Church-Planting Strategy— The Pauline Cycle

There can be little question that if there is a biblical model of the best way to go about the task of evangelizing populations and planting Christian congregations all around the world, it is to be found in the ministry of the apostle Paul. Yet we are also mindful that our Lord in response to the apostle Peter's affirmation of faith prophesied, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18). As all know, this statement has been the subject of considerable controversy. Often overlooked in that controversy is that the Book of Acts records that the apostle Peter was not only empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak the Word at Pentecost, but was also directed by that same Spirit to open the door of salvation to the Gentile Cornelius and his household (Acts 11:13–14), and to defend at the Jerusalem Council the ministry of Paul to the Gentiles (see Acts 15:7–14).

Nevertheless, once the apostle Paul had been converted and commissioned, and his message and ministry had been vindicated, the Acts record focuses almost exclusively upon Paul's mission among peoples in a broad area extending from Jerusalem throughout the Mediterranean world to the door of Western Europe. Moreover, under the direction of the Holy Spirit at least thirteen of the twenty-one letters that constitute a major portion of the New Testament were authored by this same Paul. In addition, the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to identify himself as a "wise master builder" of church foundations (1 Cor. 3:10). Surely, then, if we are warranted in examining and following the example of anyone at all in this important business of planting churches in new places and among new peoples, that person must be the apostle Paul, who, we have assumed up to this point, had a definite strategy in view.

Did Paul Have a Strategy?

We have used the words "strategy" and "method" without stopping to define them. "Strategy," of course, is a military term now more widely

used to refer to large-scale planning and directing of operations toward a certain goal. "Method," on the other hand, is usually taken to refer to a scaled-down way of going about a task. These words are often used without being defined, so we will depend upon the reader to determine what they mean in context. We will, however, generally use them in the way just indicated. At the same time, they are often so closely intertwined that the answer to a question such as "Did Paul have a strategy?" will be understood as relating to Paul's methods as well as to his strategy per se.

Our answer to the question "Did Paul have a strategy?" will determine how we proceed from this point. If, as Michael Green seems to believe, Paul had little or no strategy, and "the Gospel spread out in an apparently haphazard way as men obeyed the leading of the Spirit, and went through doors he opened,"[1] then all we can learn from Paul is to depend upon that same Spirit. If, on the other hand, Donald McGavran is right when he says that while Paul was in Antioch he devised a strategy for reaching a great part of the Mediterranean world with the gospel,[2] then we can learn from Paul's strategy as well as from his dependence upon the Holy Spirit.

A mediating position seems to square with the data. Green is quite right when he insists that we "must not organize [Christ] out of the picture," and when he warns against the idea that "efficiency on the evangelistic production line will inevitably produce results."[3] But he seems to overstate his case. If Paul had no plan, the Holy Spirit could not have changed it (see Acts 16:6–10)! On the other hand, McGavran's discussion of Paul's strategy for reaching "people on the bridge" (people related to believers) is fascinating and instructive. But at times McGavran too seems to overstate his case. J. Herbert Kane's words are worth pondering:

> We might begin by asking: Did Paul have a missionary strategy? Some say yes; others say no. Much depends on the definition of strategy. If by strategy is meant a deliberate, well-formulated, duly executed plan of action based on human observation and experience, then Paul had little or no strategy; but if we take the word to mean a flexible *modus operandi* developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and subject to His direction and control, then Paul did have a strategy.
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> Our problem today is that we live in an anthropocentric age. We imagine that nothing of consequence can be accomplished in the Lord's work

1. Michael Green, "Evangelism in the Early Church," in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975), 174.
2. Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (New York: Friendship, 1955), 25–35.
3. Green, "Evangelism in the Early Church," 174.

without a good deal of ecclesiastical machinery—committees, conferences, workshops, seminars; whereas the early Christians depended less on human wisdom and expertise, more on divine initiative and guidance. It is obvious that they didn't do too badly. What the modern missionary movement needs above everything else is to get back to the missionary methods of the early church.[4]

We tend to agree with Kane's basic position, but we would modify his statement somewhat. Paul, of course, had comparatively little opportunity to base his strategy on observation and experience. But with two thousand years of missions history behind us we should have a "deliberate, well-formulated, duly executed plan of action based on human observation and experience." However, to be Christian, that plan should not be based primarily on human observation. It must be "developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and subject to His direction and control." As for flexibility, any strategy that is not flexible is simply bad strategy.

