

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

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Published in “Featured Articles” section www.globalmissiology.org October 2010

Introduction

Short-term missions (STM) has both its advocates and its nemeses in our postmodern context. In the course of reviewing hundreds of sources I have come to the conclusion that the advocates often over-estimate the value of STM by allowing any group of people moving from one place to another to constitute “missions” regardless of what their purpose may be. On the other hand the missiological nemeses of STM have managed to pin nearly every problem on the mission field to a bad experience with a group of “ugly Americans” on a STM assignment.¹ Both assessments are subjective in nature and are less than helpful in the task of completing the Great Commission. What is needed is an objectively grounded assessment based upon the phenomenon’s biblical roots. If it can be established that there is biblical precedence for STM and that the approach is not a violation of theological orthodoxy/orthopraxy, then the missiological community should exert its gifts toward the end of discerning a strategic use for the approach.

A Biblical Basis for STM

The Ministry of Jesus

No other man has ever lived who listened to, was led by, and obeyed the voice of God the Father more than the God-man, Jesus Christ. On the one hand, Jesus epitomizes the long-term

¹ Ralph Winter. “The Greatest Danger . . . The Re-Amateurization of Mission.” *Missions Frontier Bulletin*, March-April, 1996.

incarnational approach to missions by coming to earth in the form of man and in the context of human culture, planting his life among the humanity whom he desired to reach (Philippians 2:6-7). Lingenfelter and Mayers called Jesus *the 200 Percent Person*, fully God and fully man.² Carrie Baar maintains that Jesus “was a learner who invested His life and His time to know His audience . . . (becoming an) expert of Jewish customs and beliefs.”³ On the other hand, within the context of eternity – or even human history for that matter – Jesus limited his stay to 33 years, which is a relatively short-term considering all that he came to accomplish (Philippians 2:8-11). Some missiologists would have a difficult time going as far as Peterson, Aeshlimann and Sneed who come straight out referring to Jesus as a short-term missionary.⁴

In my estimation, Jesus seems to have been a LTM that used STM as tactical strategy. Bryan Slater notes that Jesus not only took the initiative to call the disciples and sent them out (Matthew 10), but he also had previously and adequately modeled for the disciples all that they would need to do as they went (Mark 1:39 and Luke 8:1-3).⁵ Slater goes on to note that Jesus initiated the disciples’ STM, gave them specific STM training, prepared the way for their STM mission, and provided thorough debriefing following the mission.⁶ Jesus’ approach as seen here represents a very God-centered theology of mission. One might say regarding this initial STM that the disciples were God-initiated, God-empowered, God-equipped, God-dependent, God-directed, and God-debriefed. What more could one ask of a missions strategy?

Following the initial sending out of the Twelve, Jesus went on to send out a group known as the Seventy in a similar manner (Luke 10:1). His equipping of this group seems to be very

² Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1986), 15.

³ Carrie Baar, *Short-term Student Missions and the Needs of Nationals* (M.A. Thesis, Denver Seminary, 2003), 12.

⁴ Peterson et al., 2003, 209.

⁵ Bryan A. Slater, “Short-term Missions: Biblical Considerations,” *EMQ Online* October, 2000. 1. < <http://www.emqonline.com> >, last accessed January 10, 2007.

⁶ Ibid.

similar to that of his earlier commissioning. Slater remarks that this STM was purposeful, team-oriented, and receptor-focused.⁷ Most modern STMs do fine with the first two characteristics, but often fall painfully short on the latter. Slater goes on to observe, “While it is true that people who faithfully minister the grace of Christ are blessed because of it, that does not seem to be the motivation here.”⁸ I would opine that most missions that appear in the Scripture are even more God-centered than receptor-centered. If we put either ourselves or our intended receptors’ benefit above our devotion to the God of mission, then we have become anthropocentric and unbiblical.

Randall Friesen seems to believe that one of Jesus’ primary purposes in sending out the disciples was as a means for training and enrichment. “The short-term mission was connected to Jesus’ broader mission and was only possible because He had called, trained and sent these disciples.”⁹ The vast majority of the literature regarding STM has a goer-centered rather than receptor-centered slant. This will be discussed in more depth later in this article, however for now it is simply important to note that at least some believe this orientation to be based upon the model of Jesus.

