

WHO SENDS THEM

In terms of getting on with the job Paul and Barnabas had it easy. They said goodbye to the church at Antioch, walked to the docks at Seleucia, and next day were on water.

The whole world lay before them. They could go where they wanted to go, and do what they wanted to do – in the way they wanted to do it. Broadly speaking they were limited by their stamina, their devotion and their purse.

Freedom amid difficulty

Not that it was all smooth sailing. They endured their share of hardships. They faced hostile situations. And they survived a succession of stonings, beatings and imprisonments that would have finished off lesser men.

But in the less complicated political climate of their time, they could make their own plans. If an unscheduled mobbing cropped up, they were free to attend, if only as the victims.

Not so today. If there's a riot in the offing, the jet age missionary may not be able to go. The authorities may not give him a permit. If people are going to throw bricks at him they may not let him into the country.

He can't do anything much, it seems, without first fighting his way through a jungle of red tape, planted over the centuries of governments that Paul and Barnabas knew not. No longer can he simply pack his suitcase and head for Joppa, equipped with faith, good

health, and courage. He must produce inoculation scars on both arms, customs papers in triplicate, passport, visas, registrations, clearances, evidence of financial independence, and declarations without number or the authorities won't let him on the plane.

Conditions have changed

The point, of course, is that missionary work today cannot be equated with missionary work of the first century. The message has not changed, nor has the responsibility of the church to proclaim it. What has changed is the condition under which the job must be done.

This raises the question of the role of the local church in today's foreign missions programme. In the book of Acts that role was beautifully simple. The local church appointed its own missionaries, sent them out and supported them as needed. The missionaries in turn, reported to the local church as the sending authority.

Today, however, the world is so complex that it is a rare local church that can effectively follow that arrangement.

Restricted liberties and other limitations

For one thing the church is not always free to send missionaries where or when it wills. Governments do not always permit it. And the problem of logistics – moving people and goods from here to there – is only the beginning of woes. As Paul and Barnabas

discovered, once a work abroad begins to grow, so do complications.

With growth comes a proportionate need for more workers, more training programmes, more co-ordination of effort, more negotiations with government, more paperwork, more funds, more everything.

The local church is only so big. It can sponsor and administer only so much. In today's world, it faces an almost impossible task in trying to conduct, on its own, an effective, lasting foreign missions programme.

The missionary organisation

Hence the rise of missionary organisations to do for the local church what it cannot do for itself.

Ideally the missionary organisation should be an extension of the local church. It should be the agency to which the church delegates certain functions and responsibilities in accomplishing its task abroad.

The church may become the temporary focus for attention during the commissioning of a new missionary, but then the spotlight swings back to the missionary organisation. The conclusion has to be that the missionary belongs to the missionary organisation, not the local church.

Whose missionary is he?

This conclusion, however, short changes the local church. Didn't the missionary come from the local church? Aren't they supporting him? The answer of course is yes – or should be. **In ideal circumstances, the local church would not only produce its own missionaries, but would also meet their expenses.**

This scriptural role of the local church as the sending authority and financial base for work evangelism needs to be brought back into clearer focus. The church may have to face certain responsibilities more realistically and be prepared to make whatever adjustments are necessary.

Communication the key

The most important aspect is communication. Churches and missions must find ways of opening wider freer lines of communications. In missions, as in marriage, the ability of the two partners to talk over mutual affairs objectively, kindly and factually, is the keystone of a right relationship.

Exploring these areas will not solve all the problems, but it can be a step towards restoring the local church to its rightful place as the sending authority for missions.

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