

Field-Governed Mission Structures Part I: In the New Testament

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Before looking exegetically at the text of the New Testament, we would like to examine the nature of the question as it is often posed in missiological discussions today. Then we will look at the Paul-Antioch relationship in its original context, and then we will consider what implications that has for answering the questions of today.

The Biblical Question as it is Posed Today

At a popular level, most missionaries who have visited the larger supporting churches in their countries of origin have observed the trend which Ralph Winter has described:

Brand new independent congregations [are] concluding . . . that there is no need for mission agencies at all: each congregation should send out its own missionaries, [and] global, specialized mission structures are not legitimate or even necessary (Winter, in Foreword to Frizen 1992: 9).

The leadership of larger churches which do send and support missionaries through specialized mission agencies often express sentiments which tend in a similar direction:

The man sitting across from me was the missions elder in a megachurch with a reputation for its commitment to missions. He said, "We didn't approve of what the missionary was doing, so we told him that he and his family had to return to the States." Some megachurches, believing the local church is "missions," send and supervise their own people.

A mega-church pastor states this view:

There are numerous organizations who say their purpose is to be an 'arm' of the church . . . I pray that the need for their existence would become obsolete because churches would obtain a healthy biblical perspective of ministry (Metcalf 1993: 26–27).

What is meant here by a "biblical" perspective? Perhaps one element in this elder's mind was Eph 4:11–12, which we would agree sees the role of "professional" ministers as being to equip the laity for the work of the ministry. But in our experience the biblical text most commonly cited in support of the local congregation as the "biblically" proper sender and supervisor of missionaries is Acts 13:1–4. As Jack Chapin points out:

The congregation at Antioch in Acts 13 is usually the final court of appeal for those who insist that the local church has the sole sending authority and is the sole sending agency for the missionary (Chapin 1998).

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George Peters, for example, interprets Acts 13 as teaching that “the local assembly becomes the mediating and authoritative sending body of the New Testament missionary” (1972: 219, cited in Glasser 1989: 264).

The popular terminology itself of “the *sending* church” is generally explained as having its biblical basis in Acts 13:3. In an Urbana address with the title “The Sending Church”, Gordon MacDonald explained the term thus:

The church in Acts 13 . . . called Saul and Barnabas and sent them out to the uttermost parts of the earth. That was a sending church . . . The church laid hands on them and “sent them off” (v. 3). It was a sending church (MacDonald 1982: 98).

Roy Stedman argues that Paul was not an apostle or a missionary until the Antioch church mediated that calling to him in Acts 13:

The missionary call of Barnabas and Saul, recorded in the thirteenth chapter of the book of Acts . . . It is also the beginning of the apostleship of Paul. Up to this time, though he was called to be an apostle when he was first converted on the Damascus road, he has never acted as an apostle. Now, some eleven or twelve years after his conversion, he begins to fulfill the ministry to which he was called as an apostle of Jesus Christ (Stedman 1995).

Louis Berkhof, in his extremely influential volume *Systematic Theology*, goes even further, indicating that Paul and Barnabas were “ordained” in Acts 13:3 (Berkhof 1941: 588).

Do these statements represent sound exegesis of Acts 13? Does the Bible describe the relationship of the Antioch congregation to the Pauline missionary band as one in which the former was the “mediating and authoritative sending body” of the latter? It is to the exegesis of Acts 13 and related texts—in their original context—that we now turn.

Acts 13 in its Original Context

We think that some of the writers quoted above are correct when they see Acts 13 as a significant turning point in the overall Lucan narrative. Many commentators see Acts 1:8 as programmatic for the “theological geography” of the whole book of Acts. After the power of the Holy Spirit comes in chapter 2,

chapters 2–7 show Jesus’ followers “filling all Jerusalem” with their teaching; then chapters 8–12 show them bearing witness to all “all Judea and Samaria;” then chapters 13–28 show them bringing the Gospel to “the uttermost parts of the earth,” concluding in Rome. The end of chapter 12 has the phrase “Now the word of God grew and increased,” which is a Lucan literary device that often indicates turning-points in the narrative (cf. Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 19:20).

