Facing the 21st Century

PAUL'S CORE STRATEGY

BY RICHARD JORDA

Living on the brink of the twenty-first century we see huge sea changes taking place all about us. Many feel that we are seeing a cultural paradigm shift not unlike that experienced in the Enlightenment of the seventeenth century.

Some look at all this with fear and cling to what they know with ever increasing fervor--trying to avert change by shear effort to improve what already exists. Others look ahead with a great sense of adventure and anticipation. Most, however, sit still, simply waiting for whatever is going to happen.

We have a unique opportunity to look back in time to the early church, and forward to the world of the twenty-first century. At this juncture it is imperative that we have a clear philosophy of ministry based on solid Scriptural principles.

Paul's first-century injunction to Timothy to "*make full proof of thy ministry*" is God's Word to us as we face the twenty-first century. And his example leaves no doubt as to *what* he meant or *how* he intended this to be performed.

In a very few years, Paul accomplished what the present generation of the Church has only tried to do. The record is unquestionable: He established the Church on such a firm foundation that it could live and grow in faith and practice; that it could work out its own problems and overcome dangers and hindrances from within and

without; that it could so impact the culture of that day as to change the whole course of history.

Why was Paul so successful? Beyond his special Divine apointment as "the Apostle of the Gentiles," there were many reasons. One important one was that Paul considered the preaching of the gospel and the establishing of churches as his primary task. That he was concerned about the social relationships and the so-alled "felt needs" of people is patently true. However, *Paul considered his primary mission accomplished when tte gospel was preached,people were saved and churches were established.*

Were there no poor in Corinth? Were there no race problems in Ephesus? Did all the children of Asia Minor have enough to wear? Paul's epsistles clearly demonstrate his deep concern for the poor and socially disenfranchised (e.g., Gal. 2:10). Yet his uniform practice in spreading the gospel was to establish churches -*not* societies, denominations, schools, medical centers, or social agencies but *local churches.*

To ignore Paul's model is to overlook the very heart of the means whereby the gospel spread around the first-century world. Paul was so effective becausehe had a singleness and clarity of objective: He gave all of his boundless energy and unusual abilities to winning people to Christ and establishing vibrant local churches which could function as bases for the continued furtherance of the gospel.

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Between Acts 13 and 20, a period of 10-12 years according to Ussher's dating, Paul established churches in four Roman provinces: Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. In Acts 13 there were no churches in these provinces; by Acts 20:3 (when he wrote Romans) Paul could speak as if his work in these regions was done and could plan an extensive journey into the far west without anxiety that the churches he left behind would perish in his absence.

Consider his thinking in Romans 15 concerning his ministry Plans:

"For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ hath not wrought by me, to make the Gentiles obedient, by word and deed,

"Through mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God; so that FROM JERUSALEM, AND ROUND ABOUT UNTO ILLYRICUM, I HAVE FULLY PREACHED THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST."

"For which cause also I have been much hindered from coming to you.

"But now HAVING NO MORE PLACE IN THESE PARTS, and having a great desire these many years to come unto you;

"Whensoever I TAKE MY JOURNEY INTO SPAIN, I will come to you..." (Rom. 15:18, 19, 22-24).

The statements that there was "*no more place in these parts*" and that he had "*fully preached the gospel of Christ*" from Jerusalem through Asia, Galatia, Macadonia, Achaia all the way to the east coast of the Adriatic Sea (Illyricum), are nothing short of amazing!

He considered his work in this region to be *completed*-but were there no more lost people who needed to be saved or believers who needed instruction in that territory? Certainly these needs existed many times over. How then could Paul declare there to be "*no more place in these parts*" for him to preach the gospel?

The answer lies in the fact that Paul had a *carefully designed plan and strategy with a definable goal* to be reached. He knew when the job was *finished* because he knew what the job *was.*

Simply put, Paul's core ministry strategy was to *plant a multitude of fully functioning local churches* which would serve as the base for reaching the region with the gospel. With this accomplished, he was ready to move on to the next unreached frontier.

