

What is the New Testament Model for Taking the Gospel to the World?

By Bob Young

The contemporary church invests a lot of time, energy, thought, and resources into sending out missionaries! Some efforts bring minimal results; other works require an extraordinary amount of time to have even a small impact. It costs to send US missionaries to work in foreign fields. US missionaries who enter other countries encounter a host of challenges—from developing adequate language skills, to cultural understandings, to dealing with extended separation from extended family (especially during times of grief and loss), to eventual reentry. Often the results of the costly efforts are meager at best, with the establishment of small, struggling churches that continually need outside assistance and support in order to exist. Many mission churches are not healthy, meaning simply that they cannot function without external support. Is this God's plan for mission work? What is the New Testament model for missions?

Certainly, there is a need to send missionaries to places where the gospel has never gone. The expansion of the gospel depends on the initial entry of the message into a country, region or people; effective evangelism; and the development of churches and disciples capable of sustaining the continued expansion of the gospel. [Missionaries with specific skill-sets are also needed for evangelistic training and endeavors such as Bible institutes and other preacher, teacher, missionary, and evangelism training efforts, but that kind of mission work is not the subject of this essay.] The goal of sending church-planting, evangelistic missionaries is the development of capable, spiritually mature, self-sustaining, self-edifying, self-directing, self-duplicating churches. The goal of the missionary is that his or her presence will not be continually necessary. The goal is not that the missionary eventually become a local minister. A careful reading of Scripture will reveal that both Timothy and Titus had the task of helping resolve certain problems, and that they were most likely short-term missionaries. The missionary has the goal of taking the gospel to new fields; the church-planter has the goal of planting multiple new churches.

This concept of missions means that the church should seek to reach a point where it is not necessary to send missionaries to a place because local churches that are capable of evangelizing and expanding the reach of the gospel have been established. Mission efforts that continue to send missionaries instead of insisting on the development of capable, mature, healthy local churches tend to establish codependency relationships. Mission efforts that depend on the continual presence of the "missionary" tend to move away from externally-focused evangelism to internally-focused ministry. Many missionaries are really ministers, and there is no plan and no hope for ever reaching a point where the local church will support its own ministry.

For example, no one is sending missionaries to Tulsa, the city where I live. Why? Because the church already exists and is responsible for sharing the gospel in its own context. The local church is the best option for carrying the gospel to its community—understanding the context, blessed with contacts, daily presence, and influence. Again, the goal of missions is to reach a point where no one is sending outside missionaries because the local churches are capable of organizing and overseeing the evangelism effort. This does not mean that there will not be a need for various kinds of support, but the mission needs and methods change when healthy churches are developed.

Considering the above concepts, the goal of mission work in every place is thousands of Christians and dozens of new churches, so that the sending church does not have to continually support the presence of mission workers—so that the sending church can exit the field and enter a new place where the gospel has not gone. The goal is to train, encourage, teach, and facilitate the evangelism process that will be carried on by local churches and members.

What is the New Testament model of missions? How was mission work done in the New Testament? Why would we not seek to do missions according to the model we find in the New Testament? The New Testament

presents a model. We can understand how mission work was done in the New Testament. I conclude with a brief summary.

We can read and understand how the gospel expanded to Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and eventually to Antioch. We can evaluate and understand the plan of the early church as we read Acts 8-12. How long did the church send missionaries to these places? What did mission work look like as the gospel went forth in these places? Who was involved?

We can understand how the gospel went to Galatia and the easternmost regions of Asia Minor. We can understand that the new church in Antioch was a major player in taking the gospel into these new regions. How long did the missionaries stay in the places that are mentioned in Acts 13-14? What was their strategy? We read about an initial visit to establish the body of believers, and subsequent return visits to strengthen the churches and assist in leadership development and appointment.

How did the gospel go to Macedonia and then to the Achaia peninsula—Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth (Acts 16-18)? How did the gospel go into the areas of Asia Minor around Ephesus (Acts 19-20)? A church-planting team worked so that the believers were established, various workers returned from time to time for shorter visits, contact was maintained by correspondence to encourage and give instructions. When Paul had an opportunity, he returned to visit the churches. But because new Christians worked to establish new churches, there were churches Paul the missionary had never visited.

I realize that we live in a different world. We have resources that did not exist in the first century. Travel is easier; technology is instantaneous and allows communication with many places in the world. We have new opportunities and open doors! It seems to me that all of that should make our mission work more effective, not less effective! Let us read and study Scripture afresh to understand how the gospel can be carried to our world today in our generation! The Bible says it occurred in the first century. Why can it not occur again today?