

FULFILLING THE GOSPEL: THE SCOPE OF THE PAULINE MISSION

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When the apostle Paul surveys his missionary career in Rom 15:17-21, his summary statement gives rise to a fundamental question about the Pauline mission. Paul declares that "from Jerusalem and around as far as Illyricum" he has so "fulfilled the gospel" that he no longer has any room for ministry in these parts. What to Paul's mind had he done within these geographical limits to achieve such a firm sense of a task completed? In Paul's understanding, what sort of activity fell within the scope of his mission? What did he take himself to be doing in his mission?

The activity that for Paul was proper to his missionary vocation would on first glance seem a matter hardly requiring further inquiry. The evidence appears to be straightforward and familiar enough. And yet it is not least when evidence appears to be obvious that inaccurate judgments are risked. In this case the influence of Paul's characteristic terminology in summing up his career, or our own unexamined impressions of what is (properly speaking) missionary activity, may well unwittingly have led either toward a too exclusive or a too inclusive notion of what Paul took his task to be, or perhaps toward an adequate delimitation but with the accents wrongly placed.

At the risk therefore of belaboring the obvious I propose to call into review the data available on the activity that for Paul fell within the intended scope of his missionary vocation, beginning in brief with the more apparent and continuing in detail with the less apparent.

I. EVANGELISM

That in Rom 15:19 Paul speaks of having within certain limits "fulfilled the gospel" immediately highlights how characteristic it is for the apostle to refer to "the gospel" as that with which his own vocation is centrally involved. In the very same passage in Romans, for example, he has already defined his assignment as "ministering the gospel" (Rom 15:16). At the beginning of the letter he has identified himself as one "set apart for the gospel" (1:2) and as one who serves God "in the gospel" (1:9). He tells the Thessalonians that he has been "approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel" (1 Thess 2:4). To the Galatians he recounts how the Jerusalem leaders recognized that he had been "entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcision" (Gal 2:7). He does all things "for the sake of the gospel" (1 Cor 9:23). He goes to Troas "in the gospel" (2 Cor 2:12) and as far as Corinth "in the gospel" (2 Cor 10:14). The Philippians he thanks for their partnership "in the gospel" (Phil 1:5,7). He commends Tim-

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othy to them as one who serves with him "in the gospel (2:22),¹ and he mentions others who have been fellow laborers with him "in the gospel" (4:3). To the Colossians he identifies himself as one who has been made a servant of the gospel (Col 1:23).² In those contexts throughout his writing where Paul directly alludes to his vocation, a sense of involvement with the gospel is conspicuous.

What Paul understands himself to be doing with that gospel is implicit in the original word itself, the *euangelion*. He repeatedly designates his proper work to be *euangelizesthai*. This is the case whether he is thinking of (1) the task assigned him: "Christ sent me . . . to proclaim the gospel" (1 Cor 1:17); or (2) his characteristic vocational activity: "making it my aim to proclaim the gospel" (Rom 15:20); or (3) his principal line of action in a mission setting: "Because of a bodily ailment I proclaimed the gospel to you the first time" (Gal 4:13); or (4) what he should like to do in the future: "in order to proclaim the gospel in lands beyond you" (2 Cor 10:16).³

Such familiar and plentiful data may easily give the impression that Paul was, so far as his distinctly missionary activity is concerned, devoted merely to preaching campaigns, to simple acts of gospel proclamation. Reflecting on the passage in Romans 15, Wrede for example wrote:

If the name of Christ were only preached in every province, then the whole world . . . would have heard the gospel. Looking at things thus we can easily see how so great a spur to action as the approaching end of the world would drive him in a swift quest of new fields of preaching.⁴

More recently Barrett has commented:

It is evident therefore that when Paul says that in this region he has completed the Gospel of Christ, he does not mean that he (or anyone else) has preached the Gospel to every person in it, but that it has been covered in a representative way. The Gospel has been heard; more could not be expected before the *parousia*.⁵

Assuredly proclamation had a primal status in Paul's sense of mission, as his characteristic terminology suggests. And yet from the larger body of evidence it is equally apparent that Paul's evangelic mission embraced for him very much more than mere oral activity stage by stage throughout the world. That the gospel had been heard was not by any means enough for the apostle. He expected more before the *parousia*, and he attempted more.

¹See also 1 Thess 3:2.

²See also Eph 3:6-7.

