Rufus Anderson died a century ago, but his influence did not die with him. Scores of missionaries and mission board members who do not now know his name will state that it is the aim of missions to plant and foster churches that will be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. There has never been another person in the American world mission who has rivaled Anderson in creativity, in shaping policy, and in uniting the roles of administrator and theoretician.

Anderson was born into a Congregationalist parsonage at North Yarmouth, Maine, on August 17, 1796, where the theological atmosphere was Hopkinsian. He was therefore immersed in concern for mission from infancy. His personal missionary vocation was confirmed when Pastor Anderson took his sixteen-year-old son to witness the ordination of the first group of American overseas missionaries in the Tabernacle at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1812. Rufus studied at Bradford Academy and Bowdoin College, where he took his A.B. degree in 1818. Then he enrolled in Andover Theological Seminary and, while studying, worked at the office of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in Boston as assistant to Jeremiah Evarts. When he graduated in 1822 Anderson formally applied for appointment to India, but was asked to work at headquarters during another year. Before that year ended, the officers decided that the board needed the young man more in Boston than in India, and appointed him assistant secretary. In 1826 he was ordained for secretarial service with the title of evangelist, one of the very earliest ordinations for denominational service in America. Anderson's entire ministry until retirement in 1866 was spent in administration in the American Board, forty-four years. On January 8, 1827, he married Miss Liza Hill, who survived him after fifty-three years of marriage.

It was a missionary that Rufus Anderson considered himself, and it was a missionary's field salary which he received, not that of a homeland pastor or denominational dignitary. He was made one of the three "corresponding secretaries" in 1832, and soon was given total responsibility for the overseas work, usually being called "the foreign secretary" or "the senior secretary." For thirty-five years he guided the Prudential Committee, which determined policy, carried on all business between annual meetings, and appointed missionaries.

The charge has been made that Dr. Anderson was a tyrant who ruled the American Board, the Prudential Committee, and the missionaries with an iron hand. He disclaimed that. When in the course of the famous Deputation to the missions in India, Syria, and Constantinople in 1854-1855 the several missions adopted his recommendations to break up the large stations, found village churches, ordain native pastors for them, and give up English-language secondary schools in favor of vernacular-language schools, a few missionaries objected and said that he had been coercive, but the majority said, no, he was persuasive because his logic was irrefutable. Nevertheless, Anderson was conservative on some matters and could resist change. Thus he asked Mrs. Sarah R. Doremus in 1834 not to organize a women's missionary sending society. Yet in 1866 when he retired he told his successor, N. G. Clark, "I cannot recommend bringing the women into this work;
Anderson's Writings

Apart from the Memorial Volume of the First Fifty Years of the American Board of Commissioners (1861) and four histories of the board's missions (Hawaiian Islands, India, and two volumes on Oriental Churches), Dr. Anderson published few books. They include Foreign Missions: Their Relations and Claims (1869), being a collection of lectures; a volume of reports of the 1854 deputation (1856); Observations on the Peloponnesus and Greek Islands (1830); and Memoir of Catherine Brown, a Christian Indian of the Cherokee Nation (1824). His voluminous writings were in the form of articles in The Missionary Herald, instructions to missionaries, pamphlets, and the Missionary Tracts of the American Board, all of which were written by him except No. 13, The Grand Motive to Missionary Effort, by Swan L. Pomroy, and No. 15, Outline of Missionary Policy, in which S. B. Treat in 1856 drew up a statement of Anderson’s system for adoption by the board. A number of his articles are also in the board’s Annual Report. There is a complete bibliography in To Advance the Gospel. Anderson never systematized his principles or practice of missions. His books, tracts and pamphlets are now extremely rare items. The author of this article has attempted to give today’s students of missiology direct access to Anderson’s thought by bringing together from the literature pertinent selections with an introduction and notes in the volume To Advance the Gospel. Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967). The remaining stock has been purchased by the William Carey Library in Pasadena, California, and the book is available now only there.

