

## A Case for not Working Alone in Missions or Church Planting

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Mission efforts have often been led by notable individuals. When it comes to examples, we may first think of the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul, the preaching of George Whitfield, or the exploratory work of Hudson Taylor. These individuals, their characters, and their stories loom large in our minds, and to a degree, they ought to. Their biographies are helpful, their tenacity was admirable, and most important, the Lord's care for them and blessing on their work encourages the church to continue in missions. A careful survey of scripture, as well as Reformed practices and precedents, however, reveals that while the Lord often uses individuals prominently, it ought not to be ordinary to send individuals alone into a mission field.

It is not our purpose to deny that the Lord gives a calling, leadership skills, and gifts to certain men that would make them the primary leaders of a mission effort. It is clear that the Lord continues to give greater abilities and gifts to some than others, and uses them as central to missions.<sup>1</sup> The Apostle Paul was not ashamed to recount his "adventures" biographically,<sup>2</sup> to call believers to imitate and to follow him,<sup>3</sup> and Peter expected that individual elders would serve as examples.<sup>4</sup> To have a strong, capable, and even visionary leader is a gift to the church, and such a man should be respected, and encouraged to lead a mission work with zeal.

Yet, throughout the scriptures, especially in the New Testament, we read of men working in pairs, having assistants, and valuing the contributions of "yokefellows" or "fellow workers" in the gospel.<sup>5</sup> The following paper outlines a number of scriptural and practical principles that can encourage missions, church plants, and local churches to adopt this pattern, and Lord willing, also multiply their fruitfulness. These principles are first, that there are benefits of labouring together, second, that the Lord ordinarily sent multiple witnesses of the gospel after the coming of Christ, and third, that he has prescribed a plurality of elders to govern all of the activities of his church.

### *Labouring Together*

Already at creation, and before the fall, Genesis 2:18 teaches us that the Lord knew that "*It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.*" This need, of course, was met by the creation of Eve and the institution of marriage. But this

1 Ephesians 4:7–8, Romans 12:3.

2 2 Corinthians 11:22, Philippians 4:12-13

3 Philippians 3:17, 4:9, 1 Corinthians 4:16

4 1 Peter 5:13

5 Romans 16:3, Romans 16:9, Romans 16:21, 1 Corinthians 3:9, 2 Corinthians 1:24, 2 Corinthians 8:23, Philippians 2:25, Philippians 4:3, Colossians 4:11, 3 John 8

need also hints at the reality that mankind has been created to live, and to work, with others. We may survive for a time alone, but we cannot thrive alone. Our resources of strength and consistency are not unlimited, and we need others to help us along. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 teaches us:

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

We should note that there are two sides to the teaching of this passage. The first is the positive side of working in tandem: "They have a good reward for their labour." We may be tempted to assume that two men will at best double the output of one, or perhaps cynically, we assume they will produce less than double. In many industries, however, it is still often the case that two men have a greater reward for their labour, more than double what one man can do. God has designed us to work most efficiently as pluralities.

The second side is the more negative, which is "...woe to him that is alone when he falleth" and "if one prevail against him..." The reality is that the fall, and the curse, have heightened the need to work with others. Mission work may multiply the danger, as it is often done in distant, dangerous, or obscure places, where others that we lean on usually would not go. As helpful as those financially supporting, advising, and praying will be, they will not be next to the missionary on the ground if he falls, or if he encounters a season of intense spiritual warfare. We must admit that all of us are "...prone to halt and stumble."<sup>6</sup> Without help, a man with a diligent character may also be overworked, and in due time be overwhelmed. Working alongside others also means that there would be a substitute to lead Bible studies, or lead services during times of illness or rest.

### *Multiple Witnesses*

It is interesting to note that the introduction of the concept of multiple witnesses comes at the point of the establishment of Israel as a nation in the book of Exodus. Before this time, we read of patriarchs and prophets who often lived alone as believers. The Lord met with them directly, and guided them very personally. But as the Lord's covenant people grew into a nation, His pattern of revelation, and the development of leadership, progressed and developed as well.

It was Moses own sense of his insufficiency and inability that led to the appointment of Aaron as his prophet.<sup>7</sup> Though Moses' reluctance did not please the Lord,<sup>8</sup> and Aaron was at times a hindrance more than a help,<sup>9</sup> it became clear throughout the Exodus that

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6 The Psalter (1912) #103, a rendition of Psalm 38.

7 Exodus 7:1

8 Exodus 4:13-14

9 Exodus 32:24. Numbers 12:2.

Moses alone was not sufficient for the task of leadership. His appointment of judges in Exodus 18:13-27 upon the advice of Jethro is further evidence of this need. It should be noted that ultimately Moses' weaknesses pointed to the need for the Lord Jesus Christ as a perfect mediator, but that the raising up of Aaron, Joshua, and the judges also fits a pattern that continues throughout scripture. Moses was not, ultimately, sufficient for the task he was given.

