Missional Church and Church Planting

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Unit 6. Church-planting model

The Pauline model: Acts 13–14

We use the word ‘model’ to indicate a biblical example to follow. We consider this Pauline model to be foundational. On the other hand, ‘method’ is used to describe the ways in which we might go about implementing the model.

Exercise

Spend a few moments jotting down the ideas that come to mind when you hear the terms ‘church plant’ and ‘church-planter.’

Paul’s missionary journey in Acts 13–14 was the first organised gospel expedition into Gentile territory. The gospel had reached a number of Gentiles, though not out of any strategic decision. A church had been planted in Antioch because people had taken the decision to speak to Greeks, and not only to Jews (Acts 11:19-26). It was fitting that, under God the Holy Spirit, this church should become the launch pad for the gospel into Gentile territory. It was also fitting that the two people who had led, informed and shaped that church for a whole year, Barnabas and Paul, should be the two who would spearhead the expedition.

Barnabas and Paul did not travel in a straight line. Their journey was as follows:

Antioch → Salamis → Paphos → Perga → Pisidian Antioch (100 miles north of Perga) → Iconium → Lystra (18 miles SW of Iconium) → Derbe (60 miles southeast of Lystra) → Lystra → Iconium → Pisidian Antioch → Perga → Attalia → Antioch

The entire enterprise occupied Paul and Barnabas for about two years, somewhere between 44–49AD. From the narrative provided by Luke, it seems people were converted on Paul's missionary journey on the way out, and elders were appointed on the way back (Acts 14:21-24).

The time lapse between the planting and the appointing is unclear. It does not seem to have taken a great deal of time; it could have been weeks or months. Luke does not see fit to provide many temporal markers, suggesting that it is not too important. However, it is clear that the apostolic band seemed content to preach the gospel and then leave the believers to their own devices. But only for a season! Luke does not use the word ‘church’ in this journey until the return visits and the appointment of elders, cf. Acts 14:23. It is also interesting to note that Paul left Titus in Crete to “put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5).

There is a theory that Paul preached the gospel in strategic centres, so that the gospel would ripple out to the surrounding areas. Through the main towns where Paul preached, the gospel was intended to radiate outwards. The churches in those centres had the
responsibility, then, to have an impact on their neighbouring regions. While Paul and his team could not cover the whole region, the churches did.

So, these relatively young believers under relatively inexperienced leadership were given the responsibility to take the gospel further. This was effective: Paul could conclude with credibility, “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (Romans 15:19). NIVUK This was no empty boast. He had planted churches with a missional responsibility built into their DNA, and thus the gospel had spread throughout an extensive region of the northern coasts of the Mediterranean and beyond. This helpfully informs approaches to church-planting.

In Acts, Luke focuses primarily on Paul from chapter 13 onwards. He is shown to be an itinerant preacher and a church-planter. A church was inevitably planted wherever people were converted, because the identity of Christians is corporate. Paul could not think of a convert who was not part of a church. If church-planting is an apostolic gifting, then church-planters plant churches; they are not meant to pastor them. Observationally at least, church-planters are initiators and gatherers, and that is what Paul did as he travelled around the known world.

Paul did not do it alone. He gathered people around him who travelled with him at different times. This has been called the ‘apostolic band’, or ‘apostolic team’. As early as Acts 13, “the two of them” (Paul and Barnabas) in verse 4 becomes “Paul and his companions” by verse 13. On the first trip, it is usually Paul and Barnabas, but then we have Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke (15:40 and following). We also know that Priscilla and Aquila were involved at some points (18:18). We also know from the epistles about Titus, Epaphroditus, Epaphras and others. Estimates have suggested that the team grew to some 26 people at various times.

Why did Paul evangelise in this way, reluctant to do it on his own? In Acts 17, we do find Paul by himself. He was waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy to join him. During that time, his spirit was being provoked within him as he observed the city full of idols. He could
not help but do something because of what he saw. Paul ends up on Mars Hill. Athens was a significant city and yet we are not told if a church was planted there. This was a blip in the apostolic method. Normally, we see them go into a town, with a team, for a period of time; churches grew up around them as people were converted. Perhaps these apostolic teams functioned as mobile churches. Converts knew what it was to be church because they were born into a functioning church, rather than it simply being a mere idea. As the team was dispatched elsewhere, the church was left under local leadership.

