The Legacy of Anthony Norris Groves

Robert Bernard Dann

In the spring of 1834, as he neared the end of his first tour of Protestant missions in India, Anthony Norris Groves (1795–1853) declared, “My earnest desire is to re-model the whole plan of missionary operations so as to bring them to the simple standard of God’s word.” How might we interpret such a declaration? Was it presumptuous, subversive, or simply naive? Or was it the first deliberate expression of a primitivist and biblicist strategy that would prove to be of enormous significance to the future history of Protestant overseas mission? Opinions are likely to differ as widely in our day as they did in his.

Brief Biography

Born in 1795 in southern England at Newton Valence, Hampshire, Groves completed his secondary education in Fulham, near London. After training as a dentist, he set up practice in Plymouth and later in Exeter. In 1816, at the age of twenty-one, he first professed himself “a disciple of Christ,” a typical middle-class convert to evangelical High Church Anglicanism. In the same year, Groves married his cousin Mary Bethia Thompson, but soon found his growing desire to serve overseas with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) thwarted by Mary’s determined resistance. Eight years later, after contact with Anglicans and Nonconformists of a more Calvinistic persuasion, Norris Groves gained a fuller assurance of his personal salvation. About the same time, Mary also responded to Calvinistic influences and began to support not only his philanthropic activities but also his missionary interests.

While engaged in dental practice, Groves became convinced from his reading of the New Testament that Jesus intended his disciples in every age to take literally the instructions given in the Sermon on the Mount. The result was a small booklet published in 1825 with the title Christian Devotedness, in which he encouraged his fellow believers to give away their savings and possessions, and assist in proclaiming the Gospel throughout the world. The message in this booklet typified Groves’s lifelong desire “to read the word of God with a single view to know his will” and to follow, in the most literal fashion, the teaching and the example of Jesus and the apostles as recorded in the New Testament.

Embarking on a course of theological study in 1826 with a view to ordination in the Church of England and service with the CMS in the Middle East, Groves traveled to Ireland every three months to take examinations at Trinity College, Dublin. In the course of these visits, he was invited to drawing room meetings for prayer and Bible study that were attended by Christians of both Establishment and Dissent. He was impressed by his first experience of Christian fellowship transcending denominational barriers, and in the spring of 1827 he proposed going one step further. Denying the necessity for an ordained minister to administer the sacraments, he suggested that, according to Scripture, “believers, meeting together as disciples of Christ, were free to break bread together as their Lord had admonished them; and that, in as far as the practice of the apostles could be a guide, every Lord’s Day should be set apart for thus remembering the Lord’s death, and obeying His parting command.” A small circle of friends began to meet regularly for this purpose.

Robert Bernard Dann has twenty-five years’ experience with indigenous churches in the developing world. He is currently engaged in doctoral research on church and mission strategy, with particular reference to the life and work of Anthony Norris Groves.

Robert Bernard Dann has twenty-five years’ experience with indigenous churches in the developing world. He is currently engaged in doctoral research on church and mission strategy, with particular reference to the life and work of Anthony Norris Groves.
abandoned his plans for ordination. In the spring of the following year (1828), he severed his connection with the CMS, and shortly afterward he requested adult baptism.

Unconnected with any church denomination or missionary society, Norris and Mary Groves, with their sons, Henry and Frank, set off for Baghdad in June 1829. Traveling through St. Petersburg, Russia, they arrived six months later in Baghdad. There they launched what could be considered the first Protestant mission to Muslims in the Arab world. They were assisted for a year by Karl Gottlieb Pfander of the Basel Mission, whose book Mīzān al-Haqq (The Balance of Truth) subsequently became a classic in the field of Christian-Muslim apologetics. Also with them, serving as a tutor to the boys, was John Kitto, who later wrote a series of scholarly works elucidating aspects of Eastern culture for English readers of the Bible. In April 1830 Groves and Pfander started a small elementary school, in which the idea of vernacular literacy was introduced using colloquial Bible translations as reading texts for both boys and girls.

