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Paul and the Mission of the Church

James W. Thompson

The recognition that the established church is losing ground in Europe and North America has given special urgency during the past generation to a renewed examination of the mission of the church. Dissatisfaction has emerged with both the focus on and means of evangelism. This has led to a succession of alternative approaches in the last generation intended to recover the church's vitality and ensure that the Christian message speaks to a new generation. In 1980 Donald McGavran articulated a vision of church growth based on social science models.¹ In the 1980s Bill Hybels gained a following with the "seeker sensitive" model. Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church*² offered an alternative vision. Advocates of the missional church have articulated another vision of the church's task. All of the advocates have appealed to biblical models of missions and evangelism. In this article, I will examine a major witness of the biblical view in the work of Paul, the paradigmatic missionary, to investigate the apostle's understanding of the mission of the church.

Our first challenge in finding biblical models is the recognition that neither "missions" nor "evangelism" is, strictly speaking, a biblical word. Nei-

¹ Donald McGavran, *Church Growth: Strategies that Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).

² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

ther word appears in standard English translations, and neither is a direct translation of a Greek word. The Jesuits introduced the Latin *missio*, a rendering of the Greek *apostel-*, to describe the spreading of the Christian faith.³ While three references to evangelists occur in the NT (Acts 21:8; Eph 4:11; 2 Tim 4:5) without further delineation of their task, the term *evangelism* is nowhere mentioned as a ministry of the church. The latter term is rooted in the NT developments of the prophetic announcement of the one who “spreads good news” (Isa 52:7) and “proclaims good news to the poor” (Isa 61:1). The verb *euangelisasthai* appears throughout the NT for the proclamation of Jesus, the disciples, and Paul. The noun *euangelion* appears primarily in Paul as the term summarizing the content of the Christian message. Thus, while both missions and evangelism ultimately derive from the biblical words, neither word is employed for the task of the church.

Paul’s view of the mission of the churches he left behind is a debated issue. Did Paul expect his converts to carry on his mission? Did he expect them to evangelize and send missionaries? Secondary literature has suggested that he encouraged his communities to continue his missionary work. For example, Michael Green argued, “Evangelism was the prerogative and the duty of every Church member. We have seen apostles and wandering prophets, nobles and paupers, intellectuals and fishermen all taking part enthusiastically in the primary task committed by Christ to his Church.”⁴ Roger Gehring maintained, “From both Acts and the Pauline epistles it is clear that Paul practiced ‘cell planting’ missional outreach in these centers.” He adds,

Paul believed that his main objective was to establish small cells, that is, bases of operations in these cities, and to develop missional outreach from these support bases. From these bases outward the city itself and then the surrounding area were to be reached with the gospel. ... These churches were trained by Paul

³ Michael Goheen, “Bible and Mission: Missiology and Biblical Scholarship in Dialogue,” in *Dialogue, Christian Mission: Old Testament Foundations and New Testament Developments* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 211.

⁴ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 274.

to take the responsibility for their own community life and the missional outreach in their city and to the surrounding area.⁵

Similarly, Eckhard Schnabel writes,

Apart from the tasks of edification and meeting with Christ, the church has the task of making sure that the people in the neighborhood, the city, the region and more remote areas hear the news of Jesus. Since the followers of Jesus in the local congregations love the one true and living God who created the universe, and since they love the Lord Jesus Christ who gave his life to save sinners, and since they are filled with the Holy Spirit who gives them power to be witnesses, they seek to reach the immediate vicinity and the remoter regions with the news of Jesus. This task involves both evangelism and missionary work. Churches have a responsibility to reach the people who live in the neighborhood and the same city with the news of Jesus.⁶

While Gehring and Schnabel may be correct, we have no direct indications from Paul that he instructed his churches to engage in missionary activity.

Some maintain that Paul's call for imitation implies encouragement to share in his ministry of evangelism. Lois Barrett appeals to 2 Cor 5:20, affirming that "the church publicly announces the reign of God because it is an embassy full of ambassadors for Christ."⁷ This passage was, however, a part of the defense of Paul's ministry. It does not speak of all members as ambassadors, but of Paul's own ministry.

Although it would appear to be self-evident that Paul the missionary would urge his congregations to participate in his mission, the letters offer no indication that Paul exhorts his readers to engage in missionary outreach. All of the letters contain exhortations on a variety of topics, but in none of them does Paul urge his readers to engage in missions and evangelism. One is

⁵ Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 180.

⁶ Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove: IVP 2008), 423.

