

Mission Structures in the New Testament:

Supplementary Comments on Part I of *Field-Governed Mission Structures*

by *David Devenish*



The paper exegetes well the role of the sending church in Acts 13 and also highlights the trend of large sending churches now seeking to exercise authority over missionaries they have sent out. However, I think that two other current issues being emphasised and rediscovered need to be examined in the light of Scripture because they may affect some of the assumptions in the article. These issues are:

1. The perception of the local church as a missional community rather than a pastoral community. Thus members are to regard themselves as “on mission” and sent into the world as Christ was sent into the world. Each church corporately must see itself in the same way—see, in particular “Missional Church,” ed. Darrell Guder, Eerdmans, ISBN 0 8028 4350 6.
2. The restoration of the role of apostles today not as adding to the completed Canon but as a gift given by the *ascended Christ* (unlike the twelve) to extend the mission of the church, plant new churches and bring the church to maturity according to Eph 4:7–13—see in particular, “Churchquake” by C Peter Wagner, which refers to this “new apostolic reformation”—ISBN 0 8307 1918 0.

These two issues are causing a re-examination of what we understand by “missionary” and “mission structures” but also a positive emphasis on mission—i.e., that the gospel of the kingdom must be preached to every people group. Also some missionary societies are now calling their church planters, “apostolic teams.”

So what are some of the functions of apostles according to Scripture:

- To plant churches.
- To lay good foundations in churches—1 Cor 3:10.
- To reach the regions beyond—2 Cor 10:16.
- To appoint elders in churches—Acts 14:23.
- To bring biblical wisdom to difficult situations e.g., Paul’s answers to questions in 1 Cor 7.
- To exercise continued care for the churches which they have planted—2 Cor 11:28.
- Note it is always out of personal relationship and not out of formal legal structures.

It is evident that in this endeavour, apostles and their apostolic teams (Paul always functioned in teams—see 2 Cor 2:12–13) had authority invested by God to fulfil that calling. In that sense I agree with the interpretation of Acts 13 in the paper and other Scriptures quoted concerning Paul’s call and anointing, but I would see it as his “apostolic call” not his “missionary call.” This is not just splitting hairs. It could be argued that “mission” is the Latin root equivalent of

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apostle but not all we call “missionaries” today are apostles, though I believe that is biblically what the pioneers examined in the paper were.

So who are missionaries? Every believer in every church community is. But are not some called to travel to share the gospel in other cultures? Yes, so how was it done and structured in the New Testament? Firstly, what gifts do what we call missionaries have? Some may be apostles, some prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers, some helps, some administrators. They could have all the gifts and calling of any other local church member but with grace from God to function cross-culturally. The authority we have depends on our gifting from God, the recognition of that gift by others and the godliness of our character.

How did mission take place? In various ways:

- By believers being scattered—Acts 11:19ff.
- By apostolic strategy, adjusted by God’s revelation as in Acts 16.
- By evangelists travelling—Acts 8.
- By reluctant apostles receiving revelation—Acts 10.
- By Paul sending those he trained—so his strategy for Ephesus was different to that from Antioch; he trained in the Hall of Tyrannus and all of Asia heard the Word and churches were planted, e.g., Colosse to whom Paul could still write as their apostle even though they had never seen him, because of his relationship with Epaphras—Col 1:7.

What were the structures?

- Apostolic teams which could ensure a good foundation was laid even when the churches had been planted by other means—e.g., Barnabas and Paul going to Antioch, Peter and John to Samaria.
- Apostolic teams training people to go on their behalf, e.g., Epaphras
- Apostolic teams sending one of their member to a particular place with clear authority, e.g., Timothy.
- Apostles were genuinely accountable to each other, though also willing to stand up to each other—Gal 2:6–14.
- Apostolic teams reached decisions together—note plural in Acts 16:10, “concluding.”
- Apostles and their teams functioned as part of local churches

when they were there and in relational harmony with them as they travelled, Antioch—Acts 13:1–2, 14:35, Ephesus—Acts 20:18, 32–35, Thessalonica—1 Thess 2:8. Other churches founded by the apostles supported the ongoing mission—e.g., in Macedonia. They were therefore not separate from the churches but in genuine relationship.

I agree that the local church at Antioch did not govern apostolic decisions on where they should go but apostolic teams did have authority to check that good foundations were laid in churches founded by other “missionaries.”

So are mission structures field led or governed by sending churches? I would say apostolically led. The historical examples given in the paper were not local church but mission board or denominations. It may be that leaders of some local churches have an apostolic calling which in part is worked out through sending people under their authority. That does not mean every local church has authority over their church planting teams. I believe decisions should in the main be made “on the field” but with apostolic checking of the foundation and practices to ensure that they reflect biblical truth, though they will be expressed by culturally contextualised means. It may be that an apostle is leading the church planting team or the team may consult with apostles with whom they have confidence and relationship. **IJFM**

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