

2009

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Recommended Citation

Yinger, Kent, "Paul and Evangelism: A Missiological Challenge from New Testament Specialists" (2009). *Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary*. Paper 58.

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Paul and Evangelism

A Missiological Challenge from New Testament Specialists

KENT L. YINGER

The necessity and relative importance of evangelism have been topics of serious missiological debate since the early twentieth century. This is particularly the case with the evangelicals, who are often characterized by passionate commitment to personal evangelism “to the ends of the earth.” However, recent work on mission and evangelism in Paul’s letters has raised disturbing questions in regard to this missiological conviction. Congregational and individual passion for evangelism do not appear to be “Pauline.” This article introduces readers of Missiology to this vigorous and growing missiological debate among New Testament scholars, and examines possible responses by mission practitioners.

The early decades of the twentieth century saw missiologists vigorously discussing the necessity and importance of evangelism. Evangelicals, known for zealous commitment to carry out personal evangelism among all people, have been at the forefront of such discussions. Phrases like “love the lost,” “share your faith,” and “reach the world for Christ” highlight this passion. Abundant fuel for this fire seemed to lie in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s writings. “Evangelism was the prerogative and the duty of every Church member” (Green 2004:380). Paul’s converts “were to be consumed by passion . . . !” “He expected them . . . to be committed to evangelism just as he was” (O’Brien 1995:106, 107).

However, recent work on mission and evangelism in Paul’s letters has raised disturbing questions in regard to this missiological conviction.

It is striking that the numerous, often rather specific exhortations that Paul addresses in his letters . . . *do not include appeals to be active in mission and evangelism* and to work toward winning additional inhabitants of their cities and of the surrounding villages to faith in Jesus Christ. (Schnabel 2004:1452, emphasis added)

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Congregational and individual passion for evangelism do not appear to be “Pauline.”

Since most readers of *Missiology* are not specialists in biblical studies, this article will introduce them to the vigorous and growing missiological debate among New Testament scholars over this issue, and will examine possible responses by mission practitioners.

Paul and Evangelism: A Debated Issue in Biblical Studies

After quite a lull in the study of Paul and mission, a renaissance of interest is underway.¹ Nearly all of these more recent studies conclude that “Paul never assigns the task of evangelism and missionary outreach to the local Christian community as such” (Schnabel 2004:1455). Even those who utilize Paul’s letters to press for a mission mandate for churches and individuals admit there is “little written in the Pauline letters about the need for Christians to evangelize” (Köstenberger and O’Brien 2001:191). For clarity, the debate does not focus on whether *Paul* was committed to world evangelization, whether he felt himself, or his itinerant team, obligated to a worldwide mission. Nearly all interpreters are agreed that he did.² Rather, the issue is whether and in what ways Paul’s letters call his churches and converts to active involvement in that mission.

*An Orientation to the Debate*³

Michael Green’s *Evangelism in the Early Church* (1970; rev. 2004) is probably the best-known evangelical treatment of the subject and remains an excellent introduction to the motives, method, and message of early Christian evangelism. He is a strong exponent of the central importance of personal evangelism in the NT, but his treatment of Paul’s letters is scattered throughout the volume. He notes the importance of “professional ministers” in this task (apostles, presbyters, philosopher/teachers), but agrees with Harnack that the mainstay of early evangelism must have been carried out by the common believer, what Green calls “informal missionaries.” When examining the motives for early Christian evangelism, a Pauline mandate is never found. Instead Green points to NT and early church examples of widespread evangelistic activity and suggests a number of theological motivations for such activity, especially gratitude for God’s gift of salvation and a sense of concern for the lost (2004: esp. chapter nine, “Evangelistic Motives”).