The command regarding "two witnesses" in Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15 is, however, more foundational to this topic than the examples of men like Aaron, Joshua, and later Elisha. In its original form, it is directed towards negative accusations, rather than a positive testimony:

“One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.” (Deuteronomy 19:15)

This commandment gave a layer of protection from false accusation. This could apply to one instance of a crime, but it is also common that those given over to serious sin will fall into patterns, which will often become evident to multiple members of the community. When multiple witnesses come forward regarding a pattern, we automatically begin to lose our presumption of innocence, as experience teaches us we often should. A single, less substantial accusation, however, should be more easily dismissed, especially against an office bearer. (1 Timothy 5:19)<sup>10</sup>

This commandment itself gives us pause to consider a direct application to the unique situation of a missionary or church planter. They may often work amongst people on the fringes of society, with those who have less and less value for truth, and some who may think that they have much to gain through a false accusation. They will be dealing with people who do not hold a Christian worldview. Many in our society are now candid about their willingness to tell lies, or make accusations, in order to further a broader agenda. Are we wise to do evangelistic or pastoral work alone in the current culture? Does this not present unique challenges for a missionary or church planter in North America compared to a "conventional" ministry?<sup>11</sup>

More important, however, is a clear pattern of the Lord's use of two witnesses throughout the New Testament to testify of His Word. The final, and perhaps strongest instance of two witnesses being mentioned is in Revelation 11:3, “I will give *power* unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred *and* threescore days, clothed in sackcloth...” There are varying interpretations of who these two witnesses are,<sup>12</sup> but the function of their plurality should be relatively clear to the reader.

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10 “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.” - 1 Timothy 5:19

11 The emergence of the "Me Too" movement, and its effect on our culture is also relevant, both in terms of the possibility of temptation, and especially the potential for false accusation. We are now in a culture where appearances of evil or false accusations could come from being alone with young men as well.

12 Views include that the two witnesses are (1) John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ, (2) the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics, (3) two prominent martyrs in the future end times, and (4) a symbol of the truthful testimony of the often-persecuted Church. The fourth view is preferable, as the book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature, and the duality of the witnesses is more likely to be a symbol of

They together preach the gospel of repentance, which in largely serves to condemn a hostile world, and they lose their lives (Revelation 11:7-8) because of their faithful testimony.<sup>13</sup> The fact that their are two of them bringing the same message makes their message indisputable, a principle the Apostle Paul also appeals to in 2 Corinthians 13:1.<sup>14</sup>

It should not be overlooked that the missionary, as well as every gospel minister, serves as a prosecutor of God's law, as well as a herald of glad tidings. When this is understood, we see that there is a relationship between the command of Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15. The charges of God's law must be brought against sinners, often even before the good news will be preached.<sup>15</sup> In Acts 17, the Apostle Paul preached,

...the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by *that* man whom he hath ordained; *whereof* he hath given assurance unto all *men*, in that he hath raised him from the dead." - Acts 17:30–31

Scripture speaks of the difficulty of bringing such a call to repentance, including the assumption that their will be times to "shake dust off of our feet"<sup>16</sup> and times where persecutions will arise. The Lord Jesus warned his disciples:

If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before *it hated* you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you. - John 15:18–20

When we understand that indictment is a primary function of a missionary, this may help us understand the strong two-by-two pattern of sending in scripture. Bringing accusations of guilt, and calling to repentance, often needs to be done by more than one person.<sup>17</sup> It is a difficult and heavy task.

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truthful, certain testimony, than to be taken literally. The fourth view also allows for the inclusion of the ministries of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus as an integral, foundational element of the churches truthful testimony.

13 If we are serious about these passages in scripture, perhaps we would be less pragmatic. Great patience should be given when it comes to "results" in mission work. It may be the Lord's plan to use a missionary to further condemn a people, more so than it is to save.

14 "This *is* the third *time* I am coming to you. In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established." - 2 Corinthians 13:1

15 In my experience in church planting, a number of visitors to Sunday worship have been deeply impacted and convicted by readings from the law in the early part of the service, which in some cases has been their first real introduction to the Word of God.

16 "...whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them." - Mark 6:11

17 "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." - Matthew 18:15–16

Since the coming of John the Baptist, there has been a strong, even consistent pattern of the ordinary use of at least two witnesses to the law and gospel. When the Lord sent out the twelve disciples, and later the seventy, he sent them in pairs with warnings about the difficulty of their task.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the book of Acts, and in the epistles, we read of the Apostles ordinarily working in pairs with other men.<sup>19</sup>

The "sharp contention" of Acts 15 is especially notable, as the division leads not to individuals separating and going their own way, but each going as a new pair, and in God's providence "doubling" their mission. This hard situation clearly illustrates that they saw a need to go with a companion, and the value that was placed on having two witnesses. The ordinary pattern of missions in the time of the New Testament is that those sent out did not go alone, or witness to the truth alone.

