

# Responsibility of the Local Church in Discerning Missionary Call

Ricky Don Wilhelm

When a church member says, “God is calling me to be a missionary,” many well-meaning pastors, struck by the realization that 4.7 billion people across the globe need the gospel, will not think twice about affirming and celebrating that person’s call. Evangelicals tend to give a great deal of credence to someone claiming to hear God’s still, small voice in decision making. Even the way in which Christians often express their sense of call (*i.e.*, “God told me”) assumes a particular amount of divine authority.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*,<sup>2</sup> Carl Trueman attempted to trace the development of the contemporary Western worldview and exposed “expressive individualism” as a prominent influencer of the modern psyche. Expressive individualism refers to an understanding that each person finds his meaning by giving expression to his or her own feelings and desires. Trueman observed that mainstream culture is advocating that individuals

---

<sup>1</sup> Much of the content in this article has been adapted from portions of my dissertation, Ricky Don Wilhelm II, *Where there is a Church: A Biblical Investigation into the Work of an Evangelist and Its Implication for International Mission Board Team Leaders in Established-Church Locations*. PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 46.

find meaning in the “inward quest for personal psychological happiness.”<sup>3</sup> They claim that the ultimate purpose of an individual is to externally express what he thinks will make him internally content—he must be *authentic* to his inward desires.

Expressive individualism could explain why so many rush to affirm someone’s desire to become a missionary. Our Western intuition compels us to never stand in the way of what someone believes will make him or her feel happy. Churches must recognize, however, that a dangerous level of subjectivity resides in the idea of the missionary call which, if misidentified, can lead someone straight into the perils of expressive individualism. Still, should Christians fully dismiss their existential perspective in God providentially leading them to missions? This article proposes 1 Timothy 4:12-14 as a biblical model which acknowledges both God’s activity and the authority of a local church in assessing missionary candidates. This article concludes with a warning about the ecclesiological dangers in allowing subjective callings to drive the decision for sending a missionary.

### **1 Timothy 4:12-14 as a Model for Assessing Future Missionaries**

In 1 Timothy 4:12-14, Paul aims to encourage Timothy to persevere in his challenging ministry by reminding this apprentice of his election to ministry. Paul wrote, “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.”<sup>4</sup> Many scholars have recog-

---

<sup>3</sup> Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 46.

<sup>4</sup> Biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version.

nized the correlation between this account of Timothy's election and the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:1-3.<sup>5</sup>

Upon observation of the events surrounding Paul and Timothy's laying-on of hands, the themes of gifting, calling, and a church's affirmation arise, which may serve to give churches and missions organizations insight into the New Testament practices in sending and receiving missionaries.<sup>6</sup> Since Timothy and Paul were leaders in the task of church vitalization, the use of "missionary" and the suggested areas for candidate assessment in this article particularly pertain to those commissioned to lead in healthy church formation, although the basic principles could apply to all.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 108; Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, vol. 34, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 139; John MacArthur Jr., *1 Timothy*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1995), 180; Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 325.

<sup>6</sup> My research has led me to conclude that the NT depicts two kinds of missionaries: 1) Paul occasionally used ἀπόστολος in the generic sense of someone sent for the fulfillment of a specific task. This use would be translated as "missionaries" and gives credence to churches sending a variety of missionaries contributing to the body of Christ and the mission in different ways (Phil 2:25; 2 Cor 8:23; likely Rom 16:7). 2) New Testament evangelists (εὐαγγελιστής) are elder-qualified, leaders in itinerant church vitalization. Textual evidence identifies Paul, Timothy, and Phillip as evangelists. Paul uniquely exercised two roles—a universal-church role as an apostle appointed by Christ and a local-church role as an evangelist. However, all three (and certainly others) fulfilled the work of an evangelist by laboring in itinerant church vitalization as they traveled to various locations planting and strengthening churches. The strategy for fulfilling the work of an evangelist—whether planting or strengthening—was dependent on the status of the local church in the given location. Some will object to these categories on the claim that the NT depicts a little "a" ἀπόστολος to mean cross-cultural missionary or church planter—a category for which I find little scriptural support. See "Biblical Examination of Apostles," in Wilhelm, *Where there is a Church*, 58-91.

<sup>7</sup> *Church vitalization* is an all encompassing term. It refers to ministry that gives life to, or vitalizes, a local church including planting a new church or strengthening an existing church.