During attempts to stir Australian churches to evangelism, Peter T. O’Brien noted “there were relatively few texts in Paul’s letters urging believers in his churches to evangelize others” (1995:x). He finds two major supports for a Pauline mission mandate: (1) a few texts do speak of Paul’s expectation — Ephesians chapter six is Paul’s “Great Commission” to his churches; (2) Paul generally expected his congregations to mirror his own attitudes and actions, including especially his commitment to world evangelization. Similar to Green, O’Brien represents a thoroughgoing attempt to argue for a Pauline expectation that his congregations actively engage in evangelistic outreach to win the lost around them. Each believer was to be “consumed by passion” for winning the lost.⁴

James Ware’s 1996 Yale dissertation saw publication in 2005 in revised form as *The Mission of the Church*. While limited to a study of Philippians chapters 1–2, he, like O’Brien, identifies a strong mission mandate in Paul. In particular, he finds numerous echoes of the Isaianic tradition of a pilgrimage of the nations to Zion and

suggests that Paul viewed the Philippian believers (along with all believers) as the eschatological Israel who was to be the light to the nations. Ware engages in detailed interaction with (and rejection of) the positions of Bowers and Dickson (see below).

Eckhard J. Schnabel's *Early Christian Mission* (2004; German original 2002) — a massive two volume work (nearly 2,000 pages) — is intended to replace Harnack's classic, but now 100-year-old, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity*. No one speaking on any aspect of mission in the earliest church can avoid interaction with Schnabel's treatment. In discussing "The Lack of Exhortations to Active Missionary Participation" (vol. 2, pages 1452–1456), he concludes that "Paul never assigns the task of evangelism and missionary outreach to the local Christian community as such" (Schnabel 2004:1455). Schnabel here represents a broad consensus on the absence of explicit calls in Paul's letters to evangelistic outreach. However, alongside this lack of explicit calls, Schnabel concludes that Paul *expected a certain degree of commitment by his congregations to this worldwide mission*.

Paul does not direct the churches to initiate missionary projects in other regions of their province or the Roman Empire: this is primarily the task of the apostles and of other missionaries whom the churches have commissioned. But Paul commends and praises the missionary commitment of individual churches. And he hopes that the believers' conversations and lifestyle in everyday situations will contribute to and support God's desire that more Jews and more Gentiles hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, accept it by faith and join the church, which thus continues to grow. (Schnabel 2004:1485)

If Schnabel's work represents the best recent treatment of early *Christian* mission, John Dickson's *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities* (2003) takes first place on the subject of *Paul* and mission. His book seeks to answer one focused question: "In what ways and to what extent were Paul's converts expected to promote their new-found faith to unbelievers" (Dickson 2003:4). His answer overlaps nicely with that of Schnabel. He argues convincingly that no call to active congregational or individual engagement in local or regional mission can be found in Paul's letters (Dickson 2003: esp. 94–122). Dickson's particular achievement is in showing how this negative result (no explicit mandate) coheres with an equally strong expectation of *active congregational mission commitment*. Paul's churches were to be actively involved in local outreach via authorized heralds (e.g., evangelists) and in the larger mission of the gospel via partnership with Paul. This sets the stage for a two-dimensional view of mission: apostolic heralds (including local evangelists) proclaimed; congregations partnered with them in a variety of ways (e.g., prayer, giving, adorning the gospel through ethical behavior).⁵

Survey of Pauline Evidence

The debate just reviewed centers upon specific passages in the Pauline corpus; it is to those texts that we now turn after a brief look at Jewish antecedents to Paul's views.

Antecedents for a Pauline Mission Mandate?

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert. (Matt. 23:15)⁶

By the mid-twentieth century there was general agreement that first century Judaism was a missionary religion, and thus a precursor to Paul's mission. Harnack could speak of Judaism's vigorous and successful "missionary impulse" (Harnack 1908:9), and Jeremias could view the first century as "*par excellence* the missionary age of Jewish history" (Jeremias 1958:12). This common view was, however, challenged in quick succession by McKnight (1991) and Goodman (1994), and was reiterated forcefully by Feldman (1993).

