



UPSTREAM



A HEALTHY POSTURE TOWARD THE LOCAL CHURCH SENDING CHURCH ELEMENT #9

When my best friend got married he made the mistake of asking me to officiate his wedding. No, it wasn't so much that I dropped the bride's ring on the floor. Or that it rolled within an inch of falling into a vent. It was that when she came down the aisle, I almost out-cried him. I loved my friend so much. Seeing his bride, the woman who made him so happy, filled me with the kind of emotion guys don't know what to do with. So I just smiled and made that awkward snort that signifies choking back tears.

If we love Christ, then we will love his bride. This is the legacy of the man whom Jesus himself said there was none greater, John the Baptist. Nestled in John 3, this man's love was put to the test when Jesus began to out-trend him. As he literally watched his hard-earned disciples depart to follow Jesus, this is what he said:

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete, vv. 27-29.

The joy of John was the joy of Jesus. It was seeing him get his glory, come into his kingdom, receive his bride. With a posture only possible by the Spirit upon him, John concluded humbly, "He must increase; I must decrease" (v. 30). A healthy posture, simply put, loves what Christ loves. And what does Christ love more in all creation than "the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28)?

Yet I have seen some unhealthy posture in my day. Honestly, I've had it myself. I have been a missionary who didn't love the American church very much. Particularly because she was inwardly focused and slow to change, I found her to be a burden to either reform or escape. Now there were many good reasons why I initially desired to serve as a missionary. But I am sad to say that it was, in part, disillusionment with the church that helped turn my eyes toward foreign fields. Furthermore, I often found common ground there among fellow missionaries. It lurked not so much in our words, though we often verbalized our disappointment with pastors and church members who "just don't care" and "don't get it". The real proof was in our actions: that we were willing to try the work of missionaries without deep, abiding relationships with local churches.

Now as a pastor (insert irony), I'm thrilled by the changes I see. With God's help I've come a long way, and so have many churches. We've begun to recognize that the Great Commission was given not simply to individuals, but to local churches. If you keep up with Upstream at all, you're familiar with our blog project that eventually became the book, [The Sending Church Defined](#). Its purpose was to take a definition of "sending church"—written by sending churches—and explain it one word at a time. Throughout the research I was blown away by the clear message of Scripture and scholarship: local churches are responsible as the sender of their people into the neighborhoods and on to the nations. They're all in with God's mission, not merely outsourcing their missionaries to agencies, nor simply donating money to their cause. They take the primary responsibility in shepherding their missionaries before, during, and after their service overseas.

What troubles me now, however, is what I didn't find during that project. Though there is much written about the posture of the church toward the missionary, I have found almost nothing about the missionary's posture toward the church. Except for one notable book, that is: the Bible. It portrays so much regarding the missionary's love for the church, an affection as zealous as that which burns in them for unreached people.

Take Paul, for instance. We look to him as the prime example of a pioneer missionary. Yet his life is actually a helix of both church and field. As he is converted and affirmed alongside churches (Damascus, Jerusalem, and Tarsus), he is called and formed into an apostle to the Gentiles ([Acts 9](#)). As he co-pastors the church at Antioch ([Acts 11](#)), he is commissioned to be sent on his first missionary journey ([Acts 13](#)). After planting new churches on that first journey ([Acts 13-14](#)), he settles back into his sending church for a while ([Acts 14:24-28](#)). Then fast forward in his life. As he writes a letter to the church in Rome while spending time with the church in Corinth, he expresses his need for support in getting to where Christ was not yet known—Spain ([Romans 15](#)). Church and field are so intertwined in Paul that it's almost unhelpful to distinguish between the two.

Even a cursory glimpse into his life begins giving proof to this statement: Just as the church continually sends love ([Philippians 4:10](#)), prayer ([Ephesians 6:18-19](#)), and resources ([Romans 15:24](#)) to the missionary, the missionary continually sends love ([Philippians 1:4](#)), prayer ([Ephesians 1:16](#)), and resources ([Colossians 4:7-9](#)) to the church. And yet it's still not quite strong enough to capture their New Testament relationship. Take out "sends" and add "initiates". You get this:

Just as the church continually initiates love, prayer, and resources to the missionary, the missionary continually initiates love, prayer, and resources to the church.

Paul's relationships with churches is rarely one of merely reciprocating. Rather, his initiating affection for those churches is written all over his missionary identity. We find him writing heart-felt letters to them ([2 Corinthians 2:4](#)), agonizing over their growth ([Galatians 4:19-20](#)), praying for them constantly ([1 Thessalonians 1:2](#)), being delighted to spend time with them ([Romans 15:23-24](#)), wooing them to join in the mission ([Philippians 1:27-30](#)), avoiding being a financial burden to them ([2 Thessalonians 3:7-8](#)), rejoicing over them ([1 Thessalonians 2:17-20](#)), and weeping with them ([Acts 20:36-38](#)).

So, why is it often different today? Why do many missionaries look to the leadership of their missions agency more than their sending church? Why is there bitterness toward struggling churches rather than patience, encouragement, and exhortation? Why is missionary candidates' posture toward the local church not a significant part of their assessment? Why is a deep, abiding relationship with a sending church something so easily laid aside?