The Practice of Missions

Anderson’s fundamental thesis was that “missions are instituted for the spread of a scriptural, self-propagating Christianity. This is their only aim.” These factors are included in the aim: (1) the conversion of lost men, (2) organizing them into churches, (3) giving these churches a competent native ministry, and (4) conducting them to the stage of independence and (in most cases) of self-propagation.” Anything additional is secondary, or even superfluous. Simplicity of operation and good stewardship are required. Comity, that is, mutual division of territory and cooperation among mission agencies, is necessary so that there be no waste of personnel and money and that all peoples everywhere be evangelized. “Civilization” or social transformation is not a legitimate aim, but will come as the consequence of the impact of the gospel. Apart from preaching, no method is prescribed, and every method is permissible if effective. Effective means contributing to the upbuilding of the local church for aggressive mission. A truly mature local church is an evangelizing, missionary one, a growing church, a church going out to others. Bible translation, literature, schools, the press, and all other activities should be directed toward that end. “The governing object to be always aimed at is self-reliant, effective churches,—churches that are properly native.” The missionary is not to be a ruler or pastor, but an evangelist, who hastens on as soon as possible to another place, leaving the local church under a native pastor and in full Christian liberty to manage its own affairs. The school, seminary, and any other institution exists only to build up the local churches.

This scheme of practice terminated the older “mission families” of ministers, teachers, farmers, carpenters, masons, and other artisans who aimed at first civilizing the American Indians and the Hawaiians so that they could then be evangelized. Social transformation would in due time result from the gospel. However, seldom would a missionary move on to pioneering on new ground and leave a congregation to its own independent existence. It was hard to agree that one was dispensable and to leave the fruits of one’s labor. Only in one instance during the nineteenth century was a whole mission terminated, that is, in the case of Hawaii, where the independent Hawaiian Evangelical Association was created.

Missionary Principles

Rufus Anderson found the norm and abiding model for missions in St. Paul’s missionary action as revealed in the New Testament. He summarizes his findings there, which are to guide modern missionaries, in these sentences:

Such were the apostolic missions. Such were the efforts made for propagating the Gospel among the heathen by missionaries under a special divine guidance. It was by gathering converts into churches at the centers of influence, and putting them under native pastoral inspection and care. The means employed were spiritual; namely, the Gospel of Christ. The power relied upon for giving efficacy to these means was divine; namely the promised aid of the Holy Spirit. The main success was among the members of the middle and lower classes of society; and the responsibilities for self-government, self-support, and self-propagation were thrown at once upon the several churches.

Anderson found in the apostolic record no evidence of an aim to change and transform society and, therefore, he opposed the efforts and apparatus for furthering “civilization,” which had prevailed until then. They were complicated and costly and in his view deflected concentration from the rightful objective. The foremost motive for mission is obedience to Christ, since the Great Commission presents the church with “its standing work ... for all ages of the world.” But the obligation rests on the individual disciples rather than on the church collectively, because the Great Commission was given before the birthday of the church. Each person under the guidance of the Holy Spirit must decide whether to serve overseas or, at home, to support those who go. The mission board or society exists solely to help the missionary discharge his or her duty. The missionary is not a servant of the society. Few mission boards appeared to have adopted this view of their nature, and even the ABCFM sometimes treated the missionaries as employees. This obedience is not legalistic submission to authority but, rather, the glad obedience of love.

The Holy Spirit is God himself in missionary action. He prompts the church and the disciple, opens doors of opportunity,
The mission board or society may not be a denominational or confessional empire builder, but it sends persons to plant and foster churches that will join in the universal task of evangelization. Every action and program should be subordinate to the multiplication and upbuilding of missionary churches. The test of success with respect both to a congregation and to an individual disciple is the clear evidence of a religious life. Neither is to be judged by the behavior of New England Christianity, which is the result of many centuries of nurturing in the gospel. They are to be judged by whether there has been a genuine change in the quality of life, a reorientation toward Christ.

Schools should be principally village vernacular ones, which provide evangelistic opportunities among the families of the children. Mission education aims at training the laity and educating national church workers. Schools that build up the church are essential, but those that primarily supply the government and commerce with trained employees are not.

Missionaries are ambassadors of Jesus Christ, beseeching people to be reconciled to God. Their business is not with believers; they are not pastors or rulers, but evangelists. Their first duty is to gather a local congregation. They will be spiritual leaders to it, but will leave it to a native minister and move on to preach the gospel in some other place. The sole exception is when a church is organized and there is no suitable native pastor available. The missionary should raise up ministers and give them responsibility. Too many missionaries in any area will retard the development of the churches. Missionaries should be married, and their home will be a model of Christian family life.