Though this is an ordinary pattern in the New Testament, we must recognize that there are examples of men working alone as well. One significant instance is Philip in Acts 8, and it appears that Titus may have had to temporarily work alone as well.<sup>20</sup> This is especially important as in Acts 8:26 the angel of the Lord directly instructs Philip to minister to the Ethiopian eunuch, clearly he was not wrong to go alone. It is also notable that Acts 8 was an extraordinary time of persecution and scattering of the church.<sup>21</sup> There may be times, especially on the very forefront of missions, that in God's providence, men are equipped to work alone. Though we may see the wisdom of working with others, we must be careful not to charge those who do work alone with sin. We can speak of going in pairs or teams as ordinary and ideal, but we cannot condemn going alone in every circumstance. The example of Phillip reminds us that we ought not to use these principles to avoid circumstances, that will arise in the Lord's providence, where we *ought* to evangelize alone.

We should also qualify this by noting that there is no biblical evidence that ordained ministers must be sent out in pairs. Such an arrangement may be ideal in some cases, but it may also be neither necessary nor preferable in others.<sup>22</sup> The term "yokefellow" or "fellow worker" in the gospel applies to a broader group of individuals.<sup>23</sup> It does not seem consistent with the scriptures that the second witness was as capable as the primary missionary. In fact, there seem to be evidences that some of these men were less competent and in need of growth, were younger, and served more as "companions in travel" or "aides."<sup>24</sup> It would be consistent with the Biblical pattern that a minister or

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18 "He called the twelve to Himself, and began to send them out two by two," (Mark 6:7) "The Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come." - Luke 10:1

19 Acts 13:43, 15:39. Compare also the inclusion of Timothy in 2 Corinthians 1:1 and Colossians 1:1.

20 "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:" - Titus 1:5

21 "As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed *them* to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word." - Acts 8:3-4

22 I heard from the "Jerusalem Chamber" podcast, a group of RPCNA pastors who are PRTS graduates, that the RPCNA is experimenting with sending two ordained men to plant churches.

23 Acts 16:3, 9, 21, 1 Corinthians 3:9, Philippians 4:3.

24 Acts 15:37-38. Acts 19:29, 20:4.

missionary could be accompanied by an elder, deacon, intern, student, or layperson who is of the character, and has the capabilities, to function as an effective witness.

### *A Plurality of Elders*

A closely related concept is that of the plurality of elders, which when practiced, in many cases may also address the principle of having multiple witnesses. Titus 1:5<sup>25</sup> and James 5:14<sup>26</sup> show that it was a rule in the New Testament church that a plurality of elders would be working together to govern the church and visit the sick. Our church order states that the office of the elders is:

- (a) From Article 16, "... to exercise church discipline and to see to it that everything is done decently and in good order,"
- (b) From Article 23 "... to take heed that the ministers, together with their fellow elders and deacons, faithfully discharge their office."<sup>27</sup>

Various Reformed denominations have historically clung to the necessity of a plurality of elders working to oversee the church. Corporate worship in a Reformed church cannot be properly held apart from the presence of a plurality of elders. The tradition of having an elder shake the minister's hand before and after the service is a visible reminder of the need for a plurality.<sup>28</sup>

Though work on any mission field requires a certain level of adaptability, we ought not to abandon the importance of the office of elder functioning, effectively and in a plurality, on the mission field as soon as possible. (Titus 1:5) Various denominations testify of this understanding of the need for plurality in their church planting materials. The Orthodox Presbyterian manual states:

Paul took many traveling companions with him on his missionary journeys (Acts 18:1–5). It appears that they provided the initial elder structure while new churches were being formed. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church does the same thing. When a new mission work is established, the plans for the work always include how God's newly gathered people will be cared for by an overseeing session. One individual pastor alone providing all the care, wisdom, and oversight is not God's design for His church. Experienced elders or even whole sessions from other congregations are "loaned" to new churches to provide the wise counsel and oversight as God's care structure.<sup>29</sup>

The United Reformed church planting manual states:

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25 "...set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city" - Titus 1:5

26 "Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:" - James 5:14

27 Church Order of the Free Reformed Churches. (FRC Publications: Calgary, 2017), p. 29 & 31.

28 It could be argued that custom of an elder publicly shaking hands with the minister prior to a service is also a visible representation of the broader principles discussed earlier as well; working together, and having multiple witnesses.