A year after their arrival in Baghdad, civil war broke out, and the city entered upon two years of devastation through siege, famine, warfare, floods, cholera, plague, and typhoid, during which two-thirds of its inhabitants were killed by disease, and two-thirds of its houses were swept away by floods. Among the dead was Groves’s wife Mary. After many delays and anxieties he was joined in Baghdad by a small party from Dublin including John Vesey Parnell, Edward Cronin, and Francis W. Newman (younger brother of the cardinal John Henry). The team opened a medical clinic and resumed their evangelistic efforts, but without any great encouragement.

In 1833 Groves left Baghdad to investigate the possibilities for ministry in India, and the following year the Baghdad venture was abandoned.

In India Groves intended to visit missions associated with a wide range of Protestant agencies and denominations throughout the subcontinent. Traveling in short stages from Bombay to Calcutta via Ceylon, he generally met with a warm welcome and found opportunities to share his distinctive ecclesiological and eschatological (premillennialist) ideas with missionaries and other expatriates. In the far south, at Tinnevelly, he attempted to intervene in a dispute between the CMS and some of its own German agents, led by the Lutheran K.T. Rhenius, who protested the curtailing of their right to ordain Indian catechists in deference to the Anglican bishop in Calcutta.

After remarriage, to Harriet Baynes, and a brief recruiting campaign in Britain and Switzerland, Groves returned to Madras in 1835 with a fresh team of missionaries. Somewhat to his surprise, he encountered opposition to his unconventional views and to his support of Rhenius against the CMS, and his opportunities for pastoral ministry and Bible teaching in English became severely reduced. A Christian farm settlement that he then established at Chittoor suffered serious financial reverses, which largely clouded his later years. In 1853 he died at the age of fifty-eight in Bristol, England, at the home of his sister Mary and her husband George Müller.

Although he considered his own missionary career a failure, Groves lived long enough to witness the success of his most promising Indian disciple, John Christian Arulappan, who created an expanding network of indigenous Christian fellowships in the Madurai district of Tamil Nadu. Following Groves’s distinctive missiological principles, this indigenous work might be considered the true fulfillment of his vision in his own lifetime.

A Radical Ecclesiologist

In seceding from the Anglican Communion, Groves was following a path marked out by others of his generation. He differed from them, however, in his choice neither to attach himself to another denomination nor to launch a denomination of his own, but rather to adopt a deliberately nondenominational stance. He attributed the tensions and divisions between contemporary Christians to church customs and requirements not found in the New Testament. As he himself expressed it, “My full persuasion is that, inasmuch as any one glories either in being of the Church of England, Scotland, Baptist, Independent, Wesleyan, etc., his glory is his shame. . . . For as the apostle said, were any of them crucified for you? The only legitimate ground for glorying is that we are among the ransomed of the Lord by his grace.”

Groves’s ecclesiology was essentially pietistic, based upon the simple principle of the individual believer seeking to please Christ and encouraging others to do the same. With little interest in buildings, services, finances, organization, training, or ceremony, he desired to rediscover, from the New Testament itself, the original “apostolic” principles of Christian ministry, unity, and influence. As a principle of ministry, he urged the liberty of any Christian man to teach the Bible and of all members of the spiritual body to exercise the spiritual gifts entrusted to them, recognizing no distinction between clergy and laity. Regarding unity, he considered the essential oneness of Christians to be spiritual rather than organizational, insisting that a true church should be neither an arm of the state nor a voluntary society with limited membership. Concerning influence, he believed that personal benefit would extend to others from God’s spiritual blessing on a Christlike life, rather than through the acquisition of social prominence or political power.

In several controversial articles and booklets, as well as in his personal journals, Groves applied these principles to the circumstances of his day. In particular, he urged Protestant Christians to cooperate, without reference to church or denomination, in any spiritual activity that did not require them to act against their own conscience. He encouraged personal holiness through a willing response to progressively increasing “light.” He hoped, at least initially, for a restoration of miraculous gifts, especially for a gift of tongues to facilitate gospel preaching to other peoples. He proposed a simple form of dispensationalism, liberating the church from the necessity to observe the law of Moses while requiring it to follow the instructions of Christ. He urged sacrificial Christian stewardship, a literal offering of oneself and all of one’s material resources for the benefit of others. In fact, he considered his frugal practice of “living by faith,” in constant dependence on the written promises and active providence of God, to be the happiest and wisest course for every Christian. He affirmed, “So intensely am I convinced of this truth that I can with my whole heart pray for myself and all who are nearest and dearest to me that we be so circumstanced in life as to be compelled to live by faith on the divine promises day by day.”

