

Whatever Happened to the Apostle Paul?

An exposition of Paul's teaching and practice of giving.

—Christopher R. Little

What would the Apostle Paul say and do if he showed up at your church, joined your missions committee, became a member of your mission agency or brought the redemptive message of Christ to your town? The answer can be found in the pages of the New Testament.

No doubt he would preach the death, burial, resurrection, appearing and imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ. He would go to any length to make sure people understood that apart from personal faith in Christ in this life there is no hope of being reconciled to God for eternity.¹ As he himself said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved,” for “there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all” in order that we may not have to “pay the penalty of eternal destruction” (NASB, Acts 16:31; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; 2 Thes. 1:9).

Beyond correct theology, Paul would also be deeply concerned about proper missionary strategy. He would emphasize that we must be governed by the principles demonstrated in his own ministry which lead to the development of healthy indigenous churches. Thankfully, these principles are summarized in his farewell address to the elders of the Ephesian church (Acts 20:17-35). After three years of ministry among them he testified that: 1) he coveted no one's treasure (v. 33); 2) he provided for his own needs and those of his teammates (v. 34); and 3) “in everything” he showed them how they should work hard and provide for the needs of the weak among them (v. 35). Paul's own testimony points out something that is often overlooked: when there were needs in the fellowship, he expected those in the church to work hard to meet the needs of their fellow-believers, as he did, without looking elsewhere for assistance. Hence, Paul undeniably strove for the local sustainability of the churches he planted.²

We have just as much to learn from Paul's missionary

practice as from his theology. Well-respected missionary statesmen and missiologists have long known this. For example, Robert Speer noted: “The first missionary marked out for all time the lines and principles of successful missionary work.”³ Roland Allen wrote: “Since the Apostle, no other has discovered or practiced methods for the propagation of the Gospel better than his.”⁴ And Donald McGavran concluded: “If the church is to grow faster, individual churchmen, church boards, missionary societies, local churches, and assemblies must consciously align their practice with the ‘Pauline mission’ pattern of missionary action.”⁵

Besides these wise human assessments, there are at least three Biblical reasons why we need to adhere to Paul's missionary strategy. First, Paul was a “wise master builder” of churches (1 Cor. 3:10). When Paul began his ministry there were no churches in Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia, and in little over a decade he spoke of his work in these provinces as finished so that he could press on to new regions (Rom. 15:19-20). Truly, he was “the most effective cross-cultural missionary the church has ever seen.”⁶

While some may believe Paul's methods to be outdated, the similarities between his world and ours are astounding. The ease of travel, migration of people, existence of pluralism widespread economic disparity, etc. all add up to the conclusion that “we are back for the first time in something like the earliest centuries of Christianity.”⁷ E. M. Blaiklock, professor of classics at Auckland University in New Zealand, even stated, “Of all the intervening centuries, [ours] is most like the first.”⁸ We cannot ignore this scenario and assume we know better than Paul did. The truth is that “the Apostle's methods succeeded exactly where ours have failed.”⁹ He was able to initiate and preserve locally sustainable, culturally sensitive expressions of Christianity where, in the majority of cases, we have not.¹⁰

Second, Paul places his conduct on the same level as his doctrine. Among other things, he tells Timothy to follow his “teaching” and “conduct” (2 Tim. 3:10). The Greek word for “teaching” is *didaskalia* and refers to “the

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historical revelation of God as attested by Scripture.”¹¹ It is the same word found in the well-known verse later in the chapter: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching” (2 Tim. 3:16). The Greek word for “conduct” is *agogé*, meaning “manner of life,” and indicates “the orientation of the writer, which is to be appropriated no less than [*didaskalia*] by his reader.”¹² According to Willis De Boer, “the reference to conduct here [has] in mind particularly Paul’s missionary methods, the practical matters in his ministerial work, his way of preaching, organizing his communities, and such matters.”¹³ Fundamentally, this signifies that Paul’s conduct as a missionary is a means of instruction on equal footing with his teaching.

Consequently, Paul would have resisted any attempt to drive a wedge between his teaching and his missionary practices—to accept his doctrine but not his methods. He felt both were avenues by which Timothy and others (including ourselves) could learn and implement the proper ways in which to spread the Gospel and plant the church. The messenger was the message, conveyed through both his words and his life.

