

## Encountering Mission in the New Testament Church

### INTRODUCTION

The divine drama does not end with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' followers having been commissioned, Luke picks up the story in the second volume of his historical account, the Book of Acts. In it he traces the earliest establishment and expansion of the Christian church—much of it through seemingly serendipitous trials and tribulations rather than directed, purposeful evangelism. In this act of the divine drama the church is both the center and the agent for the kingdom of God in the world, and the story of the church as portrayed in Acts is the story of God's mission. That story continues to focus on sending and going into the world, calling peoples of all nations, tongues, and tribes to glorify God through living worshipful lives.

### ACT 6: GATHERING A PEOPLE: THE CHURCH

Luke outlines early in Acts the direction in which this part of the story will take us: beginning in Jerusalem, then to all of Judea

and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth (1:8).

The consistent failures of the disciples in Mark are seen in Acts as well, though not quite as conspicuously. Again, this is good news for us: God chooses to use ordinary people, not supersaints, to accomplish his work of calling the world to glorify him.

#### *Jerusalem Reached*

After the Spirit comes, the early church is privileged to see many Jews who come to Jerusalem from around the world respond to Peter's inspired preaching by placing their trust in Christ at Pentecost (2:1–41). However, even such a vivid illustration of God's concern for the whole world does not seem to shake the apostles enough to move them beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem. Over the next several chapters (3–7) Luke recounts how they evangelize among Jerusalem's Jewish population. This population includes both those born into Jewish heritage and those who came to the Jewish faith from Gentile backgrounds.

One of the first problems that the members of the young church have to address is

an unequal distribution of food among widows, apparently along ethnic and linguistic lines. They solve it by assigning deacons of Gentile descent to ensure that the Gentile-descended widows' needs are met (6:1–6). Though they consolidate their gains in the fledgling church, and rejoice in what God is doing, they still do not seem to truly grasp the idea that Christ is for those beyond the borders of Judaism and that they themselves have a responsibility to live out this truth.

#### *Judea and Samaria Reached*

Stephen, one of those chosen to ensure that food is properly distributed, preaches forcefully in the power of the Holy Spirit and is martyred (6:8–7:60). A fiery persecutor named Saul looks on with approval (8:1). This event opens the doors of a broader persecution, with Saul as the chief antagonist, and the church scatters (8:1–3; 11:19).

Luke then tells a story of Philip, one of the scattered, to illustrate the results of the scattering. At last the church is now moving out of Jerusalem to all of Judea and Samaria. Philip, whose name indicates his Greek heritage, successfully brings the good news across a cultural boundary by preaching in Samaria (8:5). The Samaritans, historically related to the Jews, are a mixed lot who are seen by the Jews as “half-breeds,” not fully Jewish but not completely Gentile.

They respond to Philip's preaching, and accompanying signs and wonders affirm their conversion. The church in Jerusalem, apparently still not understanding, sends Peter and John to check things out and ensure that the conversions are real (8:14–17). The stories brought back by Peter and John are enough to convince the Jerusalem church leaders that even Samaritans can come to faith. Christians in our time

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have a hard time recognizing how great a shift this was for the first Christians. Even so, God had not yet finished expanding their horizons.

In preparation for what is to come, Luke relates the story of Saul, the witness of Stephen's martyrdom and now the main enemy of the early church (9:1-31). Because of the vigor and success of Saul's persecution, the church must scatter for safety. An unintended result of that scattering is that Jesus is preached more broadly. Thus, even before Saul's miraculous conversion, one result of his work is the spread of the church.

That conversion, told three times in Acts (9:1-19; 22:3-21; 26:1-23), becomes a central event for the expansion of the church. In it Luke sets the stage for the person who will be the center of the story of Acts from chapter 13 on.

Before that, however, Luke returns the thread of the narrative to the apostle Peter. By now, having seen the conversion of Samaritans himself, Peter is at least open to the wonder of what God is about to do. Leaving no room for doubt, however, God gives Peter a vision that forces him to open the door for Gentiles to convert (10:9-16). Cornelius comes to Christ, and the stage is finally set for the ends of the earth to be reached. Unlike Peter, Cornelius does not need three repetitions of the same vision to be convinced of what God is saying to him (10:1-8).

## *To the Ends of the Earth*

After Peter is imprisoned and then escapes, Luke's focus dramatically switches. Now in Antioch, rather than Jerusalem, a multiethnic church is described. Luke set the stage by earlier relating the story of the

development of the church in Antioch from those scattered by persecution (11:19–29). In this story the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to Antioch to see what was happening. Encouraged by what he saw, he went to Tarsus to get Paul, and the two of them lived and ministered in Antioch for a year, after which they were sent to Jerusalem to bring an offering from Antioch to help out with famine relief (11:27–29; 12:24–25). Though often overlooked, the journeys from Tarsus to Antioch and from Antioch to Jerusalem and back form Paul's first missionary experiences.

It is while they are in Antioch, away from Jerusalem, that God sets Paul and Barnabas aside for the special task of going throughout the world proclaiming the gospel (13:1–3). God wants to *send* them out from the Antioch church to the ends of the earth. The door that was opened through Peter is the one they travel through in their ministry—the Gentiles now are in focus, though not without obstacles to be overcome. Paul and Barnabas begin their ministry as itinerant evangelists who call people everywhere in the then known world to repent and give themselves to Christ.

Every student of mission sooner or later encounters the accounts of Paul's missionary journeys. It is tempting to read too much into the journeys, treating them as though they are carefully planned itineraries managed with military precision. Luke's account is more realistic. In a blend of Spirit-led decisions and divine revelations, Paul moves from one city to another, preaching Christ everywhere he goes. As Roland Allen noted some time ago, in the relatively short span of roughly a decade, Paul could confidently say that all of Asia (as he knew it) was reached for Christ, and he was planning to go further west, apparently in the expectation that the

newly planted churches would carry on just fine without him (Allen 1927, 3).

Here, a quick detour to introduce Paul before discussing his missionary journeys will help set the stage. Reading through Acts, one is quickly struck by the fact that an obscure person who participates in the persecution of the church (7:54–8:3; 9:1–2) is turned around by Jesus and eventually moves to center stage in the drama portrayed in Acts. It is obvious that this man is special in God's early work of spreading the gospel.

What was it like for Paul (then Saul) when he was blinded on the road to Damascus? Put yourself in his position. You set out on a journey full of importance—you have a special role in stamping out this new sect on behalf of Judaism. Along the way you are confronted by a vision of the very person whose followers you are pursuing. You are struck blind and have to be humbly led into the city in which you had planned on carrying out your campaign (9:1–8). Keep in mind that Paul did not know that his blindness would last only for three days. What do you suppose he thought about during that time? What would you have thought about?

