

The Surprising Relevance of the Three-Self Formula

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The Three-Self Formula is much better known in mission circles than it is practiced. It has been around for over 150 years and it states that a newly planted church is mature or indigenous when it is self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting. It was first popularized and implemented by a pair of mission executives who headed the largest mission agencies of their day. An Englishman, Henry Venn, headed the Anglican Church Missionary Society from 1841-72, while an American, Rufus Anderson, led the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions from 1832-66. They represented some of the best mission thinking of the second generation of leaders of the modern missionary movement; both men arrived at the formula independently of one another at approximately the same time.

Editor's Note: Henry Venn's father, John Venn, was rector of Clapham parish and pastor to William Wilberforce and others who made up the famous group later called the "Clapham Sect." Henry's grandfather, also named Henry Venn was the "spiritual father" of the Clapham Sect.

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The thinking behind the formula derived from field experiences of the personnel of both agencies as well as from Bible study. The goal of the formula was simple: to speed up the pace of world evangelization by moving missionaries on to new places while the leaders of the churches they started would complete the task of local evangelization. Venn and Anderson gave missionaries a goal to work toward: the production of churches that were mature enough to function on their own without missionary help in their own locale. Once that was achieved, missionaries could go to the “regions beyond,” sure in the knowledge that the churches they left behind could succeed without them. That, after all, was how the Apostle Paul proceeded in his mission work.

This sounds good, but what was the result? Actually, it is hard to make a definitive assessment of how much the Three-Self Formula streamlined world missions, because it was so often ignored. During the period of colonialism, missionaries preferred to linger in one place rather than move on. Not only was it easier to remain in charge of the churches they planted, but they also began to doubt whether local leaders were ready to take over. This led to the problem of dependency, where foreigners felt they had to lead indefinitely the churches they planted, and local people felt powerless to run their own churches.

Roland Allen reacted strongly to this state of affairs in his famous 1912 book, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*, where he compared the mission efforts of that time with those of the Apostle Paul. Understandably, he found that Paul's methods were far superior. He called on missionaries to have more confidence in their converts and to release control over them as Paul did, trusting that the Holy Spirit would help them learn how to work effectively in their churches, even through their inevitable mistakes. But Allen predicted that few would pay attention to his proposals, as colonialism had not yet ended.

In this prediction, Allen was correct, as “indigenous principles,” which incorporated the Three-Self Formula, became popular after developing nations became independent in the second half of the twentieth century. Along with the end of colonialism came the sudden interest in mission circles to indigenize local churches. Apparently, the thinking went something like this: if leaders of the developing nations are now expected to run their own countries, perhaps it is also time to allow the local church leaders to run their own churches. Not only that, but church leaders also insisted on taking over from missionaries after the prolonged delay associated with Western domination.

With the end of colonialism, we would naturally expect the end of the dependency syndrome as the Three-Self came back into prominence through the writings of people like Melvin Hodges and Donald McGavran. But that did not happen. Why? In fact, the Three-Self Formula came under attack from various quarters. We can summarize the gist of these multiple objections under the following six headings:

1. Lack of Cultural Perspective

Cultural anthropologists objected that the Three-Self Formula describes “indigenous” churches in terms of church policies rather than in terms of culture itself. As missionaries became more aware of anthropology, this appeared to be a major deficiency in the formula. Some missionary anthropologists suggested adding more “selves” in order to include the notion that an indigenous church would communicate Christianity effectively in its own context. Probably the best suggestion came from Paul Hiebert who coined “self-theologizing” as the fourth self. By this he meant the ability of an indigenous church to read and interpret Scripture within its local culture.

2. Too Much Emphasis on “Self”

Some critics said the formula promoted a dangerous autonomy in the membership of the global body of Christ in an age of interdependence. This objection misses the point that the goal of the formula was to produce mature churches that could handle their own affairs. 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.

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the formula actually preclude valid partnerships? Of course not. If all parties in the partnerships are Three-Self bodies, then it is much more certain that it will be a partnership of equals, and not a disguise for dependency.

4. A Hindrance to Western Support of Foreign Evangelists and Missionaries

Another popular trend in postcolonial missions is support by wealthier Christians from the global North for poorer evangelists and missionaries in the global South. Again the Three-Self Formula is seen as an obstacle that must go in order to allow this method freedom to operate. Certainly, if the formula is valid at all, then this mission method is flawed. Support by Christians in the global North of workers who live in the global South perpetuates the old colonial mentality of wealthier Christians holding the purse strings while the rest do the actual work. Furthermore, it removes local accountability, whereby local Christians in the global South should be responsible for looking after their own workers. Finally, it can easily create dependency, where Christians in the global South may decide not to work for God if no Northern funds are available.

5. A Hindrance to Aid from Rich Christians to the Global Poor

Given that the gap between rich and poor is widening around the world, some mission thinkers say it is time to discard the Three-Self Formula in order to let aid flow. But does the formula actually prevent humanitarian aid from moving to those who desperately need it? Of course not. It does imply, however, that any such aid should not be perpetual.

6. Permission Not To Be Generous

A recent allegation states that current missiologists have twisted Venn's original intentions in order to permit wealthy Western Christians to keep their money for themselves. According to this objection, Venn only meant to prevent Western domination in missions and was not so concerned about creating dependency. But domination and dependency are just

3. A Hindrance to Partnerships

One of the first popular mission methods of the postcolonial period was the formation of "partnerships." Since these are often in reality one-way flows of resources and not true partnerships, their advocates see the Three-Self Formula as an obstacle. But does

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two sides of one coin. Whenever one side is dominant in money or power, there is a danger that the other side may become dependent. Furthermore, since the majority who engage in missions today consider the Three-Self Formula obsolete, how can it so dramatically influence the generosity of Christian giving? For those who espouse the formula, the thinking about giving would be that all Christians, rich and poor, should give sacrificially to propagate God's work where they are able, but without creating dependency.

Over the past few decades, the Three-Self Formula has been called an elevation of the self, an evil autonomy in the body of Christ, silent about Jesus' love for the poor, a projection of American value systems, a hindrance to partnerships, a sacred cow that needs to be slaughtered, outdated, and senile. Yet the fact that all its opponents still regularly attack it as a worthy adversary is an admission that it continues to have staying power. It has survived over 150 years, but what exactly is its relevance today? Simply this: the formula, whatever may be its shortcomings and blind spots, remains the criterion in missions for a church or Christian organization that is not dependent. A Three-Self body of Christians has enough strength and responsibility to work for Christ whether others are available to help or not.

The formula was the first projection toward a postcolonial mission method that respects local converts and cultures enough to assume that each locality can have active Christians who operate fully under the guidance and resources of the Holy Spirit to bring salvation in Christ to people in their context and beyond, for the glory of God. Many of its modern opponents seem to think local Christians in the developing world cannot carry out these functions without help from foreigners. But why should anyone desire that bodies of believers in various parts of the world not become self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting, when this is exactly what it will take to complete the task of world evangelization? So the Three-Self Formula remains relevant because it takes Christians in the developing world more seriously than many other current popular mission methods that continue to create dependency. 