³For further examples in the same sequence see (1) Gal 1:15-16; (2) 1 Cor 9:16-18; Gal 2:2; (3) 1 Cor 15:1-2; 2 Cor 11:7; Gal 1:8, 11; 1 Thess 2:9; (4) Rom 1:15; Eph 6:19. Cf. also 1 Cor 9:23; Phil 1:7, 16; 1 Thess 2:2, 8; 2 Tim 1:10-11.

⁴W. Wrede, *Paul* (London: Green, 1907) 47-48. Yet later, incongruously but correctly, Wrede can say: "A transient proclamation of the gospel was not enough for Paul; for him everything depended on well-founded communities. The care which he expends in making them such belongs to his missionary work just as much as does his restless journeying to new fields, and the preaching by which he lays a first foundation" (p. 56).

⁵C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: A. and C. Black, 1957) 276.

Paul took service itself, without reference to its successful outcome, as meaningful. Simple faithfulness is praiseworthy in God's sight (1 Cor 4:1-5). But beyond that act of service he was very much concerned with its results. He might indeed portray himself in his mission as a fragrance confronting people along the route of Christ's triumphal progress, to some a harbinger of death, to others of life (2 Cor 2:14-16). But this does not imply an indifference to the variant responses thereby evoked. He meant not only to confront people but as well to win them. This is especially evident when he describes at some length the pains that he takes to identify himself with all sorts and conditions of people in order that he might, as he puts it, "gain" them for the gospel (1 Cor 9:19-22). He strives to please all, seeking thereby not favor for himself but their salvation (10:33). He speaks to the Gentiles "that they might be saved" (1 Thess 2:16). He is sent not only to proclaim to the Gentiles but also to secure their obedience (Rom 1:5; 15:18; cf. 16:26). He is especially concerned that hearing be accompanied by heeding (10:14-21). Mere proclamation was not enough. Paul proclaimed with the intention to convert.

Paul's understanding of his task in terms of conversion is of a piece with his familiar commitment to primal evangelistic work. He is devoted for his part to the unconverted regions, to introducing the gospel where as yet no one has invoked the name of Christ (Rom 15:20-21; 2 Cor 10:13-16). That Paul perceives his role as initiatory in nature is apparent as well in the specific metaphors he applies to his vocation: He plants (1 Cor 3:6-9; 9:7, 10, 11); he lays foundations (Rom 15:20; 1 Cor 3:10); he gives birth (1 Cor 4:15; Phlm 10); he betroths (2 Cor 11:2).

II. CHURCH PLANTING

But just these initiatory figures of speech point beyond conversion to an additional dimension of that which for Paul was proper to his mission. He was not only proclaiming and converting; he was also founding communities.

That Paul in his mission did bring communities into existence is a commonplace, and yet it is a commonplace of not inconsiderable import for any attempt to grasp Paul's concept of his missionary task. Not all religious propaganda is directed at converting, nor by any means is all converting intended to issue in the generation of communities. One may compare the intentions, for example, of the Jewish proselyte movement of Paul's own background, or the intentions of the Hellenistic wandering preachers of his day. Both groups were concerned in some sense with conversions, but neither was directly concerned with founding new communities.⁶ For Paul, however, conversion meant incorporation. Baptism is baptism into the body of Christ. The new believer implicitly becomes a believer-in-community, and Paul is concerned in his mission not only with the emergence of such believers but also with the emergence of such communities, for only in such a setting could that which is offered in the proclamation be properly realized and experienced.

Among the forms therefore by which Paul recognizes the results of his

⁶See e.g. P. Bowers, "Paul and Religious Propaganda in the First Century," *NovT* 22 (1980) 316-323.

mission in any area the corporate tends to predominate. Thus when he addresses his letters to those who have believed in Corinth or Thessalonica or Philippi, the addressee is a community. That all Paul's major letters are directed to church communities is surely not without significance. Indeed the existence of such groupings is for Paul the very authentication of his apostolate (1 Cor 9:2; 2 Cor 3:1-3). It is noteworthy that when in his letters Paul refers generally to those who have responded to the gospel in his mission territories he tends to refer to them not as aggregations of converts but as bodies of believers, not collectively but corporately.⁷

