

PAUL'S MINISTRY VISION: STRATEGIC OR SPONTANEOUS?

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INTRODUCTION

Many have asked “Did Paul have a strategy or deliberate plans in his attempt to grow the body of Christ, or did the early Christian movement expand spontaneously?” I believe the answer is an emphatic yes to the former. In the book of Acts, Luke shows Paul’s *ministry vision* was *intentionally and strategically planned* while also being *empowered* by the Spirit to fulfill his *God-given mission*. This concise statement communicates the Apostle Paul’s missionary method. The content of this statement will be further explored in this paper. However, before beginning it is important to define the *italicized* words above.

Paul’s *ministry vision* refers to the big picture. One convincing definition of vision by the authors of *Re: VISION* is: “a clear, exciting picture of God’s future for your ministry as you believe it can be and must be.”¹ Paul’s vision was to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth through preaching the gospel, planting churches, and developing leaders who would do the exact same thing. This definition of vision is clear and concise and definitely resonates with God’s deepest desires. And it is something Paul thought could, and more importantly, should happen. He was not satisfied in ministering where a foundation had already been laid. His *ministry vision* was that the whole world would hear and know the gospel. All of his missionary journeys and ministry initiatives fell into this framework. The decisions he made flowed from his ministry vision.

For Paul, such a lofty aspiration could only be accomplished *intentionally and strategically planned*. In other words, Paul did not just walk

¹Aubrey Malphurs and Gordon E. Penfold, *Re:VISION: The Key to Transforming Your Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2014), 154.

around preaching the gospel in hopes that one day the whole world would know it and believe it. From his very beginnings he intentionally reached out to particular groups of people, in particular places, with a particular style of communication, with a particular team. He was intentional in everything he did. All of this intentionality shows his many strategic plans to carry out his ministry vision. What really reveals his strategically plans is the emphasis in his missionary journeys on urban outreach. It was not by accident that he went to the cities he went to.

Paul's ministry vision, intentional and strategic plans, his mission (which will be explained next), and the success of all of his ministry endeavors were only possible because he was *empowered* by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit was enabled Paul to be a bold witness and the Spirit strengthened, encouraged and guided Paul and his decision making. It was because of the guiding of the Spirit that Paul established his strategic plans. The Holy Spirit is central to the spread of the gospel in the early Christian movement. As Keener writes "the Spirit not only is intimately connected with their mission but is the author."² I would agree, yes, the Spirit is ultimately in charge. And at the same time, you cannot just sit around until you hear from the Spirit to make a move. It is our responsibility to be closely in sync with the desires of God and the leading of the Spirit (*empowered* by the Spirit) while we cast our ministry vision and strategically plan for the future.

All of these things are key contributions to how Paul fulfilled his *God-given mission*. God-given should be quite self-explanatory. God literally gave Paul his mission. And anyone can clearly read that in Acts. Paul's mission was simply to be a light to the Gentiles. Yes, he did spend a lot of time in Jewish synagogues, but that will be discussed later. His reason of existence was to glorify God through being a light to the Gentiles. It was his God-given mission.

By now one should know the answer to the question proposed in the title of this paper: Was the way in which Paul did ministry strategic or spontaneous? In essence, everything following will defend my position: Paul's *ministry vision* was *intentionally and strategically planned* while also being *empowered* by the Spirit to fulfill his *God-given mission*. While approaching different areas of Paul's ministry through the lens in which I understand it to be, I will look at both sides of the argument.

²Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 2:1994.

INTENTIONAL DIVINE DESIGN

The Apostle Paul was clearly an organized person. This is true even before acknowledging Christ as Lord and being indwelt with the supernatural power of the Spirit. This first section has more to do with how God made Paul. I will argue Paul was wired in a certain way so that he could carry out his ministry vision.

There are many differences from when we first meet Paul in the Bible and when we read the last words that he wrote. He has a different name (Acts 8:1), he is a well-trained Pharisee³ and he is a persecutor of Christians. Yet there are many similarities from pre-Christian Paul and when we first read the words he wrote. For example, he is zealous, passionate and determined. He is organized and intentional in the things he does. Let us examine two passages to illustrate Paul's God-given wiring. The first is pre-Christian Paul and the second is Christian Paul:

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2 ESV)

Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. (Acts 19:21-22 ESV)

Paul did not rely on his reputation to achieve the things he desired. In the first passage he went and got letters from the high priest, giving him ultimate permission to do the things he wanted. The second passage is just one of many allusions to Paul's organization and strategic way of thinking during his missionary journeys. This passage is strategy-rich: Paul is obedient to the Spirit, he went to Jerusalem in order to reach Rome, and Rome to reach Spain.⁴ In addition, he developed leaders who would be eventually sent out from Paul.

³Paul was trained as a Pharisee under a well-respected and well-known member of the Sanhedrin. "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today" (Acts 22:3 ESV).

