

Paul's Missionary Pattern In Acts 9-20

In Acts 9 through 20, the reader is provided Paul's conversion story and then a record of his three missionary journeys. As Paul's ministry unfolds before the reader in these chapters, it quickly becomes apparent that there are certain patterns Paul followed and commonalities in his evangelistic approach in the various towns where he preached: 1) he preached to the Jewish population first, typically in the local synagogue, before turning to the Gentiles; 2) he made cultural accommodations to reach the people he would engage; 3) he tailored his evangelistic presentation to his audience, giving them a context for the gospel; 4) Paul preached the death and resurrection of Jesus; and 5) the Holy Spirit guided his ministry. Only the last two of these patterns are prescriptive, but insofar as Paul was an apostle with a tremendously successful ministry, we find in Paul's approach a model that we can borrow from in modern missions work.

In almost every instance when Paul entered a new town, he began his preaching to a Jewish audience, typically in the local synagogue. After his conversion recorded in Acts 9, we read that "...straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God." (Acts 9:20). On his first missionary journey, over and over again, Paul's pattern was to preach first to the Jews: "...at Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews" (Acts 13:5), "...they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the sabbath day" (Acts 13:14), and "...it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews" (Acts 14:1). The same pattern was followed on his second missionary

journey. Regarding his ministry in Thessalonica, Luke recorded: “Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, *as his manner was*, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures...” (Acts 17:1-2) (emphasis added). Paul followed this pattern in Berea (Acts 17:10), Athens (Acts 17:17), Corinth (Acts. 18:4), and Ephesus (Acts 18:19). On his third missionary journey, Paul retraced his steps and the text focuses on his visits to churches he had already planted before, especially the church in Ephesus, but even there he started again in the synagogue. (Acts 19:8). Plainly, Paul’s conviction was that he should preach first to the Jews, for he states in Romans 1:16 that the gospel is “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”

Someone might point out that Paul did not always follow this pattern. For example, Paul preached to Sergius Paulus, a Roman official over Cyprus, at his invitation. (Acts 13:7). And in the case of Philippi, Paul did not begin at the synagogue but at the river and to a Gentile woman. The use of the Greek *proseuche* in Acts 16:13 may indicate a synagogue (or house of prayer), but in any event, Paul’s attention is focused on a Gentile individually and not a public presentation within a synagogue.¹ Since Paul did stray from his common practice, we can conclude that the pattern is descriptive and not prescriptive, for otherwise Paul would never have strayed from it. It seems that Paul had a practice he followed by conviction but not

¹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2002), 155.

rigidly; he strayed from the practice whenever there was an open door to present the gospel.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Paul's missionary work that we can draw from was his willingness to engage the culture. This meant two things. First, he was willing to accommodate the culture so that he did not offend them and create an obstacle to the gospel. Second, his presentation to a Jewish audience that already believed in the God of the Old Testament was not the same as his presentation to polytheistic Gentiles. Paul became "all things to all men, that [he] might by all means save some." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). We see this cultural accommodation in Paul having Timothy, who in Jewish minds was Jewish since his mother was Jewish, circumcised, which he did not do with Titus. (Acts 16:3; Galatians 2:3). Notwithstanding the Jerusalem Council's decree in Acts 15 that was carried abroad by, among others, Paul and Silas, Paul kept Jewish traditions when he was among them. (Acts 21:21-26). Paul became like the culture he was in—not, of course, adopting any sinful practices—so that his own preferences would not be an obstacle to his ministry there.

Paul also tailored his presentation to his audience. When Paul preached in a Jewish synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13, Paul assumed their knowledge of the God of the Old Testament and certain historical events recorded therein. Paul's sermon used God's historical dealings with Israel, and especially God's selection of David to succeed Saul as king, to give a context for the coming of Messiah Jesus as the promised seed that would come through David. As Gangel notes, Paul covered some 450 years of history quite quickly because there was "[n]o need to elaborate

these points; synagogue worshipers would have know all the particulars.”² Paul did not need to convince his audience of monotheism, nor that the existent god was the God of the Old Testament scriptures, nor of Israel’s history recorded therein, but only that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.