In His relatively short life, Jesus fully accomplished the will and mission that the Father planned for Him (John 17:4). However, the *missio dei* gave birth to “missions” at the Resurrection and commissioning of His disciples, who would carry on the Father’s global plan of redemption until the *Parousia*.

The Ministry of Paul

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 2.

⁹ Randall Gary Friesen, “*Improving the Long-term Impact of Short-term Missions*” (based on doctoral thesis, University of South Africa), 2004. 1.

One of the most common arguments against short-term missions is that there is a great disparity between what can be accomplished in such a limited amount of time by “amateurs” and the amount of money that such trips require. Martin Goldsmith interjects that, “The task of evangelism and teaching God’s church must largely be fulfilled by long-term missionaries”¹⁰ However, arguing against a short-term approach to missions is to argue against much of the early missionary cause as documented in the Book of Acts. One needs not look far to learn that the Apostle Paul and other biblical figures accomplished a great deal in often short and always purposeful visits.

Some refer to the Apostle Paul as the greatest missionary the church has ever known. Much of what we know about missions from the Scripture we derive from the ministry of Paul. O’Brien mentions however that, “he (Paul) does not seem, at first glance, to say a great deal about how the Christians in his congregations were to carry on his work or to be caught up with his mission and so be involved in the saving purposes of God.”¹¹ Paul, it seems, was a long-term missionary who, like Jesus, executed through short-term strategies. It is widely accepted that Paul seldom stayed longer than a few months or even weeks in a single location, with a few notable exceptions in Ephesus (possibly 2.5 years) and Corinth (possibly 1.5 years).¹² This being the case, many that work in STM today have heralded Paul as their champion and seem to believe that if the strategy were good enough for Paul, it should be good enough for missionaries today. One must be careful of making too close of a comparison however, because although Paul never planted himself for life in one location (which has become the “modern” missions

¹⁰ Martin Goldsmith, *Don’t Just Stand There: A First Book on Christian Mission* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 109.

¹¹ P.T. O’Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 135.

¹² John Miles, “*An Assessment of STM*,” (M.A. Dissertation, Birmingham Bible Institute, 2000), 12.

standard), he had made a lifetime commitment to missions at the outset of his ministry and continued in that calling sacrificially until his death.

A. Wayne Meece reasons that Paul's short-terms were not of his own devising but were necessitated by circumstance. He goes on to say that,

It was not Paul's practice to spend a week or two in a place, baptize a few people, organize a church, appoint elders and then leave them on their own. Those who do so and use Paul as their example misunderstand Paul and his methods altogether.¹³

Meece's argument ends however with the idea that STM should not replace long-term missions (LTM), but rather should be utilized to supplement the overall missionary cause. Thus, it is not a matter of choosing either STM or LTM, but rather both STM and LTM in a symbiotic relationship.

STM today is often treated as an opportunity for people to test-drive a calling in missions – to try it on for size. That is not even close to Paul's STM strategy where he took small teams along with him establishing churches and appointing national leaders from one location to the next, continuing in a mentoring or coaching role through return visits, sending others in his stead, or writing letters addressing the specific needs of a congregation. Missiologist Roland Allen in his classic, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*, notes that much good can be accomplished in a short amount of time when missionaries empower the nationals to reach their own people.¹⁴ Thus, the question is not that of duration of stay or even of receptivity, but rather that of purpose and strategy. Miles believes however that Allen's statements need not be taken as an endorsement of the modern phenomenon of STM because "he was saying that the long-

¹³ A. Wayne Meece, "Was Paul a Short-term Missionary?" *The Gospel Unhindered*, edited by Doug Priest, Jr. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1994), 216-217.