Somewhat to his surprise, Groves encountered opposition to his unconventional views.
Ecclesiological Influence

It can hardly be disputed that Groves’s ideas were radical. The bitter opposition they aroused, especially from Anglicans of the expatriate community in India, demonstrates the extent to which they were unconventional and largely unwelcome to the majority of Christians around him.

They came, nevertheless, at a time when the “romantic” and the “primitive” were newly fashionable.10 The publication of Christian Devotedness in 1825, followed in 1827 by Groves’s suggestion that unordained Christians of diverse denominations might partake together of the Lord’s Supper, and then his own resolve in 1829 to launch a mission to Baghdad “by faith,” without the support of a recognized church or missionary society, certainly challenged and enthused his circle of personal friends. Some of these friends soon became leading figures in the Brethren movement, which itself would prove to be a phenomenon of great significance to British evangelicalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.11

It could be argued that, once Groves himself had left Britain, the Brethren movement developed without significant personal input from him and in directions of which he strongly disapproved. Correspondence between India and Britain, however, enabled him to remain in fairly close touch with major leaders of the movement in Devonshire and London, particularly with his friends and former colleagues John Parnell (Lord Congleton), Henry Craik, Robert Chapman, and John and Robert Howard. His closest tie was with his brother-in-law George Müller, whose influence in open Brethren circles was second to none.12 The views expressed by these men substantially coincide with those offered by Groves in his published writings, copies of which he authorized, or paid to do so.

The examples they set, Groves claimed, would “simply through prayer and decision to live ‘by faith’ without financial appeals or debts,” and then to provide for his orphans, might partake together of the Lord’s Supper, and then his own resolve in 1829 to launch a mission to Baghdad “by faith,” without the support of a recognized church or missionary society, certainly challenged and enthused his circle of personal friends. Some of these friends soon became leading figures in the Brethren movement, which itself would prove to be a phenomenon of great significance to British evangelicalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.11

A Radical Missiologist

It was in India, however, that Groves spent most of his adult life and where we see the fullest practical outworking of his ecclesiology in a cross-cultural context.

He observed affluent missionaries amid poverty, foreign denominations competing for Indian converts, and missionary societies preoccupied with issues of authority, property, and finance. He suggested, “It must be obvious to all, if the native churches be not strengthened by learning to lean on the Lord instead of man, the political changes of an hour may sweep away the present form of things, so far as it depends on Europeans, and leave not a trace behind.”13 He wished to simplify the missionary task of the church, believing that conversion to Christ should be quite possible without any provision for authority, property, or finance. With no organization to oversee, no buildings to maintain, and no salaries to pay, his emphasis lay in the freedom of local converts to meet together without foreign supervision and to preach the Gospel to their own people without being trained, authorized, or paid to do so.

Groves elaborated these thoughts in his journals and especially in his “Letter on Missions to the Heathen,” published in 1840, where he suggested that “the work societies endeavour to accomplish can be done better, because more scripturally, by the Church herself.”14 He proposed the sending of evangelists by local congregations to plant other local congregations, the liberty of indigenous Christians to take responsibility without reference to foreign organizations, the freedom of missionaries and Indian Christians to seek guidance and provision directly from God, the development of local leadership in the course of active Christian service, and the partnership of industrialist and evangelist in frugal living “by faith” for the extension of the Gospel.15

Fourteen years later, Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson would propose their “three-self” scheme for congregations to become self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, along with their concept of the foreign mission as a scaffolding that must remain until the national church has been firmly built. But Groves had already foreseen the difficulties that would face mission executives wishing to transfer weighty administrative and financial responsibilities to nationals, and he did so eighty years before Roland Allen drew our attention to the problem.16

Whereas Venn envisaged the creation by one institution (a foreign mission) of another institution (a national church), Groves made no distinction between mission and church. And rather than projecting an eventual shift from foreign government, support, and propagation to self-government, support, and propagation, Groves would start with no organized government, support, or propagation at all, expecting these to develop naturally as local believers helped one another develop their own abilities and ministries after the fashion described in the New Testament.