Final consensus has not been reached, but a mediating position seems to be emerging as the best way forward. With only a few exceptions, Jewish communities did not view active proselytizing as their obligation. However, "some Jewish teachers took it upon themselves to instruct Gentiles in the way of the Torah. They thus assumed a role analogous to that of a 'missionary'" (Dickson 2003:50, see also chapters one and two).

Neither did Paul's Gentile environment yield antecedents for active proselytizing. Greco-Roman philosophies did not generally seek converts, but adherents. "Their mission was to educate rather than proselytize" (Goodman 1994:37, see further 20–37, "The Diffusion of Cults and Philosophies in the Pagan Roman Empire"). Nor did Hellenistic religions engage in analogous mission efforts.

The Pauline Evidence⁷

This section will briefly review the most contentious passages (roughly in order of decreasing contentiousness). Our question again is, Do Paul's letters contain appeals to congregations and/or individuals to win others in their vicinity to faith in Christ? Although the New Testament guild (including this author) generally concludes that Paul did not make such appeals in his letters, dissenting views will be noted, allowing readers to consider for themselves the weight of the evidence.

1 Thess. 1:8

For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.

An initial reading of this text suggests that Paul is praising the Thessalonian believers for their commitment to regional evangelism: they had actively propagated ("sounded forth from you") the evangelistic message ("word of the Lord") so as to relieve the apostle himself of any further need to evangelize in that region ("so that we have no need to speak about it"; see Ware 1992:126–131).

It is equally possible, however, that Paul is giving thanks for the widespread report about the Thessalonians' conversion, a report which has become known to other Christian communities ("in every place your faith in God has become known . . . how you turned to God from idols," 1:8–9; so Wannamaker 1990:83). While this view has the better arguments in my opinion (in which case there is no reference to evangelistic activity on the part of the Thessalonians), even the former view falls short of a call for personal or congregational evangelism, suggesting at best Paul's pleasure when congregations engaged in regional evangelism.

Phil. 1:27

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.

Here, too, it sounds as though Paul praises a congregation for their evangelistic activity — “striving . . . for the faith of the gospel” (so O’Brien 1995:116–117). The literary context, however, points toward living worthily of Christ in the face of opposition (see esp. verses 27a, 28a). The athletic imagery of playing as a team (“striving side by side”) parallels “standing firm in one spirit,” and refers to their unity in common life rather than to evangelistic activity.

Phil. 2:15–16

... so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to [ἐπέχοντες] the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

The NIV translation suggests a possible evangelistic intent in this verse: “as you *hold out* the word of life” instead of the NRSV’s “*holding fast* to the word of life” (see esp. Ware 2005:256–270). However, ἐπέχειν does not normally carry this evangelistic sense, and most commentators agree with the NRSV’s rendering above.⁸ Paul’s concern about ministering “in vain” has to do with the failure of his converts to persevere in their faith, not with their failure to evangelize (cf. 1 Thess. 3:5; also 1 Cor. 15:2). “Shin[ing] like stars in the world” refers to the converts’ blameless and unblemished perseverance in following Christ rather than to their evangelistic endeavors.

Eph. 6:15

As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace.

According to Peter O’Brien, this is the “Pauline Great Commission” since it speaks of readiness to proclaim the gospel (O’Brien 1995:109–131). Paul’s language reflects LXX Isa. 52:7 — “as the feet of one preaching glad tidings of peace” — a text used elsewhere by Paul to speak of those who preach the good news (Rom. 10:15). Reference can be made to the offensive nature of the weapons (e.g., sword of the Spirit), suggesting the aggressive, forward thrust of evangelism, and to sandals as the proper footwear for runners with a message.

The obscurity of the language resists dogmatism, but a different interpretation is to be preferred and can be seen readily in Barth’s translation — “steadfast because the gospel of peace is strapped under your feet (lit. having your feet strapped in readiness of the gospel)” (Barth 1974:770). Or, as Lincoln states matters, “The reference is . . . not to readiness to proclaim the gospel . . . but to the readiness or preparedness for combat and for standing in the battle that is bestowed by the gospel of peace” (Lincoln 1990:449). This understanding better suits the literary context which is part of a final call to “stand against the wiles of the devil” by “put[ting] on the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:11; see verses 10–20, esp. verses 13 and 14).

