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THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR TEAM MINISTRY

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Introduction

The concept of team ministry in the local church has become very popular in the past two decades. Instead of the individual pioneer missionary or church planter, we now more commonly have mission and church planting teams. The multiple staff church has become the norm, with even many small churches having more than one pastor, paid or unpaid.

A definition of team ministry, for our purposes, will be a team of two or more persons consciously engaged together in ministry on a full-time or significantly extensive part-time basis, usually in a paid capacity. This definition would not, of course, rule out lay ministry teams which use volunteers.

The key question which we need to raise is this: Is there evidence of team ministries in the Bible? If biblical examples or encouragements toward team ministry cannot be found, the current trend will have to be re-evaluated by Evangelicals.

The Old Testament Evidence

The Old Testament, at first glance, shows little evidence of anything except strong individual ministries which resisted the possibility of cooperative effort. Moses, the leader of the Exodus, Joshua, the conqueror of Canaanites, and the judges, each appear to have worked alone as charismatic leaders. The kings ruled as individuals, and the prophets, even when they lived in the same general location at the same time, apparently had little contact with one another. True, Elijah and Elisha operated together for a few years (I Kings 19:15-21; II Kings 2:1-12), but Elisha seems to have been more like Elijah's apprentice than a fully functioning team member. There is no indication that he

did any teaching or performed any miracles on his own until Elijah had been taken from him.

It is in this latter observation, however, that a key to a rudimentary form of team ministry in the Old Testament era may be found. Moses, overburdened with the weight of his duties, was commanded by God to appoint as assistants seventy of the elders of Israel. God's words regarding their duties are instructive: "They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone" (Numbers 11:7).

Other examples of such assistance are found in the Old Testament. After the inauguration of the kingship in Israel, teams of advisors commonly assisted the king in carrying out his responsibilities and wishes. In the case of the prophets, there was a long tradition of prophetic "guilds" or "schools," generally led by an established prophet who trained his disciples in the ways of God (II Kings 4:38) and assigned them duties to perform, including such things as anointing a king (II Kings 9:1) and preaching judgment (I Kings 20:35-43). Samuel acted as a sort of president over such a band of prophets (I Samuel 19:19-20). Elijah and Elisha were both well known for their support of the same tradition (II Kings 2:3, 5, 7, 15-18; 4:1, 38; 5:22). Isaiah 8:16 indicates that prophetic schools probably continued well beyond the time of Elisha.¹

In the Old Testament, then, there is a team ministry based on groups of servants or disciples assisting established leaders in the performance of their tasks. There is little indication of teams of co-workers having equal power or status, except perhaps in the

¹ For more information on prophetic "guilds" or "schools" see Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 28-34; J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), 69-70; E.J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 83-94.

roles of Ezra and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8) or Zerubbabel and Joshua (Haggai 1:1; 2:2).

As civil and religious leaders carrying out either civil or religious roles within the nation, they were thrown together for a common purpose. Only in such rare examples is the servant or discipleship role absent.

The Ministry of Jesus

The ministry of Jesus with his disciples again demonstrates a master-servant approach to the team. Within the Ancient Near Eastern pattern of disciple training, Jesus affirmed, along with his contemporaries, that the disciple is not above his master but is expected to become like his master (Matthew 10:24-25). Jesus, like the prophets before him, assigned tasks to his followers, thus involving them in his ministry (see, for example, Luke 22:8-13; John 4:8).

But on two occasions during his earthly work, Jesus formed his disciples into full-fledged mission teams sent to carry out specific service together. In the mission of the twelve (Mark 6:7) and of the seventy (or seventy-two, Luke 10:1ff.), Jesus sent out teams of two disciples each to preach the message of the kingdom and do miracles.

The use of teams of two was already an established pattern of Jewish life, because messengers of sanhedrins or synagogues were often sent in twos to convey information, serve documents, collect taxes and even preach.² The Mishnah (Aboth 1:6) encouraged would-be disciples to find a master and also get a partner disciple. The

² See M.H. Shepherd, Jr., "Apostle," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962).

Sanhedrin in Jerusalem had a policy of dividing its members into twos to discuss any second thoughts after convicting someone of a crime (Mishnah, Sandhedrin 5:5). But most such two-by-two arrangements dealt with civil matters. There is no contemporaneous evidence of a rabbi or other religious leader authorizing missionary work through ministry teams as Jesus did.

The Old Testament gave two rationales for using teams of two. The most obvious reason was that of Ecclesiastes 4:9-12: two together can accomplish more than one individually. Beyond this, Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:5 set a strong precedent for the need of two or more people to bear believable testimony.³

It might be argued that the teams Jesus sent out were of short duration so that there is no biblical warrant for using them as a basis for modern long-term team ministries. But Jesus was training a long-term team throughout his earthly ministry--the twelve apostles. When he left them, he indicated that they, as a team, were to continue the mission for which he had trained them (John 20:21-22; Acts 1:8). The very fact that they were later so anxious to replace Judas (Acts 1:20ff) shows that the apostles understood that they were to act as a team, the number "twelve" probably corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Early Church

³ On Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15 as the rationale for the use of two messengers together see Robert A. Guelich, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 1-8:26* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 321; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1980), 207.