## Evident Gifting

Paul wrote to Timothy, “Do not neglect the gift [χαρίσματος] you have, which was given you” (1 Tim 4:14), which likely referred to his gift for ministry.<sup>8</sup> Paul did not specifically mention which gifting he meant. However, the imperatives preceding verse 14 may provide some clarity. As one charged with church vitalization, Paul expected Timothy to set an example (4:12) and devote himself to public teaching (4:13). These expectations confirm that the Holy Spirit had granted Timothy a gifting, at minimum, in leadership and teaching (Rom 12:7-8). Additionally, this indicates Timothy met the requirements of an elder listed in chapter three of 1 Timothy.

If the young missionary was to succeed in his task of strengthening this church to overcome false teaching, then the Spirit must have equipped him to lead and teach. As Paul instructed Timothy, “If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus” (4:6). Readers can observe from 1 and 2 Timothy that God gifted Timothy to function as a temporary teaching-leader in a local church.<sup>9</sup>

Andy Johnson, who currently pastors overseas, presented this exhortation to sending churches:

If you carefully read Acts and the Epistles, you will notice that heresy, confusion, and syncretism most often occur at the edge

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Fee argued, “The word gift [*charisma*] means something like ‘gracious endowment’; because in Paul there is frequently a close tie (as here) between *charisma* and ‘Spirit’ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:7; 12:4, 31; Rom. 1:11), the word is frequently translated ‘spiritual gift’ (as NASB, GNB here). In this case the gift ‘that is in him’ almost certainly has to do with his calling and gift for ministry as a preacher/teacher of the Word,” Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> The assumption that Timothy settled permanently to Pastor in Ephesus makes two errors. First, it ignores the immediate context of the letters. Paul said, “Do your best to come to me soon... When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments” (2 Tim 4:9-13). Second, Timothy settling would assume that he suddenly changed roles. However, the NT consistently portrayed Timothy’s ministry as itinerant (Acts 17:14-15; 18:5; 19:22; 1 Cor 16:10; Phil 2:19; 1 Thes 3:2). Therefore, when Paul tells Timothy “fulfill your ministry” (*\*τὴν διακονίαν σου πληροφόρησον\**), Paul was urging Timothy to begin wrapping up his ministry in Ephesus, so that he could rejoin Paul as was his custom.

of gospel expansion. Therefore, that is where we need our best-equipped people. Such work is not for every Christian who simply loves to share his or her faith. We need to make sure those we send possess deep theological knowledge so that what they teach can be reproduced in the lives of their hearers with accuracy until Christ returns.<sup>10</sup>

Before a church approves sending a church-vitalizing missionary, they should ask themselves, “Would I entrust this man with the teaching and leadership of a church plant here?” If a missionary candidate does not possess the competency to lead a church in his own country, the extra challenges present in a cross-cultural setting will all but ensure his failure.

### **Divinely Initiated Aspiration**

Contention and confusion prevail around contemporary uses and abuses of “calling.”<sup>11</sup> For this reason, I would prefer to see an increase in the use of the word “aspire” from 1 Timothy 3:1 (“I aspire to be a missionary”). Of course, I am not implying that I do not believe God is at work initiating this aspiration.<sup>12</sup> In 1 Timothy 4:14, when Paul reminded Timothy of the prophecies about him, he emphasized God’s direct involvement in moving this young missionary to serve in that particular place at that particular time. Philip Towner explained, “Prophecy itself will not have been the ‘means’ or cause of conveyance; the passive verb ‘was given’ indicates the action of God/the Spirit. It is probably rather a reference to words of the Spirit spoken. . . that confirm and identify Timothy’s giftedness and thereby authorize his ministry

---

<sup>10</sup> Andy Johnson, *Missions: How the Local Church Goes Global* (Wheaton: Crossway 2017), 43-45.

<sup>11</sup> See Jon Deedrick and Ryan Robertson, “Episode 14: Calling—Greg Gilbert,” September 29, 2019, in *The Great Commission Podcast*, produced by Reaching & Teaching, podcast, mp3, Length in 29:49, <https://rtim.org/podcast/episode-14-calling-greg-gilbert>.

<sup>12</sup> I fully affirm the categories of calling described in International Mission Board, *Foundations* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board, 2018), 65-66.

in the community.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, Towner understood the prophecies as divine activity leading to words spoken to affirm Timothy’s gifting to serve the church in Ephesus.