Third, Paul commands his churches to imitate him (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thes. 1:6; 2:14). There are also many other passages where Paul refers to his life as an example and model to be emulated (Gal. 4:12; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 1 Tim. 1:16; 2 Thes. 3:7-9). In turn, the impact of his life led to others being effective in the spread of the Gospel and living a godly life (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thes. 1:7; 1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:7). Paul offered “himself as a paradigm” for the entire Christian life.¹⁴ As such, his life represents a normative standard for the Church throughout the centuries (cf., Heb. 13:7). Joseph Grassi comments that since Paul’s “own life is the direct link with Christ, he can present himself as a concrete example of Christian tradition that is to be handed on to others. *This is his apostolic authority*. . . [It] is an authentic embodiment of the Gospel in his own life to such a degree that it can be a living Christian tradition that will be handed on to others” (cf., 2 Tim. 2:2).¹⁵

How do we apply this? Are we to imitate Paul in things like going to synagogues to evangelize and adopting Jewish purification rites (Acts 13:14; 21:26)? Whenever we attempt to glean from Paul, we must discern the motives which drove his ministry. Paul had a receptive audience in the God-fearing Gentiles he encountered in the synagogues. In like manner, we should go to religious institutions like mosques and temples to communicate divine revelation as long as people will listen. Moreover, Paul’s *modus operandi* was always: “I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). Hence, we need to contextualize ourselves, as Paul did, in order not to cause offense but to win as many as possible to Christ.

Paul’s Pattern: Local resources or outside support?

If Paul were among us today, he would encourage us to serve within the local context by using local resources to meet the local needs of churches, because that is exactly what he did. There is no record in the New Testament of Paul raising and transferring finances from one church in order to subsidize the ministries of other churches. Today many are ignoring this fact (see “What is Driving Partnership,” p. 26). Those who believe in supporting local ministries with foreign funds base their position on at least four accounts in the New Testament.

First, 3 John 5-8 shows how local churches often assisted those who were not a part of their own fellowship, but this is simply a case of showing hospitality to traveling evangelists in the first century. Paul expected the Roman church to do so for him during his journey on the way to Spain (Rom. 15:24). We should likewise demonstrate hospitality when fellow believers from anywhere in the world visit our churches (Heb. 13:2).

Second, Paul “partnered” with the Philippian church which sent support to him while he served in other

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churches and this ought to serve as a prototype for us today.¹⁶ This notion is based upon Philippians 1:4-5: “I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now” (NIV; see also, 2:1; 4:14-15). The Greek word for “partnership” is the well-known word *koinonia* which is normally translated “fellowship.” Commentators are divided on how best to translate this term in Philippians. Whatever the case, we know that Paul based his reputation on providing for himself through his tent-making vocation in order to preach the Gospel without charge in an effort to not hinder the advance of the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:12, 15-18).¹⁷ When he received assistance from the Philippian church it got him into trouble with the Corinthians because they thought he lived by a double standard (2 Cor. 11:7-9; 12:13). Evidently, he was “not particularly enthusiastic about the gift”¹⁸ since it “caused him problems. It violated his principle of paying his own way by working with his hands. . . . Consequently he swings suddenly from praising the Philippians [in 4:10] to informing them that he did not need their gift [in

4:11ff], that he had learned self-sufficiency.”¹⁹ Hence, to use Paul’s relationship with the Philippian church as a basis for promoting financial partnerships among the global church today is to misconstrue how he actually viewed it.

Third, the Antiochene church took up an offering for the Jerusalem church during a famine (Acts 11:27-30). This was clearly an act of Christian compassion which needs to be followed today. When Christian communities suffer an overwhelming disaster that depletes their local resources, then their brethren around the world, not just from the West, should be ready to offer help. Experience has taught us that all assistance must be temporary and empowering in order to avoid unhealthy dependency.

The last example comes from Paul’s collection project

among the Gentile churches for the Jerusalem church (1 Cor. 16:1-4).²⁰ Various reasons have been offered for why Paul undertook this project. Many assume that Paul was driven by a humanitarian concern for the Jerusalem church. But this does not fit the evidence since Paul would have been working counterproductively as he took contributions from the Philippian church which at the time was experiencing “deep poverty” (2 Cor. 8:2). This view also wrongly assumes that the designation for the Jerusalem church as “poor” must be limited to socio-economic categories (Rom. 15:26; Gal. 2:10). Rather, the designation “poor” in the teachings of the early church carried the connotation of “humble” or “pious poor” (cf., Mt. 5:3; Lk. 6:20).²¹ Thus, another motive for the collec-

What is Driving “Partnership”?