⁴Romans 15:24

Paul thought about and planned for the future. He did not just “go with the flow.” He did not just sit around and wait for God to open doors. He was in an active pursuit to fulfill his ministry vision. He was intentionally organized and future oriented.

INTENTIONAL URBAN OUTREACH

It is clear throughout Acts that Paul was intentional about where he preached the gospel and planted churches. He developed leaders to do the same thing. He didn't wander aimlessly and spontaneously. In Luke's narrative, the vast majority of the places Luke chooses to tell us about are significant urban locations. They are not villages in the middle of nowhere. They are important and strategic locations. I believe this was not by accident. Keener sums it up in writing “Paul and Silas ‘pass through the small towns and hurry to the biggest,’ Chrysostom observes, ‘since the word was to flow to nearby cities as from a source.’”⁵ It is evident Paul targeted cities, particularly significant ones such as Roman colonies and other strategic sites.⁶

People who flock to cities are typically more open to change. Cities are usually more progressive and set the tone for the society and the communities that surround it. Therefore, cities were a natural place for people with a different message to go. It is likely to be a place where a new way of thinking might be received better. There are too many cities in Acts to be comprehensive, but it is important examine a few to support this claim.

Antioch (Syria). Early in his ministry, Antioch is Paul's base of operations (Acts 15:22-36). The church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas out by the Holy Spirit and this is the location he intentionally returned to after his first and second journeys. By the first century A.D. the city was third in size behind Rome and Alexandria in the Roman Empire.⁷ Located on the great commercial road from Asia to the Mediterranean and possesses many natural sources which contributed to its wealth.⁸ The city had an estimated Jewish population between twenty-five thousand and sixty-five thousand.⁹ Not only this, “Paul could have reached several cities in Northern Syria

⁵Keener, *Acts*, 1:590.

⁶Roman colonies such as Troas, Philippi, and Corinth. Important and strategic sites such as Thessalonica, Athens, Ephesus. See Keener, *Acts*, 1:589.

⁷Craig A. Evans, and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 34.

⁸Ibid., 35.

⁹Ibid., 35. Statistic from Josephus, *J.W.* 7.3.3 §43. Jews in Antioch also enjoyed many rights and privileges.

with the gospel. Traveling in a northerly direction, he would have reached Platanoi and Alexandria; in a northeasterly direction were Imma, Gindros, Kyrrhos and Nikopolis, and in an easterly direction Litarba and Beroia".¹⁰

Corinth. Corinth is well-known to many Christians from 1-3 Corinthians. The city was a strategic place for Paul to spend time to carry out his ministry vision. Corinth was an international crossroads¹¹ of commerce and travel¹² and one of the largest and more important commercial cities in the Roman Empire.¹³ It was a very wealthy city and was one of the four permanent sites for the modern-day equivalent Olympics.¹⁴ In addition, there was a significant Jewish community in Corinth.

Ephesus. As the capital of the province of Asia during Paul's time, Ephesus was an important city. Paul spent a significant amount of time in this city, at least two years and some change (Acts 19:8-10). Ephesus was had a very rich history¹⁵ and was one of the largest and most important cities in the Empire (exceeding 200,000¹⁶). The city was economically prosperous, in part due to the temple of Artemis.¹⁷

Tarsus. Tarsus had a large Jewish population,¹⁸ and was strategically located ten miles north of the Mediterranean Sea. For this reason it was an important center for commerce.¹⁹ Tarsus was the most significant city in its region after Antioch.²⁰ Tarsus citizens were students of philosophy, liberal arts, and any kind of learning.²¹ All of these factors contribute to the strategic location of preaching and evangelizing in this city. And there is no doubt that Paul spent some time here following his conversion (Acts

¹⁰Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 1:1052.

¹¹Corinth, being placed southwest of the Corinthian Gulf and also northwest of the Saronic Gulf, had two harbors on these gulfs making this city an important place for trade.

¹²Evans and Porter, *DNTB*, 228.

¹³Ibid., 228.

¹⁴Ibid., 228. The Pan-Hellenic Games (like modern day Olympics) undoubtedly played a huge role in the enormous wealth of this city. And also is interesting to think about this as a venue for evangelism for Paul.

¹⁵See Schnabel, *ECM*, 2:1206-07; information on the history of the city of Ephesus regarding its origin (founded by son of king Kodros of Athens) and further Roman rule.

¹⁶Schnabel, *ECM*, 1:1210.

¹⁷See Schnabel, *ECM*, 1:1211 for details on temple of Artemis' contribution towards economic prosperity.

¹⁸Clinton E. Arnold, "Acts," in the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 2:299.

¹⁹Arnold, "Acts," 2:299

²⁰Schnabel, *ECM*, 1058.

²¹"Tarsus," *ABD* 6:344. The level of learning in this city became so great that it surpassed both Athens and Alexandria in education in schools.