Acts 13 is a turning point not only in theological geography and narrative structure, but also in the creation of mission structures. As Glasser points out:

In Acts 2–12 the story of the expansion of the Christian movement is largely a record of spontaneous growth brought about by the witness of individual Christians (e.g., Peter in 2:14–40; 3:12–26 and Philip in 8:5–13) and, on occasion, by multi-individual activity (e.g., the Hellenists who were driven from Jerusalem and went everywhere preaching the Word—8:2,4). In Acts 13–28 the expansion of the Christian movement was achieved through a strikingly different structure—the apostolic band or mission structure (Glasser 1989: 262).

In what follows below we will examine whether Acts 13 tells us anything about the relationship between these two structures—the local congregation and the mobile missionary band. Does Acts 13 imply anything about an authoritative sending relationship between them?

When Did Paul Become a Missionary?

As we rightly perceive that Acts 13 is a turning point in the development of mission structures and in the Lucan narrative of theological geography, we must not think that this implies that this was Paul’s first discovery of his personal missionary call. We must not overlook other historical events in the life of Paul which took place before this, and which are reported both in Acts and in Paul’s own letters. For Paul did not become a missionary or an apostle for the first time in Acts 13.

In fact Paul had already been a missionary for probably at least a decade before the events of Acts 13 (see below), and it was as missionaries that Barnabas and Paul had first *come* to Antioch. Acts

makes no reference to the existence of a church in Antioch until Barnabas and Paul came to establish it. In 11:19–21 we read that some unnamed Cypriot and Cyrenian (North African) believers (with the sanction of no local congregation) went to Antioch and told the Gospel to both Jews and Greeks, with the result that a substantial number of people “turned to the Lord.” These individual believers are not yet described as a church, however. It is in 11:25–26 that they are first referred to as a church, after Barnabas had brought Paul from Tarsus, and together they had met with these believers and taught them “for a whole year.” Thus Barnabas and Paul *came* to Antioch as missionaries, and the Antioch church itself was a product of their missionary labors.

So was it at *that* point in time that Paul first became a missionary and apostle? Did Paul receive his missionary call or his call to apostleship through Barnabas when Barnabas brought him from Tarsus? Galatians provides some clues to answering that question.

In Gal 1:1 Paul states that he is an apostle “neither from human beings nor through a human being” (οὐκ ἀπ’ ἀνθρώπων οὐδὲ δι’ ἀνθρώπου), but rather “through Jesus Christ and God the Father.” Paul continues, saying:

When God (who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me through his grace) was pleased to reveal his Son in me in order that I might preach the Gospel about him among the nations, I did not go for advice to flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I departed immediately into Arabia, and again I returned to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to make the acquaintance of Cephas, and I stayed with him for fifteen days. I did not see any other of the apostles, except James the brother of the Lord. The things which I am writing to you—behold before God—I am not lying. Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Gal 1:15–21, translation ours).

Thus Paul asserts that he received his missionary call directly from the Lord, without human intermediary, and that upon his conversion he *immediately* (εὐθέως, vs. 16) embarked on missionary work in Arabia, in Damascus, in Syria, and in Cilicia. The capital of Cilicia was

of course Tarsus, and it was from there that Barnabas brought Paul to Antioch to establish a church where there were already some new believers. Thus, by the time Paul came to Antioch, he had already been working as a missionary for some years.

Some readers may object that it is commonly held that Paul's time in Arabia was not spent preaching the Gospel, but rather in quiet meditation before the Lord, learning more about Christ. Some preachers suggest that this took place "in a cave," while others see Paul alone at a desert oasis. In reply we would first point out that this view is generally asserted without any support for it in the text. No other text in the New Testament supports that assertion, and the text we have reviewed above clearly implies that what Paul did immediately upon his conversion was to begin *preaching the Gospel* in the locations he names. Why should one think that he was preaching the Gospel in Damascus, Syria and Cilicia (ancient "Arabia" can be defined as including the first two of these), but that he was only meditating in Arabia? Is it perhaps because of a Western cultural assumption that the only thing in Arabia is sand? Given the presence of Arabic-speakers on Pentecost (Acts 2:11), is it not more plausible to remember that Arabia also contains *human beings* in need of the Gospel?

We would point out second that, even if one assumes that Paul's years in Arabia did not involve missionary work, few commentators would dispute that he was engaged in missionary activity in Damascus, Syria and Cilicia (including Tarsus) for several years before Barnabas brought him from Tarsus to Antioch (which was in Syria). Martin Hengel, for example, agrees that during this period these regions were "the focal point for his missionary activity" (Hengel 1979: 109).