To what extent this is reproducible is debatable, but it was clearly an effective method of church-planting.

**Applying Paul’s model**

**Mobility**

We do not tend to plant churches in this way today, though we perhaps should. Most church-planting literature does not commend this as an applicable model. Yet it seems at least a model worth considering. We need Paul-like figures (perhaps called ‘apostles,’ who are sent to go around planting churches, because the Greek word *apostolos* means ‘sent one’). We need to train them on the job. As people are converted, they learn what church is by being part of this ‘mobile church’. As leaders emerge, then, they are already learning about gospel ministry, being equipped for church-leadership and church-planting. The apostles go out to plant more churches.

This could be a model that we see more often in cities in particular. Perhaps it was easier for Paul, being single — he could travel all the time. Tent-making in the day, teaching the Bible in the evening, he was able to commit himself to such a way of life. A married man with children does not have the same degree of flexibility, cf. 1 Corinthians 7:32-35. We could though, be looking for bright, young entrepreneurial types, encouraging them to stay single, training them and then sending them out with a team of others to plant churches.

To do this, we would gather a number of others alongside the church-planter. Those others might be single, younger people, or older people without children to nurture. This team ventures into an area, deciding about who can work together with whom, and where. They plant a church, which may take a few months or a few years, depending on their context and success.

In some contexts there is not the same need for mobility. In a city, a number of churches can be planted in a large area, with this same apostolic model.

**Community**

Through this model, it seems possible to develop a gospel community very quickly. In 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul is unembarrassed to describe how his apostolic team had shared their lives with the church in Thessalonica. It seems that relationships developed very quickly in Paul’s team in a way we rarely see. This may be due to cultural differences between the individualistic West and the Greco-Roman culture of the day. However, if the gospel is preached and gospel lives and relationships are modelled, you can quickly demonstrate what gospel community is about. Furthermore, if people had a community mindset, it would affect the way teams were formed and sent out. Instead of it being a question of personal preference whether a person or team stayed or left, it would become an issue for the community to discuss in light of the gospel.
Flexibility

We need to plant in a way that fits our specific situation. For various reasons, the gospel will not progress at the same rate through all cultures and regions. If gospel progress is slow, this does not necessarily mean the team is inept. According to the different situations he faced, Paul stayed for three years in one place and only a few weeks in another. If we follow this apostolic model, it may enable us to react appropriately to our circumstances, which may mean acting differently in different situations.

None of this is to say that other church-planting strategies should be abandoned. But this apostolic model is not one which has been used or commended enough. While it has been used abroad by missionary organisations, this model has not often been adopted in the West, and there is no valid reason for this apparent reluctance.

Reflection

Can you imagine using this apostolic church-planting model in your context? If not, what are the obstacles? If so, what do you think the main challenges would be?

The problem of finding leaders

One of the oft-cited problems for proposed church plants is a lack of leaders. An already established, but rapidly growing trend is creating multiple sites for one church. This arises where a large church with a particularly gifted preacher wants to plant, but they do not have enough ‘attractional’ leaders to lead the churches that they want to plant. So instead of starting a new church, they set up premises or take over existing churches and turn them into ‘video venues’ — the ‘mother church’s’ main service is relayed via video. This commends itself as a sensible strategy in contexts of rapid growth. But how significant is it that the apostle Paul did not seem to have problems finding leaders?

Combining 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, we find that Paul lists about 25 different qualities of leadership. Nowhere does he talk about charisma or an ability to hold a crowd of 100 or 1000. He talks primarily about proven character that has been hammered out on the anvil of life. Paul looks for someone with ambition to be a leader, who has led his household well, who is of good character, who is well thought of, and who handles money well. If we put our emphasis on character and not on charisma, then our church-planting will not hit a brick wall for lack of leaders.

Leaders

As a piece of observational wisdom, it seems that entrepreneurial leaders are an asset in any church planting programme. Here are some qualities of such leaders:

- **Visionary**: has a clear picture of the future and an ability to inspire others with it;
- **Creative**: has the ability to make it up as he goes, is adaptable and does not need tight structures;
- **Productive**: gets a lot done; tendency to overwork without restraints;
• Impatient: always moves forward and is never truly satisfied;
• Self-starter: lots of internal motivation; no need for external prompting;
• Maverick: does not feel the need to be on a team, but can form and work in one.

