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CAN THE INDIGENOUS PRINCIPLE BE PRACTICALLY APPLIED?

JACOB P. KLIEVER

The simple phrase, "indigenous principle" has become a complex and a controversial expression that creates a variety of definitions in the minds of the readers. Since this phrase is under such a fog of definitions, the statement of a few New Testament principles of missions should give us a common point of departure for this discussion.

Principle 1--The Gospel is intended for the whole world. Matt. 28:19-20

Principle 2--The Gospel is to be preached to the whole world. Matt. 28:19-20

Principle 3--The Gospel is God's power unto salvation to anyone that believes. Rom. 1:16

Principle 4--Those who believe become new creatures in Christ. 2 Cor. 5:17

Principle 5--Believers are being created in Christ unto good works that have been programmed by God. Eph. 2:10

Principle 6--It is God himself that works in the believers to will and to do of his good pleasure. Phil. 2:13

Principle 7--All believers are endowed with the same spiritual potential for witnessing. I Cor. 12:11-13

Principle 8--These believers are now "One Body" being fitted together and built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. Eph. 2:16-22

Principle 9--These believers have equal competence as they gather into a group of believers to effect local churches of equal ability, quality and testimony irrespective of their racial, linguistic, geographical or cultural origin. Eph. 2:17-22

Principle 10--Believers are to be trained and equipped for the work of the service of the Church. Eph. 2:12

Rev. Jacob P. Kliever is presently Field Director of the Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church in the Central African Republic. He has served as a missionary since 1938.

We conclude then that it is God's will that the Gospel produce a Church that is indigenous in any part of the world where it is accepted. This is a challenge to missionary faith, the faith that knows that the Gospel is God's power, well able to accomplish the same quality of work in all peoples in all parts of the world.

Racial and cultural pride, class distinctions as well as the pride of geographical origin have ever been a means of testing the Church. The New Testament is not lacking in exhortation concerning this (Gal. 3:26-29; Jas. 2:3-4 etc.). Whether it is done consciously or unconsciously, these are often manifested by missionaries. Their work is very definitely affected by whatever attitude they manifest. This is especially true in Africa today. There are some missionaries who accept and even teach that the "dark" race (even to the point of having only one drop of Negro blood in their veins) is inferior to the rest of the human family. They hold also, that the Negro race is doomed to be subservient to others all of their racial existence. This is supposedly based on the conclusion of those who saw Genesis 9 and related passages as justification to make slaves of the Negro. There are also some missionaries who regard themselves as superior to the people to whom they have come. The Apostle Paul had something to say about that attitude in 1 Cor. 9:19-22. Most missionaries, however, do not count their racial or national origin as any advantage in Christ, and consider themselves as being the servants of all to gain or win them for the Lord. The matter of attitudes is very important because this very definitely determines to what degree the missionary will make a practical application of the indigenous principle.

In discussing the application of this principle in the continent of Africa, it is to be noted that many parts of Africa are now closed to the work of foreign missions. The following statements concerning the practical application of the indigenous principle are from first-hand observance, or from conversations with the missionaries involved. These are proof that the best and the abiding results of missionary work are where there has been a serious and practical application of this method. One of the observations could be classed as a negative proof. It is that as some see that time is running out in Africa, they are now making an all-out attempt to apply the indigenous principle. This is a confession that other methods are not the best. It is sad to note that in some cases it is too late. African political leaders, for the most part, recognize that the application of the indigenous principle has produced the best results among the people. There is another external testimony that might have some merit here. An official of the U.S.A. Embassy made the observation that should the "white" man be asked to leave Africa now, almost all of the work done here by the various European countries and the U.S.A. to help these emerging nations would fold up, but the work done by the mission would remain because the Africans have accepted it, and it has become their own.

It will perhaps be well to clarify what is meant by "practical application" as it applies to the indigenous principle. There have been many varieties of so-called "applications" of the indigenous principle that have not had practical or lasting results. Some have even used these adverse results as arguments that you can have churches that are indigenous and dead. On one extreme you have some that claim to be indigenous when they have some natives as puppets with the missionaries manipulating the controls behind the scenes. On the other hand you have a situation where the missionaries sit, as it were, on the sidelines more or less as spectators

observing an experiment of "hit or miss," "trial and error" or "sink or swim" being enacted by the natives. We come again to the matter of faith in the power of the Gospel. Does the missionary believe that God can do what He has promised with and for the people to whom he has come as a missionary?

The practical application involves teaching and guidance, so that they themselves accept God's Word as their guide and their authority, and that they recognize themselves as directly responsible to God. Then it can be said of them, as it was of the Ethiopian eunuch when the missionary Philip was taken off the scene, "But he went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39). There are no short-cuts; there are certain things that are a "must" in the practical application of the indigenous principle. The people must be convinced that God is their God and not the God of the "whites" being shared with them. They must believe that the Bible is the only true and proven revelation of God's will for man, and that it is His Word for all mankind for all generations. It is God's message to them.