The idea that Paul's missionary call, and the beginning of his missionary activity, took place at the time of his conversion and not in Acts 13 is also supported by the descriptions of his conversion in Acts. In Acts 9:15, three days after Paul's conversion, we read "This man is my chosen vessel to carry my name before the nations." In Acts 26:17–18 we read that on the Damascus road Paul heard



Jesus say, "[I will] rescue you from this people and from the nations to whom I am sending [ἀποστειλω] you to open their eyes to turn from darkness to light."

How many years are involved here from the beginning of Paul's missionary call and work to the events of Acts 13? The clue provided in Gal 2:1 ("then, after fourteen years, I again went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas") is open to more than one interpretation, depending on how one harmonizes the Acts chronology with the chronology in Galatians. F.F. Bruce (1977: 151, 475) connects this trip with the one in Acts 11:30. On that basis he sees Paul's conversion in about the year 33, Paul's second trip to Jerusalem in the year 46, and the events of Acts 13:1–4 in the year 47. Thus Paul was working as a missionary for 14–15 years before the events of Acts 13 (or, if one sees the Arabian time as non-missionary, for 11–12 years). If one equates the Gal 2:1 trip with the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), then the chronology is perhaps 2–3 years shorter, but Paul must still have been working as a missionary for about a decade before the events of Acts 13.

In summary: Paul says that his missionary call was not communicated through any human intermediary; rather he received it directly from the Lord at the time of his conversion. Paul was engaged in missionary work for several years before he went to Antioch. It was as missionaries that Barnabas and Paul first went to Antioch, and though there were already individual believers

in Antioch when they arrived, the existence of the Antioch church as an organized community was the product of their missionary work. By the time of the events of Acts 13, Paul had already been a missionary for at least a decade. Acts 13 was certainly not the moment when Paul received his missionary call.

So what did happen in Acts 13?

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said:

Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then, having fasted and prayed and laid hands on them, they released them. They, then, sent out by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia, and from there they set sail to Cyprus (Acts 13:2–4, translation ours).

I have called them

First let us note the perfect tense of the verb προσκέκλημαι ("I have called them"). The meaning of the perfect tense in Greek is "an action [that] takes place in the past with results that extend up to, and even include, the present" (Story and Story 1979:115). Blass and Debrunner say that the perfect tense "denotes the *continuance of completed action*" (1961: 175, emphasis theirs). They cite the example of Acts 21:28 (Ἐλληνας εἰσήγαγεν εἰς τὸ ἱερόν καὶ κεκοίνωκεν τὸν ἅγιον τόπον τοῦτου), which they explain as meaning "their entrance *in the past* produced defilement as a *lasting effect*" (Ibid.: 176, emphasis theirs).

Thus Acts 13:2 indicates that the Holy Spirit said, in effect, "Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I already fully called them in the past, with continuing implications today that they should continue that work." The work to which God had called them in the past was that of establishing churches where there were none. They came to Antioch for that purpose, but now that there was a solidly established church, that work no longer existed in Antioch. The past call to pioneer work must have continuing effect: Barnabas and Paul must go on to places where there are no churches.

"Sent" them?

As we noted earlier in this paper, much discussion today on the proper relationship between the home congregation and the missionary band centers on the use of the word "sent" in verse 3 of

our passage: “Having fasted and prayed and laid hands on them, they ‘sent’ them off.” This was the basis cited by Peters for saying that “the local assembly becomes the mediating and authoritative *sending* body of the New Testament missionary” (Op. cit., emphasis ours). It was the basis for Gordon MacDonald’s use of the term “sending church” (Op. cit.). While we are not here questioning more broadly whether a home congregation can play a role in “sending” a missionary (cf. Acts 11:22), we believe that this interpretation misrepresents the intent of Acts 13:3.

The word commonly translated “sent” is ἀπέλυσαν. As Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich-Danker note, the primary meaning of ἀπολυω is “set free, release, pardon.” Only secondarily is it used euphemistically to mean “let go, send away, dismiss, divorce” (1979: 96). Indeed the overwhelming majority of scholarly commentaries on Acts 13:3 interpret ἀπέλυσαν as meaning “released them.”