11:25). Even more important, this is Paul's home city. He has citizenship in this city. He probably has family, friends, and relatives in this city. It just made sense for Paul to go to Tarsus to begin his new life in Christ.²²

For Paul, urban outreach was not only intentional but it was essential. He understood that for a movement to have major impact, it had to start in the cities. Does this mean that Paul believed that smaller cities and villages were unimportant? Certainly not! Schnabel answers this objection by saying "Passages such as Acts 13:48-49 show that Paul's missionary work was not limited to cities but also reached into the cities' territory, the people living in villages."²³ Luke writes "word of the Lord spread through the region." The Greek word translated region (χώρα) is also translated district, region, land, fields, and place (BAGD). Luke is referring to the villages and the smaller cities. The places that many people leave to go to the large cities. Paul understood that the χώρας of the world would be reached through the cities. He knew that the πόλις (city) would radiate the gospel throughout the χώρας. He knew that multiplication began in the metropolis.

INTENTIONAL PREACHING POINTS

It is important to reflect on the many Christian works Paul began. He had a strong desire to win as many people as possible (1 Cor 9:19). In Romans Paul declares his inner yearning for the gospel's proclamation: "I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation" (Rom 15:20). Paul set this framework in which he would preach the gospel, and he did just that. Although there weren't many places where Christ had already been proclaimed, he certainly fulfilled this internal passion. He had a "commitment to pioneer evangelism, to pursue his mission only in virgin territory."²⁴ Can you imagine entering a city with absolutely no Christians with a culture that worships pagan gods? Where and how do you even begin telling people about Jesus? Paul's answer is the synagogue.

Luke reports frequently the first thing Paul did when he arrived in a new city was go to the Jewish synagogue. But if Paul supposed to be the light to the Gentiles why is he going to the Jewish gathering place?

There are some who understand Paul to believe theologically that the

²²Schnabel, *ECM*, 1058.

²³Schnabel, *ECM*, 1:1300.

²⁴James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 544.

gospel was meant to be proclaimed among Jews before Gentiles.²⁵ They believe Paul's custom was to go to the Jewish synagogue because he had a theological understanding that the gospel must be heard by the Jews, and then upon rejection, the Gentiles.²⁶ For example, John Stek understands Paul's custom of going to the Jewish synagogue as a theological rather than strategic:

Although Luke's plain intent is to show how the gospel of Jesus Christ was carried from Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, to Rome, the center of the Gentile world, he records of Paul's ministry in the Roman capital only his customary initial ministry to the Jews (Acts 28:17 ff.). In Acts too, therefore, the theme is clear, the gospel is "to the Jew first."²⁷

Stek an example of scholars who interprets Paul's going to the synagogues upon arrival as theological significant. But there is good support for this practice as Paul's strategic method rather than a theological decision. It is true Jesus was Jewish and it is correct his ministry dealt with Israel. It is even accurate that the early part of Acts was about Jewish response to the gospel. However, by the middle of Acts God is starting to do something a different. Because Israel as a nation rejected the gospel, God was turning to the Gentiles.²⁸ Does this mean salvation for Jewish people was no longer important to Paul? Absolutely not. As he says himself, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race" (Rom 9:3). Does God's turning to Gentiles make them more important than Jews? Certainly not. Again, Paul writes, "This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3:6). The gospel continues to be proclaimed among the Jews. Paul makes a trip to Jerusalem in Acts 15 to talk with the Jewish Christian leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Jews are not cut off from the good news of Jesus Christ. With that being said, Paul has been given a mission: to be a light to the Gentiles.

Paul went to the synagogues first because he thought it would be the best way to carry out his mission. These gathering places were mostly filled with Jews. However, it was common for there to be a couple of God-fear-

²⁵"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile." (Rom 1:16 ESV)

²⁶"We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles." (Acts 13:46 ESV)

²⁷John H. Stek, "To the Jew First," *Calvin Theological Journal* 7 (1972): 17.

²⁸See Romans 11:25. God is ushering in a new time where Gentiles are of main focus.

ing Gentiles who would congregate with the Jews. Dunn writes, “for it was in the synagogues that he would find those Gentiles who were already most open and amenable to his message.”²⁹ Perhaps his motive is “because the synagogue services were attended not only by Jews but also by proselytes and God-fearers who had Gentile relatives and friends.”³⁰ These Gentiles possibly had an understanding of Scriptures and would even possibly recognize Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah. It should be noted Judaism is not an attractive religion for most Gentiles, but the God-fearing Gentiles were open-minded. They heard the teaching of the one true God and it resonated with them. They were already willing enough to give up the things that they grew up with for a strange religion only Jews practiced. For the most part, Jews and Gentiles did not have a positive relationship. There was a great deal of animosity between them. The fact these Gentiles were attending a Jewish synagogue showed they were willing to accept teaching from Jews. The Gentiles that he would have been preaching to had less of a prejudice against him.

It is for these reasons and many others as well that brings me to the conclusion Paul understood: “The nearest and surest road to the Gentiles led directly through the synagogue.”³¹ His strategical method of going to the synagogue first is indeed a theological expression. However, it was not because he had to preach the gospel to Jews before the Gentiles.