Let's agree, then, that "what the modern missionary movement needs above everything else is to get back to the missionary methods of the early church." That is the starting point. It would be as foolhardy for us to disregard the Holy Spirit–inspired record of the way in which the early Christians, and especially Paul and his cohorts, actually built up the churches of their day as it would have been for Paul to disregard the Holy Spirit's guidance received in Arabia and Antioch. At the same time, it would be as unthinkable for us to discount the understanding that has come to us through two thousand years of experience and study as it would have been for Paul to discount the processes of the Hellenization of culture and the religious penetration of Judaism in his own day. Nevertheless, Kane's warning is not to be ignored. If our dependence is on the overall strategy and the method of its implementation rather than on the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot claim to be true to the New Testament, nor will our witness be as effective as was that of the first-century believers.

Is Pauline Strategy Applicable Today?

To say that Paul's missionary labors resulted from thinking as well as praying and working does not end the matter. We must ask whether or not Pauline strategy is applicable in our day. To that question we answer yes.

4. J. Herbert Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 73.

In the first place, the first-century world of Paul bears some remarkable similarities to our world of today. Of course, we must admit that the twenty-first century is not a carbon copy of the first century, and that, when compared to the situation in which modern foreign missionaries usually find themselves, Paul's situation was quite different. Paul was a citizen of his missionary world. He did not have to learn a strange tongue in order to communicate. Moreover, from the very beginning of his ministry he was familiar with the thought patterns of his audience. At the same time, as E. M. Blaiklock, professor of classics at Auckland University in New Zealand, is reported to have said, "Of all the intervening centuries, [ours] is most like the first."[5] There was considerable intercultural flow of peoples of different races and backgrounds. There was a widespread bankruptcy of ideas and ideals. And there was a group of people scattered throughout the Roman Empire who, by virtue of their contact with or commitment to Jewish monotheistic and ethical ideas, constituted a prepared audience for the gospel.

In the second place, Paul claimed to be a master builder of the church (1 Cor. 3:10). While not inferring from that fact that we are to slavishly follow every approach employed by the great apostle to the Gentiles, we can at least profit from a careful study of his strategy and even his methodology. After all, modern architects study the works of master architects of the past even though they may not design and build identical buildings. Just so, we can learn from Paul. As Richard Longenecker has written:

> It has often been devotionally said: "The world has yet to see what God can do with a man wholly committed to Him." Paul was such a man, and the world has witnessed the effect. He possessed a firmness of commitment to his Lord, a fervency of spirit, a compassion of heart, a breadth of outlook, a keenness of perception, and a constant openness to the Spirit. Such an example of a Christian life and ministry stands as both a paradigm and an inspiration to us today.[6]

To What Extent Is Paul's Methodology Normative?

It is clear from the New Testament Scriptures that Paul's message is normative. To the Galatians—troubled as they were by the Judaizers—he could say, "But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). To the Corinthians—plagued as they

5. Quoted in Ray Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, Calif.: Regal, 1972), 129.
6. Richard Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 112.