Whatever the answer, Paul's entire life is now turned upside down. The people he was hounding now must accept his conversion, and for the rest of his life he is dedicated to the one who appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

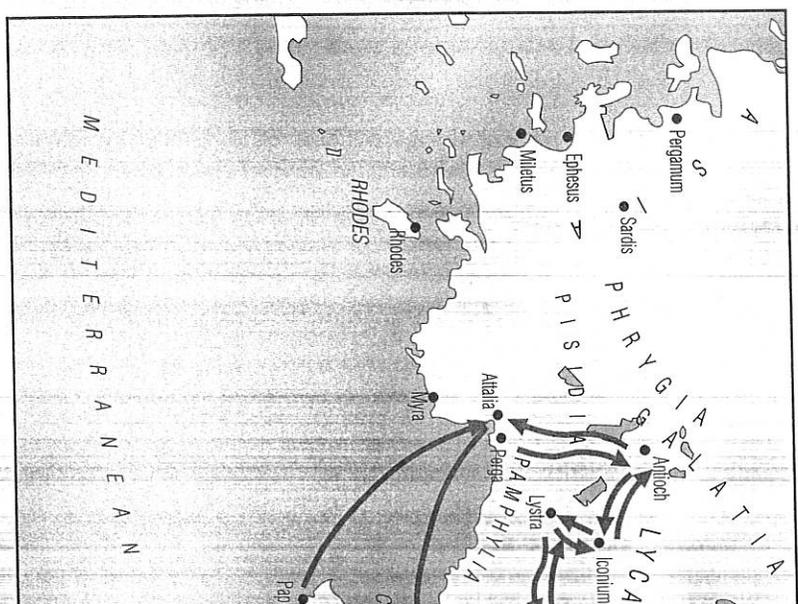
If a contemporary missionary followed Paul's schedule and itinerary, burnout would be a real danger. Four major trips occupy the rest of his life, including hardships everywhere he goes, care and concern for the fledgling congregations planted at almost every stop along the way, and a burning desire to preach Christ where he was not known.

Many extensive treatments of Paul's journeys exist (see, e.g., Allen [1912] 1962, 1927; Longenecker 1971; Bruce 1977; Pollock 1972; Boyd 1995; Bolt and Thompson 2000). We will focus on highlights rather than details and draw out lessons of importance for today from Paul's work two thousand years ago.

**Paul's First Journey (Acts 13:4–14:28)**

Paul's first journey was a round trip from Antioch north and east into Asia Minor (see map 4.1).

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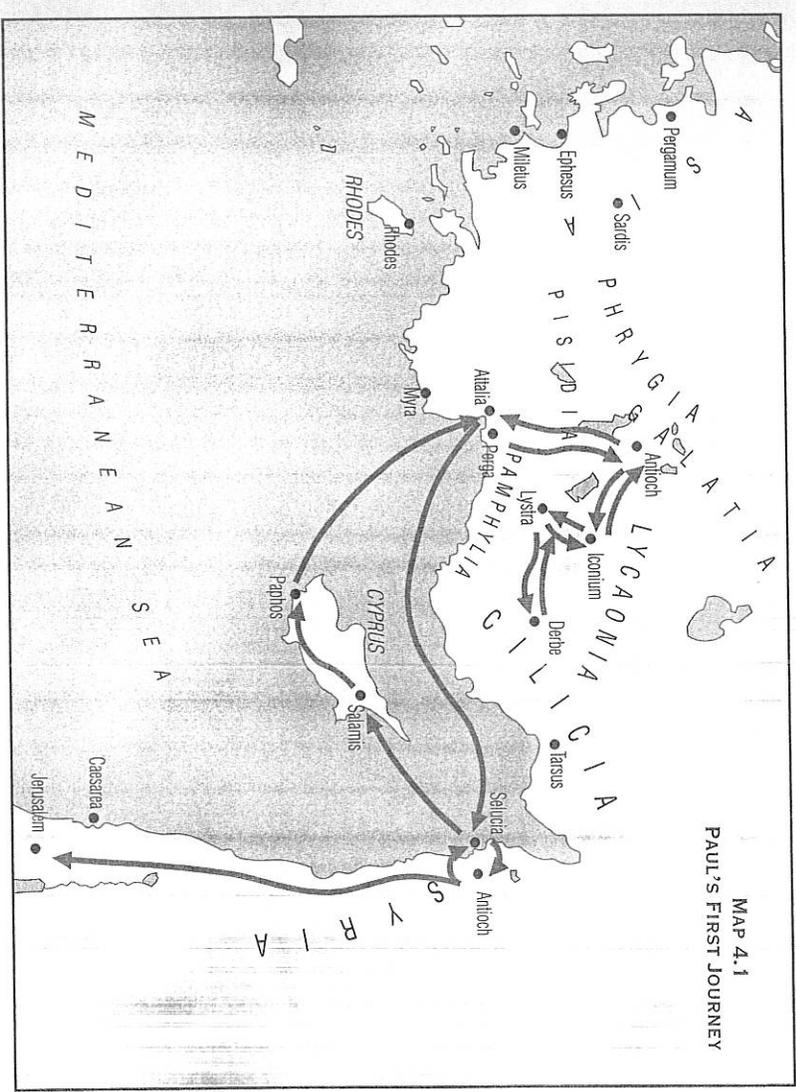
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surprising, since he wanted to reach his own people for Christ wherever possible. Having heard the message, some of those in the Jewish communities accept the new teaching and others reject it. Those who reject Paul's message in turn influence the larger Jewish community to reject, and often to persecute, Paul.

At this stage Paul turns to the Gentiles and meets them where they are (Longenecker 1971, 47–48). They typically are more responsive to the message he brings, and those who come in faith are integrated into the new church that is planted.

Prior to Paul's first journey, Gentiles generally came to Christ only through significant contact with Jews as proselytes. Now



MAP 4.1  
PAUL'S FIRST JOURNEY

they have their own channels through which the gospel can be offered. The breakthrough is found in the story of Sergius Paulus (13:6–12), the Gentile Roman proconsul who listened to Paul preach away from the context of a synagogue. From this time on Luke refers to Saul as Paul, the Roman version of his name (13:9). Perhaps by this Luke hints at the shift in Paul's thinking. Paul's call was to the Gentiles rather than to the Jews, and this is demonstrated by Luke calling him Paul (Longenecker 1971, 43).

The city of Derbe is as far as Paul and Barnabas go on this journey. Winning “a large number of disciples” (14:21) there, they turn around and retrace the journey back through Lystra, Iconium, and (Pisidian) Antioch to Perga. Modern Christians may wonder what Paul's feelings were as he returned to Lystra, where recently he had been stoned and left for dead, but Luke offers no related comments. Perhaps it was a “nonissue” for Paul, though that seems humanly impossible to us.

As they returned through each city, they visited the recently planted churches, building them up, appointing elders, and entrusting those churches to the Lord with prayer and fasting. The “encouraging” that Paul and Barnabas do is something that many today might not find so encouraging: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (14:22).

In revisiting the very cities from which he so recently escaped, Paul demonstrates his courage and stick-to-itiveness. He had indeed gone through many hardships for the sake of the kingdom. His life was a living object lesson to the believers. They too need to endure hardships, not letting persecution dominate the way they live or how they preach Christ. Paul, after all, is their model.

Rather than return to Cyprus, Paul and company travel to Attalia and sail from there directly to Antioch, where they stay for a while. Luke notes that they report how God had opened a door to the Gentiles—a reminder of the change that was taking place as the gospel stretched beyond the borders of Judaism.

It took Paul and Barnabas roughly three years to cover almost fifteen hundred miles on this journey (Boyd 1995, 112). Churches were planted in at least nine cities along the way; the gospel was taking root in new territories.

