

The Missionary Principles of Paul and How They Should Apply Today

In a day when many mission organizations are reassessing their strategies for world evangelisation it is perhaps appropriate to examine more closely the methods of the man who is credited with bringing Christianity to Europe.

St. Paul was a man with a single purpose, to see the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought to the world (Rom. 10:14-15). He received his commission directly from the Lord (Acts 9:15) and did not need to have instruction from the apostles in Jerusalem about what he was to teach (Gal. 1:15-17). All this could easily have caused him to become proud and arrogant about his exalted position, but we see no sign of this in his life as recorded in Acts and his epistles. When he speaks of his deeper spiritual experiences he wrote as if he were describing that of another (2 Cor. 12:1-10). Even then he did so with the aim of exhorting others to be humble.

If there is one feature that stands out about Paul, it is his Christ-likeness. He sought to demonstrate the truth of his message through his changed life (1 Tim. 1:13-14). On the basis of this he encouraged others to follow him as he followed the example of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). It is clear from his letters that this factor was a key to his success and foundational to his teaching (1 Thess. 2:8; 2 Thess. 3:3-9). Luke records that Paul's didactic lifestyle was the basis of his final advice to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17-38).

There can really be no substitute for the testimony of a changed life in Missions. Teaching the world is of no use if we deny our faith by our lifestyle. Jackie Pullinger, called to work among the drug addicts in Hong Kong, said that she had no success in telling people about Jesus until she became Jesus to them.

Although it is seldom referred to directly in Acts (16:13;20:36) prayer was also one of the foundational factors in Paul's ministry. He prayed continually (Eph. 1:16-23; 1 Thess. 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:11-12) and urged others (once gain) to follow his example (1 Thess. 5:17). In doing this he was following the example set by Jesus (Hebrews 5:7). The closeness of his relationship with the Lord is evidenced by his Christ-like nature, his ministry in the gifts of the Spirit (to be discussed later) and by his knowledge of the Father's will. Prayer, like Christ-likeness, is one of the unchanging factors in Mission. The Moravian revival started a prayer meeting that lasted for a hundred years. Even today the only Christian church in Lhasa, Tibet, is the one founded by Moravian Missionaries. One of the criticisms made of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) by Nepali Christians is that it is weak in the area of prayer. The same could probably be said of many other missions. This is clearly not part of the pattern set by Paul and our Lord, and all Missions and missionaries need to deal with prayerlessness at its source.

As mentioned briefly above, Paul was no freelance, even though he was commissioned directly

from the throne of God. On the contrary, he was very much church-based. When the Lord finally gave him the word to start his first missionary journey, it was through the ministry of the believers at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3). He submitted to their commissioning and set off as part of a team, initially comprising of Barnabas, John-Mark and himself (Acts 13:2,5;14:36-41). On completion of his first journey he reported back to Antioch (Acts 14:26—28) and rested a while. His second journey was brought about through the recognition of a need, rather than by a gift of the Spirit (Acts 15:36). The importance of a good church base cannot be overstressed. It is a sad reflection on the church in the twentieth century that the Lord has had to raise up so many parachurch organisations to meet the needs. Paul demonstrated that he was submitted to leadership (Acts 13:3), and was not working on his own. The team that gathered around him is mentioned several times in Acts (18:5; 20:4) and in the epistles (1 Thess. 1:1; Col. 4:7-18). The action of the action was led by the Holy Spirit and common sense.

“My teaching and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor. 2:4; cf. 4:20). Paul was a man filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17; cf. Eph. 5:18), and his ministry often featured the miraculous. Acts records miracles of judgment (Elymas, 13:6-12); healing (14:8-10; 19:11-12); the dead being raised (20:9-12); deliverance from demons (Acts 16:16-18; 19:11-12), and of the preservation of his own life (27:3-6; cf. Mark 16:18). The reaction to these miracles was often mixed, to say the least (Acts 16:16-24), but always they worked out eventually for the good (Acts 16:25-40; cf. Rom. 8:28). Today more than ever we need to see the Lord confirming the preaching of the word with signs following, as He promised He would (Mark 16:17).

Paul was led in his journeys by the Holy Spirit, but there was also a good measure of commonsense involved in his planning:

Paul always made a point to visit the vital centres of trade and culture, knowing that each of them radiated an influence on the surrounding area. Not that he ignored villages, for connecting cities to surrounding villages were permanent lines of communication.(1)

A study of the cities that Paul visited is sufficient to prove this point. Antioch in Persidia,(2) Lystra,(3) Troas,(4) Philippi,(5) and Thessalonica(6) were all Roman colonies, and therefore were connected by Roman Roads. Paphos,(7) Thessalonica,(8) Athens,(9) and Corinth(10) were the capital cities of Cyprus, Macedonia, Attica and Achaia respectively, and therefore the centres of Roman administration. The others were either ports (Salamis, Paphos,(11) Attalia,(12) Perga,(13) Troas,(14) Neopolis,(15) Ephesus,(16) and Cenchrea(17) or connected by major land routes. (Obviously all ports would also lie on major land routes). The only exception to this general rule is Beroea, which lay off the beaten track, however, it was “one of the most populous cities of Macedonia.”(18)

What is often forgotten is the religious significance of these cities. Just as Jerusalem was the spiritual capital of Israel, so many of these cities were dedicated to a particular god. Perga was dedicated to the ‘Queen of Perga’ (a variant of Artemis);(19) Antioch in Persidia to *Mên*;(20) Lystra to Zeus (loosely connected with the ‘Zeus’ of Greece, but with local additions)(21) (Act 14:13); Thessalonica to Cabirus;(22) Artemis to Ephesus (Acts 19:35);(23) Athens to Athena(24)