were with church difficulties—he could write, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you" (1 Cor. 11:23a).
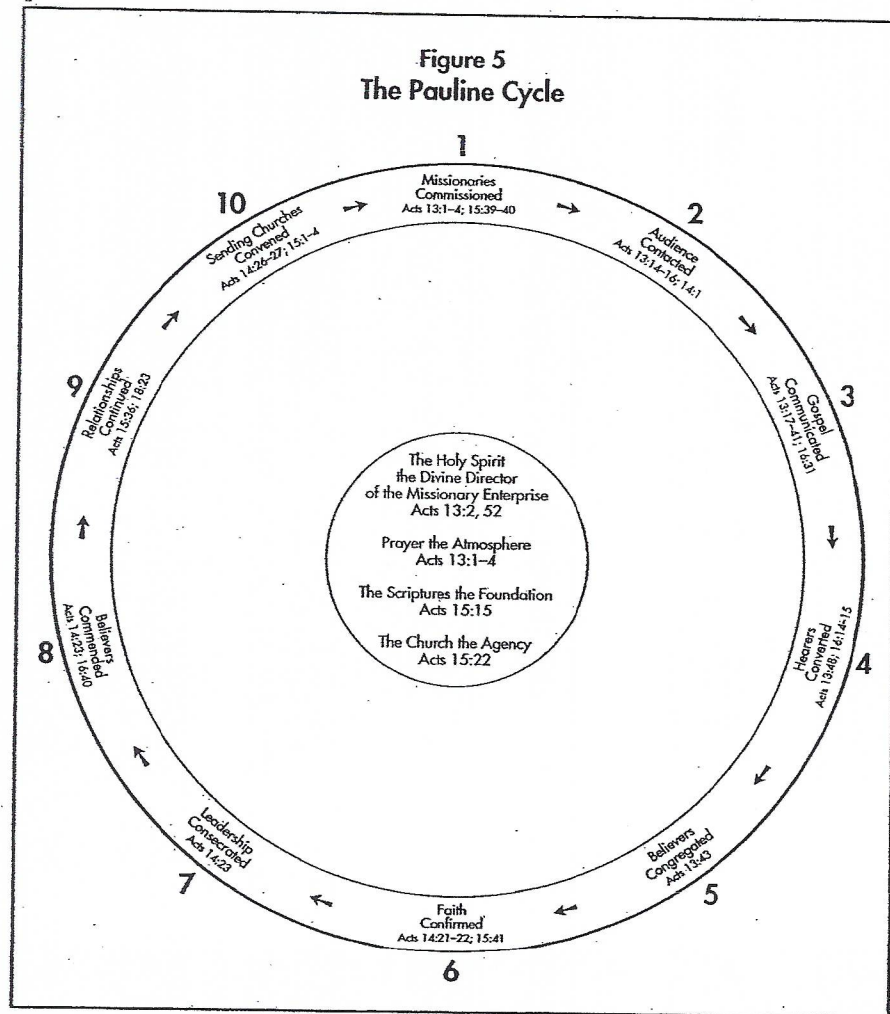
It is also clear from the New Testament that, in a secondary sense, Paul the man was a normative example of what a Christian should be and do. To the Corinthians, who desperately needed an example of what a Christian should be, he could make that remarkable statement, "Be imitators of me" (1 Cor. 11:1a). But Paul was not perfect. He knew it. And therefore he added those all-important words, "just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1b). So Paul's example of Christian living is normative to the degree that it reflected the perfect pattern—that of Jesus Christ himself.

Then what about Paul's missionary method? There seems to be little to indicate that the Holy Spirit expects us to slavishly follow every Pauline procedure in our evangelistic outreach. On the other hand, there is explicit teaching in the Epistles which directs us to carry on the same activities in a similar way—namely, to go where people are, preach the gospel, gain converts, gather them into churches, instruct them in the faith, choose leaders, and commend believers to the grace of God. And where could we find a pattern for these activities that is less likely to lead us into blind alleys than is the apostle Paul's missionary work? As A. R. Hay writes, "Paul's ministry and that of his companions is recorded in detail because he and they provide a typical example for the exceedingly important permanent ministry of church planting."[7]

We conclude, then, that Paul's message is absolutely normative, and that his manner of life and missionary methodology are less normative. It is a matter of degree. There is room for adaptation in each case, but less in the case of his message and more in the cases of his lifestyle and methodology. Those of us who are two thousand years removed from the physical presence of the Master and his apostles would do well to learn from Paul's preaching, person, and program in dependence on the Word and the Holy Spirit.

To put it in words that will be used throughout this book, church planners and planters should always be faithful to biblical principles, and they should always be attentive to biblical precedents. In every phase of both planning and planting they should both give themselves to prayer and exhort coworkers and converts alike to do the same. Little or nothing will be accomplished without prayer! Little or nothing will be accomplished without thinking and working. Ask the apostle Paul! Consult the biblical record!