⁷ Lois Barrett, "The Church as Apostle to the World," in *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (ed. Darrell L. Guder; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 136.

struck by the intramural character of Paul's instructions. He engages in extended catechesis and urges his converts to "walk worthily of God." However, he never instructs the converts to engage in evangelism or plan mission programs. The weight of his instructions involves building up the community and his desire that the communities will be blameless at the coming of Christ.

When one considers the importance of missionary outreach for Paul, the absence of exhortations for his congregations to share in his mission is astonishing. Inasmuch as the letters contain only a small portion of Paul's total instruction, the possibility remains open that his oral instructions contained exhortations for missionary outreach. However, since the letters present our only record of Paul's instruction, the question of the involvement of Paul's churches in missions and evangelism remains open.

Paul the Missionary

Although early Christian tradition claimed that the apostles evangelized vast territories, from the first two centuries we have evidence only of Paul as a missionary who conducted missionary journeys. Thus throughout Christian history, Paul has been the paradigmatic missionary. Acts reports a series of missionary journeys in which he proclaimed Christ and made converts in the eastern half of the Mediterranean (Acts 13–20). His letters recall the evangelistic work among Gentiles who "turned to God from idols" (cf. 1 Thess 1:9–10; 1 Cor 1:10–2:5; Gal 4:12–20) as a result of his preaching. Anticipating a visit to a church that he did not establish, Paul describes his ambition to preach where Christ has not been named (Rom 15:20) and speaks of his plans to complete the circle of the Mediterranean world by going on to Spain (Rom 15:24) after running out of room in the East.

Paul's statements about his missionary task indicate the distinctiveness of his call. He is the minister to the nations, and his goal is to present them as an offering to God. Like the prophet of Isaiah 49, Paul received the divine call from his mother's womb (Isa 49:1). Indeed, the frequent echoes of Deutero-Isaiah suggest that he is the prophet who announces "light to the nations," "brings good news," "announces salvation," and says, "Your God

reigns” (Rom 10:15; cf. Isa 49:6, 52:7). His concern that he not “run in vain” (cf. Gal 4:11) or “labor in vain” (cf. Phil 2:16; 1 Thess 3:5) echoes the words of the prophet, “I have labored in vain” (Isa 49:4). In his call for reconciliation with the Corinthians, he recalls the words of the prophet, “In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you” (2 Cor 6:2; cf. Isa 49:8). His anticipation of the time when “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2:11) echoes the words of the prophet who concludes the oracle on the universality of God with the announcement, “To me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear” (Isa 49:23).

In preaching where Christ has not been named, Paul ensures that “Those who have never been told shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand” (Rom 15:21; cf. Isa 52:15). Like the prophet, he appeals to his listeners “in the day of salvation” (2 Cor 6:2; cf. Isa 49:8). On numerous occasions he speaks of the divine call, compulsion, and obligation to preach the good news (1 Cor 9:16). God revealed himself to Paul so that he might proclaim Christ to the nations (Gal 1:15). Thus he is under obligation “to the Greeks and the barbarians” (Rom 1:14). His purpose is to offer the Gentiles as a sacrifice to God (Rom 15:15–16). Paul obviously has a prophetic consciousness as one called to evangelize the nations.

Paul is concerned for the advance of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:12, 25) and recognizes that others are involved in preaching Christ. Other apostles and eyewitnesses preach the same gospel that Paul preaches (1 Cor 15:11; 2 Cor 10:12–18; Gal 2:1–10). Co-workers who serve (cf. Phil 2:22) and “struggle” (Phil 4:2) in the gospel apparently share his ministry of preaching. When others preach—even with impure motives—Paul rejoices that “Christ is preached” (Phil 1:18). Thus while he has a unique call to evangelize, he acknowledges that others are involved in preaching Christ.

The Mission of the Churches

In the absence of direct exhortations to evangelize and send missionaries in Paul’s letters, one must ask what role his churches played in his mission.

Clearly, the churches participate financially in his mission. He desires that the Romans support him in his intended visit to Spain (Rom 15:24). He expresses gratitude that the Philippians participate in the gospel (Phil 1:5) by sending him financial support (Phil 4:15). But what evidence do we have that Paul expected for his congregations to evangelize? Scholars have appealed to several passages to suggest Paul's expectations for mission. We can examine them to recognize the nature of evangelism in his churches.

Evangelism in 1 Thessalonians. Paul's statement that "the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith has become known" (1 Thess 1:8) is understood by many scholars as a reference to the evangelistic work of the Thessalonians.⁸ This passage, a part of the epistle's thanksgiving (1:2–10), expresses Paul's satisfaction in the listeners' conduct after their conversion. The larger context determines whether Paul is actually commending the readers for their evangelistic work.