#### PAUL'S SECOND JOURNEY (Acts 15:36–18:22)

While Paul and Barnabas are still in Antioch, some Jewish converts arrive from Judea. They begin teaching that Gentiles

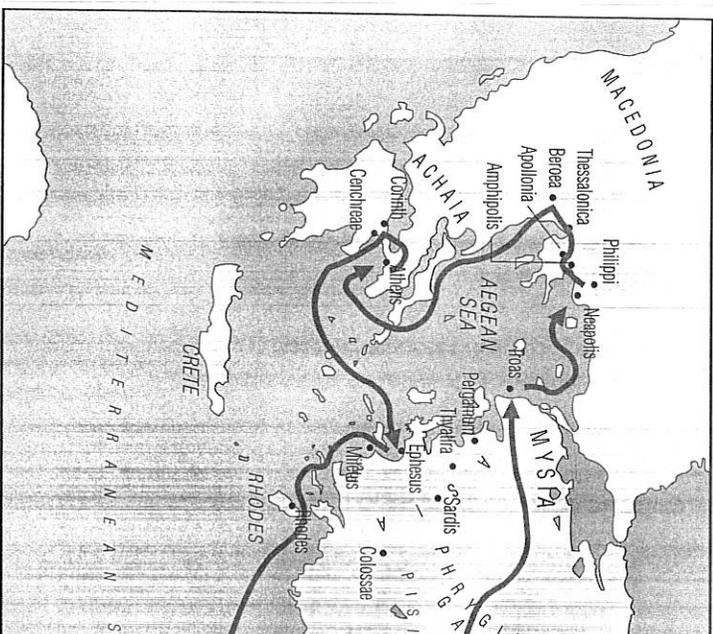
must be circumcised if they are to be genuine followers of Christ. Paul and Barnabas immediately dispute their claims. Eventually the fight grows to the extent that members of both sides of the debate are commissioned by the Antioch church to carry the question to Jerusalem, where the apostles and elders can resolve the issue.

At the council in Jerusalem, James's and Paul's arguments win the day. Circumcision is not a necessary precondition for Christian faith, and Gentiles do not have to enter the house of Christianity through the doors of Judaism. The apostles, however, affirm some basic prohibitions that Gentiles should observe once they have committed themselves to Christ: they must avoid things polluted by idols, sexual impurity, meat from

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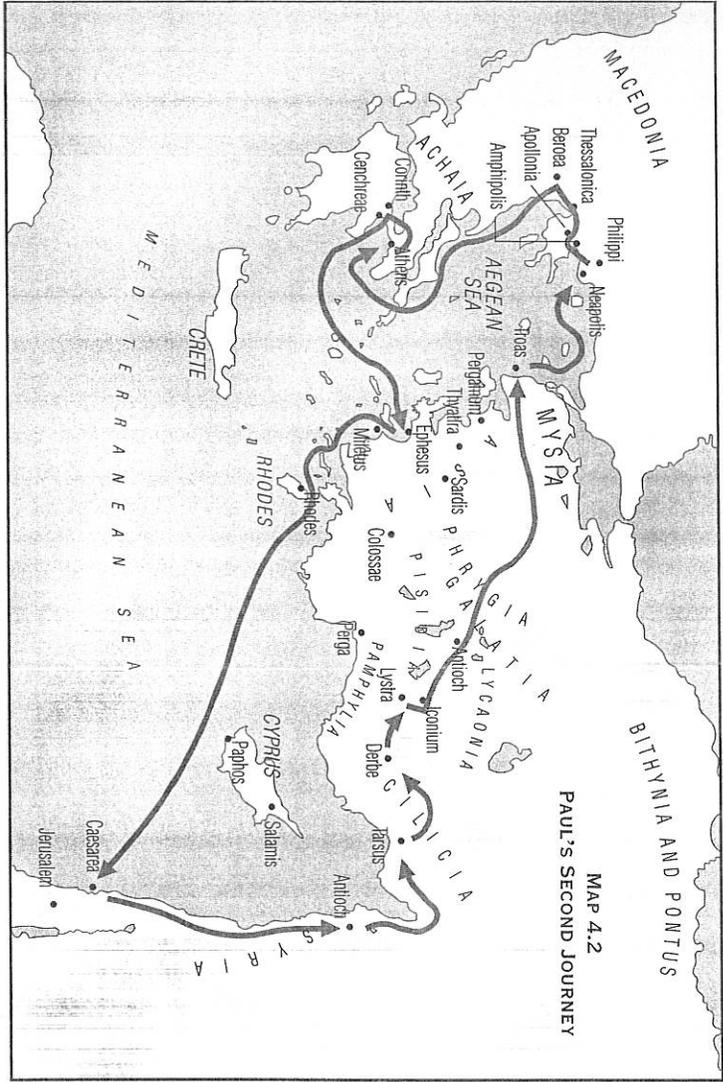
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animals that were strangled to death, and blood (15:19–20, 29).

However these prohibitions might be interpreted today, the main emphasis was that faith in Christ was open to Gentiles apart from them having to enter through Judaism (especially the rite of circumcision). New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall states, "The story of the mission is at the same time the story of how these two groups [Jews and Gentiles] were able to form one people of God without the Gentiles having to submit to circumcision and in effect become Jews in order to become Christians" (Marshall 2000, 99). If this is true, then the Jerusalem council is a pivotal point for missionary thinking and provides a model for missionaries today in wrestling with issues of contextualization.



MAP 4.2  
PAUL'S SECOND JOURNEY

After the meeting Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch, with a letter from the council in hand, to report to the Antioch church the good news of the decision. After reporting, they remain in Antioch, teaching and evangelizing.

"Some time later" (15:36) Paul feels a need to follow up on the believers from their previous journey. He mentions the need to Barnabas, but the two are unable to agree whether to include John Mark, who had deserted them before they had finished their first journey.

Their disagreement becomes so acute that Paul splits from Barnabas and John Mark. After noting that the latter two sail off to Cyprus (15:39), Luke does not mention them again. Paul chooses Silas as his new partner. Silas, a prophet from Jerusalem, was a Roman citizen (16:37), which provides an added benefit for Paul. The two of them embark on Paul's second missionary journey, and the rest of Luke's narrative follows Paul's travels and ministry.

Paul's first concern on the second journey is to follow up on the churches planted during his first journey. This is the third time the churches see their founder, and he and Silas satisfy themselves that the fledgling churches are growing. They present to those churches the decision made at the Jerusalem council.

In Derbe Paul picks up Timothy as a traveling companion. Interestingly, in light of the decision made at the Jerusalem council, Paul has Timothy circumcised. Luke is careful to note, however, that salvation was not the issue at stake, but rather the ability to preach successfully to local Jewish audiences who knew Timothy had a Greek father and had not previously been circumcised. Clearly seen in this action is Paul's concern to avoid placing unnecessary communica-

tion barriers that could prevent people from giving the gospel a fair hearing.

Once the initial follow-up in the Galatian region is completed, Paul turns to travel north and east, deeper into Asia. However, the Holy Spirit does not allow him to go there, but instead leads him west toward

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Europe. The implications of this turn of events are staggering. Paul is used by God to open Europe to the gospel, changing the course of history. Luke does not explain why God did not allow Paul to head further into Asia. Europe was to be impacted forever by the momentous course of events recorded in five short verses (16:6-10).

