All power is given unto *Me*,” *Jesus* said. As God, He always had all power (ἐξουσία), the active, full ability to do as He willed. Since His incarnation; His human nature shared in this power though seldom using it. Now the exalted God-Man uses His power fully and puts it forever behind His command to make disciples of all nations. The word “therefore” reminds us that the task which would have been absolutely impossible is now gloriously possible because of His power. Also His promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” was designed to embolden and empower us. That glorifies, risen Lord would walk with and work alongside us as we carry out His command.

What was His command? “Go ye,” He said, using the aorist active participle πορευθέντες which can be translated with imperative force. “Make disciples,” Jesus commanded; using μαθητεύσατε. More is involved than making converts. We are told to make disciples. Only three other times is this verb used in the New Testament. In Matt. 13:52 we find the aorist passive participle μαθητεύθει, “every scribe *which is instructed* unto the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that is an householder.” In Matt. 27:57 we have the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular aorist indicative passive ἐμαθητεύθη, where it says of Joseph, “who also himself *was Jesus’ disciple.*” And in Acts 14:21 we have the aorist active participle μαθητεύσαντες. Where it says of Paul and Barnabas at Derbe that “they *had taught* many.” These uses of the verb form show us that instruction involved, learning about matters pertaining to the kingdom and about Jesus.

Who are to be made disciples? πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, Jesus said, “all nations.” In their lexicons both Arndt-Gingrich and Thayer show how τὸ ἔθνος can be used for 1) nation or people such as “the people of Samaria” in Acts 8:9 or “every nation of men” in Acts 17:26; 2) τὰ ἔθνη is usually used for the Gentiles, the pagans who do not worship the true God as in Matt. 6:32, 10:18 and sometimes even for Gentile Christians as in Gal. 2:12 where it speaks of Peter “eating with the Gentiles.” We take for granted what the lexicons show. that “all nations” means all people or to put it a different way as Jesus did in Mark 16:16 “every creature.” Yet some apparently misunderstand these words. Donald McGavran in seeking support for his “people movement” approach writes, “Coming to the New Testament we note that Matthew 28:19 instructs Christians to disciple the tribes. In Hindu, the national language of India, the words read ‘*jatiyon Ko-chela Karo*’,” is “disciple the castes” - a much more accurate rendering of the Greek than the common English version ‘make disciples of the

nations.’ What our Lord said was precisely ‘disciple the tribes,’ the castes and families of mankind.’<sup>1</sup> No, in His great commission Christ was not directing us to seek out separate classes and specific castes of men, but to go to all nations in general.

How are we to make disciples? Christ tells us with two present active participles which as participles are subordinate to the main verb. “Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost”, He said. The form is βαπτίζοντες, though the Vatican and Cambridge codices have the aorist which would definitely put baptizing first before the teaching and thus settle forever the old Baptism argument about which comes first, but better textual evidence points to the present participle. “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you,” He continued, using διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν. Not only were all nations to be reached, but all things were to be taught. Nor was this teaching to be purely an intellectual process. It was to ‘be teaching them to τηρεῖν to keep, hold on to, guard, and preserve all things which Christ had commanded. Such keeping of necessity would fill the mind, lay hold on the heart, and exhibit itself in daily character. To hold on to all things which Christ has commanded obviously means that all things must be taught. R. C. H. Lenski puts it well, “The idea that all we really need in order to be Christians is to embrace one or two central features of the Gospel is here shown to be highly dangerous. Jesus binds us to all that He has bidden us and not merely to one or two features.”<sup>2</sup> Prof. Ylvisaker writes also, “All things must not be limited only to Jesus’ valedictories, nor only to the ethical teachings of our Lord, but the reference is to Jesus’ instruction in general from the moment He appeared in His prophetic capacity. His instruction shall be kept both as to the Law and the Gospel, inwardly and outwardly, in doctrine as well as in life, in our confession that is His will is to all who would be His disciples.”<sup>3</sup> In these words from Matthew 28:19-20 we are told what it means to be a disciple. It means to be baptized and to be taught to observe and preserve all things whatever Christ has commanded.