The thanksgiving expresses gratitude for the moral transformation that resulted from the Thessalonians' turn from idols to serve "the true and living God" (1:9–10). Three participial phrases (*poioumenoi ... mnēmoneuontes ... eidotes*) in 1:2–5 elaborate on Paul's thanksgiving, indicating that the Thessalonians' turn from idols has resulted in their moral progress. As Paul prays, he remembers their "work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope" (1:3). While this progress continues until the present time,⁹ it originated at the time of their conversion, as the three participial phrases indicate. Their "election" (1:4) was the occasion when Paul's gospel came to the Thessalonians "not in word alone but in the power of the Holy Spirit" (1:5). Thus the

⁸ See James Ware, "1 Thessalonians as a Missionary Congregation: 1 Thessalonians 1,5-8," *ZNW* 83 (1992): 127-28; J. Lambrecht, S. J., "A Call to Witness by All: Evangelisation in 1 Thessalonians," *Teologie in konteks*, ed. J. H. Roberts et al. (Johannesburg: Orion, 1991), 324.

⁹ Timothy's positive report of their "faith and love" (3:6) suggests the continuing progress of the Thessalonians.

focal point of 1:2–5 is the power of Paul’s preaching, which has continuing effects among the Thessalonians.

Having elaborated on the Thessalonians’ moral progress, Paul turns to their reception of his message (1:6–10). The Thessalonians became “imitators” (*mimētai*) of Paul and of the Lord (1:6). The nature of their imitation is suggested by the phrase, “Receiving the word in affliction with much joy of the Holy Spirit” (1:6). The word (*logos*) that they received was the gospel that came with power (1:4). Paul anticipates the later comment that the word of God “is at work in you” (2:13). Thus the word has continuing power to work in the believers’ lives. The same power at work in Paul’s preaching was also at work among the Thessalonians. Just as Paul spoke with power in the context of opposition and affliction (2:1–2), the Thessalonians have imitated his endurance because of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. They have imitated not only Paul and the Lord (1:6), but also the churches of Judea by their endurance in the context of affliction (2:14).

As *ōste* (“so that”) indicates in 1:7, the Thessalonians’ imitation of Paul—and the churches of Judea—has resulted in their becoming a model for believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The reference to believers reflects the sharp division between believers and non-believers—insiders and outsiders—that permeates Paul’s letters. The use of the word “brother” (*adelphos*) demarcates the kinship group from outsiders. The “brothers” include not only the local house church, but also the house churches in the wider geographic area of Macedonia and Achaia.

The ways in which the Thessalonians have become an example to siblings in the larger geographic area is indicated by the preposition *gar* in 1:8. The parallel phrases suggest the impact of the Thessalonians’ faith: the word has resounded, and their faith in God has gone out. The resounding of the word in Macedonia and Achaia is a reference to the believers in those regions mentioned in 1:7. “Resounded” (*exētai*) suggests the power of the word mentioned in 1:5. Paul speaks with hyperbole in saying that their faith has gone out “to every place.” Every place is probably a reference to “those who call

on the Lord in every place” (cf. 1 Cor 1:2). Thus the word has resounded among believers.

The opening phrase of 1 Thess 1:9 refers to the believers in the places mentioned above. They—the believers—are reporting the extraordinary change among the Thessalonians. Thus Paul gives thanks for the impact of the word on the lives of the Thessalonians, and he describes its influence among neighboring congregations. He does not describe their work as evangelists, but their influence on believers in distant places.

The sharp demarcation between believers and nonbelievers in 1 Thessalonians does not suggest that they retreat from the world. After describing a behavior that is “not like the Gentiles,” Paul insists on behavior that is attractive to the outsiders (4:12). When the Thessalonians work with their hands, they will make a positive impression on outsiders. The attractiveness of their moral behavior seems to be the chief feature of their evangelistic impact.

Evangelism in 1 Corinthians. The Corinthian correspondence offers an additional window into Paul’s understanding of the church’s mission to the world. In both letters he announces that his personal mission is to evangelize a world that remains unreconciled to God (1 Cor 1:17; 2 Cor 4:1–6; 2 Cor 5:18–6:2). Response to his message demarcates those who are saved and those who are perishing (cf. 2 Cor 2:15). As a consequence, he challenges his readers to separate from the world, and he employs sharp dichotomies to distinguish between the church and the world. Outsiders are the unbelievers (1 Cor 6:16; 7:12; 20:27; 14:22–23; 2 Cor 4:4; 6:14–15). Paul’s goal is to “win” some of them (1 Cor 9:19–23).