The synagogue a good place to reach Gentiles, but he could also persuade some Jews while he was there. The Body of Christ is not just made up of Gentiles. And it isn't just made up of Jews. Paul's initial outreach in a city would lead into church plants, usually house churches (will cover this later), that made up the local church in that area of the world and often represented the Universal Church, including both Jews and Gentiles. Paul accomplished his mission and vision through strategic preaching points. He intentionally “proclaimed the word of God in Jewish synagogues” (Acts 13:5). He purposefully went “as usual” to the Jewish synagogue (Acts 14:1). When the synagogue became hostile, he found another place to continue the work of proclaiming the gospel of the grace of God to both Gentiles and Jews (Acts 19:8-10). Paul, a Jewish Christian missionary, was strategic in declaring the good news in places where his fellow countrymen would be gathering and where Gentiles could also be found. And when there was no synagogue in a city, he tried to find where Jews met (Acts

²⁹Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, 2:560.

³⁰Schnabel, *ECM* 1:304-305.

³¹Johannes Weiss, *Earliest Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1959), 211.

16:13). Discovering the best and easiest place to share the gospel with the people who might be the most receptive is central to Paul's ministry vision and should be to ours today as well.

INTENTIONAL COMMUNICATION

“The past two and a half decades have witnessed an explosion of interest from around the globe in the theory, the process, and the problems associated with the contextualization of the gospel.”³² It is true there has been a recent push on emphasizing the contextualization of the gospel. In essence, contextualizing the gospel means adjusting the method in which the message of the gospel is made known in a particular culture or context. Although the term “contextualizing the gospel” is recent, the idea is not new. The mission God gave to Paul was extremely difficult. God was asking the Jewish Paul to preach to the Gentiles and tell them the God of Israel (who chose them as His special people) was now offering salvation to Jews and Gentiles on equal basis. God asked Paul to tell them there is no distinction between the Jew and Gentile because of blood of the Jewish Messiah and God. For the most part, Gentiles already despised Jews and thought their beliefs were bizarre and superstitious.³³ Paul had to cross cultural boundaries in order to fulfill his mission. This required him to be intentional in who he communicated the gospel to and how he communicated it to them. The following of this section will display how Paul did a superb job at contextualizing the gospel.

Paul understands who he is. He knows his background, his origin, where he grew up and the significance of who his teachers. It is surprising how deliberate he was from the time he put his faith in Christ. Luke tells us Paul “at once” began to preach in synagogues. In Acts 9 Luke says “he talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews” (Acts 9:29). First, Paul goes to the Hellenistic Jews. “Hellenism refers to the multiform interactions of Greek civilization with the cultures of innumerable indigenous populations in the Eastern Mediterranean basin and the ancient Near East.”³⁴ To be a Hellenistic Jew means to be a Jew who has adopted the Greek language and some aspects of Greek culture. Keener suggests why Paul may have

³²Dean Flemming, “Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens: Paul’s Areopagus Address as a Paradigm for Missionary Communication.” *Missiology* 30 (2002): 199.

³³See Feldman and Reinhold, *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans* to see a variety of sources commenting on what Gentiles thought of Jews, specifically their culture and customs.

³⁴Evans and Porter, *DNTB*, 477.

gone to the Hellenistic Jews and why Luke found it worthy to add that in his narrative:

Jerusalem Hellenists were, if anything, probably more zealous for the traditions than many other Jerusalemites were; that they had left their homelands to settle in Jerusalem shows “that they were not average Jews”. (On the identity of the “Hellenists,” see discussion at Acts 6:1.) That Paul was their former ally and probably a member of their synagogue (6:9-10) made the situation all the more desperate; whereas one should seek to honor one’s hometown by one’s behavior, Paul had embarrassed his associates.³⁵

First, Keener clarifies some of the confusion behind how these Jews identify themselves. They are not Jews from Jerusalem who have adopted Greek culture because they prefer it over their own. They are born in a Greek city, not Jerusalem. However, their desire to pursue and honor their Jewish roots is demonstrated by coming and dwelling in Jerusalem. Second, the apostle Paul can relate to the Hellenistic Jews himself. He was a Jew born in the Greek city of Tarsus. He left his homeland and became a Pharisee, trained under Gamaliel. He knew Greek and understood that culture. Third, Keener points out that Paul had a similar background as the Hellenistic Jews and was familiar with the specific people he sought to reach. It is possible he worshiped at the same synagogue as some of these Hellenistic Jews. The fact Paul goes to these people shows that he was trying to clear some of the confusion he may have caused them with his conversion.

It is clear Paul was intentional with regards his target audience for the Gospel. Paul wanted to reach the ends of the earth with the gospel, but this certainly does not mean he needed to personally preach the gospel to every person. Part of his vision was to develop leaders so they could continue his mission. He focused his time and energy on the people who provided the best opportunity for this goal.