The euphemistic usage of ἀπολυω can be understood by analogy to the English euphemism for firing an employee: “We had to let him go” is a euphemism for “We sent him away.” The same euphemism can be found in French (“licencier”) and in German (“entlassen”) terminology for firing employees, where again “allow to leave” is a euphemism for “order to leave” or “send away.” This is the euphemistic sense in which ἀπολυω can mean “dismiss” or “send away.” It is almost painful to imagine that the Antioch church “sent away” Barnabas and Paul in that sense!

Because ἀπέλυσαν in Acts 13:3 is so widely understood today in popular exegesis as meaning “sent” in the sense of “authoritatively commissioned,” it is worth taking some time to examine closely the meaning of this verb in its New Testament context. The verb is used in 60 verses of the Greek New Testament in addition to our text (Bushell 1995). We have analyzed each of these 60 verses, and have classified them by the way in which ἀπολυω is used in each (i.e. according to what the verb means in each context). We list them here in order of frequency of use.

Usages of ἀπολυω

“Release” from prison (27 times):

Mt 18:37; 27:15; 27:17; 27:21;

27:26; Mk 15:6; 15:9; 15: 11; 15:15; Lk 23:16; 23:18; 23:20; 23:22; 23:25; Jn 18:39; 19:10; 19:12; Acts 3:13; 4:21; 4:23; 5:40; 16:35; 16:36; 17:9; 26:32; 28:18; Heb 13:23.

“Dismiss” burdensome people, e.g., hungry or rioting crowds, or importunate demanders of help (13 times):

Mt 14:15; 14:22; 14:23; 15:23; 15:32; 15:39; Mk 6:36; 6:45; 8:3; 8:9; Lk 8:38; 9:12; Acts 19:40.

“Divorce” (12 times):

Mt 1:19; 5:31; 5:32; 19:3; 19:7; 19:8; 19:9; Mk 10:2; 10:4; 10:11; 10:12; Lk 16:18.

“Give leave to return home” (6 times):

Lk 2:29; 14:4; Acts 15:30; 15:33; 23:22 (Acts 28:25, in passive voice, means “go home”).

“Forgive” (1 time):

Lk 6:37.

“Release from infirmity” (1 time):

Lk 13:12.

Nowhere in the New Testament (with the unlikely possible exception of Acts 15:30) is ἀπολυω used with a sense that is anything like “authoritatively commission.” The natural meaning is “release.” People are “released” from prison, “released” from financial debt, “released” from moral debt, and “released” from infirmity. They are “released” from a responsibility (e.g., Lk 2:29; Acts 23:22). The natural sense of ἀπολυω is also evident in the six verses where it is used to mean “give leave to return home.”

When the verb is translated “send away,” it is only in that euphemistic sense in which one “allows to leave” people whom one does not like or who have become burdensome. Thus it is the euphemism used by a man who wishes to “release” his wife (that is, send her away by giving her a bill of divorce). It is the euphemism used by the disciples in urging Jesus to “release” the hungry crowds (that is, to dismiss them so that they would find food for themselves and not demand food from Jesus). It is the euphemism used by the disciples to urge Jesus to “release” the Syrophenician woman who was importunately demanding

Jesus’ help (that is, “send her away so that she will stop bothering us”).

Based on this analysis, it seems almost grotesque to translate Acts 13:3 as indicating that the Antioch church “sent off” Barnabas and Paul. This missionary band was certainly not being fired, or divorced, or requested to stop being burdensome! It seems clear that the verb should be translated, according to its natural and more frequently used sense, as indicating that the Antioch church “released” Barnabas and Paul (that is, released them from their local responsibilities and allowed them to return to the kind of work that had brought them to Antioch in the first place).

An analogous text can be found in Lk 2. According to Lk 2:26 the aged Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he saw the Messiah. Lk 2:29 implies that he longed to depart in peace. When he saw the infant Jesus, he prayed, “Lord now allow me to depart (ἀπολύεις) in peace according to your word.” Similarly, when Paul and Barnabas saw the Antioch church well established with prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1), they too needed to be allowed to depart in peace—to go preach the Gospel where Christ had not been named. So the church “released” them (ἀπέλυσαν) from the pastoral responsibilities detaining them in Antioch.

Thus, F. F. Bruce’s commentaries on Acts translate ἀπέλυσαν here as “released” (Bruce 1988:244) and as “let them go, released them” (Bruce 1990: 294). Haenchen’s commentary similarly translates it as “*Sie . . . legten ihnen die Hände auf und entließen sie*” (“They laid hands on them and released them”) (Haenchen 1968: 335).