While in the early church Peter appears to have dominated in the area of preaching, the apostles considered themselves a team working together to promote a common body of teaching (Acts 2:42, etc.) and to carry out a common ministry (Acts 5:12). At the same time, Peter and John were viewed as a team within the larger team, commonly acting together (Acts 3:1, 11; 4:13, etc.). When James, the brother of Jesus, became the recognized single leader of the Jerusalem church, he still acted in concert with the apostles and elders in the congregation, as part of the team (Acts 15:13 cf. 15:22; 21:18).

The Ministry of Paul

The ministry of Paul reveals Scripture's fullest description of the use of team ministry. Robert Banks has gone as far as to state that:

Paul's enlistment of full and part-time helpers on his later missionary journeys, at times swelling to quite a substantial company of co-workers, has no parallel in the field of contemporary religious propagation.⁴

Ellis has identified some thirty-six persons who ministered with Paul, nine of whom continued with him to the end of his life.⁵

⁴ Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1980), 169. His view is supported by Helen Doohan, *Leadership in Paul* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), 53.

⁵ E. Earle Ellis, "Paul and His Co-Workers," *New Testament Studies* 17, no.2 (July 1971), 437-438.

Paul, like Jesus, took a strong leadership role in the ministry which had been entrusted to him. Five of the nine co-workers who stayed with him to the end clearly were subordinate to him and acted under his specific directions.⁶ Paul had earlier experienced being the subordinate of another (Acts 13:2,7; note the order: Barnabas and Saul), but his special call by the risen Christ and his obvious giftedness very quickly led to recognition by others that he was the true leader of the Gentile mission (Acts 13:13: "Paul and his companions").

In his use of subordinates, however, Paul was concerned that real ministry should occur. His rejection of John Mark after Mark's desertion (Acts 15:37-38) makes it plain that he had no desire to bring along anyone who was not ready to carry a proper share of the work. Those who served under him as co-workers and envoys had genuine contributions to make.

While the "two-by-two" principle of Jewish tradition and of the missions sent by Jesus was adopted by the apostle Paul, as he teamed with Barnabas and later with Silas, Paul's team relations were much more complex. He often sent team members on important missions (Acts 19:22; II Corinthians 7:13-16) and occasionally gave them significant positions in churches over extended periods of time (I Timothy 1:3ff.; Titus 1:5ff.). The comings and goings of Paul's network of co-workers were truly amazing (see, for example, II Timothy 4:9-13,20-21).

The apostle John later adopted a pattern of directing bands of Christian workers from a central location, presumably Ephesus (III John 5-10). We may assume on the

⁶ Ellis, 438

basis of the reference to "pagans" in III John 7 that John's workers were engaged in church planting.

Local Church Leadership

One final area of New Testament team ministry was that of leadership within the local churches. It is clear that most, probably all, of the local churches in the New Testament era had a plurality of leadership, whether those churches were Pauline (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 21:18; Philippians 1:1; I Timothy 5:17) or non-Pauline (Acts 13:1; James 5:14).⁷ While the titles and roles of leaders in various local settings may have differed, it is clear that each local church recognized a definable group of people as its leadership team.⁸

Not only were leadership teams recognized by their churches, but team members (like those those who worked with Paul in his mission: I Corinthians 9:3-6) also received payment for their work (Galatians 6:6; I Timothy 5:17, and, by implication, I Corinthians 9:14). this did not mean that all workers in a team served on a full-time basis, but it did mean that team members were viewed as performing valuable ministries which called for remuneration. I Timothy 5:17, with its reference to "double honour," most likely

⁷It is commonly argued that the synagogue eldership system provided no precedent for New Testament eldership, since the work of the synagogue was performed by synagogue rulers (see especially, David W. Miller, "The Uniqueness of New Testament Church Eldership," *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1985), 315-327.). While there might be more than one ruler in a synagogue (Acts 13:15), their role was much more authoritarian than that of New Testament church elders.

⁸ Banks, 135ff., remains unconvincing in the assertion that these leaders did not occupy specific leadership offices and were not distinct from the rest of the congregation members who also had ministries.

referred to those elders who spent more time in ministry and thus required larger honoraria or higher wages.⁹

Conclusions

What may be concluded about the biblical basis for team ministry? First, it is obvious from both Old and New Testaments that the use of teams to carry out ministry tasks was a biblical practice, both in missionary enterprises and in local congregations.

Second, there was commonly a leader in each ministry team, though we find no evidence of domineering masters and cowering slaves. Rather, the leader was recognized as called and gifted for the task, but each team member had a significant role in carrying out the ministry as a whole.

Third, a strong place is given in Scripture for a mentoring model in team ministry, from the schools of the prophets to Paul's work with Timothy and Titus. If a team is to continue beyond the active life of its originator, new members need to be brought in to learn at the feet of seasoned veterans (II Timothy 2:2)

The statement from the writer of Ecclesiastes forms a fitting conclusion:

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their work:
If one falls down,
his friend can help him up.

⁹ See J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (London: A & C Black, 1963), 125; Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 78).

But pity the man who falls
and has no one to help him up!

(Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

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