¹⁴ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 10 ff.

term missionary could achieve a lot (in a short time) and move on to other places”¹⁵ In essence, Paul was a long-term missionary using STM as his primary strategy. Slater states, “Like Paul, short-term missionaries today must see each project as one stop in a longer journey.”¹⁶

In total the Apostle Paul’s missionary journeys summed to span less than 15 years after which he declared “from Jerusalem around to Illyricum I have fully preached the Gospel of Christ” (Romans 15:19) going on to set his sights on Spain.¹⁷ Donald Kitchen asserts early on in the STM movement that,

Paul . . . was constantly changing his field of ministry . . . (staying) time periods that today would be considered as only a brief visit to the mission field . . . (but) was used of God to plant churches in four different provinces of the Empire, spanning two continents in less than ten years.¹⁸

Meece seems to believe that the narratives in the Book of Acts of Paul’s missionary journeys are illusive when it comes to the amount of time spent in each location. He reiterates that Paul revisited most locations time and again and that Paul seldom left a city of his own accord but was usually forced to leave because of persecution.¹⁹ Regardless of Meece’s call for reexamination of Paul’s length of term, the fact remains that Paul’s ministry had much more in common with those engaged in strategic STM today than with the modern long-term resident missionary. We have no evidence that Paul attempted to study or communicate in the local indigenous languages. We have no evidence that he ever intended to go to one particular place and plant his life there among one group of people. This is not to say that such strategies are

¹⁵ Miles, 2000, 12.

¹⁶ Slater, 2000, 3.

¹⁷ J. Herbert Kane, *A Concise History of the Christian World Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978), 9.

¹⁸ Donald Kitchen, “The Impact and Effectiveness of Short-term Missionaries” (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary Department of World Missions, 1976), 24.

¹⁹ Meece, 1994, 216.

wrong, but rather is just a notation that these may more reflect the paradigm of the modern missions movement rather than that of the Apostle Paul.

Other New Testament Examples

The Book of Acts was written as a narrative by Luke in order to document the origins of the Church of Jesus Christ. Found within the Book of Acts are a myriad of stories which document the early Church's approach to mission – or rather the Holy Spirit's approach to mission in using the early Church. One of the key characteristics that come forth from the Book of Acts is that in spite of all the signs and wonders, and in spite of all the grand personalities, the Holy Spirit intended that the entirety of the community of Christ-followers be engaged in the mission of God. Church historian Michael Green stresses that “these disciples of Jesus believed in every member ministry.”²⁰ Green asseverates that the Book of Acts is a documentation of how God used informal, unqualified and ordinary people to spread the Gospel both near and far.²¹

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch found in Acts 8:26-40 would certainly qualify as an extremely short-term of mission conducted by one of the “unlearned men” that followed Jesus – less than one day to be exact! In this case Philip was commissioned by an angel and then Spirit-led in his encounter with the devout seeker from Ethiopia. Slater touches on the fact that, “(Philip) was uniquely prepared for the mission: He was a Greek who had embraced Christ. He had served time as a deacon (Acts 6:3-7), so he had been tested and was a mature disciple of Christ. He had the gift of an evangelist (Acts 21:8), so this calling fit him

²⁰ Michael Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 48.

²¹ Ibid.

perfectly.”²² Interestingly enough the Book of Acts documents several more stops for Philip prior to his arrival and subsequent ministry in Caesarea which may possibly have lasted over 20 years.²³ This type of quick “hit and run” encounter may not be normative but we do get the impression from the Book of Acts that the “actors” documented therein were constantly on the move and that staying in one location was the exception rather than the rule. Once again, historian Michael Green contends that these short stays showed a degree of trust of the new Christians that were won, as well as trust in the God who brought them to the truth.²⁴

“It can be argued that the modern LTM strategy is more akin to the ‘evangelization by migration’ experience of the early Christians who were persecuted . . .” rather than being based upon the documented methods of most of the apostles who moved about spreading the Gospel.²⁵ Based upon these insights it may be that what began with William Carey in the late 18th century may have been somewhat divergent methodology – that of intentional long-term residential missionary endeavor.

Old Testament Examples

Our God is indeed a missionary God and there are few missiologists that would argue against the fact that the Bible is the Holy Spirit’s documentation of the redemptive plan (*missio dei*) of God. God’s original intent for humanity was missional in nature in that they were to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen. 1:28). However, the need for God’s missional initiative is highlighted after Adam and Eve’s rebellion in the Garden (Gen. 3). No sooner had man fallen than God was already acting to restore according to the *proto-evangelium* found in Genesis 3:15. It was not until Genesis 12 and the Abrahamic Covenant however that God further

²² Slater, 2000, 3.