Col. 4:6

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

It is certainly not beyond possibility that some sort of gospel witness could be included in the “gracious speech” given in response to outsiders’ queries (“how you ought to answer”). Even this, however, is far from a call to active personal evangelism. More to the point, this verse is expanding on how believers are to “conduct [themselves] wisely toward outsiders” (verse 5a), and is thus more concerned with the avoidance of public reproach than with outreach.

Rom. 1:8

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world.

This text has been seen by some as pointing to a worldwide mission on the part of the Roman congregation. Paul is more likely giving thanks “that people in the Roman capital had bowed the knee to the Lord Jesus . . . something that would be widely known” (Moo 1996:57).

Conclusion

As noted earlier, there is general consensus that Paul’s letters yield no direct call to active evangelism. Our brief review of Pauline passages confirms this point. There is much less agreement as to what this lack of an explicit mission mandate means for current theology and mission practice.

Paul and Evangelism: Possible Directions

For mission practitioners, this lack of an explicit Pauline call to evangelism could call forth varying responses. Five will be sketched here, of which the final two are considered good ways forward for evangelical missiologists.

Reject, De-emphasize, or Redefine World Evangelization

If biblical scholars are correct that the earliest churches were not characterized by clear plans, methods, or strategies for world evangelization, some suggest that the most biblical approach would be to abandon or at least de-emphasize world evangelization on the personal and congregational level.

Quite a number of related moves in this direction have been taken in the past century or so (see the concise overview in Neill and Chadwick 1986). Some argue for a form of pluralism or universalism which makes unnecessary a conversion to Christian beliefs. Among conciliar Christians a call was heard at one point for a moratorium on mission. Others highlighted the gospel’s impact on societal structures. Although not intended by early proponents of the social gospel as a call to abandon world evangelization, this position, nevertheless, developed in that direction, calling at least for bringing world evangelization down from a place of priority to a level of equality with issues of social justice. Mention could also be made here of calls for dialogue among religious traditions as an alternative to Christian evangelism.

Limit Evangelism to Apostolic or Monastic Offices

A different approach can be seen in patristic and Roman Catholic sources. According to the former (second to fifth centuries), (1) the apostles, not the church, were the recipients of Christ's mission commands (e.g., Matt. 28:18–20), and they fulfilled that mission mandate. (2) The universal presence of the church meant that the gospel had already been extended to the ends of the earth. (3) Conversion was up to God (and thus not a subject for human planning). (4) The major concern of the church should lie in the cultivation of the faith among believers since a healthy church is the greatest evangelistic tool in this age. Thus, one finds in the patristic period very few prayers for the conversion of outsiders, and missions was not usually a matter of direct discussion (Brox 2000: esp. 339–356). In the subsequent period (roughly A.D. 600–1500), the various monastic or missionary orders of the Roman Catholic Church were the primary practitioners of the mission mandate (Bosch 1991: chapter seven, "The Medieval Roman Catholic Missionary Paradigm," esp. pages 230–236, "The Mission of Monasticism").

Seek to Find a Mission Mandate in Paul (or in the New Testament)

Some heirs of the Protestant Reformation headed in a different direction. In opposition to a prevailing cultural optimism, Fundamentalists stressed the individual's need for deliverance from sin's damning guilt as the universal human predicament. Aiding others to find this deliverance was the highest priority for the church, and "the goal of every Christian is to lead people to Christ through witnessing to the power of salvation" (Hoppe 1997:168). Evangelicals have distanced themselves from much of the anti-intellectual current in Fundamentalism, while generally retaining commitment to evangelism as the highest priority (Fiedler 1997:144–146).