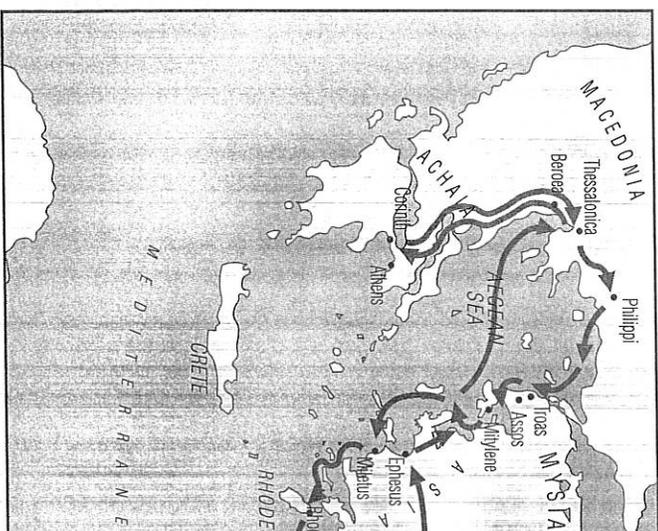
Having crossed the Aegean Sea, Paul moves south through present-day Greece, finally settling in Corinth. Along the way churches are planted in Philippi (16:11-40), Thessalonica (17:1-9), Berea (17:10-14), and Athens (17:15-34).

Much has been made of Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Athens. In it he points out that he has seen the pantheon of Greek gods in Athens. He is especially interested that the city has an altar to an unknown god. It is this God he wants to reveal. As he preaches, he draws on poets known to the Athenians, using their ideas as contact points for the gospel.

Luke's comments seem to indicate that the response to Paul's proclamation was mixed, with the number of those who responded positively being small (17:32-34). Strengthening that perception is that Paul later wrote to the Corinthians that he came

to them (from Athens) not with wisdom, but with weakness and trembling (1 Cor. 2:1-5). Perhaps, having tried cultural wisdom as a bridge in Athens, Paul decided that such an approach was not always the best one to take. Because this is an inference we make, caution must be exercised in drawing implications for mission today. Whatever else may be said, it is clear that Paul was willing to experiment with new methods and possibly cast them aside when they did not produce fruit to his satisfaction (see 1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Paul remains in Corinth for some time, and then he sets sail back across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus after taking a Nazirite vow in Cenchræa (18:18). He is well received in Ephesus and, after promising to return, departs for Jerusalem. There, he takes the time needed to greet the church and then departs for his home base in Antioch.



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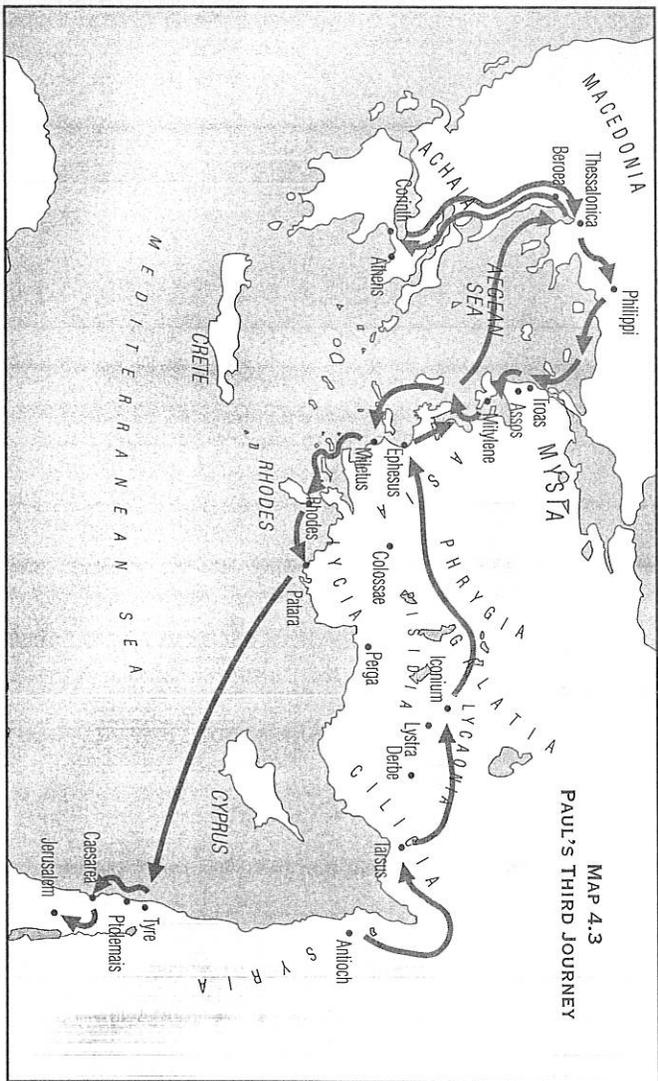
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Altogether it took Paul three and one-half years to cover the almost three thousand miles of his second journey (Boyd 1995, 148). Over the course of this journey Luke mentions five more cities in which churches were planted—all west of Paul's previous work, and now across the Aegean Sea as well. It seems likely that Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians over the course of this journey.

**Paul's Third Journey (Acts 18:23-21:19)**

After staying in Antioch for an unspecified period of time, Paul once again decides that it is time to visit the churches he planted. Luke glosses over the follow-up work in Galatia and Phrygia, simply noting that Paul strengthened "all the disciples" in those regions.

Paul fulfills the promise made during his second journey to the Jews in Ephesus,



arriving there over land after visiting the churches in Galatia. He stays in Ephesus more than two years—the longest residential stretch of his missionary journeys. While Paul is there, God performs “extraordinary miracles” through him, possibly because of the pervasiveness of magical practices and beliefs found in Ephesus at the time (see Arnold 1992).

After the events at Ephesus Paul resolves “in the Spirit” (19:21 NRSV) to travel through Macedonia and Achaia, apparently to revisit the churches planted on his second missionary journey. He makes his way south to Greece, encouraging the believers along the way.

After several months in Greece he decides to sail across the Aegean Sea (as on his second journey), but a plot against him makes him decide to return by land through Macedonia instead. Reaching Philippi, Paul sails to Troas, where he remains one week. Hoping to reach Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost, he decides to forgo a stop at Ephesus, figuring that it will delay him too long.

Instead, after landing in Miletus, some thirty miles south of Ephesus (Bruce 1988, 387), he sends a message to the Ephesian elders to meet him there. Once they arrive, he delivers his farewell to them before setting sail for Jerusalem. He travels to Jerusalem knowing by the Holy Spirit that imprisonment and persecutions await him, and that he would not see his friends from Ephesus again. Setting sail, he arrives in Tyre, and the disciples there tell him “through the Spirit” (21:4) not to go to Jerusalem. Apparently, they mistake the knowledge that he faces trials there for the conviction that he should not go (Grudem 1988). Paul, however, exercising his apostolic authority, overrides them and continues his journey. Warnings

of what is to come are given once again after they arrive in Caesarea, this time through Agabus the prophet. Again, Paul overrides the local believers’ urgent insistence that he avoid Jerusalem (Grudem 1988).

