

A Study of Successful Missional Strategy: Paul at Corinth
May 30, 2008
House Church Retreat
Text: Acts 18:1-11

As a house church, our vision is to glorify God through initiating church planting among Muslim background followers of Jesus Christ here and across the nations. We seek to model intentional *prayer, evangelism* and *Biblical community* that can be reproduced by Muslim background believers in Jesus Christ here in the U.S., among their people and among the unreached peoples of the earth.

To help recast our vision, I would like to study one case of a successful missional strategy: Paul at Corinth (Acts 18:1-11). We've been focusing very intently on Acts 17:26-27 for much of the school year, now I want to take us a chapter forward and show you how when it came to Paul, *his theology was always missiologically applied and his missiology was always theologically based.*

What we will do is read the text and then I am going to walk us through the text asking two questions: "What does it say?" (Examination) and "What does it mean for us today?" (Application).

[READ the text]

- **Paul went to Corinth**
 - **Examination:** This was infamously pagan city. We would have called this a "hard city to reach". We see here Paul obeying the command of the Great Commission to "Go".
 - **Application:** We have been called by called to leave comfort, to leave our families for the sake of His mission.

- **Doctrine Missiologically Applied**
 - **Examination:** The text says that Paul "found" Aquila and Priscilla. We don't know if Aquila and Priscilla were already believers at this point of "finding" Paul. Some believe that they were part of the church at Rome. What I find interesting is that Aquila was actually originally from the southern Black Sea coast in modern Turkey, as it says in v. 2, "a native of Pontus". God had chosen Aquila and Priscilla for His work. He moved Aquila from Pontus to Rome. Then He used persecution from Claudis, the emperor of Rome, to move Aquila and Priscilla out of Rome to Corinth. This is what Ralph Winter calls the "involuntary go mechanism". It is evident that Paul had his eye open to where God was working.

Paul stayed with them. In 18:7 we see Paul moving and staying with Titus Justus. Here we see two strategies at work:

- Paul knew the value of relationships in mission. He chose to stay with them rather than at an inn. He was building a team. He was transferring DNA.
 - Paul's strategy seen here was built on the solid foundation of the doctrine he preached to the Athenians in 17:26-27. There is supernatural, eternally significant meaning to places of residence.
 - **Application:** Paul built his missiology on his theology and he applied his theology missiologically. This is how our church should be: always applying our theology and always basing our missiology on our theology.
- **Reaching not just one family but an entire city.**
 - **Examination:** His "custom" (Acts 17:2) was to go straight to the place where he knew he would contact as many hearers as possible: the synagogue (cf. Acts 13:14). He also preached in the "marketplace" (Acts 17:17) as well as political/judicial centers (Acts 17:22). He aimed for gospel saturation in the public sector (at the Areopagus), the private sector (marketplace), and the religious sector (synagogue). His audience was the religious *and* the pagan.
 - **Application:** Paul's task was to reach the city, not just one family. Paul knew the value of *filtering* a city for where God was working. His strategy was to enter a town and head to the synagogue where he would reason and persuade people that Jesus is the Christ. *Our task should be the same: reach the entire community of Muslims in our city.* If there are 15,000 Muslims in our city, how are we going to see that all of them have a chance to respond to the Gospel?
- **The Missional Team**
 - **Examination:** In this passage alone we see Paul relying on current team members (Silas and Timothy, v. 5) as well as building new team members (Aquila and Priscilla, Titius Justus).
 - **Application:** Paul understood that the advance of the Kingdom requires the hearts, hands, heads, and homes of all kinds of people working in communication with each other. We must not forsake missional community, not only because its Biblical, but also because its needed for our own health and vitality.
- **Paul preached Jesus.**
 - **Examination:** In the synagogue in Corinth he "reasoned" and "persuaded". What was he reasoning and persuading about? V. 5 tells us the answer in 2 ways: 1) Paul was "occupied with the word". Here the text means the written Scripture. 2) What about the word? The text clarifies what he was likely occupied with in the word: "he was testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus". Because he was "reasoning" and "persuading" people, most of which, had a Jewish worldview, it seems most likely that his occupation with the word was one where he was seeking every means possible to show the people

that whole Scripture points to Jesus as the Christ. Acts 28:23: “From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets”. The person of Jesus was Paul’s main message. Therefore, he could tell the Corinthians later in his letter that “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). In terms of the Great Commission, Paul was “making disciples” of Jesus and baptizing them (v. 8). *To sum up, Paul main message was a call to Jesus. His main text was the Scripture.* (cf. Acts 17:2-3; 20:21, 24; 23:11; 28:23).