Of course, this raises the question of the nature of these prophecies (certainly, this article will not propose a resolution to this debate). On the one hand, readers could understand these prophecies as the Holy Spirit working through authoritative, divinely inspired utterance.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, these prophecies could be taken as the Holy Spirit working through the elders in Ephesus to speak intuitively in a way that provided Timothy with God-given confidence about his next venture.<sup>15</sup>

In either case, we can deduce that some amount of subjectivity clouded the certainty of Timothy’s fitness to serve. Paul indicated that Timothy’s age affected some people’s confidence in the young minister (1 Tim 4:12). Perhaps the challenges of the missionary task in Ephesus affected Timothy’s own perceptions of himself, which led Paul to urge Timothy to recall an earlier supernatural encouragement for him to labor there (what some might deem as a *call to service*).<sup>16</sup>

I would suggest a few brief applications for those feeling that the Lord may be leading them to missions. First, if you desire to lead in healthy church formation, look to the Word. Carefully examine how your feelings and aptitude align with the Scriptural requirements of those aspiring to such a work (Acts 20:17-38; 1 & 2 Tim; Titus). Second, if you conclude that this ministry suits you, listen to others. Those around you, especially pastors and fellow church members, will be able to speak intuitively about whether such a ministry would be a good fit. Third, if someday you do find yourself on

---

<sup>13</sup> Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 323.

<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, 179.

<sup>15</sup> Carson, D. A., *Showing the Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 214. Kindle Edition.

<sup>16</sup> *Foundations*, 66.

the mission field faced with overwhelming challenges and discouragements, speak to yourself. Remind yourself of how the Lord used both His Word and other believers to encourage you to pursue that ministry. Let the memory of this support renew your resolve to complete your assignment.

### **Local Church Affirmation**

While prophecy indicated the divine aspect of Timothy's call to service, Paul also highlighted the local church's role in affirming Timothy's call to a new location in Ephesus. Towner suggested, "the elders of the Ephesian community have played a part, by relating a prophetic word and laying on hands, in recognizing and confirming the gift (rather than in actually conveying it to him)."<sup>17</sup> Paul referred to the prophecies and the laying on of hands by the elders, both which portray the "divine-human co-operation" in Timothy's election.<sup>18</sup>

The procedures in Timothy's election exhibit similarities to those in Acts 13:1-3 with Paul and Barnabas. Luke wrote,

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers [gifting], Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said [calling], "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work

---

<sup>17</sup> Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 324. Towner indicates why this should be understood as laying on of hands by the Ephesian elders saying, "1 Timothy is written both to Timothy and the Ephesian church, and so Paul not only reminds Timothy of this event and the gifting and confirmation of authority to minister, but he also addresses the elders themselves as a way to ensure their continued allegiance to Timothy and the apostolic mission." Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 324.

<sup>18</sup> Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 112.

to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them [affirming] and sent them off.

Both events describe the centrality of the local church’s action. In Paul’s case, the sending-church confirmed Paul’s call and released him to preach in a pioneer location. In Timothy’s, the receiving-church confirmed Timothy’s call to lead temporarily in their established church.

Subsequently, a Christian’s expression of an internal but subjective sense of call to missions cannot supersede the authority of a church nor obligate that church to send a candidate. Instead, the church (even if assisted by a missions organization) takes an active role in the assessment of the potential missionary to discern if the candidate meets the necessary qualifications which are no less serious than that of pastor. In summary, the authority in electing, sending, and receiving missionaries belongs to churches as led by God—not individuals, not mission agencies, nor missionary teams. This realization becomes especially important in established-church locations.

In the twenty-first century, international missions entered a new era. Churches have more evenly distributed themselves across the globe than at any other time in history.<sup>19</sup> We must consider this as a factor in how we approach deployment.<sup>20</sup> For example, Paul usually coordinated the arrival

---

<sup>19</sup> Martin I. Klauber and Scott M. Manetsch, *Great Commission Evangelicals and the History of World Missions* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008), 1-2. In the introduction, Douglas Sweeney highlights how in 1500, only 19 percent of the world's population was Christian, and more than 83 percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe, but that today there are more than 800 million evangelicals spread throughout the world.

