

ST. PAUL'S CHURCH PLANTING STRATEGIES AS REVEALED IN SELECTED PASSAGES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Ikechukwu Ugo

Published in "Featured Article" - www.GlobalMissiology.org April 2012

Introduction

Seeking to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-20; Lk. 24:47-49; Jn. 21:21-23; Acts 1:8) without the planting of local churches is like giving birth to a baby without a family. Church planting establishes a base for making and multiplying disciples among various people groups in the world. In other words, the Great Commission finds fulfillment in the context of the local church. C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn and Elmer Towns wrote, "The Great Commission implies that church planting is the primary method to evangelize the world."¹ Similarly, C. Peter Wagner confirmed, "The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches."² While the Great Commission does not categorically mention church planting, it implies it by the very nature of the command to "make disciples." The local church is the divine agency empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel and to make disciples for the Lord and His kingdom.

The Book of Acts records three remarkable missionary journeys (the first in Acts 13-14; the second in Acts 15:35-18:22; and the third in Acts 18:23-21:17), which the Apostle Paul made with tremendous success but not without some difficulties and pains. One wonders what might have contributed to his huge success in church planting mission. Paul understood that the making of disciples is the heartbeat of the Lord Jesus Christ and also central to the Great Commission. With this understanding, Paul devoted his life to the

¹C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn and Elmer Towns, *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), 143.

²C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest: A Comprehensive Guide* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002), 11.

planting and establishing of viable local churches in the then Roman world. Today, most Christians have access to advanced technological infrastructures such as good roads, means of transportation, sophisticated communication networking, medicine, and literary works. These could aid world missions and church planting, yet it appears that the Christians are not making the desired impact in the world. Roland Allen noted that many missionaries in later days have won a larger number of converts than St. Paul; many have preached over a wider area than he; but none have so established churches than he.³

How did Paul achieve this success? Some have argued that Paul had no deliberated, well formulated, duly executed, plan of action in carrying out his church planting mission. Supporting this position, Allen wrote, “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.”⁴ Allen seemed to state here that Paul never thought or planned what he would do or where he would go for his mission activities. Allen seems to miss the point. Paul would not have gone out for any mission outreach without first; giving it a great thought or set a plan of action. The truth is that he was undogmatic with his plans. He worked in partnership with the Holy Spirit (Acts 16). The Scripture demonstrated clearly the role of the Holy Spirit in Paul’s church planting mission. Responding as to whether or not Paul strategized, J. Herbert Kane wrote, “If one takes strategy to mean a flexible method of procedure, developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and subject to His direction and control, then Paul could be seen to have forethought to his work.”⁵ What can Christian missionaries learn from this greatest pioneer church planter of all time?

This article explores selected passages in the Book of Acts, in order to identify and analyze some of the strategic methods that Paul employed in his missionary effort in church planting. This article argues that Paul’s strategic methods in church planting revealed in the Book of Acts are *sine qua non* and can be employed in planting churches in any receptive area of the world, considering the peculiarities of some localities or places. It is a sound principle that the missionaries should proclaim the gospel in ways that take advantage of the currents of the national life, local circumstances, people’s peculiarities and prevailing

³Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 3.

⁴*Ibid.*, 10.

⁵J. Herbert Kane, *Christian Mission in Biblical Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 73.

conditions, rather than ignoring them or seeking to work against them. The Apostle Paul did not employ any one particular strategic method all the time. He varied his strategy as the Holy Spirit led him. He understood that the same strategy might be effective at one time, in one place, with one people group but quite ineffective at another time, in another place, with another people group.

Paul's Church Planting Strategies in the Book of Acts

Edward Dayton and David Fraser wrote, "In one sense everyone and every organization has a strategy or strategies, a way of approaching a problem or achieving a goal."⁶ The Apostle Paul had a strategy. For instance, Acts 17:2 states that on the Sabbath Paul went into the Synagogue, "as was his custom." So, his strategy involved attending the synagogue and preaching Jesus Christ to the people each time he visited the city. The Apostle Paul employed the following strategies in his mission of church planting.

