



The Antioch Principle: Missionary Support and Sending

By Donald Geddes

One of the strengths of the Presbyterian Church in the 21st century is the number of missionaries it has sent and supported. Healthy congregations are those praying for and sending missionaries. However, we tend to focus on the Missionaries and therefore overlook the importance of the sending church. A careful reading of Acts 12:19-30 and 13:1-3 will correct this failing.

While we know Paul as the greatest missionary in the history of the Christian Church, how often do we hear about the church which sent and supported him on his missionary journeys? The church at Antioch was where the disciples were first called “Christians”, which indicates it was a church which made an impact in its area.

More important is the fact that the Antioch church gives to us the Biblical pattern for missionary sending and support – a pattern we largely ignore to our great loss!

The Book of Acts records how believers originally from Cyprus and Cyrene, who were forced out of Jerusalem by persecution, founded a Christian church at Antioch (Acts 11:20). This church prospered as a great number responded to the Gospel forming a numerically strong congregation. (Acts 11:21)

The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas the encourager to strengthen the leadership at Antioch, realizing this was a strategic church. His ministry resulted in further converts (Acts 11:22-24) so that Barnabas saw the need to recruit Saul from Tarsus, no doubt realizing how the church could benefit from his knowledge and teaching. Together for a year they laboured to further expand and strengthen the Antioch congregation (Acts 11:25-26).

Thus we have a congregation numerically strong and blessed with good leadership. Such a congregation was therefore in a position to consider ministry beyond its own boundaries. A visiting preacher, Agabus, one of the prophets who came from Jerusalem, predicted a severe famine. As a result the Antioch Christians set aside money to help fellow Christians in Judea.

This shows the church being enriched by visiting speakers. It also shows how these visiting speakers taught the Christians to set aside money for outreach and diaconal aid – which laid the foundation, no doubt, for later financial support for Paul and Barnabas (Acts 11:27-30)

This giving brought blessing and further converts (Acts 12:24). It also enabled Barnabas and Saul to recruit John Mark. (Acts 12:25). Congregations with a vision for giving to missions and other causes often enjoy great blessing and growth. Inward-looking congregations tend to shrivel and die.

By this time there was a strong church at Antioch with a leadership team of five (Acts 13:1). The Antioch church was in a position to send their two most experienced leaders to spread the Gospel and plant churches in pagan areas.

From this strong base in Asia Minor, the whole church was led by the Holy Spirit to consider further missionary outreach – a vision confirmed after prayer and fasting (Acts 13:2-3). Barnabas and Saul were set apart for missionary work by the strong Antioch congregation who supported them with prayer and finance. Their missionary task was clear: it was evangelism and church planting.

In setting apart Paul and Barnabas, the Antioch church was choosing two men of proven spiritual gifts and experience. There

is no doubt a local congregation is in a far better position to assess the suitability of a prospective missionary candidate than a Missionary Society. This can help to avoid the embarrassment of sending an unsuitable person to the mission field.

It was to the sending congregation at Antioch that Paul and Barnabas reported back after their missionary journey (Acts 14:26-28). They also took the opportunity to encourage other congregations with a report of how the Lord had blessed their missionary journey (Acts 15:3).

While the Bible does not state that Paul and Barnabas were financially supported by the Antioch church, it must have supplied at least some practical support. Where Paul stayed for any length of time, such as Corinth, he supported himself by working at his trade of tentmaking (Acts 18:3). Indeed, Paul specifically stresses to the Ephesian elders: 'You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions' (Acts 20:34).

"Tentmaking" support for missionaries is a valid missionary principle and has become necessary in many countries in order to gain an entry visa. However, sending congregations usually need to contribute to travelling expenses, equipment costs and accommodation and support for missionaries on home leave.

Of course, the most vital support missionaries need is prayer. They are at the front line of the spiritual battle and up against the full force of spiritual warfare.

If a missionary is largely self-supporting, then the need to canvass a large number of home congregations for financial support is eliminated or reduced. This means the missionaries and their families can spend home leave in their sponsoring church giving them the chance to 're-charge their spiritual batteries' as well as contribute to the life of that church. It may well mean employing the missionary temporarily as a member of the church staff.

After returning from their first Missionary Journey, Paul and Barnabas taught and preached at Antioch (Acts 15:35). Perhaps the modern practice of missionaries or prospective missionaries engaging in an exhausting itinerary to garner prayer and financial support does not have much support in the New

Testament. Returning to ministry at Antioch allowed Paul and Barnabas to recoup physically and spiritually from their labours, and further strengthened the sending church.

The Antioch principle for missionary sending and supporting might therefore be summarized as:

1. We need to develop sending congregations where there are sufficient numbers to support, both financially and prayerfully, a missionary overseas. This implies an emphasis on evangelism. A church that does not evangelise at home is hardly likely to have the vision to evangelise abroad.
2. Missionaries should come from the church leadership. They need experience and proven spiritual gifts. Only a congregation with a breadth of leadership can afford to send its best leaders on missionary work.
3. The congregation needs to have a vision of spreading the Gospel and a heart to give sacrificially.
4. There must be a clear missionary strategy which first and foremost must be based on evangelism and church planting.
5. Missionaries should report to their sending congregation, and spend their furloughs ministering in that congregation for the mutual enrichment of both the missionary (and the missionary family) and the sending congregation. This does not exclude encouraging other congregations with reports of how the Lord has blessed their missionary endeavours.

It is possible for the application of these principles to also include a number of smaller congregations in the same area or even a country Presbytery banding together to send and support a missionary.

Of course this undercuts the present practice of most missionaries being sent by para-church Missionary Societies. Can Missionary societies ever be as effective as the Antioch model?

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