As noted above, biblical scholars among this group acknowledge that Paul's letters contain no *explicit* call to such personal or congregational mission commitment. From a variety of angles they argue, however, that Paul nevertheless expected his congregations to actively engage in world evangelization (so O'Brien 1995; Ware 2005). Texts are mined for their possible implications in this direction. The apostle's interest in others' "partnership in the gospel" (Phil. 1:5 NIV), his own model of missionary passion for the lost, and the logic of his dynamic gospel message, all point to one conclusion, they argue. Some suggest the apostle's expectations had been made so clear when he founded or visited these churches that there was no need to give further explicit instruction when writing.⁹ Alternately, the lack of a Pauline mandate might be considered irrelevant since sufficient mandate can be found elsewhere in the New Testament. Acts gives testimony to a more informal evangelistic activity on the part of common believers who "went from place to place, proclaiming the word" (Acts 8:4). In addition, an unmistakable mandate is given by Christ himself: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19a). As was noted above, however, in earlier church history this was not heard as a mandate to every-member evangelism, but as a commission to the apostles. It was primarily the modern Protestant missionary movement which saw in this text the fundamental and clearest NT mandate to world evangelization and to personal evangelistic responsibility (Davis 2001). Furthermore, a differing voice (or silence!) on Paul's part would remain a deeply troubling fact for those who consider themselves heirs of the Protestant Reformation, so centrally

founded on the testimony of the apostle Paul. Particularly for the evangelical wing of the church, it cannot be taken lightly when something at the heart of their identity does not appear to have been at the heart of the premier NT missionary's vision for his churches.

The next two responses take seriously the findings of Pauline studies as to the lack of an evangelistic mandate as well as the central evangelical commitment to evangelism. The first seeks to retain the personal evangelistic mandate and recognizes that this may only be possible with the adoption of some notion of progressive interpretation or revelation. The second follows Paul in omitting a personal evangelistic mandate, but envisions a more general mission-commitment that encompasses every believer.

Invoke Progressive Interpretation (or Revelation)

If evangelical identity correctly sensed the trajectory of the NT vis-à-vis world evangelization and the evangelistic mandate (especially the conviction that winning others to faith in Christ is the chief task of every Christian and congregation), and if this identity cannot be demonstrated by explicit Pauline (or NT) mandate, some understanding of progressive revelation or interpretation vis-à-vis an evangelistic mandate may provide a way forward.

Modern discussion of progressive revelation appears to have begun with John Henry Cardinal Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (repr. 1960 [1878]). For Newman this is not the revealing of heretofore unrevealed matters; rather it is the "full elucidation" of that which was given "once for all by inspired teachers" (i.e., canonical revelation). Other, generally more conservative, Christian scholars, have been more cautious about post-canonical "revelation," and speak more comfortably of progressive illumination or unfolding of that which was earlier partial and less clear (Packer 1978:143–158).

Whether termed progressive "revelation" or progressive "unfolding," conservatives have typically been amenable to the idea that God's revelation has such a progressive character *within the canon*. However, they normally wish to stress that such progressive revelation *reached its endpoint with the closing of the NT canon* (Grudem 2001). I. H. Marshall has recently pressed this issue anew, calling upon evangelical scholars "to provide some kind of reasoned, principled approach to the question of the development of doctrine from Scripture" (Marshall, Vanhoozer, and Porter 2004:45). He questions whether the adoption of the canon meant "a conclusion to doctrinal and ethical development" and suggests, "The closing of the canon is not incompatible with the non-closing of the interpretation of that canon" (Marshall, Vanhoozer, and Porter 2004: 54). One need look no further than the "Trinity" or a "closed canon" for generally accepted instances of progressive revelation. Marshall calls for a re-opening of the issue, but prefers to speak of the ongoing "interpretation of the canon" rather than "progressive revelation."

