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The primitivist missiology of Anthony Norris Groves (1795-1853): A radical influence on nineteenth-century Protestant mission

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Authors	Dann, Robert B.
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B. A Primitivist Ecclesiologist

When he first went overseas in 1829, at the age of thirty-four, Groves was a mature man with well-developed ecclesiological ideas. These have been discussed in my paper “The Primitivist Ecclesiology of Anthony Norris Groves (1795-1853): a radical influence on nineteenth-century Protestant church in Britain”.

B.1. The Development of Groves’s Ecclesiological Thought

The decade from 1825 to 1835 in which, as a young man, Anthony Norris Groves developed distinctive views concerning church and mission was one that marked a turning point in the religious history of the British Isles. It witnessed a popular transition from the eighteenth-century love of rational order to the nineteenth-century demand for the romantic, the dynamic and the ideal. In the vanguard of a new generation of radical Protestants were Groves’s contemporaries Edward Irving, Henry Drummond and Joseph Wolff. Although he cannot be considered an intimate acquaintance of these men, there is evidence of some personal contact with them, and he resembles them in many respects. Groves’s premillennialist views were probably acquired through his early contact with evangelical Anglicans such as Edward Bickersteth. His primitivist convictions may owe something to his early contact with Jewish converts to Christianity.¹

The nature of Groves’s subsequent spirituality suggests that Quaker influence in his early years made a lasting impression upon him. A strong emphasis on spiritual unity and co-operation, first awakened by his experience of the “Irish Reformation” in the 1820s, also remained with him throughout his life. His pietistic tendencies might suggest some early contact with Continental Pietists and Moravian missionaries, although clear evidence for such contact is so far lacking.

In tracing Groves’s ecclesiastical progression from nominal Anglicanism, through High Church and then Calvinistic Evangelicalism, to secession from the Church of England, we see him following a path taken by others of his generation. Indeed it is likely that the influence of, and precedent set by, contemporaries in Ireland, in the west of England and perhaps also on the Continent, played some part in his personal shift of perspective and loyalty.

Despite this, there are differences between the secession of Groves and that of most of his contemporaries. Particularly striking is the fact that in cutting his Anglican roots he neither sought to join another church denomination nor to initiate a denomination of his own. He adopted and maintained a deliberately non-denominational stance, constrained by a desire to follow “primitive” and “apostolic” practice.

¹ See PEANG: [B.1.2.3. Calvinistic Evangelical Anglican Contemporaries](#). In the theology of Judaism, principles are thought to have been revealed through events. A defining experience is given by God on a single occasion, so that all generations may learn from it and act in the light of it. In short, the event sets the precedent and the precedent establishes the principle. For this reason, “Loyalty to the norms and thoughts conveyed in the event is as essential as the reality of the event” (Heschel, 217). A Christian with this Jewish heritage will be likely to consider events recorded in the New Testament as precedents establishing principles. This was the position held by Groves throughout his mature years.

B.2. The Ecclesiology of A N Groves

In some respects, Anthony Norris Groves might be considered a typical nineteenth-century Nonconformist in so far as his ecclesiology is concerned. In particular, one would note his rejection of the concept of a national church establishment, a view shared by Nonconformists in general, along with his denial of apostolic succession. But in other respects he differed substantially from the typical Nonconformity of his day. His denunciation of clericism, ordination and sacraments carried him beyond the limits of the Reformed tradition into Quaker territory. His dispensationalism and denial of the Mosaic Law set him sharply at odds with the Puritan heritage of British Nonconformity, and his premillennialism conflicted with its postmillennialist consensus. The disposition of some Nonconformists to engage in denominational and political agitation was, moreover, considerably alien to his own view of spiritual unity and the church's role in the world.

Groves's ecclesiology was built upon the simple idea of the individual Christian learning to follow Christ and encouraging other individuals to do the same. He saw the local congregation as a means to this end, not an end in itself. He had little interest in the things that were traditionally considered essential to "church" – meetings, buildings, finances, organisation, training, ceremony. He offered a fresh and distinctive perception of what the collectivity of Christian believers was, is, and should be, and his ideas fall naturally into three categories: Christian unity, ministry, and influence.