(among a plethora of others)(25) and Corinth to Aphrodite.(26) Paul understood that bringing the gospel into the cities his converts would soon spread the good news into the surrounding regions.(27)

This is a very important point for modern missions: Paul did not attempt to do all the work himself. When he arrived in a city it was his aim to establish a body of believers and to give them intensive teaching in the basics of the faith (Acts 20:20, 27). The results of his ministry in Thessalonica serve as a good example of this (1 Thess. 1:7-8). After he had done this he would move on. Sadly today in many countries this has not happened. In Pakistan, for example, the majority of Muslim converts come from the lower classes notably sweepers and gardeners. While there is nothing wrong with these people it has to be noted that many are 'rice Christians' dependent on the missionaries for jobs and support. By contrast we see in Acts that people of all classes were being saved, even prominent women (17:4, 12).

In the majority of countries where missions still operate this pattern of dependency on expatriates still remains. Three exceptions would be Nepal, Ethiopia and Zaire. In all three the Lord has so moved that the missionaries now play only a small role in the churches, which have native leadership. Undoubtedly the church is stronger in these countries as a result.

In order to establish this body of believers in a city, Paul's plan was to go first to the Synagogue (Acts 13:5,14-15; 14:1; 17:2, 10, 16-17; 18:4, 19; 28:17, 28). The Synagogue was the obvious place for him to start, because the Jews themselves had been very successful in evangelising the Gentiles. By going to these gatherings as a visitor he would be invited to address them (Acts 13:15) and so he was able to build upon their belief in the "Living God, his Righteousness, judgment to come, and the hope of Israel."(28) He could then point to Jesus as being the promised Messiah (Acts 9:22). His epistle to the Romans demonstrates that he also had strong theological reasons for going to the Jews first (Romans 1:16).(29) Chapters 9-11 of Romans show that it had been God's purpose in raising up Israel that they should be His ambassadors to the Gentiles, but they could not do so because of their unbelief.

When speaking to Gentiles Paul always sought to find a point of contact. He could not refer to Jewish history or quote a fulfillment of prophecy when neither were accepted by his audience as authoritative.(30) Instead, when speaking to peasants living on the borders of Greco-Roman civilisation, he spoke of God's kindness in giving rain and crops in their seasons (Acts 14:14-18).(31) To the Athenian philosophers he proclaimed the 'Unknown God' - an inscription that he had seen on one of many altars in the city (Acts 17:22-23). Don Richardson and others link this altar with one set up by the Cretan prophet Epimenides in the 7th century BC.(32) As Paul quotes Epimenides as a prophet in Titus 1:12, Richardson argues that Paul was familiar with the story as recorded by Diogenes Laertius:(33)

Hence, when the Athenians were attacked by pestilence and the Pythian priestess bade them purify the city, they sent a ship commanded by Nicias, son of Niceratus, to Crete to ask the help of Epimenides. And he came in the 46th Olympiad [595-595 BC], purified the city and stopped the pestilence in the following way. He took sheep, some black and other white, and brought them to the Areopagus; and there he let them go whither they pleased, instructing those who

followed them to mark the spot where each sheep lay down and offer a sacrifice to the local divinity. And thus, it is said, the plague was stayed.(34)

It should be noted that the original account does not link Epimenides activity to the altars to an unknown god and so we should be very cautious in assuming that they are at all connected.(35) Even so, the general thrust of Richardson's book *Eternity In Their Hearts* is correct in saying that God has not left himself without a witness, and that He has prepared a 'key' in every culture (which he calls an "Redemptive Analogy") by which a wise missionary can gain access with the Gospel.(36) This for me is one of the most exciting prospects of missions work. In establishing indigenous leadership who knew the local culture Paul was able to pass the burden over to them and allow them to find and use the 'keys' - after all they would be able to find and use them more effectively. We need to do the same thing today.

Foundational to Paul's follow-up ministry was his appointment of elders. In the Ephesian church particularly we see him saying farewell to the leadership team that he had trained (Acts 20:28-31). Later he sent Timothy to them to deal with problems there caused by false teachers (1 Tim. 1:3-7), something that he had foreseen (Acts 20:29-30). We see him having the same purpose in leaving Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5). There can be no substitute for establishing local leadership in church planting operations. Paul continued to support the churches in prayer, as already mentioned above, as well as by visiting or sending representatives from time to time (1 Thess. 3:1-3).

Paul was very clear that he could expect to receive an income from preaching the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:7-12) , but he chose not to lest it detract from his message. Instead he worked hard at tent making when he could (Acts 18:3; 20:34) unless he had sufficient numbers in his team not to need to (Acts 18:5). In expecting home churches to finance foreign missions there is a tendency for the local people to become dependent on the missionary for everything.(37) This would not have been possible in Paul's day.

Finally, Paul sought to work in new areas. he did not wish to work in another man's territory (Romans 15:23). Nor did he 'steal sheep' from established churches, as has sadly gone on throughout history.(38) The important thing to see in Paul's principles of mission is not his organisational strategy. Far more important was the leading of the Holy Spirit that he knew (Acts 16:6-10) and the quality of his lifestyle. As Roland Allen pointed out: "To seize a strategic centre we need not only a man capable of recognising it, but capable of seizing it."(39) We are in need of such men today.

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