The native church and ministry form the keystone of Anderson's theoretical system. That church is not to be an end in itself, a self-contained institution, but one more unit in an ever growing and expanding worldwide mission. The end of mission is "a spiritual, self-propagating Christianity." A local church is to be government-sponsored "Three-Self movement" inspired much of the criticism. That was a travesty of the concept. There was widespread disapproval of any local or national church that tried to live to itself in a self-centered existence, because the church is to live for others. Anderson, too, would have disapproved. The church that he sought was to be part of a world mission, ongoing, self-propagating, sharing its treasure with others.

Anderson's concept of mission is too simplistic. He overreacted to the earlier creation of those Siamese twins, "civilization" and "evangelization." His discernment that evangelization is the central purpose of the mission is right, but he was too narrow in his definition. He did not make sufficient place for the social service and justice aspects of the gospel. While he warned that new Christians should not be expected to conform to the behavior patterns and standards of European-American Christians, he did not question the superiority of western civilization and failed to see the need for thoroughgoing cultural adaptation in the young churches.

The Influence of Rufus Anderson

Dr. N. G. Clark, successor to Dr. Anderson as foreign secretary of the American Board, stated at the funeral service: "There can be no hesitation in saying that the world owes to Dr. Anderson the reviving of the true method of missionary effort as illustrated most fully in the Acts of the Apostles by the Apostle Paul. ... This method and the principles involved are now the common possession of all missionary societies the world over. They are recognized in the plans adopted and the tributes paid to Dr. Anderson in this country, in Great Britain, in Germany, and wherever missions are known." He also had impact in the Netherlands. Certainly all American church missions followed the American Board theoretician in their general policy and practice down to World War II. They departed from him in particulars, but at least gave his principles lip service. During his active career the secretaries and officers of other boards read his tracts, articles, and The Missionary Herald; exchanged letters with him; and consulted him personally. The American Baptist Board of Foreign Missions had its headquarters in Boston, too, and the secretaries were in constant consultation with their American Board counterparts; so much so, that Isaac McCoy, the missionary to the American Indians, complained about their domination by the Congregationalists.

However, the long endurance of Anderson's influence was due largely to the fact that he had an extremely able posthumous disciple, Robert E. Speer (1867-1947), general secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., through whose views, lectures, books, articles, and administrative policy the heritage of Anderson was transmitted. Speer wrote of Anderson that he was "the most original, the most constructive, and the most courageous student of missionary policy whom this country has produced, and one of the two most aggressive and creative administrators of missionary work." (Walter Lowrie was the other). Speer also was both administrator and theoretician. He restated and updated the older statesman's principles in his Missionary Principles and Practice, What Constitutes a Missionary Call, and other works. Speer was the dominant American theologian and philosopher of missions from 1900 to his death in 1947, and was therefore especially powerful in the transmission of the Andersonian theory and policy, and in applying them to new situations. He was more concerned than Anderson with social issues and had a scholarly concern for world religions and cultural adaptation of Christianity, which his mentor had lacked. When this writer returned from China in 1942 and began attending the Foreign Missions Conference of North America, Anderson was still very much a living force through Speer.
Anderson’s insistence on the personal nature of the missionary vocation and the focus of the Great Commission on each and every disciple bore superabundant fruit in the Student Volunteer Movement, including the notion that the call was first of all to overseas service and that a decision to remain in the homeland had to be specially justified. These views were directly transmitted by Robert E. Speer and broadcast through the amazing circulation of the pamphlet *What Constitutes a Missionary Call?*

The American Board did not long continue Anderson’s limitation on English-language secondary and higher schools, nor did the other boards. Yet Anderson would have approved the high schools and colleges in China and Japan, because they were potent agencies of conversion as well as effective means of leavening a nation with Christian principles and idealism.

John L. Nevius, in devising his “method,” was obviously influenced by Rufus Anderson. Roland Allen probably never heard of him, but his principles and his insistence on native ministry and freedom of the new church is consistent with Anderson even more than with Venn.

It is always extremely difficult to tell in later times where and when the influence of any older molder of thought and action is being exerted unless there is explicit acknowledgment. Certainly the emphasis of American Evangelicals on evangelism and rejection of social concerns in the quarter century after World War II was a return to Anderson’s viewpoint. The leaders of the Church Growth School have recovered a fundamental principle of Anderson’s in the stress on the necessity of each church growing and reaching out in evangelization, and they honor his memory. All contemporary missiologists follow the nineteenth-century statesman in seeking a biblical basis and guidance for the missions of a new day.

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**Notes**

2. Ibid., p. 5.
4. Ibid., p. 5.
5. Refer to *To Advance the Gospel* for full documentation.
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