Once Paul reaches Jerusalem, he reports in detail to the Jerusalem elders what God had accomplished among the Gentiles. This report formally concludes Paul’s third missionary journey.

Altogether it took Paul roughly four years to cover the almost four thousand miles of his third missionary journey (Boyd 1995, 148). The third journey was a close parallel to the second one. The primary differences between the two trips are these: (1) Paul travels by land through Achaia and Macedonia (contemporary Greece) to Troas rather than sailing across the Aegean Sea from the southern tip of Achaia; and (2) the journey closes at Jerusalem rather than Antioch. Although the chronology of the actual writing of his epistles is difficult to establish with any certainty, it is possible that he wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans during this journey.

#### PAUL GOES TO ROME—IN CHAINS

After Paul’s initial report, the elders in Jerusalem explain that they have a problem (21:20–25). They tell Paul that Asian Jews have come into Jerusalem portraying him as one who forsakes the law of Moses and thereby the very fabric of Judaism. The elders propose that Paul participate in a Jewish ritual (paying for the completion of a Nazirite vow taken by several believers in Jerusalem) to dispel the rumors.

Paul agrees and does as requested (21:26). Unfortunately, the plan backfires, and Paul has to be rescued from an angry mob by the local Roman guard (21:27–36). Thus begins

the story of the trial that eventually takes him on his final trip, this time to Rome.

On the way to Rome, at almost every stop, Paul is given opportunities to share Christ. His preaching touches religious leaders (23:1–11), governors (24:1–21), kings (25:23–26:23), sailors (27:13–26), and superstitious islanders (28:1–10). The physical chains are no impediment to Paul’s spiritual vitality and ability to communicate Christ. In fact, they enable him to travel even farther than on his missionary journeys. Luke closes this act in the divine drama in mission with Paul under house arrest but able to preach freely: “Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (28:31). As a final note, it is most likely that while in Rome Paul wrote Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

#### Lessons from Paul’s Life and Ministry

In all, Paul’s missionary journeys encompass over a decade of his life during which the gospel spread throughout four important provinces in Asia Minor and on contemporary European soil. What missionary lessons can be learned from Paul (see sidebar 4.1 for additional discussion)?

First, the maximum duration Paul remained at a single location was less than three years. In that sense, Paul was an itinerant missionary rather than a residential one. He moved from place to place planting new churches but did not stay long enough to become the permanent pastor (see Gilliland 1983, 33; but see also the warning of taking this too far in Marshall 2000, 102). Thus, although Paul’s missionary career certainly must be seen as an example of what a mis-

of what is to come are given once again after they arrive in Caesarea, this time through Agabus the prophet. Again, Paul overrides the local believers' urgent insistence that he avoid Jerusalem (Grudem 1988).

Once Paul reaches Jerusalem, he reports in detail to the Jerusalem elders what God had accomplished among the Gentiles. This report formally concludes Paul's third missionary journey.

Altogether it took Paul roughly four years to cover the almost four thousand miles of his third missionary journey (Boyd 1995, 148). The third journey was a close parallel to the second one. The primary differences between the two trips are these: (1) Paul travels by land through Achaia and Macedonia (contemporary Greece) to Troas rather than sailing across the Aegean Sea from the southern tip of Achaia; and (2) the journey closes at Jerusalem rather than Antioch. Although the chronology of the actual writing of his epistles is difficult to establish with any certainty, it is possible that he wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans during this journey.

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sionary life can be, it should not be seen as the "norm" for all missionaries.

Second, Paul's strategy was far more focused on a willingness to obey the Holy Spirit than on the detailed and programmatic strategic planning practices seen in Western mission agencies of today. Herbert Kane asks whether Paul had an actual strategy that he followed. His own answer is that Paul indeed did have a strategy, but only "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" (Kane 1976, 73). Examples of divine guidance in Paul's life include his

*Paul was a theologically driven missionary and a missiologically driven theologian. His theology was missiological and his missionary endeavours were theological. May Paul's gospel of the crucified and risen Christ and his willingness to embody it through his own endurance of suffering on behalf of others be our consuming passion as well.*

Scott Hafemann (2000, 141)

"conversion vision: the activity of Ananias; the summons by Barnabas; the guidance at the Antioch prayer meeting; another vision in the temple; the dream of the man of Macedonia; the prophecies by Agabus and others; the vision in Corinth; and the vision on the ship" (Marshall 2000, 101). The human side is seen in the initiation of the second missionary tour coming from Paul's desire to return to visit churches established during the first journey.

Third, Paul certainly was an evangelist, but he was an evangelist with a goal in mind.

**SIDEBAR 4.1**

**CHARACTERISTICS OF PAUL'S MISSIONARY METHODS**

In studying Paul's missionary journeys, we find it helpful to extract patterns or activities that stretch across his missionary activity. Here, we offer lists from three scholars who reflect on Paul's methods, each drawn from years of study and careful attention to the issues at hand. As you examine each of these lists, consider the questions below as starting points for discussion on Paul's methods and what application they have for missionary work today.

**REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

Read through each of Paul's missionary journeys (Acts 13:4–14:28; 15:36–18:22; 18:23–21:19) and compare what you find with the lists below.

1. What might you add to these characteristics?
2. What might you omit from any of the lists?
3. Discuss how each of the characteristics impacts the way you think about your own future missionary work.

<b>BOWERS (1993, 610)</b>	<b>KANE (1976, 74–85)</b>	<b>GREENWAY (1999, 62–68)</b>
1. Paul is committed to introducing the gospel where it has not yet been heard, to a pioneering function at the frontiers of the Christian expansion.	1. Paul maintained close contact with the home base.	1. Paul confronted people with the saviorhood and lordship of Christ and urged them to submit their hearts and lives to him.
2. Paul confined his efforts to four provinces.	2. Paul focused on families and households in both evangelism and outreach into society.	

New Testament scholar and missionary Paul Bowers points out that Paul's primary concern went beyond winning people to Christ; his ministry focus was on forming communities of Christians throughout the regions he traveled to as a means of spreading the gospel to the whole world (see Bowers 1993, 609; Köstenberger and O'Brien 2001, 180–81). Even more broadly, Paul had a goal of developing mature believers so that they might both experience what was already theirs in Christ and become fully fit in preparation for Christ's return (Peterson 2000, 200).

Fourth, Paul was willing to change the message based on the audience. His circumcision of Timothy demonstrated that the messenger has a responsibility to avoid building unnecessary obstacles to the hearing of the gospel. His appeal to poets and shrines in Athens as contact points for the gospel demonstrated his willingness to meet people where they were as a starting point to bridge to the gospel.

Fifth, there were definite limits to Paul's contextualization. He and Barnabas being mistaken for Roman deities in Lystra was

<b>BOWERS (1993, 610)</b>	<b>KANE (1976, 74–85)</b>
2. He understands this commitment to imply geographical movement in the proclamation of the gospel.	3. Paul concentrated large cities.
3. He conceptualizes such movement in terms of specific geographical areas.	4. Paul made the synagogue the s of his chief labo
4. Paul attempts to canvass these areas in a roughly contiguous sequence, from east to west.	5. Paul preferred to preach to respo peoples.
5. Within that compass, Paul seeks to establish Christian communities in the main population centers of each region.	6. Paul baptized converts on confession of th faith.
6. Paul's missionary commitment includes nurturing such communities toward mature stability.	7. Paul remained l enough in one P establish a chur
7. Once he takes this to be accomplished, Paul feels that he has "no more room" for his particular missionary calling in these areas, and is prepared to move on.	8. Paul made amp of fellow worke
	9. Paul became all to all men.

not acceptable to him; nor was the demand that Gentiles be circumcised as part of the conversion process.

