ARE MISSION AGENCIES BIBLICAL?

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Category: Observations

To my mind there are three possible answers to this question:

- It depends on what you mean by biblical.
- Probably not.
- Possibly, yes.

Just to confuse things even further, I'd come back with a supplementary question; does it matter whether or not they are biblical? To this one, I'd definitely answer "no".

So, having confused everyone, let me try and unpack what on earth I'm going on about, and we'll start with an analogy.

Let's think about church government. The Bible has a good deal to say about church life; it lays out the requirements for elders, it talks about mutual submission, outlines what the first Christians did when they met together and so on. However, it never actually spells out how a church or family of churches should be governed. In the end, we have a range of governance systems; episcopal, presbyterian and congregational, to name the three I am most familiar with. Each of these systems points to Scripture to support some aspects of the way they work, but there is nowhere that you can turn to that lays out a system of governance in detail.

I would argue that we are in a similar situation when it comes to how mission is organised. We have a clear biblical mandate to make disciples and bear witness to Jesus around the world, but there is less of a clear picture when it comes to how things should be organised.

Let's talk about structures, first. Some people argue that Paul's "missionary band" is analogous to today's mission agencies. However, Paul's group was more or an *ad hoc* structure with people joining and leaving on a fairly regular basis. It wasn't fixed and didn't have "membership" in the way that current agencies have. Then we have missionaries like Apollos who - as far as we can tell - worked entirely on his own, without any companions.

What then about the relationship of missionaries in Acts to the church? It is often argued (I've done it myself) that Paul was under the authority of the church in Antioch. He was commissioned by the church for his first missionary journey and reported back to them afterwards - just like missionaries do today. However, about half way through the story of Paul, his connection to Antioch appears to break and we never see him returning there. Even on his final journey to Jerusalem, he calls in on

Ephesus, but doesn't greet the Christians in Antioch, even though it would have been perfectly feasible. For at least half oof his career, Paul does not seem to have been responsible to, or held accountable by a church congregation. Then there is Apollos. Not only did he work independently, but there is no record of him being sent out by a church in Alexandria, though he did pick up supporters in Ephesus on the way. (I realise that I've painted in very broad brush strokes here and that all of this needs developing - that's a different project which may or may not end up on the blog).

Try as I might, I can't discern any pattern to the missionary structures in Acts, nor to the way in which they relate to churches (beyond the fact that planting churches seems to have been the goal of apostolic missionary activity).

But I think that's the point.

Just as the New Testament gives us freedom to organise and structure our churches within certain boundaries, so it gives us freedom to structure our mission life according to the prevailing situation - again, within certain boundaries. Modern mission emerged 200 or so years ago as a response to the need to spread the gospel within the cultural constraints of the time. They are biblical in the sense that they exist in order to fulfil a biblical mandate, but they are not biblical in the sense that their structure and their relationships to settled congregations are outlined in Acts.

A more pertinent question is whether or not they are the right situation for today. The world has changed dramatically since Carey outlined the concept of the modern mission organisation; perhaps our structures should do the same.