What was the role of the church? A rare insight into evangelism in the Pauline churches is evident in 1 Corinthians, which consistently draws sharp boundaries in the first four chapters between those who receive the word of the cross and the powers of this age who cannot comprehend it (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–2:27). He challenges his readers to draw sharp boundaries between themselves and the world (cf. 1 Cor 5:9)—between believers and nonbeliev-

ers (cf. 1 Cor 5:1–11:1). He knows, however, that believers cannot totally retreat from the world (5:10).

The problem of boundaries becomes a particular issue in his discussion of marriage between believers and nonbelievers (1 Cor 7:12–16). Here he acknowledges that boundaries are not ironclad. Mixed marriages already existed, and he does not suggest that believers separate from their spouses. Although he insists that believers either remain unmarried or marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:29), he counsels those who have unbelieving spouses to remain married (7:12), offering two reasons. First, the unbelieving spouse “is sanctified,” and the children are “holy.” The believer is not polluted by the unbeliever; instead, holiness extends outward. Second, Paul offers the motivation, “Wife, how do you know if you shall save your husband?” (7:16). The advice recalls Paul’s division of the world into the categories of the saved and the perishing (1 Cor 1:18; cf. 2 Cor 2:15). The passage indicates an interest in evangelism within the church. It probably also offers a window into how evangelism took place in the Pauline churches. Evangelism was the result not of organized programs, but of the spread of the gospel within family networks.

A second window appears near the conclusion of the discussion of the “spiritual gifts” (*pneumatika*) in the church’s corporate worship in 1 Cor 12–14. Having emphasized that the “building up” (*oikodomē*) of the church is the determining criterion for the exercise of the gifts, Paul turns to the unbeliever (*apistis*) or the “non-member” (*idiōtēs*) who might come into the worship. Two responses are possible when those outside the church encounter Christians exercising these gifts. The undesirable response is that the unbeliever may say, “You are mad” (1 Cor 14:23). One desires, rather, that the unbeliever be convicted by all, be judged by all as a positive response, saying “God is among you” (1 Cor 14:25). The expression is derived from Isa 45:14, the familiar image of the nations that come to Zion. In this instance the wealth of Egypt and Ethiopia and the Sabeans will bow down to Israel. They will bow down and say, “God is with you alone, and there is no other.” This

allusion is further evidence that Paul sees the events of his ministry as a realization of the hopes announced in Deutero-Isaiah. He envisions the turn of the nations to God. As outsiders see the harmony of the believers in worship, they will fulfill the prophet's expectation of the coming of the nations to Zion. Paul anticipates that the outsiders who come to the worship may conclude that God is present in the group. Evangelism would take place under these circumstances.

Evangelism in Philippians. In Philippians, Paul expresses his concern for the advance of the gospel (1:12). At the conclusion of the Philippian hymn he looks forward to the day when "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord," alluding to Isa 45:23 (LXX). The story of Christ becomes the basis for the conduct of the believers, who "work out [their] own salvation" (Phil 2:12) by living in conformity with that story. Those who live out the story will be "in full accord and of one mind" (2:2; cf. 1:27–30; 4:2). By living in harmony with each other (2:14), they will be "blameless and unblemished, children of light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [they] shine as lights in the world" (2:15). Paul alludes to the statement in Dan 12:3 that "those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky." This assumes the fulfillment of the prophetic expectation that the righteous will be shining lights and lead others to the truth. The images of light and darkness indicate the separation of the church from the world and the impact of the church on the "crooked and perverse generation." Christian unity will influence the hostile outside world. When believers are blameless, Paul will not have run in vain (2:16). Like the servant of Isa 49:4, Paul hopes that his community will be light to the nations. Evangelism probably occurred when Christian communities provided a model of a common life that was unknown in the ancient world outside the circle of the physical family.

Conclusion: Paul's Understanding of the Mission of the Church

As the one called by God for a specific mission, Paul did not assume that his mission was the task of everyone. Consequently, he did not instruct them

to conduct organized programs of missions or evangelism. Nevertheless, one cannot doubt that churches grew and evangelized under his tutelage. Their growth was the result of their radical separation according to which they did not identify with the world, but maintained a separation from it. The community has been rescued from the present evil aeon (Gal 1:4), to which the rest of humanity belongs. His converts are siblings. He distinguishes between believers and “the rest” or “those outside.” They belong to the world that crucified Jesus. Only in their separation could they be lights to a world of darkness. He assumed that Christians at work, in the home, and at worship would have a positive impact on others.

Allan J. McNicol

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