CHURCHES AND AGENCIES IN ACTS

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Category: Observations

It is worth taking a brief sprint through Acts to see what conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between churches and mission agencies from the book of Acts. The simple answer is that we canâ€™t draw any at all.Â

The first thing to note is that there is no real evidence for a structure which is analogous to the modern mission agency. Some mission efforts in Acts were carried out by individuals such as Philip (driven by persecution) and Apollos (we donâ€™t know what his motivation for travelling to Ephesus was). Others, such as the evangelism of Antioch by the unknown Greeks, or the various things that Paul and Barnabas did were carried out in groups. Even then, Paulâ€™s missionary group or band had a constantly changing list of characters, it was not a fixed association with clear membership and roles.Â

Equally, there is no obvious pattern for the local churchâ€™s involvement or oversight in mission work. When the Samaritans accepted Philipâ€™s teaching, the leaders in Jerusalem sent two apostles to check out what had happened. A similar, after the fact, review took place when the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to see what was happening in Antioch. However, whether for pragmatic or theological reasons, there was no follow up for the Ethiopian official.

The commissioning of Paul and Barnabas is the most obvious case of a church being proactive in their support and encouragement of mission and it is important to note that they returned to Antioch to report on what God had done through them. However, even then we donâ€™t see any evidence of the church taking a lead in helping them think through their strategy or approach. After that first journey, the Antioch church appears to have taken something of a back seat. There is no record of them being involved in working through the dispute between Paul and Barnabas and after that, Paul only made one brief visit to the city.

Apollos was briefly supported by the church in Ephesus, but other than that there is no evidence of him being linked to any fellowship at all.

Acts gives us a picture of missionaries who work independently and as groups, of churches which seek accountability after the fact and one which commissions missionaries to their work. We see the same church being very involved in sending missionaries and then apparently completely hands-off with the very same missionaries later in their careers.

Any attempt to find a hard and fast model for how mission agencies should function and how they

should relate to churches in the book of Acts will be disappointed. Luke just does not provide us with this information. Whether the elders in Antioch did or did not intervene between Paul and Barnabas, we simply do not know. Luke, inspired by the Spirit does not provide us with that information. However, that should not really surprise us. Acts provides a model for how mission is carried out, not an organisational manual. Among other things, we have illustrations of the content of the gospel message, pictures of contextualisation and a demonstration of the way that mission can involve suffering. In the same way that Acts provides a picture of the church in action, without providing a blueprint for church governance or structures, so it provides an illustration of mission and outreach without proscribing how it should be organised. The New Testament allows for a degree of freedom in developing both church and mission structures that means that they can be adapted to fit differing cultural and historical situations. There is not a one size fits all pattern for mission agency structures any more than there is a one single form of church government.

However, while Scripture does not proscribe one form of church government over another, it does give guidlines as to how the church leadership and membership should interact. Leaders have certain rights and responsibilities and so do church members. Missionaries, despite their title, are first and foremost church members (they may also have leadership responsibilities) and the way in which they relate to the church and to their leadership should be the same as for other church members. Scripture may not proscribe how mission agencies and churches should relate, but it does give a good deal of teaching about church membership which can be contextualised to the mission situation.