- **Application:** Paul understood that nothing advances the Kingdom in cities except the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It might be a “foolish” message to some, but it is effective for calling out God’s people from the city into His church. *We must be intent with our Muslim friends to focus on talking about Jesus with them. Friendships don’t save people. Lifting up Jesus to the place He deserves does* (John 12:32).

○ Rejection

- **Examination:** V. 6: Paul’s first strategy in Corinth was blocked by “opposition and reviling”. What did Paul do? He “shook the dust off his feet”. He moved on to focus on the Gentiles more directly. We see the same thing happen at Antioch of Pisidia. Acts 13:46, “And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you [the Jews] thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.’”
- **Application:** Most missional strategies are blocked or “fail” *at least* once by opposition or mere circumstances. Bob Roberts says that if you are not experiencing failed church planting efforts, you are not planting enough (*The Multiplying Church*). Instead of seeing these shifts in strategy as failures, we need to see them as opportunities with potential. After Paul and Barnabas shifted strategy at Antioch at Pisidia (to the Gentiles), the text says that “the Gentiles heard [about the shift in strategy and] they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord” (Acts 13:48). At Corinth, we see that the opposition caused a change in strategy that yielded the fruit of Crispus – the ruler of the synagogue next to Titius Justus’s house! In other words, a block in strategy or opposition can be a blessing of God. Francis Bacon wrote: “Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament, adversity is the blessing of the New” (Wiersbe, Warren W. 1989. *The Bible exposition commentary*. Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books. 476). *In sum: we have always got to ready to shift strategy to where we see God moving and to what is practically working.*

- **Unintentional Fruit**
 - **Examination:** Following the directive of the Lord Jesus (Luke 10:10-11) Paul shakes the dust of his feet after being rejected by the Jews in Corinth. His first strategy failed, at least by our standards. Interestingly, Paul shifts residence at this point from a Jewish household (Aquila and Priscilla) to a Gentile household (Titius Justus). Let us note Paul’s missiological purpose here – incarnation and respect gathering. Thus, Paul sets his ministry towards the Gentiles in Corinth. At that moment though, something happens that Paul does not intend – the salvation of the household of Crispus Justus, the “ruler of the synagogue”!
 - **Application:** God may move in ways that we do not intend – in fact, in ways opposite of what we intend! Just like in the case of the salvation of Crispus, God may be using our obedience in “moving on” to call His people to which we formerly ministered to Himself! The point here is that if Paul did not obey God in shaking the dust of his feet and moving to the house of Titius Justus, we have no indication that Crispus would be saved! Obedience to God, even when it doesn’t make perfect sense to us, is the most fruitful endeavor.
- **God’s people**
 - **Examination:** V. 9-10. Here we see the third of six visions God gave to Paul (9:3-6; 16:9-10; 22:17-18; 23:11; 27:23-24). God tells Paul not to take courage and keep preaching the Gospel. The reason God gives Paul is that He is with Paul and that he has “many in this city who are my people”. Here God is keeping His promise given in the Great Commission: “I am with you always” (Mt. 28:20). How is He with him? Through His people. Now this is an interesting phrase given that most people in Corinth – even though “many” were being saved – were still not Christians. How can God have many in the city when most of the city was still lost to the Gospel? Jesus provides insight for us: “And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” (compare Acts 13:48). In other words, God the Father has given the Son sheep in the city of Corinth and when He calls them, they WILL hear and they WILL become part of the flock of God.
 - **Application:** I believe whole-heartedly that God the Father has people in this city who are now Muslims (“not of this fold”) who He has given to the Son. And I believe that one day the Son will call them out and they will hear his voice and they will follow Him! *Do you believe that?!*

 [Optional]

Great Commission Parallel

We see in this passage a micro-example of the working out of the Great Commission:

- “Go therefore”: Paul went to Corinth, a pagan city (v. 1)
- “Make disciples”: Titius Justus (v. 7), Crispus (v. 8), and the many others who believed in Corinth
- “Baptizing them”: v. 8
- “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”: Paul stayed 1.5 years to ensure that the new church in Corinth knew the word of God (v. 11)
- “I am with you always”: God kept his promise (v. 9-10).