A brief study of several passages where the noun μαθητάς “disciple” is used can also tell us something about this “making disciples”. In John 9: 31-32 Jesus told those Jews which believed on Him, “If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” εἰν ὑμεῖς μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ ἀληθείας μαθηταὶ μοῦ ἔστε. εἰν with the subjunctive indicates a condition of expectancy. μείνητε is the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural aorist subjunctive of μένω which Arndt-Gingrich define as “figuratively not to leave the realm or sphere in which you find yourself.”<sup>4</sup> In his Gospel and in his epistles John loves to use that word μένω and thus to point out how important it is for disciples to live in Jesus’ Word. For John to remain in God’s Word consists not only of a mark, but the very essence of discipleship.

In John 13:35 Jesus in the Upper Room told His disciples, “In this shall all men know that ye are My disciples if ye have love one to another.” Again we have εἰν with the present subjunctive for a condition which is expected to be met. Being a disciple according to Jesus’ words involves one’s daily life and demands the highest form of love possible for others.

John 15:8 also points to the disciple’s life. “Herein is My Father glorified that ye bear much fruit, so shall ye be My disciples,” Jesus said. The ἵνα φέρητε is an appositional clause which unfolds what is meant by “herein.” What Christ is saying clearly is that bearing fruit is part of being a disciple.

In Luke 1:26 we find the word disciple used also. Jesus told the multitudes, “If any man come to Me and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” εἰ μισεῖ is present indicative to indicate a condition of reality. A disciple is one who wants to be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). So here Christ asks His disciples to follow Him also in this hating. Lest this be misunderstood, we quickly quote Matthew 10:37 where Jesus shows us that to hate means to love less when He says, “He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” To be a disciple means to put the Lord Jesus first, even before close family members and to surrender oneself completely to the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> Donald MacGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) p. 310.

<sup>2</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1943) p. 310.

<sup>3</sup> Joh. Ylvisaker, *The Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1932) p. 783.

<sup>4</sup> Arndt and Gingrich, *Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) p. 505.

One more passage we quote. In Matt. 16:2 Jesus “said unto His disciples, If a any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.” If anyone wills θέλει or wants to come after Jesus, to attach himself to Jesus as a disciple, he is to deny himself ἀπαρνησάσθω, to say to his old sinful flesh “I know not the man.” He is also to take up the cross ἀράτω and bear what he suffers for being a Christian. And he is to follow Christ ἀκολουθείτω or as Theyer explains the verb “to cleave steadfastly to, conform wholly to His example in living and if need be, in dying also.”<sup>5</sup>

What is involved in being a disciple? Hasn’t Christ clearly shown us? To be a disciple means to know and follow Jesus, to learn from and live for that Savior. To be a disciple means also to be a learner in the school of Christ where the textbook is all whatsoever He has commanded. A disciple then is not just one who hears God’s Word, but one who lives steadfastly in that Word, all of it. Once we realize what it means to be a disciple, Christ’s command “to make disciples of all nations” looms before us as no small task. Very much necessary is His “all power” and His “alway” if we are to carry out the divine commission which He has laid before us.

From Christ we turn to the Apostle Paul to whose example proponents of the indigenous church policy like to point and whose words they like to quote. The Apostle Paul who in little more than ten short years proclaimed the Word and established churches in four provinces of the Empire showed that he both knew and took seriously Christ’s command. At Miletus, as he was heading back to Jerusalem one last time, he could tell the Ephesian elders, “I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you,” 14, and “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” *πάσαν τὴν βουλήν τοῦ θεοῦ* (Acts 20:20,27). His own ministry involved “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever Christ had commanded”, nothing more, and certainly nothing less.

In the thirteen letters which came from his hand Paul reveals again and again the same emphasis on the whole counsel of God. To the Colossians he wrote, “I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and far those at Laodicea and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of Wisdom and knowledge” (2:1-3 NIV). Again he told then, “Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured” (x:12 NIV). These churches, dear to Paul’s and Epaphras’ hearts, were not to be deluded by error, but were to cling to all of God’s Word as others had taught it unto them. In his letter to the Ephesians among whom he had worked at least two years, much longer than elsewhere, Paul exhibited the same concern. He prayed that the Ephesian Christians “might be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19) and that they “may grow up unto Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (4:15). Paul literally labored to supply as full amount of the Word as possible to those to whom he preached so that there might be maximum growth in knowledge, faith, and godly living.