Misissiological Influence

In 1985 Groves was described as “a neglected missiologist,”19 and twenty years later the neglect persists. During his own lifetime he suffered considerable prejudice and misrepresentation from Protestant Christians, which no doubt restricted the extent of his influence both in his own day and later. Nevertheless, his primitivist and pietist principles eventually found their way into circles that made great use of them. In the process, they were developed and adapted, sometimes almost beyond recognition, yet credit should be given to Groves himself for introducing ideas that stimulated the breaking of traditional denominational molds and the birth of a new generation of missions following what have been called “faith principles.”

Groves’s eldest son, Henry, having survived his early expe-
riences in Baghdad and India, in 1872 became one of the founding editors of the magazine *Echoes of Service*, which facilitated prayer and financial support for Brethren missionaries from the British Isles. Brethren have since planted assemblies with a quasi-primitivist ethos in more than a hundred different nations, and there are now approximately 2.5 million Christians worldwide identifying themselves as Brethren.

Groves’s influence was equally significant to the founders of the great interdenominational “faith missions.” All of these were inspired by Hudson Taylor, whose “faith principles” can be traced back to George Müller and, through him, to Groves. These three men moved in the same circles. Indeed, in the early years of Hudson Taylor’s China Inland Mission, its financial support came almost entirely from personal friends of Groves.

In fact, Groves’s idea of using the New Testament as a practical manual of missionary methods was taken up with greatest effect not by Western missionaries but by indigenous Christian leaders. We might think in particular of Bakht Singh in India (whose closest colleagues were great-grandsons of Groves’s disciple Arulappan), Watchman Nee in China (who mentions Groves and the Brethren as an early influence), and John Arulappan himself.

Groves encouraged young Indian Christians to ignore Western church tradition and to follow, as closely as possible, the teaching and practice of Christ and his apostles, which he saw as a divinely inspired model applicable to every generation and every culture. In 1840 he confided, “The fact that our position here puts pastoral work and fellowship on a simple Christian footing among the natives is by no means the least important feature of our work. Until we came, no one but an ordained native was allowed to celebrate the Lord’s Supper or to baptize; and when our Christian brethren Arulappan and Andrew partook of the Lord’s Supper with the native Christians it caused more stir and enquiry than you can imagine. The constant reference to God’s word has brought and is bringing the questions connected with ministry and church government into a perfectly new position in the minds of many.”

Shortly afterward, Arulappan moved to Madurai, where, with Groves’s blessing, he initiated a rapidly growing network of entirely indigenous fellowships. He encouraged self-supporting Indian evangelists to travel widely, preaching the Gospel, initiating informal meetings, and stimulating the emergence of local leadership. By 1853 congregations had been established in sixteen places, comprising nearly 200 believers. By 1856 there were twenty-five villages with 300 believers in total; and in 1859, thirty-three villages and 800 believers. In August 1860 the Anglican *Church Missionary Intelligencer* declared, “It is indeed a new era in Indian missions—that of lay converts going forth, without purse or scrip, to preach the gospel of Christ to their fellow-countrymen, and that with a zeal and life we had hardly thought them capable of.” Here, the writer believed, was “the first entirely indigenous effort of the native church at self-extension.”

**Groves in the History of Missiological Thought**

Lesslie Newbigin has identified three basic elements, as three corners of a triangle, that in varying proportions combine to determine the basic strategy adopted by any missionary or missiologist. They are foreign church custom, local culture, and New Testament principle and practice. The third of these “corners” is obviously the one that interested Groves. Indeed, we might identify him as the first major primitivist or biblicist among mission strategists.

Newbigin suggests that, in general, this third “corner” will be valued more highly by indigenous Christians than by the agents of Western missionary societies. He comments, “The Bible has operated as an independent source of criticism directed both against the Christianity of the missionaries and against the traditional culture of the tribe.” It was this use of the Bible by the Indians themselves that Groves encouraged, and which equipped them to act on their own initiative without waiting for foreign tuition, authorization, or finance.