Urban Evangelism and Church Planting

Paul focused intentionally on urban church planting. His strategy to make disciples began with evangelizing the cities and planting local churches in them. In each of Paul's missionary journeys, he crossed the Mediterranean world, going from city to city with his message and establishing churches. For Paul, the city was the natural place to preach the gospel and plant churches. He recognized it as the flashpoint from which the gospel would spread out to surrounding areas. Referring to Paul's three missionary journeys, John Stott wrote, "In each case the missionary journeys included the capital cities in their itinerary—Thessalonica being Macedonia's capital, and Corinth being Achaia's, and Ephesus being Asia's."⁷ Paul considered the cities as the most strategic places and among his highest priorities for his church events. Paul's strategies included preaching the gospel in the cities, and from there the gospel could spread to the rural areas surrounding each metropolitan center. As a result, the entire regions and provinces ultimately heard the gospel. Roger S. Greenway stated, "Paul proved himself as an effective urban strategist in evangelizing the

⁶Edward R. Dayton and David A. Fraser, *Planning Strategies for World Evangelization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1990), 13-14.

⁷John R. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 58.

towns and cities.”⁸ He established his goal to evangelize the cities and towns at every available opportunity. He realized that the cities are the strongholds of social evils, and that, planting churches vibrating in proclaiming the gospel and making disciples, is the only power to combat them. Allen wrote, “It is not enough for the church to be established in a place where many are coming and going unless the people who come and go not only learn the Gospel, but also learn it in such a way that they can propagate it. When he had occupied two or three centers he had really and effectually occupied the province.”⁹

When one looks at those places, each city or metropolitan center is situated on a major Roman road or is located near a major seaport. These represented former great trading centers which attracted many immigrants from all over the known world. Paul beheld the urban centers as evangelistic strategy for reaching the surrounding territories. To reach out to a person in the name of Jesus Christ in a city is to simultaneously reach out to the rural population. Again, Allen observed, “The centers in which St. Paul established his churches were all centers of Greek civilization. Nearly all the places in which St. Paul established churches were centers of Jewish influence. St. Paul established his churches at places which were centers of the world’s commerce.”¹⁰

The Synagogue

Paul saw the synagogue as a natural platform to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the Jews and the Greek God-fearers. John B. Polhill stated, “If one wished to make contact with the Jewish community in a town, the synagogue was the natural place to begin. It was also the natural place to begin if one wished to share the Christian message.”¹¹ As Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah, it was natural to share Him with “the Jews first.”¹² When Paul went on his missionary journeys, he visited the Jewish Diaspora synagogues throughout the Gentile region. On his first journey, Paul preached in the synagogues in Salamis in Cyprus (Acts 13:5), Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:13), and he and Barnabas also preached at the synagogue at Iconium in Turkey (Acts 14:1).

⁸Roger S. Greenway, *Apostles to the City* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 15.

⁹Allen, *Paul’s Missionary Methods*, 13.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹¹John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 297.

¹²*Ibid.*

On his second journey, Paul and Silas preached in the synagogues in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1) and Berea (Acts 17:10). Paul debated with the Jews at the synagogue in Athens (Acts 17:17); he spoke to the Jews and Greeks at the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:4), and at the synagogue in Antioch of Syria (Acts 18:19). Finally, on his third missionary trip, Paul ministered in the synagogue at Ephesus (Acts 19:8). He did not follow this pattern when he went to the city of Philippi due to the absence of a synagogue. In that case, Paul and his companions went to the riverside and found a group of women there. The riverside seemed to be an appropriate place for prayer. Upon their arrival, they preached the gospel to the group. Lydia, a business woman, believed in the Lord Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior and was baptized (Acts 16).

In the Book of Acts, the “natural place” apparently referred to any recognized familiar forum or religious people. Today, modern missionaries should see it as an obligation to evangelize the “religious” people in any location. The equivalent to the synagogue could be the church. Here, they could read the Scriptures and offer prayer for the people on the fringe who are attracted to the church but are not committed to Jesus Christ. The gospel must be proclaimed to them as Paul preached to the God-fearers in the synagogues. Eckhard Schnabel wrote:

Seen from a mission-tactic point of view, Gentiles who believed in Israel’s God were the best candidates for successful evangelism. This alone suggested that a Jewish-Christian missionary to the Gentiles should begin missionary work in the local synagogue, where he would encounter not only Jews but also Gentiles: proselytes, God-fearers and sympathizers who were attracted by the ethical monotheism of the Jewish faith.¹³

Consequently, many Gentiles who converted to Christianity came from the group of the God-fearers. As one reads the Book of Acts, one repeatedly sees Paul seeking out the “natural places,” in whatever form or forum that might have been. Every missionary should locate his own natural place within which to proclaim the gospel. The natural place may be parks, marketplaces, hotels, and street corners in the cities, towns and rural areas, and even educational institutions.

¹³Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 1300.

