

The Role of the Local Church in Sending Missionaries

Biblical Principles Regarding Sending Missionaries

Acts 13 and 14 set forth a number of important principles concerning sending New Testament missionaries.

Acts 13:1-4

1. The first missionaries sent in the New Testament were seasoned veterans: prophets and teachers. This underscores the importance of spiritual maturity in the lives of missionary candidates.
2. The call to *send* came to the leaders of the church. The call to missionary service must be confirmed by the leadership of one's home church. The current popular notion that missionaries are individuals who are called to *go*, with or without the full support of their local churches to *send*, is unbiblical.
3. The call to *send* (and the call to *go*) comes while "ministering to the Lord" in the local church. This underscores the importance of worship and prayer as a part of the process of receiving the call. It also points out that missionary candidates should be fully involved in serving in a local church before being sent.
4. There is no indication regarding the time frame covered in verse 3, but the fact that they fasted and prayed, even after having received word from the Lord, indicates time elapsed while seeking the Lord before acting. God is seldom in as much of a hurry as we tend to be, even when it comes to ministry.
5. The words "set apart" indicate a time of preparation for service. The call to missionary service is at least as important as the call to eldership.
6. The missionaries were "sent," they didn't just "go." Being "sent" indicates that the one(s) being sent:
 - a) received a commission from the local church.
 - b) remained responsible and accountable to the senders (the local church.)
7. Being sent by the Church was equated with being sent by the Holy Spirit.

Acts 13:5-14:21

1. The primary responsibility of the missionary is to "preach the gospel."

2. The fact that not all members of the team were the preachers affirms the fact that there is a need for support personnel. Not all are preachers and the non-preaching members of the team are as important to the mission as the preachers.
3. The fact that the team was a great distance from the home church and was, therefore, unable to be in constant communication, instructs us that missionaries on the field, while responsible and accountable to their sending church, must be "field led." It is impossible for the sending church to direct every aspect of the missionary enterprise. The Holy Spirit will guide and direct the missionary while on the field as to the daily details of the work. This is another reason that missionaries must be mature Christians whose relationship with the Lord and ability to hear and follow His leading must be without question.

Acts 14:21-28

1. The goal of New Testament missionary enterprises is planting churches, not merely calling individuals to salvation. Only those who have a solid understanding of New Testament ecclesiology are in a position to establish churches and appoint church leadership. Freelance missionary enterprises that are disconnected from the church will not, and cannot, establish that of which they are not a part. While on the field, unless in a region of the world in which there is no opportunity for Christian fellowship, missionaries should seek to be in fellowship in a church. If there is no church, missionaries should participate in a house church, even if it is no bigger than their own family.
2. The missionaries returned to their home sending church to report on the work they had done. This reporting on the fruitfulness of the ministry is important for two reasons:
 - a) It is a means of determining the effectiveness of a missionary. This is important in deciding whether the missionary should be sent on another term.
 - b) Hearing from missionaries encourages the senders that, though they are not all "goers," they have an important stake in the work as "senders."

3. The missionaries stayed in their home church for a “long time.” This points out the following:
 - a) The missionaries recognized the sending church as their base of operations.
 - b) The missionaries needed to be ministered to by the members of their home church after serving selflessly for a period of time on the field.
 - c) The missionaries needed to minister in their home church so that the senders would know them well and be ready and willing to support them when they were ready to be sent out again.

The Relationship Between Local Sending Churches and Para-Church Missionary Ministries

Para-church ministries are Christian ministries that, while Christian in every other way, do not meet the accepted requirements to be churches. The New Testament knows nothing of para-church ministries. While not mentioned in the New Testament, para-church ministries are not unbiblical. They are often helpful. Para-church ministries exist to assist the work of local churches. They came into being because the church needed assistance, primarily because the church was falling short in a number of areas of ministry, especially missions. The para-church movement has become so strong that many para-church ministries no longer perceive themselves as assisting the Church or the work of local churches. In the minds of many involved in para-church ministries, the church, is either unnecessary or it has a rather fuzzy definition.

When para-church ministries remember their role, they will not consider candidates for missionary service who are not fully involved in the ministry of a local church and who do not have the full recommendation and support of the leaders of that local church. This means that before making any plans regarding an applicant’s ministry, the individual is referred back to the local church for counsel. This is more than asking a pastor to fill out a personal reference form that may or may not have any bearing on the acceptance of the individual into the program. It means seeking the counsel of the spiritual leaders who are responsible to God for, and have the greatest personal knowledge of, the applicant. Only after being commended for the work by the local church should the para-church ministry accept the individual as a missionary or worker.