29 "Planting an Orthodox Presbyterian Church." A Manual Published by The Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. (Wilton Grove, PA, 2002) p. 35.

It is highly encouraged that at least one elder attend every worship service of the church plant. It is the Consistory who calls and regulates the worship services (CO Arts. 37-38). A Consistory cannot exercise proper oversight of its church plant without having an elder physically present at services on the Lord's Day.<sup>30</sup>

We ought to agree that corporate worship services should not ordinarily be held apart from the presence of at least one elder in addition to the minister. If services were held in another language, the elder would need to understand the preaching, both in order to participate in the application of church order Articles 16 and 23 (above) and in order to participate in relational pastoral ministry with those assembled. Are we within the bounds of our church order if we allow services on the Lord's day to be held in the absence of an elder? This should be answered carefully, indeed there may be exceptional circumstances of sickness or other events where one must preach alone, but those exceptional situations should not become an ordinary practice.

### *Practical Considerations*

1. It should also be noted that a plurality of elders ought to help a minister balance out his ministry. Few ministers will always have a balanced approach to legalism and antinomianism, or law and gospel, there will be emphases they we lack or overtax. Often it is helpful to hear how our preaching is received through the ears of others, and to learn that we may not come across as we think we do. There may also be difficult pastoral cases and ethical dilemmas that will also be much better addressed by a plurality than one. In North American missions especially, we will encounter a very diverse audience, and one must be very careful to ensure that the message communicated with clarity.
2. There is a real and present danger that may compound these concerns in the current North American evangelical scene. It is largely assumed that a ministry or church, or a church planting effort, ought to coalesce around a visionary, even a celebrated, leader. This trend seems to often lead to unhealthy churches where a leader, rather than Christ is exalted.<sup>31</sup> This may happen in tiny church plants, as well as mega-churches. In the broader "new reformed" circles, these trends have recently led to some very regrettable and disgraceful situations. Even within historic Reformed circles and established churches, similar expectations may creep in, and may contribute to the burnout, or even compromise, of an orthodox minister or missionary. Though there is a blessing to having a strong and gifted leader, there is a greater blessing in having a functioning plurality of elders and fellow workers.
3. Missions and church planting are spheres where temptations towards pragmatism, liberalism, and social gospel leanings often seem to emerge. Though working with others may not in itself prevent that, it will provide more means for correction.

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30 "How to Plant a Reformed Church: The Church Planting Manual of the URCNA." (URCNA Missions Committee, 2014), p. 16

31 Philippians 1:16

4. We ought not to assume that working alongside others will make things easy. It is clear from the experiences of Moses, and Acts 15, that this approach may lead to more problems at times! There may be added financial concerns, logistics concerns, and relational difficulties. These factors may be a reality, however, at times with a plurality of elders as well, and such difficulties do not change the principle.
5. We do well to recognize that false religion has featured the two-by-two pattern prominently. This includes Mormons, Russellites, Two-by-Twos, and other offshoots of the 19th century "Bible study" movement. Though this may affect the optics of mission work in some cases, we may not reject a scriptural pattern on this basis. Some of this appearance may be overcome by the way that we present ourselves, especially an emphasis on the preached Word as the primary means of evangelism.
6. Though it may be ideal to have a full-time fellow worker in the gospel, if none is provided in God's providence, a provisional "consistory" or "session" that effectively borrows the skills and time of office bearers from other nearby NAPARC congregations could mitigate these concerns. This would require these men, to some degree, have "boots on the ground" and have genuine, ongoing relationships with the community and the missionary, and the time and ability to minister to the group when necessary. It would not be consistent with Biblical patterns of missions to assume that these men need to be from the same cultural background as those being ministered to, though it would be helpful if some were.
7. We also need to understand that while committees and overseeing congregations are vital, and necessary, they cannot be expected to fill the practical role of partner or "fellow workers" in a geographically or culturally distant church plant. The reality is that committees can easily become detached as they meet periodically, and deal with information on a somewhat detached level. In time, some missions, sadly and even unfairly, may begin to see their oversight structure as more hindrance than help. It will be difficult, even in a setting that is not cross-cultural, for a board to truly understand what a missionary is dealing with, or give helpful advice. Realistically, this is one of the larger issues that mission works face, and many slip into a rut where the report is a superficial "all is well." It is also not ideal for a missionary to report alone to a committee, having a witness will aid in communicating the realities of their situation.

### Conclusion

It is clear from scripture that it is better to work together than alone, that there is an importance to the principle of two or three witnesses, and that all of the activities of the church should function under the oversight of a plurality of elders. When applied, these principles ought to have a number of practical benefits. There will be, at times, exceptional situations where the Lord blesses his church outside of these bounds, but exceptions ought not to become ordinary. Both for the sake of the mission field and the missionary, the churches ought to consider not sending men to work alone.