In contrast, when Paul preached on the Aeropagus in Acts 17, he did not focus on Israel’s history and Messianic prophecy, but he proclaimed that there was only one God and that He created everything. Bruce comments, “When the gospel was presented to pagans, even cultured pagans like the members of the Court of the Aeropagus, it was necessary to begin with a statement about the living and true God ... the present speech is equally well designed to serve as a sample of his preaching to pagans...”³ According to Polhill, Paul “was attempting to build what bridges he could to reach the Athenian intellectuals.”⁴ Paul quoted the Greek poet Epimenides and the Stoic philosopher Aratus. In particular, Paul leveraged the geographic location of sermon in the minds of his audience since that was the very place where Epimenides had, centuries ago and according to legend, satisfied the “unknown God” and lifted the plague on Athens.⁵ Paul’s sermon to this group was culturally relevant

² Kenneth O. Gangel, *Holman New Testament Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers 1998), 214.

³ F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary On The New Testament: The Book Of The Acts* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1988), 334-35.

⁴ John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: Broadman Press 1992), 370.

⁵ Don Richardson, *Eternity In Their Hearts* (Ventura: Regal 2005), 9-23.

and engaging, but would not have been so for the Jewish audience in Acts 13. Likewise, his sermon there in Acts 13 would not have worked in Athens.

The foregoing components of Paul's missionary approach are descriptive in the book of Acts, not prescriptive. We know this because, as I have shown, while Paul typically began at the Jewish synagogue when he came into a town, he did not always do so. Nowhere in the book of Acts does Luke suggest that missionary work must always follow Paul's pattern of practice. Moreover, when Paul discussed cultural accommodation in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, his stated reason for accommodation was not because it was scripturally required but "...that I might by all means save some." In contrast, there are at least two patterns to Paul's missionary work that were prescriptive. Paul preached Jesus, and in particular the gospel (Acts 26:22-23), and Paul's ministry was Spirit led.

Paul preached the "name of Jesus" in Damascus (Act 9:27), the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:27-30), the "gospel" in Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:7, 21), that salvation is through faith alone to the Philipian jailor (Acts 16:31-32), the death and resurrection of Jesus in the synagogue in Thessalonica (Acts 17:3), the resurrection of Jesus to the Athenians (Acts 17:30-32), that Jesus was the Christ to the Corinthians (Acts 18:5), and the "word of the Lord Jesus" in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). We know this is prescriptive from Paul's own writings that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16), that there is only one gospel (Galatians 1:6-9), and that the gospel is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). We also know from Acts 1:8 that Jesus commissioned the apostles to be witnesses of him.

Finally, Paul's ministry was not led by feelings, committees or church votes, but by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit stopped Paul from entering Bithynia (Acts 16:7), separated Paul and Barnabas for the first missionary journey (Acts 13:2), forbid Paul to preach in Asia (Acts 16:6) and, by implication, instructed him by a vision to go into Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). Since this was direct instruction from God, it was prescriptive for Paul just as it would be today. There is no indication in Acts or in the New Testament generally that the Holy Spirit no longer leads people in missionary work. I take it that our primary guide on such questions as where to plant a church or send a missionary should be the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I have addressed certain aspects of Paul's pattern of practice in his missionary work. Luke writes as the historian, recording what events occurred and not necessarily prescribing rules for future generations of Christians. Nevertheless, where what was taught was the Word of God—specifically, the gospel—or direction was taken from God the Holy Spirit, I believe we can accept that portion of Luke's record as prescriptive. Other aspects of Paul's ministry, while not prescriptive, provide a solid model and show us what is acceptable, such as cultural accommodation and presenting the gospel in a culturally engaging way. As Clinton Arnold commented, one of Luke's reasons for writing Acts was to "provide them with instructive models on how to proclaim [the gospel] in a variety of circumstances—whether in a synagogue or in a room full of Greek philosophers."⁶

⁶ Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Acts*, 6.