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The buzzword in missions today is “partnership.” Everybody is writing and talking about it. So much so, that a new term has been coined—the International Partnership Movement (IPM). This movement is being galvanized to a significant degree by the Consultation on Support of Indigenous Ministries (COSIM), which reported in 1997 that its 51 affiliated agencies raised over \$55 million to support at least 16,000 non-USA personnel serving in their own countries or elsewhere.¹ No doubt those figures have since changed, but the underlying philosophy has not. So what are the characteristics of the IPM?

1. A lack of historical perspective. The Western missionary movement over the last two centuries has succeeded in creating an addiction to almost everything Western, including theology, church polity, technology, educational institutions, finances,

literature and evangelistic programs. The root of the problem is not found in the non-Western church but rather in misguided missionary practices. Into this context, the IPM has asserted itself as a newcomer in a long line of benefactors and, through its well-meaning efforts, continues to feed this addiction. In doing so, it presumes to know better than respected individuals such as Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, John Nevius, Roland Allen, and most importantly, the Apostle Paul.

2. Inappropriate terminology. When Western agencies and churches “partner” with their non-Western counterparts in such a way that resources flow in only one direction, then this amounts to nothing other than sponsorship. Hence, the IPM should be more accurately dubbed the “International Sponsorship Movement.”

3. A redefinition of dependency. The IPM speaks of a healthy side of dependency and thereby

confuses the issues at stake.² Dependency typically refers to a debilitating state of mind where we assume that we cannot accomplish what God has called us to do without foreign assistance. This results in the belief that our impoverished lot in life is fixed, and therefore continual appeals to outsiders are entirely justified. Until we overcome this syndrome of dependency through the power of the Holy Spirit, no amount of foreign funding from the IPM or anyone else will solve the problem. In fact, if outside resources could remedy this situation and enable the church to stand on its own two feet, it would have happened decades ago.

4. A sub-Biblical theology of mission. In an effort to establish the biblical basis for the IPM, Daniel Rickett asks: “If Christians are to avoid dependency, what are we to do with the command to carry one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of

Christ (Gal. 6:2)? What are we to say when we see our brother in need and have the means to help (1 John 3:16-20)? And what are we to make of Paul’s collection of funds from the churches of Asia Minor for the suffering church in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-3)?”³ But these questions overlook several facts. First, the word “burdens” in Galatians 6:2 as the context shows refers to “moral lapses, temptations and guilt”⁴ and therefore cannot properly be used to advocate foreign funding of local ministries. Second, if the IPM desires to assist non-Western churches in the name of dependency along the lines of 1 John 3:16-20, it has every right to do so. But when it does, one must realize that this is not missionary work. Mission, by definition, occurs when belief interacts with unbelief.⁵ Hence, what the IPM is really promoting is membership care within the body of Christ as the Western church interacts with the non-Western church. Lastly, it is a common misconception to

tion must be sought. Others conclude that Paul's purpose for the collection was to demonstrate unity between the Jewish and Gentile branches of the first-century church (Rom. 15:27). Although this is indeed true, it does not go far enough in accounting for all the Biblical data. The ultimate reason for the collection project rests upon the fact that Paul was constrained by prophecies which spoke of the nations coming to Israel to worship its King (cf., Is. 60:4-14; 66:19-24; Ps. 72:8-11). As a result of seeing believing Gentiles coming to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4 with 21:15-19), Paul hoped that Israel would be provoked to jealousy so that it might repent and accept Jesus as its Messiah (cf., Rom. 10:1; 11:11-24). Accordingly, Paul's priestly gift is the Gentiles themselves (Rom. 15:16) to

assume that Paul's collection was undertaken for humanitarian reasons (see article above).
5. Furtherance of paternalism. It is impossible to separate giving from control. Donald McGavran said: "Control is not the purpose for which aid is given. . . . Yet control inheres in aid. It cannot successfully be divorced from it."⁶ What this means is that since more money is flowing overseas than perhaps at any other time in the history of the church, we are living in an age of paternalism the likes of which the world has never experienced. Consequently, as the West discusses partnership, non-Western church leaders speak of neo-colonialism.⁷

6. Sincere and pragmatic motives. Those involved with the IPM are quite sincere, but sincerity should never be equated with wisdom. Many in the IPM can point to success stories in their ministries, but to determine the validity of a certain agenda on the basis of whether it works is to fall into the trap of pragmatism.⁸ The fact that something

works does not make it right. Rather, when it comes to missionary activity, what is true, as defined in biblical terms, is right whether it is "successful" or not.