7. A. R. Hay, *New Testament Order for Church and Missionary* (Audubon, N.J.: New Testament Missionary Union, 1947), 220.

Figure 5
The Pauline Cycle

1

Missionaries
Commissioned
Acts 13:1–4; 15:39–40

10

Sending Churches
Convened
Acts 14:26–27; 15:1–4

2

Audience
Contacted
Acts 13:14–16; 14:1

9

Relationships
Continued
Acts 15:36; 18:23

3

Gospel
Communicated
Acts 13:17–41; 16:31

The Holy Spirit
the Divine Director
of the Missionary Enterprise
Acts 13:2, 52

Prayer the Atmosphere
Acts 13:1–4

The Scriptures the Foundation
Acts 15:15

The Church the Agency
Acts 15:22

8

Believers
Commended
Acts 14:23; 16:40

4

Hearers
Converted
Acts 13:48; 16:14–15

7

Leadership
Consecrated
Acts 14:23

5

Believers
Congregated
Acts 13:43

6

Faith
Confirmed
Acts 14:21–22; 15:41

The Pauline Cycle

The Logical Elements in Paul's Master Plan of Evangelism

What were the logical elements (steps) in Paul's master plan of evangelism and church development? These elements will be analyzed later. At this point we will simply list them and display them in diagrammatic form (see figure 5):

1. Missionaries Commissioned—Acts 13:1–4; 15:39–40
2. Audience Contacted—Acts 13:14–16; 14:1; 16:13–15

3. Gospel Communicated—Acts 13:17–41; 16:31
4. Hearers Converted—Acts 13:48; 16:14–15
5. Believers Congregated—Acts 13:43
6. Faith Confirmed—Acts 14:21–22; 15:41
7. Leadership Consecrated—Acts 14:23
8. Believers Commended—Acts 14:23; 16:40
9. Relationships Continued—Acts 15:36; 18:23
10. Sending Churches Convened—Acts 14:26–27; 15:1–4

Possible Objections to the Pauline Cycle

To some the steps in the Pauline Cycle may seem to be almost too obvious to be really important. Our response is that for people who are thoroughly acquainted with a given task, the logical elements which go to make it up should be obvious. Chemists would be hampered in working with hydrochloric acid if its molecular structure were not common knowledge in their laboratories. Once the basic elements of anything are discovered, they are more or less obvious. At that point the only real expertise that is required is in working with them.

To others the Pauline Cycle may seem somewhat contrived. Ten steps, alliterative phrases—the whole thing seems too tidy to be true, too programmatic to be practical. Our response is that there is nothing sacrosanct about this particular way of breaking the task down into manageable elements. In this sense the mission of the church is not analogous with a molecule of hydrochloric acid. Variation is possible. Nevertheless, we believe that careful analysis of the missionary task will reveal something very similar to the steps in the Pauline Cycle. It makes little difference to us how those steps are identified.

To still others it may seem that the cycle is not really Pauline. They may grant that Paul engaged in these various activities, but not necessarily in every locality. If that is the case, is not the cycle a sort of hybrid or composite inferred from a total ministry rather than the basis for a plan in any given local situation? Our answer is fourfold:

1. Paul did not establish a church in every locality he visited. He did not plan to do so. As far as Paul was concerned (and as far as we know), in Athens, for example, the cycle went through the contact and communication steps and stopped with the conversion of Dionysius, Damaris, and certain others (Acts 17:34). We know that later on there was a church in Athens. But as far as the biblical record and Paul's ministry are concerned, we have no further information about it. Athens was a layover for Paul. It was not his kind of city.

2. By using the phrase "Pauline Cycle" we do not mean to imply that Paul himself carried out every step in every place he went. Paul led a

team of men. The record is clear that he delegated responsibilities to other members of the team. For example, Paul wrote to Titus, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5 NIV).