Religiously Neutral Places

Another approach emerged from Paul's church planting mission. In both Corinth and Ephesus, his custom was to start with the Jewish synagogue. But, when the Jews rejected the gospel and vehemently opposed him, he withdrew from the synagogue and moved instead to a neutral building. A neutral place means a place not used for religious purposes. In Corinth, he chose a private house, the home of Titus Justus; while in Ephesus, he rented the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Generally, people appreciate neutral places, especially non-threatening religious sites. Today, civic centers, hotel conference rooms, and school halls qualify as neutral places.

Paul's exemplary methodology shows that one should not limit evangelism to strictly religious and thereby neglect the irreligious. If religious people can best be reached in religious buildings, then it is also obvious that secular people are more likely reached in secular buildings. Commenting on this, John Stott stated, "Perhaps the equivalent to Paul's use of the house of Titus Justus is home evangelism, and the equivalent to his use of the hall of Tyrannus is lecture evangelism."¹⁴ Paul understood that by using private houses and public halls, people would feel relaxed and comfortable, while listening to the message. Stott observed, "People will come to a home to listen to an informal talk and engage in free discussion, who would never darken the door of a church, and there is an important place for apologetic and/or explanatory Christian lectures in the local college or university or in some other neutral, public place."¹⁵

Chalmer E. Faw asserted, "By using this strategy, it provided Paul with ample opportunities to impact Ephesus to a greater degree than any other cities or towns mentioned in the Book of Acts."¹⁶ Again, Stott remarked, "Easily the greater part of his evangelistic ministry in both places was spent in these secular situations. The neutral places and environments attracted diverse members of society."¹⁷

¹⁴ Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World*, 312.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 215.

¹⁷ Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World*, 311-312.

Missionary Work in Homes

The success of the early Christian missions and the life of the new churches were connected closely with private homes. Paul's missionary strategy, simply described, was a strategy of households. The Greek term *oikos* described familiar domestic household. Win Arn and Charles Arn asserted, "In the Greco-Roman culture, *oikos* described not only the immediate family in the house, but included servants, servants' families, friends, and even business associates."¹⁸ Likewise, Ralph W. Neighbors remarked, "An *oikos* was one's sphere of influence, his or her social system composed of those related to each other through common kinship ties, tasks, and territory."¹⁹ Schnabel also wrote, "Such a house became the base for missionary work. It also served as the foundational center of a local church, the location of assembly for worship, the lodging place for the missionaries and envoys. Most importantly, they served as the primary and decisive place of Christian life and formation."²⁰

Paul focused not just on the individuals but households. The converts ranged from simple individuals to entire family members or households. The conversion of entire members of individual households are illustrated in the household of Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), the Philippian household of the Jailor (Acts 16:32-34), and the households of Crispus and Stephanas (Acts 18:8). Vincent P. Branick noted, "The homes of newly converted believers were important centers for Paul's missionary work. They were also centers of life for the newly established communities of believers."²¹

Paul also used these private homes as his platform for reaching the friends and relatives of the house owners and members of the community. This strategy of Paul could be adopted in other cultures, even the cultures that tended to resist the gospel. Household evangelism could be adopted in the Muslim fields. This method could be an effective approach in Muslim areas where the women live under the constraints of the purdah (Purdah: an Islamic system which limits married Muslim women within their husbands' house). Female missionaries could take advantage of this opportunity by visiting these

¹⁸Win Arn and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Pasadena, CA: Church Growth Press, 1982), 37.

¹⁹Ralph W. Neighbors Jr., *Future Church* (Nashville: Broadman, 1980), 163.

²⁰Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church*, Vol. 2, 1302.

²¹Vincent P. Branick, *The House Church in Writings of Paul* (Zaachaeus Studies: NT Wilmington, De.: Glazier, 1989), 18-20.

Muslim women in the purdah during the day, while their husbands are out of their houses for their businesses or jobs. Some Muslim women in Nigeria have been converted to Christianity through this strategy.