In his discussion of Acts 13:3, I. Howard Marshall says (contra Louis Berkhof and Roy Stedman, as we saw above):

The laying on of hands [was] an act of blessing in which the church associated itself with them and commended them to the grace of God (14:26), and not an ordination to life-time service, still less an appointment to the apostolate (Marshall 1981: 216).

Sent by the Spirit

However the word “sent” *does* appear in our passage, in verse 4. Barnabas and Paul went down to Seleucia and set sail for Cyprus “ἐκπεμφθέντες ὑπο του

ἁγίου πνεύματος (“sent out by the Holy Spirit”). As Stanley Horton’s commentary on Acts points out:

Verse 4 emphasizes that Barnabas and Saul were sent out by the Holy Spirit. The Church gave them their blessing and let them go (Horton 1981: 157).

Alex. Rattray Hay comments:

Barnabas and Saul went on their way, sent, as it says, by the Holy Spirit. The church did not send them; it ‘let them go’, or ‘released’ them—for that is the meaning of the word used (Hay n.d.: 67).

This reference to the *Holy Spirit* as Sender in verse 4 is often overlooked in discussions of Acts 13 as normative for the church’s role in sending. This is because it is common to make a break in the text between verses 3 and 4. Even many commentaries on the passage separate verses 1–3 from verses 4ff. For example, F.F. Bruce does this. (1988: 246) Then, in an astonishing slip, after translating verse 4 as “Barnabas and Saul, commissioned thus by the Holy Spirit . . .,” Bruce immediately goes on to paraphrase verse 4 as, “Barnabas and Saul, then, having been sped on their way by the Antiochene church [*sic*] . . .”! (Ibid.) To the extent that Acts 13 speaks about “sending” in the sense of “authoritative commissioning” it should be clear that the emphasis is on the *Holy Spirit* as Sender. Human leaders are active in blessing and supporting that sending, but Acts 13 does not describe human beings as “sending.”

Sending, Accountability, Authority Elsewhere in Acts

We are not hereby implying that the New Testament nowhere speaks of churches as “sending” people in the sense of “commissioning” them. We are saying only that Acts 13 does not do so. Acts 8:14; 11:19–30; 15:22–35 are passages which use the verbs *πεμπω* *ανδαποστελλω* to describe the “sending” of individuals by the Jerusalem church. Space will not allow us in this paper to examine these passages in depth. We will simply note here that each

of these three passages speaks of individuals being sent on a specific errand intended to be of short duration, and that all involve people being sent from one church to another existing church or at least to a place where the beginnings of a church (new believers) already existed. We know of no New Testament text which describes a local congregation as “sending”/“commissioning” people for long-term pioneer missionary service to plant churches where there are none. This does not mean that it is contrary to Scripture for a church to do so today: it means only that we know of no biblical text which directly *supports* the use of that terminology in that way.

We are also not implying here that the Barnabas–Paul missionary band, which was created in Acts 13, and which soon picked up additional members, did not see themselves as having any accountability at all toward the Antioch congregation. But we would note a clear distinction between the practice of *accountability* and the exercise of decision-making *authority* or direction. They did see Antioch as a base of operations from which they made outward journeys.

After being released from Antioch in Acts 13:1–4, they preached Gospel throughout South Galatia. Then we read in Acts 14:

They sailed to Antioch, from which they had been given over to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they announced the things which God had done with them and that he had opened the door of faith to the nations. And they stayed not a little time with the disciples (Acts 14:26–28, translation ours).

This text seems to imply that Antioch was a home base for this missionary band. When they had “fulfilled” the work they had gone out to do, they returned to stay for an extended time in Antioch, where they remembered having been “given over to the grace of God” (presumably an allusion to Acts

13:1–4). Their report of all that God had done with them implies that they sensed a responsibility for *accountability* toward the Antioch church, but nothing in this passage implies the exercise of decision-making *authority* by their home congregation over the decisions Paul and Barnabas had made “on the field.”

In Acts 15:35–40 we see that Antioch continued to be a home base for them, and that it was from there that they departed (separately from one another) on another missionary journey, with at least Paul and Silas again being “given over to the grace of the Lord” by the church (vs. 40). At the end of that missionary journey, in Acts 18:22–23, Paul again returned to Antioch and “spent some time there,” before departing again for his third missionary journey. The principle of accountability is not illustrated here, but the concept of a congregational “home base” is.