The method of contextualizing the gospel is vital. We often put the emphasis on “what” is communicated. However, it is also important to acknowledge the “how,” the means Paul used to communicate the “what” more effectively. A key passage illustrating Paul’s strategy in this area is 1 Corinthians 9:19-23:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law

³⁵Keener, *Acts*, 2:1691.

(though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19-23 ESV).

Sills sums up this: “Paul establishes the purpose and the limits of contextualization. The purpose of the adjustments is ‘I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some’ (1 Cor 9:22). He reveals the limits when he says, ‘I do it all for the sake of the gospel’ (1 Cor 9:23).”³⁶ Contextualization does not mean to do unbiblical things in order to win people over. For example, Paul is not advocating someone become a drunk to win drunkards.

The third element of Paul's contextualization of the gospel has to do with the things he actually preached. Paul is quite possibly one of the best examples with respect to this process. Contextualizing the gospel should not be for overseas missionaries alone. Sills writes, “Missionary contextualization seeks to utilize components of local culture that are not religiously charged, thus enabling nationals to understand Christianity and the gospel and avoid the impression that it is a foreign religion for outsiders.”³⁷ He is right in pointing out the absolute necessity in doing this in across-cultural context. However, there are principles of contextualizing the gospel, found in this quote, which everyone should apply in their ministry, no matter where they are.

There are two specific examples in the book of Acts demonstrating Paul's contextualization. First, in Acts 13:16-41 Paul's synagogue sermon in Antioch demonstrates his method when preaching to fellow Jews. Paul finishes his sermon proclaiming Jesus Christ as the only way to find forgiveness of sins. He tells them they are supposed believe in him for forgiveness of sins. This focus on Christ does not seem to be unique to his audience at all. This is because contextualization does not change the main message of the Gospel. What Paul does is adapt is what leads up to his presentation of the good news of the grace of God. With his Jewish audience in mind, he preaches a sermon focusing on their Jewish origin. He preaches a historical background study on the nation of Israel! He quotes prophets

³⁶Robert L. Plummer, and John Mark Terry, eds, *Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2012), 207.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 207.

from the Hebrew Bible and his sermon was wholly and completely Jewish. If he were to preach the same sermon to a Gentile in an evangelistic effort, it would be a complete failure. Bock reflects on Paul's sermon saying "The key to everything offered here is Jesus. There is a change in the pronoun from "to us" (v.33) to "to you" (here and in v.34) to press the point that the offer is being made to those who have yet to respond... The history is "for us," but the offer is "to you" because Paul's audience still stands outside the blessing."³⁸ In the same way, the offer is "to them" and the message is particularly "for them".

Second, in the very well-known speech in the city of Athens at the meeting of the Areopagus, Paul begins this sermon saying "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22). The first thing he does is acknowledge who he is speaking to and an attribute of theirs which will impact the way in which he contextualizes the gospel. Before he explains to his audience about what they need to do to receive eternal salvation, he earns credibility by discussing his tour of their city and acknowledging the gods they worship. The way he introduces the gospel is through an altar found in their city marked "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD." This is a clear case of contextualization.

Witherington suggests Paul's usage of language was intentional. "The speech is very carefully crafted with considerable alliteration, assonance, and paronomasia... the opening address in v. 22, "men, Athenians," has been thought peculiar if Paul was addressing the Areopagus; however, it was a rhetorical convention to begin speeches in Athens³⁹ in this fashion."⁴⁰

Paul contextualized the gospel. He was intentional who he *preached* to, in order to maximize his potential impact. He was intentional in how he *proclaimed* the gospel, in order to win over the credibility of his hearers. And he was intentional in what the content of his message was, giving his hearers the best opportunity to respond to the gospel.

INTENTIONAL MINISTRY TEAM

It is also important to recognize Paul was intentional about who he chose to come alongside him on his missionary journeys. There are three particular instances in the book of Acts that support this point: 1) Paul's leaving behind of John Mark, 2) Paul's choosing of Silas, 3) Paul's choos-

³⁸Darrell Bock, *Acts* (BENTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 458.

³⁹Aristotle, *Pan. Or.* 1.

⁴⁰Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 520.

ing of Timothy.

In Acts 15 Paul and Baranabas split ways over a conflict about John Mark. Their schism had everything to do with the mistake John Mark had made in their last missionary journey: deserting them midway through. "Barnabas acts in character; he had also shown Paul himself similar kindness (9:27; 11:22-25), making Paul's refusal (15:38) appear more ironic."⁴¹ Barnabas chooses compassion and forgiveness, whether Mark was his relative or not. Paul, on the other hand, has enough concern about Mark to leave him behind. Keener looks at this from the perspective of Paul: "The charge of desertion was a serious one . . . and much was at stake on this journey. The mission to reach unevangelized Gentiles took precedence over the formation of missionaries whose commitment might be in doubt."⁴² In other words, Paul's desire to reach those with the gospel who have never been reached on this journey was more important than developing a leader for future impact. He didn't want to have any kind of restriction or hindrance, which is how he potentially considered John Mark.