3. The more complete the biblical record in the case of any given local situation, the more explicit the steps in the cycle become. Take, for example, the case of the church at Ephesus. There the basic steps are made explicit in the biblical record:

Audience Contacted—Acts 18:19; 19:1, 8–9
Gospel Communicated—Acts 19:4, 9–10
Hearers Converted—Acts 19:5, 18
Believers Congregated—Acts 19:9–10
Faith Confirmed—Acts 20:20, 27
Leadership Consecrated—Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim. 1:3–4; 2:2
Believers Commended—Acts 20:1, 25, 32
Relationships Continued—Acts 20:17; Eph. 1:1–3, 15–16

4. While the cycle grows out of Pauline methodology instead of being imposed upon it, nevertheless it also grows out of logicality and the larger experience of missions. Given the nature of the task to which we have been commissioned, the steps in the cycle are practical and reasonable. Look at them again. If any of us as the modern counterparts of Paul, Peter, Thomas, or Timothy were to go to a designated city to evangelize and establish a church, would we not carry out these very same steps? And would we not carry them out in this order, more or less?

Four Important Aspects of the Pauline Cycle

Before we close our preliminary discussion of the Pauline Cycle, four aspects of it should be especially noted.

1. The cycle has a beginning and an ending. This avoids a shortcoming of a large number of recent books in the area of church growth and development, some of which do afford stimulating reading for those concerned about the mission of the church. Practitioners who are trained in the church-growth principles advocated by these books contemplate church-extension evangelism in a new area only to find that they don't know how to string these pearls of wisdom on one strand! They don't know where to begin! And they have not even thought about how to end. By thinking in terms of a cycle with a beginning and an end and logical steps in between, it may be possible to overcome this weakness. One of the many strengths of Tom A. Steffen's fine work on church

planting is that he underscores the critical importance of "passing the baton" from church planter to succeeding pastor. The successor must take up responsibility for every stage in the church-planting plan and process.[8]

2. Though we speak of a beginning and an ending to the cycle, there is a sense in which it does not admit of either. When Paul was recommissioned in Antioch before his second missionary journey (Acts 15:39–40), he reestablished contact with, and continued his ministry to, fledgling groups of believers, confirming them in the faith (Acts 15:41). At the same time he was pressing the frontiers of the gospel a little farther from the home bases in Jerusalem and Antioch. To legitimately think of a beginning and an ending, then, one must be thinking of the church-planting task in relation to only one church or one limited area.

3. The cycle must be viewed synchronically as well as diachronically. That is, while we can think of progressing from the contact stage to communication, to conversion, to congregating believers, and so on, we must also remember that as we proceed through time to the more advanced stages of development, we must still carry on the activities of the initial stages (or see to it that they are carried on). For example, we must always be making new contacts and working for new conversions from the world even as we are confirming previous believers in the faith. Not to do so is to displease the head of the church. Therefore, bold lines should not be drawn between the major elements of the cycle. In one sense they are distinct and sequential. In another sense they impinge upon, and flow into, one another.

4. It is of vital importance that the Pauline Cycle strategy be applied to existing churches as well as to pioneer situations. By evaluating an existing church step by step from "audience contacted" right on through "relationships continued," the pastor and responsible believers can analyze where their church is successful and where it is falling down on the job! Then they can make necessary changes in their overall plan, decide on standards, gather resources, and put promising innovations into operation. In addition, they will constantly gain new insights into the mission of the church at home and abroad.

Effective missionizing and evangelizing requires careful, prayerful planning and strategizing. When God was preparing to lead his people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, he called Moses and communicated a plan: "Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them . . . and you with the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt,

8. Tom A. Steffen, *Passing the Baton: Church Planting That Empowers*, 2d ed. (La Habra, Calif.: Center for Organizational and Ministry Development, 1997).

and you will say to him . . . But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go. . . . So I will stretch out My hand, and strike Egypt with all My miracles" (Exod. 3:16–20). When God was ready to bring believing Jews and Gentiles into a new community of faith, he arrested Saul and said, "But arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness" (Acts 26:16). And when Saul—now Paul—had ministered, witnessed, and established groups of believers from Syria in the East to Macedonia and Achaia in the West, he wrote to one church, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. . . . We are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it" (1 Cor. 3:6, 9–10). Above all, the accomplishment of God's plans and purpose requires divine wisdom, intervention, and grace. But it also requires that a Moses and his elders, or a Paul and his companions, dedicate themselves—body, heart, and mind—to the task.