²³ Miles, 2000, 12. Miles notes that Philip arrived in Caesarea in Acts 8:40 and is still there in Acts 21:8. The span of time between those two citations is estimated to be around 20 years, however no proof can be made that Philip resided and ministered in that context for the whole of that time.

²⁴ Green, 2004, 135.

²⁵ Miles, 2000, 12.

explained how He would fulfill His mission to restore humanity. That restoration was not just a matter of proclamation, but rather a process culminating in the very incarnation of the Son of God.²⁶ Filbeck avows that “God said it all in calling Abraham so that all clans and nations might be blessed because of him. After that, it was mainly a matter of working out the details”²⁷

All along the way those who were God’s faithful engaged in short-term “missions” as a part of God’s larger story of Redemption. The book *Maximum Impact Short-Term Missions* lists several of these temporary assignments and cites them as evidence of STM in the Old Testament. Among them are the two angel’s deliverance mission in Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19), Moses’ confrontation of Pharaoh and subsequent liberation of God’s People (Exodus 3-12), the Hebrew spies going into Canaan on a STM fact-finding mission, Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17), and Nehemiah’s short-term construction trip (Nehemiah 2-10) and many others.²⁸ I would certainly hesitate to say that all of these would correspond to what we now call modern STM. I feel that the authors may be guilty of overstating their case in their zeal to make a point. I do however believe that these cases prove that God can, when He so desires, accomplish a great deal toward His purposes in a short amount of time.

One of the premiere missionary texts within the OT is the story of Jonah. In the biblical account, the missionary Jonah was sent cross-culturally to preach repentance to the citizens of Ninevah and saw tremendous results in a very short period of time. The people and the king seem to have heard the message and repented in a single day (Jonah 3:4-5). The emphasis here is not on what Jonah did in a day, but rather what God did. Jonah preached reluctantly hoping that the Ninevites would not repent – and God, in His mercy led them to repentance in spite of Jonah

²⁶ For a massive treatment on this topic see *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, Christopher J.H. Wright (IVP, 2006).

²⁷ David Filbeck, *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too: The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Billy Graham Center, 1994), 11.

²⁸ Peterson et al., 2004, 199-207.

rather than because of him. I believe that in missions we are often too quick to take the credit for what God accomplished – whether in a lifetime of dedicated LTM service or on a one week STM journey. The point here is that it is God’s mission and that He has chosen to use all different means to accomplish it – as well as all different lengths of service.²⁹

Conclusion of Biblical Survey

So once again, the amount of time invested on the part of the servant of God seems to be of less importance than most missiologists presume. What stands out from the Scripture is that God can do anything He chooses in either a short or long amount of time – sometimes through His servants and at other times in spite of them! The Bible is replete with examples where God did use short-term assignments, sometimes with untrained and non-professional ministers, to accomplish His redemptive plan. Thus it is aptly stated in *Maximum Impact Short-term Missions*, “If short-term mission does have a solid Biblical basis, then cognitive logic fabricated for or against the use of short-term mission is rendered mute.”³⁰ In my experience, the critics and enemies of STM seem to have a more anthropocentric view of mission than do those who advocate the wise use of STM within the context of long-term church planting strategy. What is needed is a balanced, biblical view of STM and a humble confession that God has always done extraordinary things through ordinary people –often in a very short amount of time. If you would like to learn more about how to utilize STM as a catalytic part of a long-term church planting strategy, see my book on the subject: *Striking the Match: How God is Using Ordinary People to Change the World through Strategic Short-term Missions* (e3 Resources, Franklin, TN 2008.).

²⁹ It should be noted that God chose to create all that we see in the physical realm in just six days. If he can create the Universe in six days *ex nihilo* (from nothing), only a mind steeped in Western rationalism would doubt that He could, or would choose to do something significant and of eternal value on a STM journey through those He called to be His children.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

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