After the decision to split ways with Barnabas and to not take John Mark with him on the next missionary journey, he had to find a new missionary partner. Paul chose Silas as his next coworker. "Silas and Judas Barsabbas were 'leading men among the brethren' chosen to represent the Jerusalem church. . . ."⁴³ There were plenty of impressive men Paul could have chosen. But "Silas was, like Paul, a Roman citizen (vv. 37-38)."⁴⁴ This is significant because of the advantages and privileges that came along with possessing Roman citizenship. The fact that Silas, along with Paul, could use this to his advantage when found in a disadvantageous circumstance with the Roman Empire, is probably appealing to Paul.⁴⁵ He was intentional in his choosing of Silas.

The third example is Timothy. Like Silas, Timothy was well-respected with a good reputation among the believers of Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:2). Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Greek father. But as Keener suggests "this might be seen by some as an advantage in reaching Gentiles, his ambiguous status would please neither Greeks nor Jews."⁴⁶ While un-

⁴¹Keener, *Acts*, 3:2301

⁴²Keener, *Acts*, 3:2302

⁴³Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1987), 949.

⁴⁴Myers, *EBD*, 949.

⁴⁵See Acts 16:37ff for an example of this happening. Paul and Silas purposefully conceal Roman citizenship to reveal later at the most opportune and advantageous time.

⁴⁶Keener, *Acts*, 3:2311.

derstanding why Keener might say this, there are some serious issues with it as well. It is true that Paul had Timothy circumcised because without that he would potentially be a stumbling block to Jews coming to saving knowledge of Christ. This does support his suggestion of “ambiguity.” But Keener himself thinks Paul’s missionary journey is not for the purpose of training. Paul’s mission is to unreached Gentiles. Why else would Paul add a third member to his team if it was not going to help him reach the Gentiles more effectively? I believe it was an intentional and strategic move by Paul to leave behind John Mark and to partner with Silas and Timothy.

INTENTIONAL CHURCH PLANTING

Sam Vinton asks “Is Strategy Biblical?” in the context of church planting inferring that 1) church planting is essential to Church multiplication and 2) that Paul’s method of evangelism and church planting was strategic. He sums up this section of his work with this statement:

“Yes, strategizing for the multiplication of churches is biblical. If it was important for Moses to send men to spy out the land before entering Canaan (Num. 13:1); if it was important for Nehemiah to do careful research and planning before undertaking the restoration of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:4-18); and if Jesus spoke of the necessity of taking inventory and gathering facts before building a tower or going to war (Luke 14:28-32); shouldn’t the work of winning people to Christ and planting local congregations demand from us even greater planning? We believe it should.”⁴⁷

Vinton makes a very logical point, “The point has well been made that if Paul had no plan, the Holy Spirit could not have changed it. In Acts 16:6-10, Paul is kept from preaching in the province of Asia and not allowed to enter Bithynia.”⁴⁸ In addition, “the fact that Paul could speak to the Corinthians about his desire to preach the Gospel ‘in the regions beyond you’ (2 Cor 10:16) shows that he had a plan.”⁴⁹ Likewise, Van Rheenen says “I get the impression that when kingdom business is the topic of discussion, “strategy” itself is considered “unspiritual” at best and taboo at worst, a useless relic of the Church Growth era.”⁵⁰ He goes on to state his opinion,

⁴⁷Samuel R. Vinton, Jr., “A Seven-Year Church-Planting Strategy for the Communaute Des Eglises de Grace Au Zaire,” (Unpublished D,Min diss.; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1985), 22.

⁴⁸Vinton, “A Seven-Year Church Planting Strategy”, 20.

⁴⁹Vinton, “A Seven-Year Church Planting Strategy”, 21.

⁵⁰Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Anthony Parker. *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 13. Van Rheenen has a D.Miss from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and is the founder and Executive Director of Mission Alive (a church planting organization).

“But I beg to differ. Paul, imitating Jesus, was deliberate, careful, visionary, and yes, strategic... A significant part of the approach was to establish churches that would multiply until the Lord's return.”⁵¹

With the understanding that church planting is not only biblical, but it must be done with strategy, there are a few other important issues to cover on this topic. The first is: what makes a church plant a church plant? Before answering this question, a misconception must be confronted. The local church is NOT limited to the United States. Throughout my own journey of discovering God's calling for my life, I've come to learn many believers, even pastors, unconsciously believe this to be true. I have been asked “how do you feel about the local church?” or “the local church needs lots of help as well!” They say things like this in response to my desire to serve in a foreign mission field. They are assuming the local church is restricted to the America.

