

The Role of the Local Church in Missions
Week 4
(slightly edited from CHBC's Core Seminar)

Good morning – we're now in the fourth week of the missions Equip class.

We've talked about the goal of missions. What is it?

A: The glory of God

We've talked about why we do missions – by looking at God's story of redemption and calling His people throughout all of scripture (biblical theology).

And then last week, *we discussed the reality of hell* – why it's important, urgent work to share the gospel with others...but not a watered-down, wishy-washy gospel that doesn't make much of our sins, and therefore the punishment Christ endured on our behalf...but a Gospel that is clear that JESUS is the only way to salvation. There's no other way to God, apart from knowing and following Christ – and doing so explicitly.

Today we're beginning to delve into the strategy of missions – how does the Bible say we “do missions”? Through the church. This may sound obvious, but it's actually, sadly, outside the norm, or conventional wisdom, of many in broader Evangelicalism, who too often promote two errors, which will push against today: one of a hyper-individualized or personalized approach to missions...and another version that basically outsources missions to parachurch organizations/groups.

Introduction:

Let's start today with a story. Once upon a time, a member sent an email

to one of her pastors. In it she basically said – “Dear Pastor, Great news! I’ve recently been accepted to serve as a missionary with a parachurch sending agency. I’ll be working with a team doing gospel work in a small city overseas. Sorry I haven’t really talked to anyone at church to get advice. This organization isn’t connected to our church, so I didn’t think you would know much about them anyway. And since I feel so strongly called by God personally, I’m sure the church will want to support what God has told me to do. I leave in a month for a two-year project. Since you will be my “sending church,” I’d love to meet up soon and talk about prayer and financial support. Thanks a lot. Signed – An excited church member.”

Poll: What do y’all think about this?

It might surprise some to know that this is not a made-up email. It’s a synthesis of several actual emails sent to elders of a local church, by well-meaning church members, over the past 20 years. These were members who loved Christ and had good intentions.

But in it you see both an individualistic approach to missions – one that’s dependent upon a sense of “call”. But you also find an approach that’s relying totally on a parachurch organization, without any interface with the church. This email seriously misunderstands a lot of what the Bible teaches about missions and who is responsible for the mission.

Another former missionary from this church (GRBC), shared the following similar story:

I wish we had understood this when we first went to the mission field. If we had, we would’ve done things differently. When my wife and I “felt called” to missions, we were in college at the time and weren’t official members of a local church. We just decided unilaterally that we were going to go to the mission field, so we went to seminary and enrolled in their missions program. Soon after we arrived at seminary, we joined a local church and eventually informed them of our plans and asked for their help. They graciously obliged, even taking us on a vision trip to

the place we were planning to go. But there was never really a discussion between us and them about our fitness to be missionaries or lack of. Although we were intensely vetted by the parachurch organization that sent us, we were never really vetted by our church.

So this all raises the question we're going to focus on today (and our first point):

I. TO WHOM WAS GOD'S MISSIONARY COMMISSION GIVEN?

ANSWER QUESTION: WHERE DO WE SEE THIS IN THE BIBLE? WHERE IS IT CLEAR/NOT CLEAR?

a. The Assembled Church – (Luke 24:33-48)

“To whom was God’s missionary commission given?” It’s a more complex question than one might think. But it’s important to know who bears the main responsibility to see that Christ’s commission for missions is carried out.

Quick check: when we talk about this “commission” what are we talking about? Matthew 28: 18-20 – Christ’s command to go and “make disciples of all nations”.

In Luke, Chapter 24, we read about the giving of Christ’s gospel commission, and the context and circumstances of it’s being given. So this is after the resurrection, and following Christ’s appearance to two men on the road to Emmaus, we read:

[Luke 24:33-48] → start at v 44?

³³ And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And

they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, ³⁴ saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!” ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

³⁶ As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!” ³⁷ But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. ³⁸ And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate before them.

*⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ **and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.** ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.*

And as the Lord began the process to send out the first gospel missionaries, he didn't do it by speaking primarily to individual persons as we might expect, as he did to the Old Testament prophets, but instead he first spoke to his assembled church and her leaders.

Now, as later passages make clear, Saul (or Paul) felt himself to be called as the Apostle to the Gentiles and was certainly a willing missionary, not one under human compulsion. But it is interesting that

God chose to inaugurate his missionary plan by extraordinarily speaking to a church and her leaders about who they should send in a very public and corporate way. This is a special event; we don't read of many similar special callings (maybe Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:6-7) but it does accord with the pattern we see in Scripture.

It's also important to point out: missions should be an overflow of personal and local evangelism. If we are followers of Christ, we're all called to share His good news. We're all called to evangelize others.

International missions – both at the church level and at the individual level – begins with regular, normal evangelizing wherever you are. If we aren't sharing the gospel here and now, why would we think we would magically do so zealously and regularly in a more difficult environment, with language and cultural barriers? In that sense – of normal evangelism – we're ALL called to evangelize the nations.