From Paul, the great missionary, also came strong encouragement for believers to keep the counsel of God pure. The Thessalonians were commanded, “Stand fast and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2:15), *κρατεῖτε τὰς παραδόσεις*. The “traditions” here, later in 3:6 and in 1 Cor. 11:2 refer to the Word, to the truth. To co-worker Timothy Paul also spoke about observing all things, “Hold fast the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me,” he commanded his “son in the faith” and fellow servant of Christ, (2 Tim. 1:13). Timothy was ever to hold onto ἔχε the pattern ὑποτύπωσιν of sound and healthy words which he had been taught by Paul. Very strongly he told Timothy, “Guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith” (1 Tim. 6:20-21 NIV). Again he urged Timothy, “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them and that from a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:14-15). Those truths

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek English Lexicon* (Marshalltown: The National Foundation for Christian Education) p. 22.

which Timothy had learned from Paul, even before that from grandmother Lois and mother Eunice, and ultimately from Holy Scripture were something he was to hold tightly to.

When it came to ordaining elders, Paul showed the same intense concern for teaching all the counsel of God. Besides qualifications expected of all Christians, Paul also stated that a bishop was not to be a “novice” νεόφυτον (1 Tim. 3:6) and he thus urged Timothy to “lay hands suddenly on no man (1 Tim. 5:22).” Rather Timothy was to use men who were trained in the Word. Also bishops are to be “apt to teach” διδακτικόν (1 Tim. 3:2) and “able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). To teach others one must first be taught, even to the point as Paul commanded Titus that “holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince the gainsayers (1:9).”

We might sum up with Paul’s urgent command to Timothy, “The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the acme commit thou to faithful men who shall be able to teach others: also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Total adherence to the Word, “declaring all the counsels of God”, “teaching them to observe all things” had been of great importance for Paul, was to be of great importance for Timothy, and still must be of great importance for all who desire the office of a bishop.

All the foregoing prompts us to say “we agree” as we read Franzmann evaluation, “Everything that we know of Paul’s missionary preaching and his missionary methods makes it clear that he did not aim at creating a vague, emotional, and enthusiastic movement, but rather the firmly rooted, grounded, and established church of God, in which the Word of Christ, dwelt richly.”<sup>6</sup>

What has all this to do with the indigenous church? Sampling the various books on the indigenous church since Nevius’ *Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* was published in the late 1800’s, one is struck by how often the litany “self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting” is chanted but how seldom is heard Christ’s command “to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” We have to ask, “Should not a fourth “self” be added to the indigenous formula? Indeed does not Scripture demand that we add a fourth? If we want to build indigenous churches, as Scripture outlines, we must plant churches which will be not only self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting, but also self-disciplining. We must plant churches which know God’s Word, which follow that Word in practice, and which can detect and correct departures from that Word. In short, we must sow the solid seed of the Word.

### **Cultivate the Fruits of Faith**

Where the solid seed of the Word is sown we can expect to find the fruits of self-support, self-government, and self-propagation. Such fruits, wrought by the Word, will bud and mature. As with all fruit, sometimes the growing comes quicker and sometimes more slowly, but it will come as long as the Word is used in watering and fertilizing.

We begin with the fruit most people identify more closely with the indigenous church than any other, self-support. Melvin Hodge wrote, “Self-support is not necessarily the most important aspect of the indigenous church, but undoubtedly the most discussed.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps we, too, in the past had our eye more closely on this aspect of the indigenous church policy than on any other. At the last world mission conference held in 1977 Professor Panning in his essay, “Mission Subsidy, New Testament Policy and Practice” very ably presented what Scripture had to say about subsidy and self-support. Though Paul subsidized congregations by return visits (Acts 14: 21-22; Acts 15:36), though he wrote nine of his thirteen letters to such congregations, though he sent men like Timothy, Titus, Tychicus to bolster up such congregations (Col. 4:7-8; Phil. 2:19), though he himself only as an exception to his rule took gifts from his beloved Philippians (Phil 4:16), yet generally Paul preached to the heathen without charge and brought no financial subsidy to them. No one was to accuse him of bringing the Gospel only because he wanted to hear the coins clink in his coffers and thus he preached without charge (2 Thess. 3:7-12).

<sup>6</sup> Martin Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows* (St. Louis: CPH, 1961) p. 112.

<sup>7</sup> Melvin Hodge, *The Indigenous Church* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1976) p. 74.