The reality is the local church is everywhere. Many local churches make up Universal Church. Craig Ott touches on this issue when he defines the local church in his book *Global Church Planting*: “A local church is a fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ committed to gathering regularly for biblical purposes under a recognized spiritual leadership.”⁵² His definition of church planting is: “initiating reproducing fellowships that reflect the kingdom of God in the world.”⁵³

What makes a church plant a “church plant”? We often think a church requires a building, a certain amount of people, programs happening all week, a head pastor who preaches the Word week in and week out. But this was not the case during the early Christian movement. The way in which Christianity began was a “house-to-house expansion of the early church.”⁵⁴ There were many reasons for meetings to take place at a house including, but not limited to: convenience, necessity, inconspicuous, privacy, etc. Therefore, “the early believers met in houses *not by default alone* (i.e., there was nowhere else to meet) but deliberately...”⁵⁵

One scholar describes the early commission of the church as “Acts 13-28: To the End of the Earth (in a House).”⁵⁶ This is a great way to de-

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Craig Ott, and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 2011), 291.

⁵³Van Rheezen, *Missions*, 324.

⁵⁴David W. J. Gill, and Conrad Gempf, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting: Graeco-Roman Setting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 2:120.

⁵⁵Ibid., 121.

⁵⁶Ibid., 152

scribe the way in which the early Christ-followers created gospel-centered churches. It was not done through mega-churches, but rather in a home. Throughout the book of Acts there are multiple examples of ordinary people hearing the gospel, putting their faith in Jesus Christ, and opening up their own home for a “fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ.” This includes Aquila and Priscilla,⁵⁷ Phoebe,⁵⁸ and Lydia.⁵⁹ The house church was essential to growth during the early Christian movement. A church plant does not require a special building and a certain amount of people and programs happening all week long. A church plant is a fellowship of believers who meet in the name of Jesus Christ and it does not matter where. It does not matter how many. It matters that they are gathering, they are maturing through the study of the Word, and there is some kind of recognized leadership.

Another element of Paul’s intentional church planting strategy was nurturing. He was not in the business of planting churches and hoping they lasted. It is possible to accuse Paul of this since Luke describes him leaving locations quickly to go on to the next. However, “Paul’s quick departure was often prompted by persecution, not by plan.”⁶⁰ There are instances in which Paul spent extended periods of time in a city, edifying and nurturing the church (Corinth and Ephesus). There were several methods continuously Paul used to nurture, equip, and train the church even when he was not physically present: 1) he wrote letters to the church(es) of a particular area, 2) he briefly visited churches, 3) he sent co-workers to churches.

If nurturing the local church “is the process of bringing individual Christians and the Christian community as a whole to maturity”⁶¹ then Paul’s writing letters reflects an ideal example of nurturing a church one

⁵⁷This was a Jewish couple, expelled from Rome who eventually became co-workers with Paul. Romans 16:3-5 shows that they opened up their home for a church to meet. 1 Corinthians 16:19 also displays that in the province of Asia they opened up their house for a church to meet. They probably had a church in Ephesus.

⁵⁸See *Ibid.*, 184. “The praise of Paul and his ‘recommendation’ of Phoebe have some striking similarities with a Greek inscription from Corinth dated to 43 A.D. The inscription is dedicated to a Roman woman, Junia Theodora... she aided many Lycians by extending to them hospitality and receiving them into her house... Like Junia, Phoebe, was praised for her generosity as well as service. The fact that she had the economic status which enabled home ownership probably reflects her ability to manage affairs in the church”.

⁵⁹Acts 16:14-15 says that God opened up her heart to become a believer and immediately persuaded Paul and his companions to stay at her house. Although there is no definite reference to a church meeting there Gill & Gempf write, “Luke’s allusion to Lydia’s house as a place where Paul enjoyed hospitality may very well indicate that this place was known as a meeting place for the believers and that it served an important role in the establishment of a Christian community in Philippi” (186).

⁶⁰Ott, *Global Church Planting*, 398.

⁶¹Van Rheenen, *Missions*, 332.

planted themselves. A brief survey of Paul's letters will show his desire to encourage the church, to confront problems in the church, to inform them of Christian doctrine and practice, and to encourage them do continue to grow. "The amount of space Paul devoted to ethical instruction in his letters is testimony to the importance he placed on the moral aspect of the Christian life."⁶² Paul used this method of writing back to his churches, the local churches, what they needed to be doing. In his absence, he still found a way to nurture them. He still found a way to provide opportunity for growth and maturity.

The second element in Paul's intentional church planting method was visiting churches. He knew by going to these churches he would be able to provide encouragement and nurture as well as confronting conflict when necessary. There are a variety of passages to support this claim. After Paul preached the gospel at Derbe, he returned to "Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith" (Acts 14:21-22). Furthermore, at the beginning of second journey, Paul suggested "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing" (Acts 15:36). After Paul spent some time in Iconium prior to the third journey, "Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18:23). And finally, "as they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers" (Acts 16:4-5). These passages demonstrate Paul visit and revisited his churches and this method was effective.