Extended Period of Teaching and Reasoned Presentation

Paul's ministry in the cities had depth. The amount of time he spent teaching and explaining the gospel was significant. He was not one to hit a city, deliver a brief message and presentation of the gospel, and then leave. In Corinth, the Lord spoke to him and "he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:11). He spent an even longer period of time at Ephesus; which led to many people converting to Christianity (Acts 19:10). The influence of Paul's messages must have been tremendous; "it spread through the cities, but also through villages and country places."²² He consolidated the work through his teaching. Stott summed up how many hours Paul spent teaching in Ephesus, "Assuming that the Apostle Paul kept one day in seven days for worship and rest, he will have given a daily five-hour lecture six days a week for two years, which makes 3,120 hours of gospel argument!"²³

The Apostle Paul's methodology in presenting the gospel (Acts 17:2-3) involved 'reasoning, explaining, proving, proclaiming, and persuading his hearers to accept Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah. This attitude demonstrates the ability of one who intermingle apologetics in the proclamation of the gospel. Paul's presentation of the gospel was serious, well reasoned and persuasive. When the scriptures are expounded and propounded, the doors are bound to open. Stott observed:

He did not simply proclaim his message in a take it or leave it fashion, instead, he marshaled arguments to support and demonstrate his case. He was seeking to convince in order to convert, and in fact, as Luke makes plain, many were persuaded.²⁴

The pattern of Paul's preaching consisted primarily of scriptural pointers to Christ from the Old Testament. Luke described this as reasoning with the Jews from the

²²R. Paul Caudill, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Boone: NC, Blue Ridge Press of Boone, 2000), 218.

²³Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the world*, 312.

²⁴Ibid.

scriptures.²⁵ The result was great; “some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women” (Acts 17:4). It is possible that his teaching included instructions on spiritual formation and growth.

Team Evangelism

Paul practiced corporate evangelism in the Book of Acts. An examination of Acts reveals that he was certainly not a “loner”; rather, he had extensive association with others during his life and ministry.²⁶ Paul lived, traveled, and worked with other believers. He followed Christ’s example of team ministry, especially in the ministry of evangelism (Acts 9:28-30; 13:1-5, 13-16, 44-46; 14:1, 7, 20-21, 25; 17:1-15; 18:5-8). Earle Ellis pointed, “In the Book of Acts and Paul’s epistles approximately one hundred individuals were associated with the apostle.”²⁷ In summary, the picture that emerges is that of a missionary with a large number of associates. Indeed, one scarcely found Paul without companions.²⁸ In concluding the reflections of his overall treatment of Paul’s life, F. F. Bruce asserted:

Paul has no place for the solitary life as an ideal; for all his apostolic energy he would have scouted the suggestion that “he travels the fastest who travels alone.” He emphasizes the fellowship, the togetherness, of Christians in worship and action; they are members one of another, and all together members of Christ.²⁹

Paul’s example demonstrated that no ministry is intended for “lone rangers.” The kingdom work is a collective effort. In this generation, Billy Graham has appeared as one of very few evangelists who have followed the Apostle Paul’s example. From the commencement of his ministry, Graham worked with other believers. These co-workers with diverse gifts and talents contributed immensely to the success of his churching planting mission. Church planting must involve other persons as co-workers.

²⁵Polhill, *Acts*, 360.

²⁶George W. Murray, “Paul’s Corporate Evangelism in the Book of Acts,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1998): 189-200.

²⁷E. Earle Ellis, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970-71): 437.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 239.

²⁹F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 458.

What scriptural and practical reasons suggest that this kind of evangelistic activity can be carried out in missions today? Murray responded, “Corporate witness models the end product being sought, namely, the corporate community and fellowship of believers in local churches. The increased credibility that stems from multiple witnesses is another reason for team evangelism.”³⁰ Other reasons for carrying out evangelism and church planting by teams include the sharing of spiritual gifts,³¹ mutual support among the evangelizers, and accountability to each other,³² and increased results because of additional workers.³³

Follow up of Believers

Another important Paul’s missionary strategy which helped the churches he planted to grow both numerically and spiritually involves pastoral oversight. He never abandoned the converts. F. S. Hewitt observed: “No one was more aware of the folly of gaining converts and then leaving them to their own immature beliefs and practices than Paul.”³⁴ To preach in a place and then neglect it amounts to a complete waste of time and effort. According to David F. Detwiler, “It took courage to return to the very places that had resisted the gospel and mistreated the messengers, yet the decision to return was not dictated by bravado but by the practical necessity of shepherding the converts.”³⁵ The plan of the second missionary journey involved follow up and nurturing of the converts (Acts 14:21-22; 15:36, 41; 16:4-5) as the basis for further outreach. Paul showed love and concern for his converts. He was personally involved in their life in helping them grow in their spiritual walk, as Paul Bowers remarked:

Insofar as the pattern of Paul’s plans and movements is available to us, there is no restless rushing from one new opening to another but rather a methodical progress concerned both with initiating work in new areas and at

³⁰Murray, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 199.

³¹Arnold Dittberner, “Who is Apollos and Who is Paul?” *Bible Today* 71 (1974): 1549-52.