Like Groves himself, primitivists such as Arulappan, Nee, and Singh have taken to its logical conclusion the evangelical belief that the New Testament is inspired, authoritative, and rightfully endowed with a status above foreign church custom and local culture. For these indigenous leaders, the New Testament represents genuine Christianity, untainted by either Western or Eastern accretions. Bakht Singh’s approach, as described by his biographer, is typical: “He did not compromise the Word of God with Indian culture, customs or the traditions of men. He vehemently taught against any culture or custom that was contrary to, or in conflict with, the Word of God. ‘What we needed in the Body of Christ was not Western or Eastern culture but Biblical culture,’ he emphasized.”

Though generally neglected by missiologists, these primitivist movements arguably achieved more, in a shorter space of time, than contemporaneous Protestant missions following different principles. With evidence that their indigenous leaders were both directly and indirectly influenced by Anthony Norris Groves, we may consider his legacy a substantial one.

**Notes**

2. The concept of an individual divine call to salvation, irrespective of personal merit, was introduced to Groves by Bessie Paget, a nonconformist lady in Exeter, and by John Marriott, the Anglican curate of Broad Clyst. Marriott was particularly influential in Mary’s conversion.
3. Ibid., p. 11.
4. For Groves and his contemporaries, the “Establishment” signified the Church of England and Ireland, whose bishops in the House of Lords participated in the parliamentary government of Great Britain. Christians who objected to this were known as “Dissenters” or “Nonconformists.” They maintained their own churches and were identified, for example, as Congregationalists, Baptists, or Methodists.
5. Ibid., p. 39.
6. Art. 37: “It is lawful for Christian men...to wear weapons and serve in the wars.”
7. Groves’s second wife, Harriet Baynes, was sister of William Craig Baynes, an influential early settler in Quebec.
8. Ibid., p. 49.
11. The Brethren of Groves’s acquaintance are commonly called Plymouth Brethren to distinguish them from the many other groups identified as Brethren outside the British Isles. One of their earliest fellowships met in Plymouth, on the southwest coast of England.
12. In 1848 a rupture occurred in the Brethren between those willing to follow the doctrinal and disciplinary leadership of J. N. Darby and...
those who would not. Darby’s followers became known as Exclusive Brethren in contrast to the Open Brethren, with whom Groves was associated.


15. [Harriet Groves], *Memoir*, p. 393.


17. Groves advocated a sacrificial lifestyle for evangelists and missionaries and equally for those who supported them through generous stewardship of a secular income. Spiritual and material blessings would thus be shared as they labored together for the progress of the Gospel in the world.

18. Roland Allen (1868–1947) was a High Church Anglican who served with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in northern China from 1895 to 1903. Among recognized missiologists, he is undoubtedly the closest to Groves in spirit. He wrote two particularly influential books, *Missionary Methods: St Paul’s or Ours?* (1912) and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (1927), in which he argued that mission is a task for local churches and indigenous initiatives rather than foreign societies with salaried employees.


25. [Harriet Groves], *Memoir*, p. 393.


27. [Harriet Groves], *Memoir*, p. 622.


**Selected Bibliography**

**Works about Anthony Norris Groves**

Excerpt where noted, the following items by Groves are found in the Christian Brethren Archive, John Rylands Univ. Library of Manchester, Eng.


1836 *The Present State of the Timnevelly Mission; and Reply to Mr Strachan’s Criticisms, and Mr Rhenius’s Letter to the Church Missionary Society*. 2d ed. London: James Nisbet. Original at Orchard Learning Centre, Univ. of Birmingham, Eng.


**Works about Anthony Norris Groves**


We are God’s instruments.  
We have a story to tell. 
And the world is listening.

With God’s grace, we’ll take His Story and tell it on the mountain, overseas, here at home, and across the world. Since 1908, Biola has been training students to take God’s story to the ends of the earth.

We offer M.A. programs in intercultural studies, TESOL, and applied linguistics, a doctorate in missiology, and a Ph.D. in intercultural education.

Contact Biola’s School of Intercultural Studies today.