Obviously Paul did not journey over the world "preaching the Word" but laying no solid foundations, establishing nothing permanent, leaving no really instructed groups of believers behind. He definitely did not simply wander from place to place without any plan, strategy or method of any kind.

From the earliest days, Paul followed this consistent strategy: *the multiplication of local churches as the bases for doing the work of the ministry*. He helped establish

the church at Antioch (Acts 11:19-30) the first visible presence of the Body of Christ in Acts. This was a growing local church with clear leadership and ministry developed and in place (Acts 13:1-3). From that base, with a team of leaders, Paul set off to do a specific work (Acts 13-14).This is *local-church-based training and leadership.*

From Paul's epistles and the Acts record we learn that the work was carried out in several basic stages. Acts 14:21-23 serves as an example--one repeated over and over in the record of Paul's ministry.

<p style="text-align:center">EVANGELIZE</p>

<p style="text-align:center">THE LOST</p>

"...they had preached the gospel to that city..."(Acts 14:21).

Paul was passionately committed to winning the lost to Christ from all people groups. This was not a casual issue. Rather he led an "assault" with *intentional* evangelism to establish a beachhead of believers in strategic locations (Acts 14:21; 17:1, 2, 10, 11, 16, 17, I Thess. 1:5-8, etc.).

For Paul this was a *campaign*-one with the specific strategy of *evangelizing strategic population centers* to establish a core group of believers. Roland Allen notes: "All the cities and towns in which Paul planted churches were centers of Roman administration, Greek culture, Jewish influence or of some commercial importance."

Clearly Paul selected *specifically targeted* areas-*Rome* (world capital), *Corinth.* (commercial center), *Galatia* (major trade route), *Ephesus (*religious center), *Philippi* (a "chief city," Acts 16:12), etc. He knew that to establish a growing local church in a *strategic center* would impact the surounding region (Rom. 15:18-24; Acts 19:10).

It all began with purposeful, personal evangelism-the clear, bold "preaching of the cross." Writing to the Thessalonians and recalling his soul-winning work among them, Paul says: "*Remember...our labor and travail...because...we preached unto you the gospel" (*I Thess. 2:9).

The expression "*travail*" denotes the toil, labor and weariness which were involved in bringing the Thessalonians to a knowledge of Christ.

Souls are not easily won, but the first great essential in evangelism is to *pursue* lost sinners! This is the simplest part of soul winning, yet it is the one on which most people fail. Many believers do not win souls because they *do not work at it.* Remember: thefirst letters of "gospel" spell "*go."*

In spite of objections about the perceived difficulties in winning the lost, the fact is that there are always souls who can be won. The harvest is great, plenteous and available. The sad truth is that most of our difficulties about soul winning are in ourselves, not in the lost around us.

And let it be said that *professing* to be "Evangelical" or "Fundamental" or "Pauline" does not amount to anything if the professor is not *actively* engaged in efforts to win the lost to Christ.

Paul understood-and was passionately committed to-the *priority* of evangelism.

EDIFYING THE SAINTS

"'Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God"(Acts 14:22).

Next Paul carefully *edified* the new believers in sound doctrine. This too was purposeful and intentional.

He *confirmed and established* them in the "*godly edifying*"of grace by following the *Divine Design for Edification* of believers committed to him by Christ (Rom. 1;11, 12; 16:25, 26, I Tim. 1:3, 4).

This explains the seemingly incredible success--and speed-with which Paul brought young believers to maturity and ministry. He did not accept the modern axiom that converts in new areas must be submitted to a long probation before they can be expected to be able to stand alone. He knew how "perfecting the saints" was accomplished and went about this task too with a "fervent desire"-and a clear plan (Col. 2:7). We would do well to take heed!