³²Paul Thompson, *The Challenge of the City* (Coral Gables, FL: Worldteam, 1978), 23.

³³Waldron Scott, “Teams and Teamwork,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 7 (1971): 112-113.

³⁴F. S. Hewitt, *The Genesis of the Christian Church* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1964), 222.

³⁵David F Detwiler, “Paul’s Approach to the Great Commission in Acts 14:21-23,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995): 36.

the same time with bringing the emergent groups in those areas to stable maturity.³⁶

Paul suggested to Barnabas that they visit (denoting caring oversight; compare Luke 1:68, 78; 7:16; Acts 15:14) the brothers and sisters in the churches they had planted (Acts 13:13--14:20; 15:41; 16:1, 4-6). This demonstrated Paul's practice of caring and follow up with the churches he helped to plant (Acts 14:21-23; 18:23; 19:21; 20:1-6).

When Paul disagreed with Barnabas and chose Silas as a coworker, they went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches (Acts 15:36-41). The emissaries taught and strengthened the faith of the Gentile Christians, which had almost been dismantled by the Judaizers (Acts 15:32). They probably also delivered the decrees of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:23). With reaffirmation of full acceptance of the Gentiles by faith alone and with instructions on how to fellowship with scrupulous Jewish Christians, it is not surprising that the churches grew daily in numbers (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 11:21; 12:24).

Similarly, on the third missionary journey, Paul "traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18:23). The strengthening aspect of new converts is sadly lacking in evangelistic outreach of the church, today. Unfortunately, when the church fails in caring for the new converts, the converts drop out by the back door of the church. Follow up with new converts should be considered as an important function of the church, next to, and not separated from evangelism. The responsibility of follow up should not rest on the pastor alone. Rather, the lay persons in the local congregation should be trained on how to do follow up of new converts.

Such nurturing should be far more than just an afterthought in the wake of successful evangelism. In his insightful analysis of this verse Michael J. Wilkins stated:

Luke's wording suggests a connection with the discipleship process outlined by Jesus in the Great Commission, because "strengthening the souls of the disciples" and "encouraging them to remain in the faith" implies the kind of

³⁶Paul Bowers, "Fulfilling the Gospel: The Scope of Pauline Mission," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (1987): 189-90.

“teaching them to observe all I commanded you” that Jesus gave as the ongoing process of growth in discipleship.³⁷

In Acts 16:5, Luke demonstrates Paul’s concern to fortify and nurture the churches of his prior missionary efforts. Paul demonstrated that missionary work should not be done on a hit and run basis. Good missionary work involves follow up and discipling; otherwise, the work dies. Paul used also his coworkers in this work of oversight; he often sent his chosen representatives to the young churches (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Whenever he sent one of his team to a place, he wrote a letter to explain how much he cared for the converts.

Leadership and Training

The Apostle Paul considered leadership as an essential strategy in church planting. He did not leave the churches leadless. “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust” (Acts 14:23). Although Luke never explicitly wrote about it, nevertheless, there is a strong implication that the congregations participated in the appointment of their leaders. The local churches selected their own leaders who subsequently were confirmed by Paul. It was a congregational democratic pattern of appointing leaders in the New Testament church. Paul did not force any leader on the people.

How and when did Paul train these leaders? It seemed that Paul carried on a kind of “walking seminary” throughout his missionary journeys. He surrounded himself with those who would later carry on the work on their own.³⁸ Paul regarded himself as a wise master builder. He maintained intimacy with God and a close relationship with God’s people. In addition, Paul’s approach of training involved on-the-job training. He found potential leaders as he traveled from city to city. In a few areas, he invited them to accompany him, and they learned as they traveled. Later on, they were directed to their own place of ministry.³⁹ He mentored some of the leaders he recruited, like Timothy. He poured out his life into him.

³⁷Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: Discipleship in the Steps of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 268.

³⁸Paul Benjamin, *The Equipping Ministry* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1952), 13-14.

³⁹Ibid.

Contextualization of His Message

Francis A. Schaeffer wrote, “If I had only one hour to share the gospel with a person, I would spend the first forty-five minutes finding out what the person believed about God and the last fifteen minutes presenting Christ from that basis.”⁴⁰ In agreement with the above statement, David J. Hesselgrave stated, “Understanding another person’s world view (or belief system) is the starting point for communicating the gospel.”⁴¹ By showing an understanding and interest in another person’s beliefs one gains credibility and integrity with that person. Contextualization involves building a bridge to connect the message bearer to those for whom he has a message to declare. The Apostle Paul could be regarded as a master bridge-builder.