Individuals who are seeking missionary opportunities should beware of and avoid para-church ministries that do not work closely with local churches,

or that do not insist that workers be involved in some kind of church experience while in the field, regardless of how good the organization is in other regards.

At Grace Bible Church, we work with a number of para-church ministries to varying degrees. The fact that we support missionaries who are connected with orthodox para-church ministries is not an endorsement of all aspects of those ministries, their beliefs, or practices.

The Local Church’s Role in Supporting Those Missionaries They Send

There is a difference between being a *sending* church and being a *supporting* church. Most missionaries receive financial support from a number of sources, both individuals and *supporting* churches. In addition to providing financial support, *supporting* churches pray and write letters, keeping the relationship with the missionary in the field alive.

The *sending* church, on the other hand, is the missionary’s home church and the base of his or her missionary support while on the field. Antioch was the sending church for the first missionaries in Acts 13 and 14. *Sending* churches have a far greater responsibility to the missionary than a *supporting* church. Both kinds of churches provide financial and prayer support, but the *sending* church should also act as the “home team” for the missionary while he or she is on the field. The *sending* church should assume responsibility to be sure that the missionary’s needs (spiritual, personal, financial and otherwise) are being met. The *sending* church may be the channel through which the missionary’s support funds flow. The *sending* church may establish a “support team” for the missionary, dividing up the various tasks connected with the missionary’s support, to ensure that every aspect of the missionary’s needs are being met. The leaders of the *sending* church continue to be spiritual “elders” in the missionary’s life. The *sending* church is usually the base of operations when the missionary is home on furlough.

On the other hand, the missionary is responsible and accountable to the sending church. The missionary should remain in close contact with, and seek counsel from, the leaders of the sending church, remembering that they are shepherds over his or her soul (Hebrews 13:17). When home on furlough the missionary should not only view the sending church as the base of operations on the home front, but as he or she is able, the missionary should be involved in ministry in the local church when home (Acts 14:26-28).

For a more detailed treatment of the subject of Sending Churches, please read *Serving as Senders*, by Neil Pirolo.

Supporting Missionaries: Who and When?

Every missionary should be supported by his or her home church and any other churches and friends who want to be partners with the missionary. Historically, one of the ways of discerning whether God is guiding a person to be a missionary is to see if God is providing the necessary financial support. Missionaries who will not, or cannot do the work to raise support are not usually good candidates for missionary service. The local sending church should be involved in the fund-raising, or *deputation* process. Para-church mission agencies are also helpful in guiding missionary candidates through this process.

Generally, people pledge to support a missionary once he or she goes to the field. During the deputation process, most missionaries continue to work in whatever field of employment they were in when they were called to be missionaries. During the final weeks or months before it is time for departure the missionary will often stop working at other employment and begin to live on the support that is given.

The first months of missionary service (possibly up to a year) are often dedicated to training. General training about the missionary work and culture and language are often needed. This period of training is a part of a missionary's service. While on furloughs and once on the field from time to time, missionaries will benefit from additional training. As long as this training is associated with the missionary's service, the missionary should be supported during such training.

Other training, and training that precedes one's missionary service, such as Bible College or vocational training, is generally not considered a part of the missionary's service. Therefore, during these phases of training, the potential missionary is seldom supported by churches or donors. Instead, like the training for other ministries or employment, arrangements for support should be through work or handled by family.

When a missionary comes home from the field, if he or she does not plan to return to the field, or if his or her plans are unsure, the supporters should continue to support the missionary for a reasonable length of time to help with "reentry." This support should not be prolonged, however, since the responsibility of the church is to support only those who are actively involved in ministry. The missionary should begin

supporting him or herself as soon as reasonably possible.

A Word About Short-Term Missions

Short-term missions are similar to long-term missions in most respects. Most of what is contained in this paper applies to both. One difference, however, is that short-term missions are exploratory in nature, not requiring specific calling to become a vocational or career missionary. For this reason, a person interested in short-term missions still needs the support and endorsement of his home church while investigating his future in missionary service.

Conclusion

This paper has been prepared to clarify the position of Grace Bible Church on some of the issues related to missionary service, for both those who go and those who serve as senders. It is the sincere desire of the elders of the church that this paper be helpful. Please feel free to contact the elders of the church if you have any questions. We are here to serve Jesus, His church and you.

e:\ministry\sl\evangelism missions\appendix two.doc v.1.0 2/2005