He did, however, train the Christians in their faithful duty of supporting the work of the Gospel. Though he could tell the Corinthians, “I was chargeable to no man ...I have kept myself from being burdensome to you” (2 Cor. 11:9), yet he strongly enlisted their support for the needy saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 9:1f) and for his mission outreach to the west (2 per. 10:15-16). Also it was to these same Corinthians that he wrote, “Even so both the Lord ordained that they which preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel” (1 Cor. 9:11t). In Gal. 6:6 he said it again., “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor” (Gal. 6:6 NIP), and in 1 Tim. 5:18 he quoted Dent. 25:4 and Luke 10:7 as he wrote, “Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn and the laborer is worthy of his hire.” From day one Paul sought to teach Christians to bring their love offerings for the support of the work of the kingdom.

Though Paul apparently brought no financial subsidy with him and though the mission congregations in his day apparently supported their program of Gospel work, we can scarcely conclude that we must do the same. Prof. Panning summarizes, “The NT Church seemingly did not operate with subsidy, but that does not bind us in the changed conditions under which we must work. We need carefully and soberly to assess the situation of our day, to apply ourselves with prayerful earnestness to the knotty questions that arise both with having and not having a program of subsidy and then to let the Holy Spirit direct us to decisions that will best further His Work.”<sup>8</sup> We need to declare the whole counsel of God with whatever programs that requires, meanwhile looking for the fruit of self-support to ripen as fast as possible under the powerful rays of the Gospel sun.

As one reads the Acts of the Apostles and Paul’s letters, we find self-government and self-propagation emerging in the church also as fruits of faith. In Acts 6 we find the first organizing in the church when deacons were chosen by the congregation to “serve tables” διακονέω (v.6). The early church had no command from the Lord, but followed their Christian liberty in organizing something that would take care of their needs in an orderly fashion. Perhaps the church followed the pattern of the Jewish synagogue which had elders or rulers to supervise services, take care of property and watch over doctrine. That such a practice of organizing continued we know from Phil. 1:1 where Paul sent greetings to all the saints, bishops, and deacons at Philippi and from 1 Tim. 3:8f where he lists the qualifications for deacons. The interesting point is that the Bible has more to say about the qualifications of such people than about their organization. Wren more does Scripture speak about the real mission of the church which all organization is to serve as a handmaid. Waldo Warning expresses this, “The church is well governed in the-measure in which God’s Word is taught, accepted, and applied by the congregation. The basic business is to provide the richest supply of the Word for every member for the maximum growth in knowledge, in faith, in godly living, and in sharing it with others.”<sup>9</sup> Where that great commission is properly understood and responded to by joyous faith, organization will follow as needed. From the beginning such fruits of faith are to be cultivated fully among groups of Christians.

From the beginning Paul was also concerned about having qualified local clergy to serve in the congregations which he had helped found. Returning through Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe on his first missionary journey, Paul saw to it that elders πρεσβύτερος were ordained in every city (Acts 14:23). To Titus went the command to “ordain elders in every city as I had appointed thee” (1:5) and in both Titus 1 and 1 Tim. 3 definite qualifications were set down to ensure that such elders be qualified. That these qualifications included knowing all the counsels of God and being able to teach those counsels to others, we have already seen. Through revisits, letters, and the sending of personal representatives Paul assisted in this self-governing and self-propagating as necessary and possible. Yet the bulk of this seems to have been left up to the individual congregation. Certainly we will strive for the same. We will cultivate as arduously and ardently as possible the fruits of self government and self-propagation on the trees of faith. If we had before us as a nucleus a group of Scripture-oriented people like the Jews and proselytes with whom Paul could start, perhaps we would see national pastors much more quickly in our foreign fields. If we had before us a core of members trained in the synagogue where lay leadership, self-reliance, and democratic action were the norm, perhaps we would see the fruit of self-government ripen much more quickly. In most of our fields we have different conditions prevailing,

<sup>8</sup> Armin Panning, *Mission Subsidy, New Testament Policy and Practice* 1977, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Waldo Werning, *Vision and Strategy for Church Growth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977) p. 31.

so these particular fruits ripen more slowly. We do, however, have the same dynamic Word which Paul preached. When we preach that full Word fervently and employ prayerfully our God-given common sense, surely, though perhaps slowly, the fruits of self-support, self-government, and self-propagation will ripen on the tree of faith. Sow sound seed! Cultivate the fruits of faith!

SOW SOUND SEED! CULTIVATE THE FRUITS OF FAITH!

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