Sixth, Paul focused his attention on planting churches and moving on to new areas. Though the churches Paul planted had an ongoing relationship with him, they were expected to stand independently of his presence. He avoided developing a dependence relationship with the churches he planted, instead giving them enough to stand on their own feet with Christ's power. Modern Christians do well to pay close attention

**METHODS**

Testament  
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of Paul's missionary  
r of missiology and  
ary to Sri Lanka  
ay identifies seven  
aul used. Look at  
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3. Paul concentrated on large cities.

4. Paul made the synagogue the scene of his chief labors.

5. Paul preferred to preach to responsive peoples.

6. Paul baptized converts on confession of their faith.

7. Paul remained long enough in one place to establish a church.

8. Paul made ample use of fellow workers.

9. Paul became all things to all men.

GREENWAY (1999, 62-68)

3. Paul stressed the importance of planting and nurturing churches and communities of faith, worship, fellowship, and service.

4. Paul concentrated on developing local leaders in the churches and placing them in charge as soon as possible.

5. Paul used the natural "bridges" of family relatives, friends, and other contacts in spreading the gospel.

6. Paul started "house churches" everywhere he went. These house churches became living cells of the body of Christ. Paul used a large number of "fellow workers" (called "lay people" today) to spread the gospel and minister in the house churches.

7. Paul taught believers to promote justice, truth, and mercy in society and to care for the Lord's earth.

not acceptable to him; nor was the demand that Gentiles be circumcised as part of the conversion process.

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to Roland Allen's penetrating summary of Paul's methods (see sidebar 4.2).

Seventh, the content of Paul's preaching essentially was the story of Jesus. It parallels the story accounts seen in the four Gospels (see Wenham 2000; Secombe 2000). With the exception of his approach in Athens, Paul chose to focus on the history rather than philosophy, on the simple story rather than intellectual discourse.

Eighth, Paul tended to work as the leading member of a team of people rather than trying to go it alone on his journeys. Practi-

**SIDEBAR 4.2**  
**PAUL'S MISSIONARY PRINCIPLES**

Roland Allen penned the classic text *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* in 1912, and his book is still used in mission classes today. In it he explores Paul's methodology in planting churches, comparing and contrasting Paul's methods with the (Anglican) methods prevalent in Allen's day. That the book remains in print is a testimony to the fact that Allen's analysis remains relevant in spite of the almost one hundred years of change that have transpired.

What follows is a section from the book in which he summarizes the most important lessons learned from his study about Paul's methods in church planting and development (pp. 151–52):

We have seen that the secret of the Apostle's success in founding churches lay in the observance of principles which we can reduce to rules of practice in some such form as this:

1. All teaching to be permanent must be intelligible and so capable of being grasped and understood that those who have once received it can retain it; use it, and hand it on. The test of all teaching is practice. Nothing should be taught which cannot be so grasped and used.
2. All organization in like manner must be of such a character that it can be understood and maintained. It must be an organization of which the people see the necessity; it must be an organization which they can and will support. It must not be so elaborate or so costly that small and infant communities cannot supply the funds necessary for its maintenance. The test of all organization is naturalness and permanence. Nothing should be established as part of the ordinary church life of the people which they cannot understand and carry on.
3. All financial arrangements made for the ordinary life and existence of the church should be such that the people themselves can and will control and manage their own business independently of any foreign subsidies. The management of all local funds should be entirely in the hands of the local church which should raise and use their own funds for their own purposes that they may be neither pauperized nor dependent on the dictation of any foreign society.
4. A sense of mutual responsibility of all the Christians one for another should be carefully inculcated and practiced. The whole community is responsible for the proper administration of baptism, ordination and discipline.
5. Authority to exercise spiritual gifts should be given freely and at once. Nothing should be withheld which may strengthen the life of the church, still less anything be withheld which is necessary for its spiritual sustenance. The liberty to enjoy such gifts is not a privilege which may be withheld but a right which must be acknowledged. The test of preparedness to receive the authority is the capacity to receive the grace.

**REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

For each of Allen's five lessons, discuss the impact on the views you have of mission and how it should be carried out.

cal considerations may have applied. Travel in Paul's day was far more dangerous than in many parts of the world today (Winter 2000), and traveling in groups was one of the best ways to ensure safety. Although initially Paul and his named companions (Barnabas and later Silas) were colleagues, later he was the one in charge, and the companions were helpers rather than colleagues (Marshall 2000, 106).

Ninth, persecution was a crucial part of Paul's circumstances (See Hafemann 2000), but it did not deter him from proclaiming the gospel. He lived through the very thing about which he warned the churches on the follow-up leg of his first journey: the path of the kingdom is a path of hardships (14:22). Hardships did not deter Paul, and they are not to deter missionaries today. The reality that more Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001, 2:229) stands as a stark reminder that what Paul said twenty centuries ago still applies in many parts of the world today.

Tenth, Paul was flexible in his financing. Occasionally he depended on the hospitality of God's saints (Acts 16:14–15) or the contributions of various churches (Phil. 4:16), but most typically he generated his own income through making tents (Acts 18:1–4; 20:33–34; 1 Cor. 9:3–18). Though Paul's practices were flexible, Roland Allen notes that there were some boundaries for him:

There seem to have been three rules which guided his practice: (1) that he did not seek financial help for himself; (2) that he took no financial help to those to whom he preached; (3) that he did not administer local church funds. (Allen [1912] 1962, 49)

**Encountering Mission in the Epistles**

The various epistles that comprise the rest of our New Testament were written as occasional letters. Prompted by a certain occasion, event, or concern about a church, a community, or an individual, each epistle tends to focus on the specific issues facing the intended audience. They were written to address concrete situations rather than as general treatises, and so they tend not to

be taught which cannot be so grasped and used.

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offer systematic treatments of topics except when those topics are of immediate concern to the readers.

One looks in vain for a focus on a theology of mission in any epistle. However, interwoven among them are the great themes of mission already seen in the rest of the Scrip-

*There is perhaps little theology of missions as such in the New Testament because it is in its totality a missionary theology, the theology of a group of missionaries and a theology in missionary movement. Thus it does not present a theology of missions, it is a missionary theology.*

(George Peters [1972, 131])

tures. For the purposes of our discussion we will focus our attention on five selected themes seen in these epistles that continue the divine drama of mission. For each theme we cite only a sampling of the possible supporting ideas and verses available.

#### THEME 1: GOD'S MERCY EXTENDS TO ALL PEOPLE

Although Paul's specific calling was to reach the Gentiles (Rom. 1:5; 15:17–19), the very fact that Gentiles were included indicated that the offer of the gospel was a universal offer. Jesus died for all (Rom. 5:18–19; 2 Cor. 5:15), and God wants all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). Therefore the offer of salvation extends to all—to Gentiles and Jews, slave and free, men and women (Gal. 3:28). All are given the opportunity to worship the King of kings. The amazing vision given to John of the gathered throng before God's throne, which includes people "from every nation, tribe,

people and language" (Rev. 7:9), indicates that God's offer will be accepted among all peoples (though not by every person) of the world before the end.