The motivating force behind much of the partnership movement today is worthy of commendation. A hearty effort to overcome some of the shortcomings noted above would be a sizeable step towards genuine health in the global Christian community. 🌐

1. Daniel Rickett and Dotsey Welliver, eds., *Supporting Indigenous Ministries*, Wheaton: Billy Graham Center, 1997, pp. 108-109.
2. *Building Strategic Relationships: A Practical Guide to Partnering with Non-Western Missions*, Klein Graphics, 2000, p. 17ff.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
4. Gerald Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, Vol. I, p. 555.
5. Lesslie Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World*, Wm. Carling & Co. Ltd., 1958, p. 29.
6. *How Churches Grow*, World Dominion Press, 1957, p. 113.
7. George Kinoti and Peter Kimuyu, eds., *Vision for a Bright Africa: Facing the challenges of development*, International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, 1997, p. 226-227.
8. Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999, p. 606-607.

verify that the God of Israel had also become the God of the Gentiles and that there is now only one people of God comprised of all nations (Gal. 3:28-29; Eph. 3:4-6). As such, Paul's collection project is hardly normative for mission today, unless one wants to take up an offering for the church in Jerusalem in hopes of converting Israel.

In conclusion, one must be very careful when using Paul as a paradigm for mission. However, all those willing to steadfastly search for him, seriously listen to him, conscientiously learn from him and wholeheartedly follow him by implementing his sound missionary principles will find a proven guide in establishing locally sustainable expressions of Christianity around the world for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). 🌐

1. For an overview and Biblical assessment of recent evangelical interpretations of the eternal state of the lost, see my book, *The Revelation of God Among the Unevangelized: An Evangelical Appraisal and Missiological Contribution to the Debate*, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2000.
2. Apparently, Paul embraced the principle of the early church that the needs of believers should be cared for by fellow believers in their local communities (cf., Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-7; 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Thes. 4:11-12; Jam. 2:1-17; 1 Jo. 3:17-18).
3. Quote in J. Oswald Sanders, *Paul the Leader*, Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1984, p. 105.
4. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962, p. 147.
5. *How Churches Grow*, World Dominion Press, 1957, p. 76.
6. Dean Gilliland, *Pauline Theology and Mission Practice*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983, p. 261.
7. Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, Camelot Press, 1949, p. 135.
8. Quoted in David Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally*, 2nd Ed, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000, p. 45.
9. Allen, p. 147.
10. For a good example of what happens when one fails to follow Paul's missionary principles, see David Macdonald Paton, *Christian Missions and the Judgment of God*, 2nd Ed, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966. But for an excellent case study on the tremendous benefits of following Paul's methods, see Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1978.
11. Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, Vol. II, p. 162.
12. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 128.
13. *The Imitation of Paul*, University of Amsterdam, 1962, p. 201.
14. P. T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), p. 91.
15. *The Teacher in the Primitive Church and the Teacher Today*, University of Santa Clara Press, 1973, pp. 63-64.
16. On whether "partnership" can be considered a comprehensive concept to describe Paul's relationship with his churches, J. Paul Sampley writes: "Partnership does not provide any overarching structure that links the various Christian communities together." In *Pauline Partnership in Christ: Christian Community and Commitment in Light of Roman Law*, Fortress Press, 1980, p. 112.
17. Yet he also granted others the right to earn their living from the Gospel (Gal. 6:6; 1 Cor. 9:9-14; 1 Tim. 5:17-18).
18. Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992, p. 231.
19. Gerald Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians*, Dallas: Word Books, 1983, p. 210.
20. In order to understand what is being said here one must be familiar with the historical and theological background of the collection project as discussed by the following authors: Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, (John Knox Press, 1959); Keith Nickle, *The Collection: A Study in Paul's Strategy*, (W. and J. Mackay and Co. Ltd., 1966); and Dieter Georgi, *Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem*, (Abingdon Press, 1992).
21. For more on this see, Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1964), Vol. VI, pp. 909-910; and Louis Countryman, *The Rich Christian in the Church of the Early Empire* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1980), pp. 31-32, 85.