1. *Christian Unity.* Groves believed the true unity of Christians to be spiritual rather than organisational. In his view, the body of Christ in the whole world, as in any particular part of it, should be considered a "mystical body" comprising all genuine believers, whether attached to one of the many diverse church denominations or to none. He refused to identify himself with any denomination or society, believing that to do so would require submission to a "system" restricting his freedom to act according to his own conscience and leading of the Holy Spirit. He nevertheless believed it possible and desirable for a Christian to co-operate with others in any spiritual activity that did not require the individual to act in a manner he or she believed contrary to the will of God. One of his stated aims in India was thus "to become united more truly in heart with all the missionary band there, and show that notwithstanding all differences we are one in Christ, sympathising in their sorrows and rejoicing in their prosperity."¹

2. *Christian Ministry.* Groves urged the liberty and authority of any Christian man to minister (and especially to teach from the Bible), wherever and whenever he might personally feel led to do so, with the approval of those to whom he ministers. He emphasized the importance of all members of the spiritual body engaging in some form of ministry, according to the spiritual gifts granted to them by God, and he encouraged Christians to offer financial support to men whose ministry they particularly appreciated in order that these might devote more of their time to spiritual rather than secular work. He proposed a simple form of dispensationalism (identifying four dispensations) which would liberate mankind from the necessity to observe the Moral Law of the Old Testament

¹ M226; see PEANG: [B.2.1. Christian Unity](#).

whilst requiring the individual Christian to obey all the instructions of Christ. He particularly disliked what he termed “that awful distinction between clergy and laity,” “that yoke of mere human ordination, the necessity of a title from man to preach and administer, as it is called, the sacraments, of which not so much as a hint is contained in the New Testament.”¹ He proposed an alternative: “For all the varied circumstances that can arise in an increasing empire like this of ours in India, every body of believers, however small, will then feel their full liberty, authority and power, notwithstanding any secular pursuit, to take the office of bishop in the church of God: and every one of the church, however humble his gift, will feel free to minister, as of the ability which God giveth.”²

3. *Christian Influence*. Groves taught that a Christian will be influential in so far as he or she resembles Christ and holds to the teachings of Christ. A disciple of Jesus will not seek to become influential by advancing himself to positions of power and prominence, but will draw others to follow his example through the evident blessing of God upon his life of simple faith and obedience. The Church, comprising Christians of this type, will be a gathered community of the faithful rather than a state-sponsored establishment. Groves emphasised the Christian’s need for personal holiness and the importance of an immediate individual response to progressively increasing “light”. Throughout his mature years Groves continued to hold to his earliest convictions regarding Christian devotedness, believing that a Christian should literally forsake all, devoting either himself to the missionary cause or his income to the support of missionaries. He counselled, “While one has that ministration of the Spirit which leads him to go and preach the gospel in person, another shows that he is guided by the same Spirit in carefully supplying the wants of him who thus goes... from the abundance yielded by devoted diligence in his honest vocation, and by rigid habits of self-denial.”³

B.3. The Ecclesiological Influence of A N Groves

We might well feel justified in considering Groves a radical ecclesio­logist, whilst admitting greater difficulty in ascertaining the extent of his influence in the United Kingdom, at least in his own lifetime. Some might wish it had been substantially greater. Indeed, if Groves rather than Darby had been the pre-eminent voice among the Brethren of the 1830s and 40s, the movement might have followed a rather different course, becoming not merely an additional Nonconformist denomination, but rather an alliance of Evangelicals embracing individuals from every denomination and from none. If this was Groves’s original intention, and we have some reason to suppose it was, then we might think his influence in his own generation somewhat slight.

Nevertheless, there were aspects of his primitivist ecclesiology, mediated especially through his brother-in-law George Müller, that found a significant place in the Brethren movement. In addition, his ideas concerning liberty of ministry, active participation in the body, plural unpaid leadership,

¹ R261

² *Liberty*, 74; see PEANG: [B.2.2. Christian Ministry](#).

³ D11; see PEANG: [B.2.3. Christian Influence](#).

spiritual unity and co-operation, and his concepts of sacrificial stewardship, holiness, “light”, faith and obedience eventually found their way, through Brethren influence, into far wider evangelical circles.¹

There is no doubt, however, that Groves’s personal significance to most of his own generation in the United Kingdom stemmed less from his ecclesiological writings, published after leaving Britain, than from his “romantic” example before doing so. His own secession from the Establishment, his self-sacrificing Christian devotedness, his plans for a mission to Baghdad: these all fell into a brief period of less than five years, between the spring of 1825 and the summer of 1829, and they made more direct impression in his homeland than all his subsequent pages of closely argued prose. Groves was indeed a radical ecclesiologist, and his ideas were not lost on his own circle of personal friends, but, as we shall see, his primitivist influence was considerably greater overseas than in the British Isles.

¹ See PEANG: B.3. The Ecclesiological Influence of A N Groves.