Perhaps common wisdom tells us that there are fewer entrepreneurial types around than those who are suitable for local church leadership. There is a sense in which mavericks and entrepreneurs are not simply genetically disposed; they are also culturally shaped. If you compare US and UK cultures, it seems the US churns out more entrepreneurs per capita than the UK. The culture in the US nurtures and honours that development. If our churches are meant to be alternative cultures, then our churches can generate and nurture these entrepreneurs too.

The problem is that such people are not always easy to raise. All of our ecclesiastical systems work against them, and often suppress them. Or at the very least, they inhibit them and encourage conformity. But new ground was never taken by a conformist. One of the tragedies of conservative evangelicalism is its ability to nurture conservative evangelicals! We need to help change the culture to one which generates entrepreneurs. We need somehow to give birth to, and nurture people who, out of a deep and abiding love for Jesus, will take risks for the sake of the gospel. Great victories are never won by playing safe, or even by playing to the rules. After all, who writes the rules? Who establishes convention?

Paul

We think that Paul is given to us as a model of this kind of character. He clearly had an ongoing relationship with the churches that he planted and he was clearly pastoral in his dealing with them (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:28). Paul is a better pastor than we might give him credit for, but he could do the job if circumstances required it. But he would not fit into our conventional models of leadership, and he would often have been an uncomfortable person to have around and be around.

It has been suggested that it was while Paul was in Antioch that he devised a strategy for reaching a great part of the Mediterranean world with the gospel. But J. Herbert Kane’s words are worth pondering:

Did Paul have a missionary strategy? Some say yes; others say no. Much depends on the definition of strategy. If by strategy is meant a deliberate well-formulated, duly executed plan of action based on human observation and experience, then Paul had little or no strategy; but if we take the word to mean a flexible *modus operandi* developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and subject to his direction and control, then Paul did have a strategy.26

Effectively, Paul’s strategy is his method. We know of no master-plan behind his activity. We are not told of a five-year scheme where he details the number and location of the churches he wanted to plant. We do know he wanted to reach the world in a way that was consistent with the gospel. He got a team around him and went about preaching a foolish message in a foolish way, resulting in foolish people converted and foolish churches established that had an impact on the world like nothing else before!

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26 Kane, J.H., *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* (Baker, 1976), 73
In what sense should Paul’s methodology be said to be normative? His message is clearly normative as we see in Galatians 1:8; 1 Corinthians 11:23. Paul’s ‘moral’ conduct is also normative (1 Corinthians 11:1). Which perhaps means that there is a case to be made for his approach to be so. David Hesselgrave believes so, and has identified the following elements:

7. Leadership consecrated — Acts 14:23

This creates a cycle where there is no endpoint — churches would reach a stage which allowed Paul to be sent on to the next place. The benefit of identifying this cycle is that it can be used as a template to analyse the condition and practice of both established churches and pioneer works.

**Reflection**

Where is your church in this cycle? Depending on your church structure, different parts of the church may well be at different points. Can you see what steps might be taken to move the church around the cycle towards sending new missionaries?

**Practicalities**

Having deduced a methodology from Paul’s activity, there are still a number of important practical steps to identify. We shall explore a number of these in the coming units. Here are five key issues we need to address as we go about church planting. The same questions can be asked for an existing community looking to take a more missional stance:

- **Connection**: How do we meet and connect with people? It is common to talk about finding a ‘third place’ — that is, someplace which is not a home or a workplace, but is a third place such as a cookery class, a cafe or local shop.
- **Identification**: How do we identify the felt needs of the people we are trying to reach? We need to get a sense of what the community needs, and then out of compassion respond to that in a way that is pertinent and personal.
- **Demonstration**: How do we live our lives openly before them? How can we expose people to Christian community, to lives that have been transformed by the gospel?

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• **Proclamation:** How do we communicate the gospel clearly to them? Is there a prevailing framework or worldview? What matters to people? We have to find these things out in order to establish how we will communicate the gospel to them.

• **Integration:** How do we incorporate converts into a growing congregation? People are saved to be a part of a church. We do not just leave them to it once they have been converted.