Let's be realistic. There are legitimate reasons that missionaries struggle to have deep, abiding relationships with local churches. Let's examine some of them.

Why Sent Ones Struggle to Relate to Sending Churches

- 1. Missionaries haven't always been sent by local churches in the first place.** For years some churches (not all) have chosen to "support" rather than "send" missionaries. By "support" I mean churches commit to finances, prayer, and affirmation, but they ultimately outsource the central role of sending to missions agencies. Missionaries are left to discern calling, pursue development, endure assessment, experience commissioning, and forge community in the halls of the agency rather than the homes of their pastors and church members. In accepting this, churches turn over their right and responsibility to be God's primary under-shepherds for missionaries (1 Peter 5:1-4). No wonder the local church takes an insignificant place in the missionary's heart and mind. No wonder "missionary" is a common term rather than a term like "sent one."
- 2. Missionaries are easily neglected by local churches.** One of my fears in addressing this topic is that I'll ignore the deep hurts of missionaries who have been forgotten and forsaken by churches. Have a few conversations with missionaries and you will hear a horror story or two: a church who cut their support without reason or warning; a church who made lots of promises they didn't keep; a church who split or dissolved while the missionary was overseas; a church who sent a short-term missions team that culturally sabotaged the work; a church who over-publicized the missionary and got them kicked out of their country; a church who gave the missionary no time or place to report back; a church who wasn't a safe place for the missionary to be honest because they were put on too high a pedestal. In biblical terms, these churches have fallen short of sending their people in "a manner worthy of God" (3 John 1:6).
- 3. Missionaries are already overwhelmed with the mission, let alone staying connected to local churches.** Asking missionaries to invest back into their sending churches is a great idea. But anyone who's served overseas will wisely rebut, "Ain't nobody got time for that!" (perhaps with better grammar). Missionaries are relentless enough to push through all the reasons not to go, so it's uniquely difficult for them to deeply root in a church for a prolonged season instead of just taking off. When they do finally arrive on the field, they face the pythonic squeeze of succumbing to a new culture and language. And all this is added on top of maintaining their marriage, children, health, and sanity during an identity flush as violent as the airplane's toilet. Investing their limited time and energy back into churches – or more, initiating it all, seems too much of a distraction from life and ministry's demands. I regularly sit with missionaries

who essentially challenge me to convince them why it's important to keep reaching out – writing newsletters that go unanswered, sharing struggles though people can't relate, pursuing friendships when others have moved on, asking for help when no one comes through, receiving short-term trips despite the risk and exhaustion, mentoring mid-term team members even if the investment may not return much. It's understandable that missionaries hesitate to add weight to the great burdens they already bear.

4. Missionaries recognize it shouldn't be their job to lead in relationships with local churches.

If the church is indeed the means by which God will fulfill his mission, and if local churches are the hubs from which Christians are sent into the neighborhoods and on to the nations, then local churches should joyfully and jealously initiate in relationships with their sent ones. Though the task is daunting, churches should allow themselves to be compelled by the word and Spirit to send and to shepherd those who “have gone out for the sake of the name” (3 [John 1:7](#)). Missionaries may not traditionally assume this exact formula (especially considering the focus on agencies), but they have a nagging sense that churches ought to be more on board with the mission. That explains missionaries' disappointment with churches, ranging from hopeful longing to embittered disdain. In some ways, they might justifiably say, “It ain't *my* fault,” and carry on without giving the church a second thought.

Do We Submit to New Trends or Old Truths?

In light of these struggles, expecting missionaries to initiate relationships with local churches—or even hinting at a chink in their armor—feels audacious. Keep in mind, as a former missionary who dreams of returning overseas, I'm throwing rotten tomatoes at my own house here. Yet what's on the table comes not from new trends but old truths.

For all that Paul embodies as one changed by God and obedient in mission—a model we often love to tout as second only to Christ—he also showcases the appropriate missionary posture toward the church in word and deed. Was he so driven in his relationship with local churches because he was a highly gifted Apostle? Was it merely his responsibility as one who established many of those churches? Did he initiate only because he had the authority to do so? Theologian [George W. Peters](#) says no way:

Paul did not exercise such authority in missionary partnership. Here he was a humble brother and energetic leader among fellow laborers, and a dynamic and exemplary force in the churches in evangelism and church expansion (236).

No doubt Paul's frontier dreams were slowed down, so to speak, due to his inconvenient devotion to local churches. He too experienced neglect and discouragement from churches ([Philippians 4:10-15](#), [Galatians 1:4](#), [Acts 21:13](#), [2 Corinthians 2:1-4](#)). He too carried an overwhelming ministry load ([2 Corinthians 11:28](#)). He too could have chosen to operate exclusively within a mobile missionary dream team.

But he didn't.

Despite every failure and hindrance, Paul loved local churches ([Philippians 4:1](#), [1 Thessalonians 2:8](#)).

He knew that ditching the bride meant insulting the groom. He knew the church, with all her warts, was not merely a hindrance nor side note to the mission of God. Though there are many honest reasons missionaries might not pursue deep, abiding relationships with local churches, these old truths seem to trump them.