Ok – but for that distinct work of crossing cultural and language barriers – what does the Bible say about the mechanisms that make that happen?

b. Chain of missionary sending

In the Bible, we see the progression of the gospel in a so-called **chain of sending** that starts appropriately with the initiative of God the Father.

i. God sends his Son.

*John 3:17: ¹⁷ For God did not **send** his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

It then continues with the initiative of the risen Son.

ii. The Son sends the Holy Spirit.

Luke 24:49: ⁴⁹ *And behold, I am **sending** the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.*

Then the Holy Spirit strengthens and empowers the church.

iii. The Holy Spirit gathers and encourages the church.

Acts 9:31: ³¹ *So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the **Holy Spirit**, it multiplied.*

And finally, the gathered church sends a few of her people on the mission that God has given them.

iv. The church sends her people.

1. Of the congregation in Antioch, we read in Acts 13:2: ² *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the **Holy Spirit** said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”*

2. Romans 10:14-15: ¹⁴ *How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?^[1] And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach **unless they are sent**? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”*

We see this repeated theme: a missionary doesn't send him or herself. They are SENT. By whom? The pattern in scripture we see is that they are sent by the church.

This seems to be the plan of God in the New Testament. That the local church would gather, equip, and send (willing) gospel emissaries to declare the gospel and to gather new churches in places where Christ's name is not known. In this sense, God intends the local church to be central in his missionary plan.

Certainly, this doesn't negate the role of the individual Christian. We don't know anything of missionaries sent without their consent, of course. And a desire in an individual heart may be the initiating event for a church to evaluate and send a member. I think that's true of many missionaries – they have an initial passion, call, desire, or aspiration for this work. They talk to their elders about it, and they begin to consider together what that might look like.

But at the center is the local church. We don't see rogue missionaries in the Bible. We want to think about the local church as the **engine** of gospel advance throughout the New Testament, and it has been at the heart of most healthy missionary efforts ever since.

Ok – so we've established from scripture the idea that the church is an integral part or partner to sending...we also talked briefly about how the individual is certainly involved in that. But what do we do with that?

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR A LOCAL CHURCH TO BE CENTRAL IN SENDING MISSIONARIES?

So what does it actually mean for the local church to be central in sending out missionaries? Four things seem especially clear.

a. Evaluation

It means that the local church takes the responsibility to evaluate the character and the abilities of members **BEFORE** recommending them to any other missions sending agency. The church, as the community that

knows that person best, should be willing to test and evaluate their character, gifts, fruitfulness, knowledge and suitability, as best they can. It's in the context of a local church that the maturity, wisdom, and faithfulness of an individual can best be assessed.

It seems right that missionary qualifications should be similar to that of deacons or pastors. We want to send our most mature, godly, and steadfast members to the nations...not just those who seem to want to.

b. Teaching/training

And in a local church, the majority of teaching and training takes place. As Paul exhorts Timothy (2 Timothy 2:2), it is in the local church that faithful men and women should be taught, so that they can, in turn, pass on gospel truths to others. Through regular preaching and doctrinal teaching, it's the local church that trains up missionaries (and everyone else).

And a local church is also the normal place to oversee any special training or teaching that missionary candidates might receive.

c. Sending and supporting // overseeing and caring

None of this precludes a local church from partnering with another church (or churches) to help to send and support workers. Paul's letter to the Philippians indicates that there were a number of local churches involved in supporting his missionary team.

- Sending with authorization (a la Acts 15)
- We'll talk about this next.
- Providing for material and spiritual support (3 John)
 - o Sending them on their journey "in a manner worthy of God"

III. HOW SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT MISSION SENDING AGENCIES?

So if it's the church's job to send and support, what do we make of sending organizations?

We should think of them as...

a. An optional, but permissible, means of organized cooperation among churches.

Philippians 4:14-16: ¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to **share** my trouble. ¹⁵ And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

We see in this passage that Paul looked to several churches (in Corinth, Antioch, and Philippi) for material support. Together those churches partnered with Paul to support his work. By extension it seems clear that any effort to organize that cooperation is warranted. That's exactly what we see in John's third letter. There he commends some itinerate missionaries with the hope that they would be supported from another church so that, together, John's church and this other church would "work together for the truth."

*3 John 1:5-8: ⁵ Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, **strangers as they are**, ⁶ who testified to your love before the church. **You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God.** ⁷ For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸ Therefore we ought to support people like these, **that we may be fellow workers for the truth.***

At its best, this is what a parachurch sending organization does. It helps organize cooperation and pools resources among multiple churches so that, together, they may partner in the spread of the truth of the gospel.

b. Only authority is that delegated to them by local churches (Acts 15:23-25).

But it's important to right-size their influence. In other words, that though they may be helpful, the ultimate authority over our workers and our gospel work remains with the local churches.

c. Useful for strategic coordination, humility, and field oversight.

Sending organizations or partnerships can be helpful for coordination (so everyone knows who is doing what and where), as an act of humility in cooperation (we know and understand we only have so much bandwidth and ability), and for field oversight (a sending organization can have multiple folks working in one area who can better hold one another accountable than a church far away).