On this issue of accountability one other point should be mentioned. There is no evidence in the New Testament that the Pauline missionary band ever asked or received financial support from the Antioch congregation. From other New Testament texts, though, we can observe that for Paul the receipt of financial donations heightened the importance of accountability. This is important to our present-day discussions since most (but not all) missionaries today are financially supported by their home congregations.

In 2 Cor 8 we see Paul aggressively seeking donations, not for his own personal support, but for the poor in Jerusalem (as he had promised to do in Gal 2:10). In transporting these donations, he brought with him representatives chosen by the donor churches (the equivalent of financial auditors). In Acts 20:3–4 we read a list of the names of these representatives together with the churches which they represented. Paul says to the Corinthians why he is doing this:

So that no one may find fault with regard to this generous gift which we are administering. For we intend [to do] honorable things not only before

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the Lord, but also before human beings (2 Cor 8:20–21, translation ours).

These words are quite remarkable coming from the same man who said, “Am I now seeking the approval of human beings, or of God? If I were still pleasing human beings, I would not be a servant of Christ!” (Gal 1:10) In most areas of life Paul insists that he cares only whether he pleases God; other people’s opinions of him are not important (cf. Jesus’ teaching on this in Jn 5:44). But Paul makes here a major exception to this principle, in the area of financial accountability. When receiving financial donations, he seeks total transparency with the goal of pleasing *both* God and human beings.

However, again, one must distinguish between the practice of *accountability* and the exercise of decision-making *authority*. Throughout the missionary-journey passages in Acts we can see various major decisions made by the missionary bands without consulting their home congregations. This was the case when Barnabas—sent by Jerusalem to Antioch—decided to go to Tarsus to get Paul to join him. It was true in Acts 16:6–10 when the missionary band wanted to “preach the word” in the province of Asia but were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit” from doing so. Then they tried to enter Bythnia, but the “Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” Proceeding in the only remaining geographical direction, they came to Troas on the west coast of the Anatolian peninsula. There Paul had his “Macedonian vision” which directed the missionary band to cross the Hellespont into Europe. These were major decisions on the direction of the work, and they did not involve consultation with the Antioch congregation. The mission structure was apparently self-governing under the Spirit. Numerous similar examples could be cited.

Acts 16:1–3 is the interesting example of Paul’s recruitment of Timothy to join the missionary band. 16:2 indicates that Timothy’s two home congregations in Lystra and Iconium (both started by the Paul-Barnabas-John Mark missionary band) “bore witness” to Timothy’s good qualities. But 16:3 seems to indicate that it was Paul who made the decision that Timothy should join his group as a missionary.

Possible Examples of Home-Base Governance in the New Testament

Are there any examples in the New Testament of missionaries whose work was governed from a home base? There are certainly no examples for which we have anything like the kind of detailed information that we have about the Pauline missionary band and its relationship to Antioch and to other “home” congregations from which its members came. But two somewhat sketchy and uncertain examples are worth mentioning as possible cases of home-governed mission efforts in the New Testament.

The first example is the so-called “Judaizers” Paul writes about in Galatians. He writes:

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he was clearly in the wrong. For before certain people came from James, he ate with the Gentiles, but when they came, he drew back and separated himself out of fear of those of the circumcision faction. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. . . . I said to Cephas in front of them all . . . “By what right do you compel the Gentiles to become Jewish [literally: to Judaize]?” (Gal 2:11–14, translation ours).

The details of this situation are unclear. It is not certain that the people referred to in this passage are the same as those elsewhere in Galatians who sought to persuade Gentile believers to be circumcised and to keep the Law of Moses. It is also not clear that the words “certain people came from James [president of the church in Jerusalem]” imply that we are dealing here with a home-governed mission structure. It is quite possible that there is no mission structure at all involved here, and that these people were simply individual visitors, not missionary envoys seeking to assert Jerusalem’s control over the ministry in Antioch. In that case this example would be irrelevant to the concerns of this article.