#### THEME 2: MISSION INVOLVES A MESSAGE

The message is from God (Rom. 1:1), and the content of that message is central (Gal. 1:6-8). It incorporates the centrality of Jesus (Rom. 1:3-4; 2 Cor. 5:19, 21), the reality of every person's estrangement from God (Rom. 3:23), the fact of his coming judgment (1 Thess. 1:9-10), and the need to respond (2 Cor. 5:11-21) as empowered by God's grace (Eph. 2:8-9). The idea that salvation comes through works undermines God's plan of redemption (Rom. 10:3; Gal. 2:21; Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 3:9), though works are intimately related to the Christian life (Eph. 2:10; James 2:14-26).

Jesus is the reality of God's plan for people (Col. 2:8-12). Because Jesus came as a humble, obedient servant, God chose to exalt him above all others (Phil. 2:6-11; Heb. 2:9). He is the Lamb of God, slain before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8) and now seated at the right hand of God (Eph. 1:20). Though the message is constant, the means to communicate that message must adapt to fit the situation and the people being reached (1 Cor. 9:22-23).

#### THEME 3: MISSION FACES A SUPERNATURAL OPPONENT

Mission and spiritual warfare are inextricably intertwined. The unbelieving world or domination system (Wink 1992) is under Satan's sway, being held captive to his schemes. He blinds those in the domination system (2 Cor. 4:4). They are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-3) and are slaves to his tactics and nature (Gal. 4:3, 9). For a season Satan and his hosts are

allowed to continue to exert authority here on earth in his domain of darkness (Col. 1:13; Eph. 2:1-3).

The reality underlying the limitations on Satan's activity is framed by the fact that Jesus is successful in his mission to destroy the works of Satan (1 John 3:8) and set people free from fear of the power of death (Heb. 2:14-15). Though it is true that Jesus completely defeated Satan and his forces at the cross (Col. 2:15-22), that total defeat has not yet been fully manifested (Heb. 2:8), although it will be in God's timing (1 Cor. 15:24-26).

Christians, having been declared a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), are God's children (Rom. 8:15-17; Eph. 1:4-5), are given Christ's authority (Col. 2:10), and are called to engage in the kingdom conflict (Eph. 6:12) in the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 10:3-5). They do this by submitting to God and resisting Satan (James 4:4-9; 1 Pet. 5:5-9).

#### THEME 4: GOD IS SOVEREIGNLY IN CHARGE OF MISSION

The sovereignty of God is clearly in evidence. He is a loving (Rom. 5:8) "Daddy" (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:4-6), yet still the immortal, invisible, eternal King of kings (1 Tim. 1:17; 6:14b-16), who is over all, in all, and through all (Eph. 4:6), and in whom all things hold together (Col. 1:17). He created and governs the world (Acts 17:24-28), and gives generously to all he created (James 1:5-8, 17) while working all things toward good for those who love him (Rom. 8:28-30).

As the Sovereign One, God's plans for peace (1 Cor. 14:33a) cannot be thwarted. His foolishness is greater than human wisdom; his weakness is greater than human strength (1 Cor. 1:25). He is the one from whom all things come and for whom all people live

(1 Cor. 8:6), and ultimately the one whom all nations will worship (Rev. 15:3-4).

#### THEME 5: WE ARE CHRIST'S AMBASSADORS

In Christ, Christians have been given a new position as (1) a chosen race (1 Pet. 2:9-12) (or elect generation [from Isa. 43:20]); (2) a royal priesthood (Exod. 19:6), sharing in the kingly ruling with Christ (Stibbs 1959, 104); (3) a holy nation (Exod. 19:6); and (4) a people for God's own possession (based on Hos. 1:6-10; 2:23). There is a purpose for the Christian's position: to proclaim the excellencies (virtues or eminent qualities) of God. Michael Lawson notes,

While God's people await the coming of their King, they are not passive. They are a people with a purpose. Corporately, they are to "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." In short, God's people are to be a sign of the kingdom. (Lawson 1987, 135)

God works in Christians (Phil. 2:12-13), enabling them to grow (1 Cor. 3:7) and to do the works already prepared for them (Eph. 2:8-10). Based on their submission to Christ, they do not wage just a defensive battle, but actively and offensively engage the enemy of their souls using God's rules of engagement. These include overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12:21) and returning curses with blessings (1 Pet. 3:8-12) as God's ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:18-21). New Testament scholar Philip Hughes points out, "This ministry with its message of reconciliation is, in the ultimate issue, the one thing needful for our world in all circumstances and in every generation" (Hughes 1962, 206).

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#### THEME 5: WE ARE CHRIST'S AMBASSADORS

In Christ, Christians have been given a new position as (1) a chosen race (1 Pet. 2:9-12) (or elect generation [from Isa. 43:20]); (2) a royal priesthood (Exod. 19:6), sharing in the kingly ruling with Christ (Stibbs 1959, 104); (3) a holy nation (Exod. 19:6); and (4) a people for God's own possession (based on Hos. 1:6-10; 2:23). There is a purpose for the Christian's position: to proclaim the excellencies (virtues or eminent qualities) of God. Michael Lawson notes,

While God's people await the coming of their King, they are not passive. They are a people with a purpose. Corporately, they are to "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." In short, God's people are to be a sign of the kingdom. (Lawson 1987, 135)

God works in Christians (Phil. 2:12-13), enabling them to grow (1 Cor. 3:7) and to do the works already prepared for them (Eph. 2:8-10). Based on their submission to Christ, they do not wage just a defensive battle, but actively and offensively engage the enemy of their souls using God's rules of engagement. These include overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12:21) and returning curses with blessings (1 Pet. 3:8-12) as God's ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:18-21). New Testament scholar Philip Hughes points out, "This ministry with its message of reconciliation is, in the ultimate issue, the one thing needful for our world in all circumstances and in every generation" (Hughes 1962, 206).

Buttressing this idea is the logical chain that Paul presents in Rom. 10:6-17: (1) people can call on Christ only if they have already believed in him; (2) they can believe in him only if they have heard him; (3) they can hear him only if someone proclaims the message; and (4) the message can be proclaimed only if God commissions someone to proclaim it (adapted from Cranfield 1985, 262). Culver emphasizes the gist: "There is no plainer statement of the mandate in all of literature, biblical or otherwise. Some must go with the gospel to the people who have not yet heard it and others must send them!" (Culver 1984, 121).

#### ACT 7: RENEWING ALL CREATION: THE CONSUMMATION

The first act of creation foreshadows the final act in that God has promised to replace the current sinful order with a new, glorified one. The consummation will restore the universe to the order that the world had at the time God declared, "It is good."