Paul also *exhorted* these new saints "*to continue in the faith*"in view of the "much tribulation" they would now face as believers. This was training in the *application* of

sound doctrine to the details of life-the development of *sound chracter* to "*adorn the doctrine."*

Believers are no longer aliens-they *belong* (Eph. 2:19) and have a *new identity* (I Cor. 12:13, 27; II Cor. 5:17). They are *called-out* people, no longer a part of the old culture but now separate and distinct from the society about them (II Cor. 6:14-16). Thus Paul trained them in their new life in Christ and its impact on their lives. They needed to understand that the *basis* of service is Sonship; the *motivation* for service is love.

Paul understood that it was only perfected saints who would successfully do "*the work of the ministry*."

ESTABLISH LOCAL CHURCHES

"And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed" (Acts14:23).

Paul then *established* the communities of believers in to *organized local churches*. He did not simply gather groups of saints; he planted churches--and he did not leave until they were fully equipped with trained, capable leaders.

While they met in a variety of venues-homes (Rom. 16:4, 5), schools (Acts 19:9), public meeting places (Acts 20:20), and the like-the churches Paul established were:

Self-governing (Acts 14:23; 2O:17, 28): They were not run from afar by religious bosses. They were autonomous-responsible for their own affairs (II Cor.1:24). He gave them instructions for ordering the local church (see the Pastoral Epistles) but set up no extended heirarchy to impose a culturally based structure on them.

Self-supporting (I Tim. 5:17): Paul expected the churches to manage their own finances, honestly and capably. He never made them render an accounting to him.

Self-propagating (I Thess. 1:6€): The natural fruit of a local church is *another* local church. Paul "passed the baton" to the elders of these churches to continue the process (Acts 20:17-28), charging the leaders he had trained to train others in the same manner he had trained them (II Tim. 2:2).

Before the pioneering workers departed, they commended them to the Lord." This was much more than simply a parting salutation or blessing conferred on them. Rather it was an orderly transition to *local leadership* in the congregation (cf. Acts 20:.28) as they were released to this God-ordained system.

Paul had confidence in God's provision expressed in local grace churches with faithful men to guide, shepherd and reproduce them. Now the continuation of effective ministry was in their hands.

EXPANDING TO THE REGIONS BEYOND

These local churches were bases for the *expanded penetration* of the gospel into communities and regions beyond (II Cor. 10:13-15, Phil. 1:3-7, 27 -30; 4:3, 15).

They were bases for raising up and training leaders who knew how to establish churches. They were bases from which experienced leaders were strategically placed in specific fields with a plan to win the lost and develop "faithful men" whom they could assist in planting and leading indigenous churches. They were bases which provided continued support to Paul and his team in very direct ways, such as sending finances as well as people to assist him (Phil. 1:3-6; 4:10-18).

Paul's expansion strategy was built on the *centrality of the local church*. He continued to strengthen the churches by sending letters and making personal visits and he used them as a base for taking the gospel to new frontiers. So important to him was this basic approach that if the need existed he would give priority to strengthening a local church over the expansion of the gospel into an unreached area (See II Cor. 2:12, 13).

Such a local-church-based approach resulted in the planting of scores of independent, thriving and *reproducing* churches, filled with real leaders, able to think Scripturally and soundly in their own culture.

OUR CHALLENGE

Paul's core model is as clear as it is simple:

Evangelize the lost through intentional, targeted gospel preaching.

Edify the believers in sound doctrine and practice.

Establish local churches as the bases for the work of the ministry.

Expansion through reproducing local churches in other areas and people groups.

If we apply his principles to our day we too will see grace churches that are thriving and multiplying globally. For far too long even the so-called grace movement itself has ignored Paul's pattern in this regard. We must return to his first century thinking before turning to the twenty-first century.

We are living in marvelous times filled with unmatched opportunities. But we must be willing to think differently. We must act boldly. And we must take the dare of faith to follow Paul's pattern and thus *make full proof of our ministry*. Someone has said:

If you want to grow something that will last a season-plant a *flower*.

If you want to grow something that will last a lifetime-plant a *tree.*

If you want to grow something that will last through eternity-plant *churches.*

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