But *if* “came from James . . . fear of the circumcision faction” does imply that Gal 2:11–14 is indeed an example of a home-governed mission effort, then it is clear that it is recorded by the New

Testament as a *negative* example of what *not* to do. And it illustrates an interesting problem that we will see in later missions history. For the issue between Paul and the “Judaizers” was not merely *theological* (whether one is saved by the works of the Law), but also *cultural* (whether Gentile believers on the “field” at Antioch must change culturally to become like Palestinian Jewish believers in the “home country”). Newly arrived envoys from the “home-base” in Jerusalem were eager to see cultural practices in Antioch made to conform to the norms of the home country. Paul, the experienced missionary who had resided longest among these Gentiles and who knew them best, was vehement in insisting on the importance of their retaining their culture while renouncing those practices (idolatry, sexual immorality, violence, etc.—cf. Gal 5:19ff.) which were contrary to the moral message of Jesus.

The second (similarly sketchy) possible example of a home-governed mission effort in the New Testament is the case of the “superapostles” (οἱ ὑπεράλιαν ἀπόστολοι) in 2nd Corinthians. Again the details of this situation are unclear, and it may or may not be relevant to our concerns in this article.

It seems probable, but not certain, that the “superapostles” mentioned in 2 Cor 11:5, 13 and 12:11 are the same as those mentioned in 2 Cor 3:1ff. who brought with them to Corinth credentialing letters of recommendation from some other church (Jerusalem?), and who sought such letters *from* the Corinthian church. Paul insists vehemently that the only apostolic credential which matters is the evidence of an apostle’s ministry, such as: the churches the apostle has planted and people the apostle has led to Christ (2 Cor 3:3; 2nd Cor. 11:1–7); the sufferings which the apostle has endured (2 Cor 11:16ff.); and the signs and wonders wrought by God through the apostle (2 Cor 12:11–12).

Of course the writing of letters of recommendation from a sending congregation does not necessarily imply a home-governed mission structure. Acts 18:27 seems to imply a positive judgment on Priscilla and Aquila’s writing of a letter of introduction for Apollos to take with him to Corinth. But the tone

of 2 Corinthians seems to imply that the “superapostles” did not merely carry letters with them, but went further in asserting that no missionary was legitimate unless the missionary had such a credentialing letter.

As in the case of the “Judaizers” of Galatians, so also here with the “superapostles” it is not at all certain that we are dealing with a home-governed mission structure. But it is certain that *if* this is such a structure, the New Testament presents it as a *negative* example of what *not* to do. As we saw with the “Judaizers” in Galatians, these “superapostles” were apparently newer, less-experienced missionaries who came to visit an already-established church, and who criticized the legitimacy and work of the more experienced missionary (Paul) who had pioneered the church before them. Later in this paper we will have occasion to see this same social dynamic at work in the work of Matteo Ricci, of William Carey and of Hudson Taylor.

Comments of Other Exegetes and Missiologists

Our interpretation of the relationship in the New Testament between the home congregation and the Pauline missionary band is supported by other biblical scholars. Gerd Theißen goes so far as to see this as a key point of distinction between Paul, on one hand, and the “judaizers” and “superapostles” on the other:

Noch in einem zweitem Punkt haben sich die Konkurrenten des Paulus auf eine traditionelle Legitimation berufen: Sie kamen mit Empfehlungsschreiben und ließen sich von der korinthischen Gemeinde Empfehlungsschreiben geben (II Cor. iii. 1). Sie traten also immer auch als Abgesandte einer bestimmten Gemeinde auf. Paulus tat dies nicht.

Paul’s competitors appealed to a traditional legitimation in yet a second point. They came with letters of recommendation, and they had the Corinthian church give them letters of recommendation (2 Cor 3:1). Thus, they always appeared as emissaries of a particular congregation. Paul did not do this (Theißen 1979: 223; translation ours).

It will be remembered that Paul knew well what it was to travel with letters of reference to congregations: in Acts 9:2 he had taken letters of reference from the high priest to the Damascus syna-

gogues authenticating him as persecutor of the Church. His personal experience of using such letters was an example of abuse.

Paul Pierson’s commentary on Acts expresses a view similar to the one we have taken:

[The laying on of hands in Acts 13] did not add to their call or authority, but it was important because it symbolized the participation of the whole church in the mission... In turn, the two missionaries continued to recognize their bond of *koinonia* with the whole church, but with Antioch especially (see Acts 14:26–28; 18:22,23). They were not under its control but they continued to be a part of the church. In turn they enjoyed its support in prayer and hospitality (Pierson 1982: 105).