Third, Paul sent co-workers whom he trained and developed himself to the churches he planted. There are many examples of Paul doing this in the Epistles later in Acts. This is most likely a result of Paul's ministry being more established, more churches have been planted, more "missionaries" have been trained to be sent. For example,

In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

²¹After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also." ²²He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer. (Acts 19:20-22)

⁶²John Polhill, *Paul & His Letters*, (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 125.

Another example of Paul sending his co-workers to churches, and to plant churches, can be seen through his letters to Timothy as well as Titus. Paul did not merely send those he had traveled with and trained, but he also trained and developed leaders in the churches themselves.

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Some might argue anything that is strategically focused is not spiritually focused. If there is an emphasis on strategy, there is no room for the Holy Spirit to do His work. This fear is far from the truth. An advocate of this view would be one of the classic texts on Paul's mission strategy, Roland Allen. In his book *Spontaneous Expansion* Allen argues "spontaneous expression on the part of both individuals and of Churches is the key to expansion, and that the restriction of it, from fear of its uncontrollable character, though natural, is disastrous."⁶³ He goes on to describe his missions strategy, or perhaps better described as a lack of strategy:

This then is what I mean by spontaneous expansion. I mean the expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian Church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share; I mean also the expansion of the Church by the addition of new Churches.⁶⁴

Allen also writes that "it is quite impossible to maintain that St. Paul deliberately planned his journeys beforehand, selected certain strategic points at which to establish his Churches and then actually carried out his designs."⁶⁵ Allen believes in order to maximize potential impact, you must allow for the Holy Spirit to do its work. I do not believe this means strategy must be completely eliminated, and I do not think intentional methods should be avoided.

Strategy and the power of the Holy Spirit must be intimately intertwined. They were both important and vital to Paul's ministry vision. Ott encapsulates this point precisely, "nothing could be clearer from Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, than the centrality of the enabling and

⁶³Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1956), 8.

⁶⁴Ibid., 10.

⁶⁵Allen, 15.

empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the spread of the gospel and establishment of churches.”⁶⁶

And hopefully every minister would agree with this statement about the role of the Spirit. What is interesting are some of the things Ott notes in regards to where the Spirit is present, “strengthening and comforting the churches (Acts 9:31) guidance in decision making (Acts 16:6-10) calling and sending missionaries (Acts 13:2-4)”⁶⁷ These are all things that have been acknowledged in this paper as intentional strategical works of Paul. Schnabel is correct, “Paul relies for the ‘success’ of his missionary work not on the powers of rhetorical strategies and techniques, and certainly not on social or psychological factors. He relies on the power of God.”⁶⁸ However, Paul provided something for the Holy Spirit to powerfully work through and he allowed the power of the Holy Spirit to move in his strategic planning and intentions.

There should also be something said about the commissioning of the Spirit. God, himself, was *intentional* in choosing Paul to carry out this work: to be a light to the Gentiles.

Why didn't God just send Peter or James or John or any of the other disciples he just spent three years training and developing? It makes sense they would be viable candidates to take this position. But God had other plans. In his sovereignty and foreknowledge he knew those Jewish men would not be able to handle the specific calling as light to the Gentiles. God prepared and chose Paul. There are many factors hinting at the intentionality of God when he chose of Paul: he was a visionary, strategic planner, passionate and zealous, Jewish, a Roman citizen, and he grew up in a Hellenistic culture. Overall, Paul was the perfect choice. God could have used anyone but it seems clear that God chose Paul for these reasons.

CONCLUSION

In the book of Acts Luke shows Paul's ministry vision was intentionally and strategically planned. Paul himself was empowered by the Spirit to fulfill his God-given mission. Paul was as far from spontaneous, so did he allow room for the Holy Spirit to work? Of course he did! Was he obedient to the Holy Spirit when his plans were not in accordance with the will of God? Absolutely. Did Paul recognize that his methods needed to change or be developed? I'm sure he did. The point is, he was strategic. Schnabel

⁶⁶Ott, *Global Church Planting*, 331.

⁶⁷Ibid., 334.

⁶⁸Schnabel, *Paul's Missionary Methods*, 371.

says “there is no question, however, that Paul deliberately planned missionary initiatives, sometimes years ahead of their realization, but always remained open to divine guidance and the exigencies of historical circumstances: he prays, he acts as a result of dream-visions, and he realizes that not all plans can be carried out.”⁶⁹

Yet missionaries in the twenty-first century should not copy exactly what Paul did. For example, it is obviously not the best idea for every missionary to go to the synagogue first. It is also not the best idea for every missionary to pursue church planting or to take up the role of one of Paul’s co-laborers. Despite the differences, I firmly believe Paul’s ministry vision is a viable method for a missions for the twenty-first century. Some will be called to be a Timothy. Some will be called to be a Lydia. And some will be called to be a Paul. I mean by this, putting into practice the principles described in this article.

If you have been created with a particular divine design, and if you are intentional and carry out these principles, you will have a major impact on the church in the twenty-first century. I firmly believe the pattern of Paul’s ministry can be and should be followed.

⁶⁹Schnabel, *ECM*, 1481.