<sup>20</sup> The IMB deploys 91% of their missionaries to “unreached peoples” meaning to people groups which are less than 2% evangelical, see Scott Barkley, “Southern Baptists Generosity Fuels Reaching the Unreached,” *The Baptist Press*, October 12, 2022, accessed Oct 27, 2022, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/southern-baptists-generosity-fuels-reaching-the-unreached>. “Unreached” should not be interpreted as locations without established churches. For example, the IMB could deploy a missionary to London but assign him to evangelizing Iranians, or they could deploy him to almost every major people group on the European continent, and that missionary would be counted as deployed to the unreached. Yet, there are numerous established churches in those locations. At the time of writing, the IMB has 2156 units on the mission field and 419 of those are in Europe. Therefore, these all fall within the parameters of an established-church location.



and ministry of a missionary with a local church. He attached his recommendation for Timothy's ministry to the church in Philippi, writing, "For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. . . . you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel" (2:22). Epaphroditus went ahead of Timothy to deliver this letter and paved the way for his arrival.<sup>21</sup> Timothy would team with this church in a similar fashion as he did in Ephesus.

Sometimes, missionaries arrive on the mission field and show up at a local church, expressing their desire to serve. Local pastors are, at best, caught off guard by the unsolicited arrival of foreigners and, at worst, offended by the thought that they need the help of the perhaps lesser qualified and lesser experienced missionary. While Paul's apostolic authority was unique, churches and missions organizations would benefit from his wisdom and example by planning the deployment of missionaries with national church leaders. Intentional communication with national pastors and churches will help identify where church vitalizers are invited and needed in ways that demographic statistics cannot. Such an approach not only serves churches more effectively but also allows churches to exercise similar care for missionaries which Paul expected from churches receiving his co-laborers.

In 1 Corinthians 16:10-11, Paul urged the church to "put Timothy at ease" among them, to not "despise him," and to "help him." He prepared his own way to Rome by appealing to the church to begin praying for him so that when he came, he would be refreshed in their company (Rom 15:32). Unfortunately, when missionaries arrive on the mission field with no church waiting to take them in, help them, and put them at ease in their new context. When they arrive to churches unannounced, they may even find others despising their well-intentioned offer to help reach the city. Although coordinating with the local church may require more time and money, churches and

---

<sup>21</sup> Hansen, *Philippians*, 201.

missions organizations can more faithfully steward their missionary's calling by intentionally communicating and planning with local churches.

### **Present Danger in the Subjectivity of Calling**

One of the great fallouts of expressive individualism is the impact on how people perceive institutions, in that institutions no longer exist to mold a person but to affirm that person's external expressions of "self."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, one of the greatest offenses which an institution could commit in this age is to deny a person's "right" to pursue what he believes will make him feel psychologically affirmed. Great Commission Baptist churches are not immune from such anti-institutional ideology. This ideology threatens the inspired truth that Christ left the church as His representing institution. According to Baptist ecclesiology, each local church autonomously governs itself under the guidance of the Scriptures. God works through the congregation as a whole to sanctify and build up its members (Matt 18:15-20; Eph 4:12-16). So, the church cannot submit to the whims of every inspired member saying, "Here am I, Send me."

Christ blesses the church with the privilege to encourage and empower those fit to lead in the missionary task. He also blesses them with the responsibility to prevent unqualified missionaries from going despite the cultural presuppositions that institutions do not have the right to hinder the pursuit of such internal desires. Missionary E.D. Burns cautioned, "Both elements, the inspiring call and the careful consideration, are needed. But we must think more about the fact that we are in a feelings-driven age, and it is now easier than ever to surf the wave of an experience all the way to a faraway place, only to find that once the feeling subsides, so too does the zeal for gospel promotion."<sup>23</sup> Through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit has given an ob-

---

<sup>22</sup> Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> E.D. Burns, *The Missionary-Theologian: Sent into the World, Sanctified by the Word* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2020), 12-13.

jective assessment for the qualification of church leaders. Great Commission Baptists cannot leave the matter of electing missionaries to lead in church vitalization on the level of subjective feelings. The task is too important, and God's glory among the nations is too great to be held captive by the modern self.

---

Ricky Don Wilhelm has been a missionary in association with the International Mission Board since 2008, serving 13 years in Russia and currently in Wales. He holds a Ph.D. in Evangelism and Missions from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.