Similarly Warren Webster quotes with approval this analysis by C. Peter Wagner:

[Paul] reported back to Antioch from time to time, just as he reported to Jerusalem and the other churches. The church in Philippi most likely was one of the financial supporters of the mission. But the missionary society was not controlled by Antioch or Jerusalem or Philippi, so far as we can determine. The church was the church, and the mission was the mission, right from the beginning (cited in Webster 1991: D–240).

Ralph Winter expresses it thus:

Both the stationary Christian synagogue that remained in Antioch and the travelling missionary team (which, note well, no longer took its orders from the Antioch church) were essential elements of the body of Christ, the people of God of the New Covenant, and were equally the church (Winter 1978: 339).

“Doug,” a prominent leader in our own mission describes his understanding of these texts thus:

There is no indication that the church in Antioch (or anywhere else) laid out the plans for the work, or gave them direction in the work. In fact, they were constantly making “on the spot” decisions (where to go, whom to speak to, how to respond to circumstances like rejection, stoning, rioting, jail, “closed doors,” etc.) for which they could only be accountable to each other (in their apostolic band) under the direct supervision of God

(e.g., 13:46; 14:19–22; 16:6–15). They could “report” to the church(es), later, what they had done, but this is different from being directed by the church(es) in the work... I see a pattern of reporting to the church, not being supervised by the church (e.g., Acts 14:27; 15:4)... Paul & his companions were definitely NOT under the authority/direction of the church, either in Jerusalem or in Antioch, for their ministry, but accountable to each other in the team/apostolic band, for carrying out the work to which God had called them (personal e-mail 1999, emphasis his).

Arthur Glasser goes even further than the view which we have taken here:

There is no indication that the apostolic band (the mission team) was either directed by or accountable to the Christians in Antioch... We state this without qualification, even though upon returning from their first journey, Paul and Barnabas “gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them” (Glasser 1989: 265).

Implications for Mission Structures Today

The discussion above has not considered all aspects of congregation-mission relationships in the New Testament, but has focused on the relationship between the Antioch congregation and the Pauline missionary band. This is the congregation-mission relationship about which we have the most information in the New Testament, and it is the one most frequently mentioned in discussions of this issue today. Our consideration of other such relationships in the New Testament has been more by way of brief overview. With the caveat that other perspectives might potentially be drawn from other relationships in the New Testament, we think that we can draw certain tentative conclusions from the material which we have analyzed:

- 1) Congregational structures and missionary structures are both legitimate structures, and are both legitimately part of “the Church.”
- 2) Mission structures which follow this biblical model will be directed in their decision-making by the Holy Spirit through their mutually-accountable personnel in the field, not by leaders at the “home base.” The missionary band which began in Antioch (and took on members from other congregations) was not

under the decision-making authority of the Antioch congregation.

- 3) Nevertheless mission structures, if they wish to imitate this biblical model, should see themselves as *accountable* to the congregations from which their missionary members come. Accountability implies transparency and reporting, but it does not imply decision-making authority or veto power.
- 4) When a missionary structure accepts financial donations from supporting congregations, this gives the congregations an increased right to transparent accountability. This still does not imply decision-making authority or veto power, however.

Glasser agrees:

We merely desire to take note of the distinctives of these two types of structure—congregational and mis-

sion—and to contend that neither is to be at the disposal of the other. Indeed, both are definitely subordinate to the Holy Spirit. Neither is to be an end in itself. Both are to be in wholesome symbiotic relationship to each other... Neither is to be overly upgraded or downgraded. Hence one should deliberately avoid speaking of “church” and “para-church” (Glasser 1989: 265).

Winter also expresses it compellingly:

Don't miss the larger and urgent significance of the very concept of the self-governed mission agency—just like the self-governed congregation—held in mutual accountability with other like organizations, fully legitimate as one expression of the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ (Winter, in Foreword to Frizen 1992: 10).

In the church today people in missional structures frequently tend to criticize congregational, local and geographical structures (including dioceses and districts) for lacking vitality and missionary commitment. The people leading the congregational-local-geographical structures equally often criticize missional structures as lacking legitimacy, as not really being part of the “Church.” The material considered above leads us to hope that these two ecclesial structures may learn the kind of partnership—envisioned in the New Testament—in which “through the Church the diverse wisdom of God may be made known” (Eph 3:10). **IJFM**

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