What is contextualization? According to Stan May, “It is the ongoing work of presenting the unchanging message of the gospel in the mutable forms of the culture so that the receptors are able to understand, internalize, and embrace the message in the manner in which God intended it to be understood.”⁴² In the process of contextualization, the message of the gospel does not change, but the method of presentation could be altered. From observation of Paul’s life and message, one could see how he presented the gospel to fit the needs of his audience.

When he addressed the Jewish monotheists in the synagogues, Paul began with the Old Testament Scripture. The Jews accepted the Old Testament as special revelation from Yahweh. In doing so, he was able to establish a common ground with them. This made it easy for him to communicate the gospel to them. In Acts 9:19-22, he preached the gospel to the Jews. Reflecting on this passage, A. T. Robertson wrote, “All the great superstructure of his future teaching to the Jews unfolded here. He knew for certain that Jesus fulfilled the Messiahship of the Jews.”⁴³

Moreover, this shows the core of Paul’s ministry to the Jews throughout the Book of Acts. He proved from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ. In Acts 13:14-16, he traced and proved to his people, from the Law to the Prophets, that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts

⁴⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, vol. 5 (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1982), 424.

⁴¹ David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 121.

⁴² Stan May, “Ecclesiology: The Missing ingredient in Modern Missions,” *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 4 (2005): 89-102.

⁴³ A. T. Robertson, *Epochs in the Life of Paul* (New York: Scribner’s, 1909), 61.

13:27). R. C. H. Lenski wrote, “These proofs were conclusive, overwhelming, and silenced the opponents.”⁴⁴ His Jewish opponents could not deny the fact that the Old Testament prophecies found fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, they stubbornly rejected Jesus as the Messiah because the kind of Messiah they anticipated must be one that would restore the political kingdom of Israel.

To the pagans of Lystra (Acts 14), Paul presented the gospel differently from his approach to the Jews. As Homer A. Kent observed: “Paul’s speech to the pagans was appropriate to his audience. He made no special appeal to Scripture, but built upon the knowledge they had from the natural world. He stressed the evidence in nature of a supernatural Creator, and showed the folly of idolatry”.⁴⁵

This records the first sermon in Acts to a purely pagan audience. He did not begin with Jesus. He mentioned three things about God: He is the Creator of all living of things on earth and in heaven; God is merciful (v.16); and God is a provider (v.17). Then he appealed to them to abandon their worthless religion and turn to the true and living God, who is the source of life. In this situation, Paul began his presentation of the gospel from what they already knew about God.

In another occasion, while in Athens, the idolatry of the city disturbed his spirit. As he preached in the synagogue and spoke in the market place, the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers invited him to come and present “this new teaching” to them on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-31). In this case, Paul preached to a group which not only was composed of Gentiles but also included some of the intellectual elite of the city. In his approach, he did not appeal to the Scriptures but again to the evidence in nature, that emphasizes a supernatural Creator and the natural need of man to worship the things that point to God.⁴⁶ Paul’s sermon delivered on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-32) conveyed a language and categories of thought that would be intelligible and understandable to pagan Greek philosophers.

Regardless of his audience—whether Jews or Gentiles, ignorant or elite, poor or rich—he never failed to declare the whole counsel of God. Although his approach differed with each group, he endeavored to build bridges or common ground of understanding. He

⁴⁴R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1934), 371.

⁴⁵Homer A. Kent Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 116-7.

⁴⁶C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn and Elmer Towns, *Church Growth: State of the Art* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1988), 143.

always began with concepts familiar to his audience and from there proceeded to the new and unfamiliar truth. The Apostle Paul strongly maintained Christ-centered preaching.

Conclusion

The Great Commission anticipated the planting of churches as exemplified by Paul, in the selected passages in Acts. Evangelism should result in the planting of churches as a fulfillment of the Great Commission. This paper maintains its argument that Paul's missionary strategies lend themselves for use in any mission field. The strategies of Paul included urban evangelism and church planting, follow up, going to less resistant people, pastoral oversight, team evangelism, training of leaders, and contextualization of the gospel message.

Paul never embarked on any missionary journey without a definite plan; however he depended on the Holy Spirit for direction and guidance. Obviously, the Book of Acts reveals that he was not dogmatic regarding a particular method. He changed from one strategy to another without compromising the eternal message of the Cross. He adapted his strategy to fit any prevailing situation and each people groups.