In my own mind, I have often likened the IMB (International Mission Board) to the State Department. In the same way that it's hard for us to muster the resources and manpower to conduct diplomacy abroad, so too is it impossible for the saints of GRBC to have a widespread, global work from our local church. In the same way that the State Dept has systems in place to send ambassadors, office infrastructure abroad already in place, and training for diplomats, the IMB has it's own systems in place to send the Word forth. So in that sense, in partnering with the IMB or other sending organizations, we're also able to partner with work more broadly. But it also means that like State, the IMB comes with it's own particular, often very bureaucratic systems that we have to navigate.

We lose some flexibility and some depth...but we gain expertise and breadth in international gospel work. It's a trade-off that makes sense for our church at this time.

d. Servants of the local churches.

However it's arranged, we want to partner with organizations that understand they are servants of local churches, not replacements for them. The Bible's plan for us to reach the nations is not, primarily, through sending organizations or parachurch ministries. Praise God he does often use them! But what we see in scripture is the local church as the foundational, organizational plan for reaching others.

IV. WHY DOES IT MATTER THAT WE ARE CLEAR ON THESE POINTS?

a. Because the church is the goal and the means of missions (Eph. 3:10)

⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

b. Because individualism and “parachurch-ism” are real temptations (Acts 15:24)

Again, this is not to say that individuals don't have a role and responsibility for God's missionary plan, nor that individual desire and giftings aren't important. And it's not to say that organized cooperation beyond the local church isn't useful.

But that the desire and initiative of individuals should be mediated through their local church, as church members. That's where we see the authority and responsibility for the great commission. It's in the church.

c. Missions is intensely congregational, not just intensely personal.

Missions is a congregational enterprise. It involves all of us. We already read passages from the New Testament that speaks to this – those sent to share the gospel, to encourage and teach churches, were sent out by the church. Jesus Himself calls those to share his good news in front of the congregation.

Biblical missionaries are not some lone wolf actors who just decides on their own – outside of any community, pastoral counsel, and separate from other relationships. It's to be done within the context of a local church.

Q: How does this look or sound different from a missions philosophy you grew up with/were taught? What are other 'errors' or concerns we should consider in missions as it relates to the local church?

Ok, let's get to some application that hits close to home:

V. WHAT MIGHT ALL THIS LOOK LIKE IN THIS PARTICULAR CHURCH?

a. Teaching God's Word is our most fundamental "missions" task

- Mobilize members through Biblical preaching and teaching on missions
- In particular, by shaping our congregation's view of the gospel as a glorious message.
 - o This is something we should want to share! People are dying. They need the gospel. We should want to go, and have a burden to go or support the work.
- And as we do preach and teach, we want to raise the missionary imperative of the gospel

- One thing we should remind members of regularly: it's possible God is calling you to uproot yourself and your family, move to another place, and do exactly what you're doing here, but in a different country/city/context.
- This is a regular part and expectation of the Christian walk – telling others about Christ, and in particular, telling those do not know His name.
- We want to encourage everyone at this church to organize their lives around the gospel – whether here or overseas is secondary

b. Being a Biblical church is the organizational means –it's the platform or foundation for sending

- One of the best things we can do for our missions enterprises is building up a healthy church here. That creates the environment to train others, and a freshwater pool to dive into when they come home from the field.

c. Training and equipping members to intentionally go

- We want to follow Christ's command – and in doing so, we want to encourage normal things all Christians are called to do: evangelism; daily disciplines; making strategic decisions to support the church here and abroad.
- But more specifically, we have:
 - Ladies' Missionary Society
 - This missions Equip class
 - Short term trips
 - Regularly praying for our workers and that God would send more from among us

d. Sending teams in cooperation with the sending agencies.

- Wanting like-minded teams from GRBC or likeminded churches
- Cooperating with sending agencies that see church as central

e. Maintaining theological and pastoral oversight.

- Sending/supporting based on close relationships
- Keeping up relationships – visits, calls, and hospitality
- Delegating, but never abdicating
 - For example: happy to delegate and trust those who work for us, too
 - Relationships with IMB or other sending agencies, based on deep knowledge and like-mindedness
 - But we know, as elders of this church, that every person we send out, we are accountable to the Lord for their spiritual well-being.

Q: Any questions about how GRBC seeks to serve as this platform for missions, as a local church?

CONCLUSION

a. Local churches are central to the New Testament plan.

- This is the organizational entity for the fulfillment of the Great Commission

b. The gathered local churches are the mediating entities – a glorious platform – for implementing God’s great commission.

- God’s commission is executed through local churches, their relationships, and cooperation
- Individuals take on their roles in the context of their identity as church members
- And any sending organizations are involved under the full leadership and authority of the local church.

c. Local churches are both the aim and the means of God’s missionary plan.

- Churches send missionaries, who gather other local churches
- Churches planting churches is THE plan for global gospel advance

Any questions before we close?

Let's pray together.