Thus, in order to retain world evangelization as central and essential to Christian identity, evangelicals may need to embrace some notion of progressive revelation or interpretation vis-à-vis evangelism. Whichever terms are chosen, it may be part of the distinctive evangelical contribution to the Christian movement to insist to the worldwide church that God is revealing his own commitment to reach all peoples at

all times with the unique message of Christ, and that he is calling all congregations and every individual believer to active involvement in this mission.¹⁰

No Mission Mandate in Paul, but an Implied Mission-Commitment

A final possible response does not presume an every-member evangelistic mandate. Dickson and others have made a convincing case that Paul expected from his converts and congregations “mission-commitment” (Dickson 2003; Schnabel 2004). While he did not give them a mandate to personal evangelism and world evangelization, there is plenty of evidence that he did expect them to be involved in various ways in the divine mission of taking the gospel to the nations. At the least, Paul expected this commitment to entail partnership in his own apostolic mission to the Gentiles. References to prayer for (1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1; Col. 4:2–4; Eph. 6:19–20) and financial support of (Phil. 1:3–5; 4:14–18; 1 Cor. 16:6; 2 Cor. 1:16) apostolic ministry are found regularly; and the churches supply him with personnel (Phil. 2:25; Col. 4:12–13; see Dickson 2003: chapter six, “Mission-Commitment as Financial Assistance,” chapter seven, “Mission-Commitment as Prayer,” and Appendix A, “Epaphroditus: Courier and Missionary?”). In relation to their own city, there are indications of locally recognized prophets, evangelists, and teachers (Phil. 1:14; 4:2–3), and Paul expects their assemblies to have some effect upon unbelieving outsiders (1 Cor. 14:23–25). In the case of a mixed marriage (a Christian with an unbelieving outsider), Paul is explicit about the evangelistic potential: “Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife” (1 Cor. 7:16).

This model provides a Pauline mandate to a full-orbed mission-commitment by every believer and congregation, but stops just short of laying upon every believer a mandate to be personally engaged in verbally propagating the gospel (“witnessing” in evangelical usage; see esp. Dickson 2005).

Conclusion

Specialists in the respective disciplines of missiology and Pauline studies traverse disciplinary boundaries only infrequently. Recent developments in the latter discipline demand greater interdisciplinary discussion, particularly by evangelical missiologists. This article seeks to further such discussion.

Notes

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

1. See “An orientation to the debate” below. Thus, William Larkin’s justified 1998 complaint that “since World War II, little attention has been given to the theme of mission” [in NT studies] is being remedied (Larkin 1998: 1).

2. See Gal 1:15–16; Jer 1:5; and the discussion of Paul’s missionary calling in Lietaert Peerbolte (2003: chapters 4–5).

3. For older standard treatments see Harnack (1908) and Hahn (1965). Since 2000: Plummer (2006), Nissen (2004), Schnabel (2004), Dickson (2003), Lietaert Peerbolte (2003), Köstenberger and O’Brien (2001), Bolt and Thompson (2000), Reinbold (2000), and Ådna and Kvalbein (2000).

4. For similar voices, see Swigchem (1955) and Plummer (2006).

5. The writings of Paul Bowers (1976; 1991) head in the same direction.

6. Although the precise aim of these travels is disputed (proselytizing of Gentiles or god-fearers to Judaism, intra-Jewish proselytizing to Pharisaism, etc.), it is generally acknowledged that this verse does not constitute evidence for a widespread Jewish proselytizing mission; cf. Bird (2004).

7. Since limitation of “Pauline evidence” to the seven undisputed letters would make no difference in the conclusions reached on this point, and since some missiologists hold to a 13-letter Pauline canon, I will include both disputed and undisputed Paulines in this review.

8. ἐπέχειν: primarily “to maintain a grasp on someone or something” (BDAG). See the commentators listed in Dickson (2003).

9. While this possibility cannot be denied, it does seem strange that Paul felt it necessary to repeat so many other important items already communicated orally (e.g., avoid immorality and idolatry), but not this one.

10. On comparable developments in Roman Catholic missiology since Vatican II, see Bosch 1991: 371–372, and 368–510 on “Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm.”

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