The following are a few of the incidents that were definite encouragements to continue stressing that this was their Gospel. They seemed aware that color was not especially a dividing of races and nations, but they did wonder about the variations of language. It meant a lot to them that God's Word had in it the account of the confusion of tongues at the tower of Babel. Paul's message to the Athenians became a basic reference, especially the fact that God had made of one blood all nations of men (Acts 17:26). It is very easy for anyone with animism as his background to incorporate God, Christ and the Holy Spirit as some new-found gods into his system of multiple gods. Whole villages would accept the gospel, but when it was explained that it meant a turning to the true God, forsaking their idols to now serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:10), many of them remained on the sidelines for further hearing and observation. There were many who had somehow become sceptical of their old system of idolatry and they accepted the Gospel without reserve. God had prepared their hearts for this. If the early believers here had not had a heart conviction along the lines that have been mentioned above, they could not have accomplished the positive testimony that will be manifested in some of these case histories. These believers became key witnesses in showing forth the power of the gospel. They openly and fearlessly exposed the trickery and the deception of the witch doctors and sorcerers, many of whom were also won to the gospel. For example, Andrew, after having exposed the deception of a witch doctor was told that the water in the divining bowl would become poison to kill him. He asked the witch doctor, "Will it really?," to which the witch doctor replied that it would. Andrew then took the bowl and drank of it in front of all those assembled there! Andrew is today an ordained elder of the church, pastoring a city church; the witch doctor is out of business! At a Saturday evening service, a sharp gasp went up when a rather important looking woman went forward to express her intention of accepting Christ. She asked for time to say something. She revealed that she had been called to the village to divine the cause of the death of so many infants. She exposed how she had become a sorceress, how she had performed, and how she had been practicing deception all this time even though she had no power of divination. She now renounced it all for Christ. She was whipped and she was threatened with death but she clung to her new-found faith.

Local circumstances also called for a practical application of the indigenous principle. If evangelization was to depend on the missionary elders, each one would have from two hundred

and fifty to three hundred villages as his field of operation. It was necessary for the missionary to consider himself as an instrument to train and equip the believers for the work (Eph. 4:12). It was continually pointed out to those in training that this was the Lord's work, and that the engagement to do the Lord's work was between them and the Lord, not between them and the missionary. The missionary, too, was only one of the team. Becoming a worker for the Lord was a personal arrangement with the Lord, and their dependence was upon the Lord for all things. It was also emphasized that it was the Word that was ever the first and the final authority on all important matters and questions. Where the Word was silent on a subject, it could quite safely be classed as a minor question or problem. Instruction was given to help them recognize that there were questions and problems that were personal (affairs of the inside of the house) and those that had to do with the church and its testimony. Most of their personal things they were to work out personally with the Lord. The things relative to the church were best worked out together with the members of the church. This sounds quite simple as to theory, but the application and its outworking helped them to realize that no one lives to himself alone, and that there is a new kind of fellowship in the gospel.

It would have been quite easy for the missionary to plan the expansion of the church, but as it worked out, there were volunteers for opening new points of witness. They saw the Lord's hand in it all, the Lord prepared hearts, the Lord moved them, there was a partnership with the Lord. These workers evangelized, each spotted the strategic points for starting a Church, arranged with the believers desiring to be baptized as to becoming their worker (later their pastor) and the work was established.

After a few years, they were no longer asking, "Do you really believe the Lord can do his complete work through us? Won't we always need to have a missionary around to help us?" As each new responsibility was committed to them or taught them, it was mentioned that they were deemed ready for it, and we now hoped to prepare them for yet other responsibilities. There have been many and real problems for them to solve. Many times they came to us with a report of what happened and how it had been taken care of.

They were submitted to a special and a new test as national independence came into being for them, when the civil government passed from the white man to the African. There were a few newer and younger men that started making a parallel of this with the church. When this was discussed, it came out that the church never had been under the white man (missionary) but that it was the Lord's. There was no change as to the church, for white and African believers could work together under the Lord. Recently a group of missionary elders and African elders were discussing their responsibilities. When the missionaries asked the African elders, "What do you expect of the missionaries?," they replied, "We have been taught how to evangelize, how to pastor a church, how to teach, how to officiate at all the services of the church (communion, baptisms, marriages etc.) but we still have much to learn from you. We want to know how to create and adapt literature for the various church needs, Sunday School quarterlies, etc. We also need guidance and teaching in matters of administration, organization, making of Bible School curricula, etc." They seem to have a clear conception of what they can and will do, and that which they still need to learn so that they can assume the advanced responsibilities. There is also a sincere willingness to learn and then do. The following incident

reveals that they have the right view of the place of the missionary. Pastor John was asked to explain why he was radiating such joy. He replied, "I was just thinking of my brother who is a politician. You know he is absolutely on his own, but we as servants of the Lord have the Holy Spirit to guide and to lead us."

Can the indigenous principle be practically applied? You would receive a resounding "Yes" from the following if they could be given a chance to reply to you: the 44,000 members in more than 250 local churches pastored by their own brethren, of whom over 100 are either ordained or licensed ministers of the gospel. Come to any of our annual District Conferences (about 40 in number) or to our next annual General Conference of all the Brethren Churches (the 9th one). Come visit some of our District Bible Schools taught by our African teachers, or to our Bible Center at Bozoum where the Director and half the faculty are our African brethren. The Medical work and our Bible High School would invite your inspection to check the progress they are making in the application of the indigenous principle. All of these as well as other individuals and groups could provide positive evidence that the practical application of the indigenous principle is according to God's will of taking the Gospel to every creature, and that it produces results that reflect the power of the gospel.