Not surprisingly, the final act of the divine

*Jesus told us plainly that the world will become a most unpleasant place and evil will multiply and even apparently triumph, but at the same time [Christ's] people will multiply and spread across the face of the earth. Everything is heading towards a climax—both evil and good. It will be high tide at midnight.*

Patrick Johnstone (1998, 87)

drama of mission in the Bible is the most difficult to describe. Ultimately, John Piper

## CASE STUDY: A GROUP CONVERSION

Paul G. Hiebert

*(Hiebert and Hiebert 1987, 158-60 [used with permission])*

Mark looked at the chief and elders before him and at the more than two hundred men, women, and children crowding behind them. "Have they all really become Christians? I can't baptize them if they don't each decide for themselves!" he said to Judy, his wife.

Mark and Judy Zabel had come to Borneo under the Malay Baptist Mission to start a new

work in the highlands. They spent the first year building a thatched house, learning the language, and making friends with the people. The second year they began to make short treks into the interior to villages that had never heard the gospel. The people were respectful, but with a few exceptions none had shown any real interest in the gospel. Woolfak

was always around and had been from the beginning. In time he had become a believer, but few of the others took him seriously. He was something of a village maverick. And there had been Tarobo and his wife and four others. By the end of the third year, the worship services were

made up of these seven baptized believers. Mark and Judy, a few passersby, and a dozen children. That year an epidemic had spread through the highlands. For weeks Judy and Mark went through the villages, praying with the sick and dispensing medicines, until they thought they could go on

no more. They wept with families faced with death and told them of the God who loved them and had conquered death itself. One village in particular had suffered

greatly from the disease. Though the people seemed to appreciate the love shown by the two missionaries, they had shown no particular interest in the gospel. Three months later, two elders from this village had come to the mission home, wanting to see the missionaries. "Can you come to our village and tell us more about your God?" they asked. "We want to know more about him."

Mark and Judy were excited. Their many hours on the trail in the rain and the weary days of ministering to the people were bearing fruit. Taking some food, water, changes of clothes, cots and nets, they set out for the distant village.

It was almost dark when they arrived. The village chief invited Mark into the men's long house where all the adult males of the village were gathered. Judy joined the women, who sat in front of their huts discussing the decision to make. She sensed that there had been much

is right: mission is a temporary activity of the church that will cease when the roster of worshipers is complete.

When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. (Piper 1993, 11)

One very clear element of the consumption is the portrayal of the extent of the

kingdom of God. An uncountable multitude of people from "every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev. 7:9) will stand before God; no one will escape the consequences of the end of history. This is a vivid reminder that our current missionary task extends to every person on the planet.

When the divine drama closes, mission will come to an end. The passion of the Christian until that time is to be intimately involved in the process of urging others to recognize their state of separation from

discussion in the village before she and Mark had been invited to come. Now there was a feeling of excitement and uncertainty in the air. Some of the women wanted to know more about this new God. Others said that it was best to stay with their ancestors who cared for them in the spirit world, and with the tribal gods who had helped them to be victorious over their enemies in the past.

In the long house the chief asked Mark to tell them more about his God. For three hours Mark told the men about the Jesus Way and answered their questions. Then the chief asked Mark to sit down on a log. Mark noticed that the men broke up into smaller groups, each made up of men from the same lineage. For half an hour there was a loud debate as men argued for and against following the new God. The arguments died down, and then the leaders from the various lineages gathered with the chief. Again there was a heated discussion. Finally the chief came

to Mark and said, "We have decided to follow the Jesus Way. We want to be baptized! Woolfak and Tarobo."

Although it was late, neither Mark nor Judy could sleep the meeting. The decision the village, especially the it was made, had caught totally by surprise. They knew that tribal people often make important decisions, such as moving their villages or neighboring tribes, by group consensus. But never dreamed that people might use this method to a new god. All their theological training in their church at College had taught the missionaries that people to make personal decisions become followers of Christ. The group leaders had decided for all. What did that mean a valid decision, especially some had opposed the decision. How could they baptize whole village when not agreed? Then again, what

God, to repent, and to commit themselves to Christ and thereby join the great throng around the throne worshipping God forever. This urging is done by the way Christians live, as reflections of God's glory in a dark world. It also is done by the way Christians speak, imploring people to be reconciled to God through Christ. Finally, this urging is done by the way Christians live out the firstfruits of God's coming kingdom

**DIY:**  
**MISSION**

Used with permission)

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It was almost dark when they arrived. The village chief invited Mark into the men's long house where all the adult males of the village were gathered. Judy joined the women, who sat in front of their huts discussing the decision the village elders were about to make. She sensed that there had been much

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Although it was late, neither Mark nor Judy could sleep after the meeting. The decision of the village, especially the way it was made, had caught them totally by surprise. They knew that tribal people often made important decisions, such as moving their villages or raiding neighboring tribes, by discussion and group consensus. But they never dreamed that people might use this method to choose a new god. All their theological training in their church and Bible College had taught the young missionaries that people had to make personal decisions to become followers of Christ. Here the group leaders had decided for all. What did that mean? Was it a valid decision, especially when it was clear from the debates that some had opposed the choice? How could they baptize the whole village when not all were agreed? Then again, what did

it mean in Acts when the jailer believed and Paul immediately baptized him and his whole household? Moreover, if they did not accept the villagers as Christians, the villagers might return to their old gods. Judy and Mark knew that they had to do something before they left the next day.

As Mark and Judy searched for an answer, suddenly the great spirit gong in the men's long house rang out. Hurrying over to find out what was going on, Mark found the chief and asked him why they were summoning the tribal spirits, now that they had become Christians. "Don't worry," the chief said. "We are calling them to tell them to go away because now we have a new God."

Judy and Mark were still uncertain as they finally fell asleep, bone-tired and knowing that they would have to give the chief and the village an answer in the morning.

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through acts that show his love and compassion, his desire for justice to rule the nations, and his infinite mercy graciously extended to all.

Every person's life path is to point toward the consummation of the divine drama of mission. May God give us all the strength to live faithfully his vision of learning to delight in him as our loving, merciful, creating redeemer!

**CONCLUSION**

As we have seen, the story of mission is presented through the panorama of Scripture. From beginning to end, the themes of God's deep love for all people, our subsequent rebellion against him, Christ's sacrificial giving of himself, our responsibility to worship God by reflecting his glory, and calling the nations to repentance have been clear and compelling. In light of the events and emphases of the divine drama, what should be a corresponding theology of mis-

sion? That question we will take up in the next chapter.

In the case study for this chapter we explore the process of conversion, one of the great themes in the New Testament drama. One question that missionaries face in many cultures is whether or not it is possible for groups of people to convert at the same time. North Americans are accustomed to the idea of individual conversion, and the case study challenges them to consider what should be done when an entire group wants to convert.

# Encountering

**INTRODUCTION**

To many people, the word *theology* conjures up images of dusty tomes lining towering bookshelves. The connection between theology and real life is lost somewhere in the library entryway. Even so, theology does have an essential role to play. Good theology is not about endless debates over the nature of God or predestination, but about establishing grounds for what people do and providing reasons for the way Christians minister to others: Theology is important—as long as academic theologizing is not confused as Christian living!

What are the important theological issues in mission today? Before that question can be answered, we need to understand mission itself. In this chapter we explore some of the words used for mission. After that, we will look at some of the more important ideas used in the study and practice of mission today.

**LAYING THE GROUNDWORK**

Many organizations talk about their mission. There are missions to explore space,

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