

Field-Governed Mission Structures

by Joseph & Michele C.

How should mission structures be governed? Does the Bible provide us with information on the exercise of decision-making authority in how mission structures should operate? Do twenty centuries of mission history offer us any lessons on this question?

Of course virtually all Christians would agree that missions should be supremely governed by God, with Jesus Christ as active head of the Church. The biblical text which is most central to our reflections in this paper—Acts 13:1–4—has as its clearest emphasis the *Holy Spirit's* role in directing missionary decision-making.

However this does not answer the question of human instrumentality in God's direction of mission. Through *whom* does God exercise direction? Most Christians would agree that God often gives direction through godly, humble, legitimate human leaders—but *which* leaders? What if sincere, godly people *disagree* about what God's direction is? Who is the final human interpreter of God's direction of mission?

In our experience of the ways in which this question is discussed in the evangelical missions context today, debate frequently centers on the proper relationship between *field* leadership and leaders at the *home* base. In our experience that discussion also tends to revolve around the interpretation of Acts 13:1–4 and its implications for understanding the relationship between the Pauline missionary band and the Antioch local congregation.

The first article of this series will explore the question of field-governedness and home-governedness in the New Testament. It would be impossible in a article of this length to exhaust all that the Bible says on the question of the relationship between home congregations and field mission structures, so we will focus primarily on the Paul-Antioch relationship (since this is so central to the discussion today), while also looking briefly at some of the other relevant New Testament materials.

The succeeding articles of this series will examine the same questions of mission governance and structure throughout twenty centuries of missions history. As Spanish historian George Santayana remarked, "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Again, concerns of length make it impossible to examine the organizational structures of every missionary movement in history. Instead we have attempted to select a number of the most important and representative movements and individuals in missions history. The criteria for this selection have been an attempt to represent broadly the entire sweep of twenty

centuries of history, and to focus on well known and influential individuals and movements, while giving particular attention to those missionary pioneers most interesting to evangelical Protestant readers. Thus our examination of New Testament mission structures in the 1st century (Part I) is followed by Patrick of Ireland and the Celtic peregrini movement in the 5th–10th centuries (Part II), then Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit mission to China in the 16th–18th centuries (Part III), then William Carey and the 18th–19th-century dawn of the era of modern Protestant missions (Part IV), and finally Hudson Taylor and the 19th–20th-century emergence of the "faith-mission" tradition (Part V).

We would like to emphasize that many other examples could have been chosen which would have illustrated equally well the issues at stake in this series of articles. In the future we hope to add a section on the rise and the fall of the so-called "Nestorian" missions of the medieval Church of the East (to illustrate a non-Western mission), and another section on the structural evolution of the American Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions (to illustrate a mainline Protestant denominational mission). In both cases we believe that one can observe the same forces which will be seen at work in the five examples in this series. **IJFM**