This is not to propose that in Paul there is disinterest in the individual. Nor is it to trace out his missionary conception in terms of a polarity between individual and corporate results. It is a question not of imposing an either/or upon his thought but of recognizing the operation of a part/whole there—and of not mistaking the part for the whole. The kind of task in which Paul is involved is focused through and beyond the individual upon the corporate grouping. Perhaps it is of some significance that Paul does not, for example, call himself a fisherman, a figure preserved in the synoptic traditions with reference to the early Christian mission. Paul does not, it would appear, picture his task ultimately as catching men—as an act, that is, of simple aggregation. To revert to one of his own metaphors, it is worth noting that Paul pictures himself not as a maker of bricks but as a builder of buildings.⁸

Paul certainly considers his task to be *evangelic*, but it would be a substantial distortion of the shape of his vocational task as he understood it and practiced it to represent his mission therefore as simply *evangelistic*, the seeking of converts. The vocation of evangelic proclamation was for Paul a larger complex than evangelism. For him it was a mission that embraced evangelism within an ecclesiological intention.

III. NURTURING EMERGING CHURCHES

That Paul in his mission was devoted to the emergence of church communities does not however fully encompass the relevant data on the activity that Paul took to be appropriate to his missionary vocation. Paul's vision was not limited merely to initiatory efforts. If he wishes to go only where there is need for a first foundation to be laid, this does not mean that in such cases Paul is only concerned with putting in that foundation. If he will not build on another's foundation, this does not mean that he is disinterested in construction on what he himself has laid.⁹ Paul repeatedly displays commitment not only to founding

⁷So. e.g. 1 Cor 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33b; 16:1, 19; 2 Cor 8:1, 18, 19, 23, 24; 11:8, 28; 12:13; Phil 4:15; 2 Thess 1:4; cf. also Rom 16:1, 4, 16.

⁸1 Cor 3:9-10; 2 Cor 10:8; 12:19; 13:10.

⁹1 Cor 1:17 on first glance might appear a direct contraction to this: "Christ sent me not to baptize but to proclaim the gospel." Paul seems here expressly to limit his assignment to evangelistic activity, to the exclusion of ministries devoted to development of the community. But that assumes an equation of baptizing with church nurture and of proclaiming with initial outreach. The reverse is more likely. And in any case in context Paul's point is not that his assignment is restricted to proclaiming to the

but also to upbuilding, not only to begetting but also to rearing, not only to planting but also to nurturing.¹⁰

The significance of such activity for a study of Paul's understanding of his mission may easily be misassessed, if for no better reason than the modern conventional equation of mission with evangelism. Given such an equation, nurturing becomes not so much a missionary as a post-missionary function, to be understood as adjunctive rather than integral to Paul's specifically missionary activity. We must therefore inquire more closely into how this task of nurturing emerging churches appeared to Paul himself. There are at least three different lines of evidence deserving consideration: (1) the manner in which Paul proceeded in his missionary activity, (2) the priorities evident in Paul's disposal of his missionary energies, and (3) Paul's own direct reflection on his missionary responsibilities.

1. *Paul's practice.* In Paul's missionary plans and movements an urge to establish fledgling communities is prominent. For example, revisitations of previously founded churches are a regular feature of Paul's missionary career. Near the end of Paul's first tour, as reported in Acts, the party was on the direct road home eastward to Antioch. Nevertheless it turned back at Derbe, retracing its steps, strengthening and organizing the groups already brought into being in the earlier phase of that tour (Acts 14:21–28). The second tour was suggested as, and in its first stage was, a mission of revisitation (15:36; 16:1–5). During the Ephesian mission Paul considered, and also made, at least one visit back to Corinth as part of his efforts to attend to the unstable situation there.¹¹ His Aegean work concluded with another revisitation to the churches founded in that area.¹² And several of his prison epistles reflect intentions to revisit the communities addressed.¹³

Coupled with Paul's habit of revisitation are the residential missions that Paul pursued first at Corinth and then at Ephesus. These were not merely extended evangelistic campaigns. They represent a prolongation of the sort of ministry Paul initially undertook toward his Thessalonian converts, only to have it cut short: "You know how, like a father with his children, one by one we exhorted you and encouraged you and charged you to walk worthy of God" (1 Thess 2:10–12). Insofar as the pattern of Paul's plans and movements is available to us, there is no restless rushing from one new opening to another

exclusion of baptizing but that it is centered on proclamation rather than on baptism. 1 Cor 1:17 is a disparagement not of the work of building up the church but of the place of baptism in that effort. Similarly 1 Cor 3:6, "I planted, Apollos watered," may appear to limit Paul's functions to initiatory action, but the letter itself, being a deliberate act of "watering," belies this. So also does Paul's adjacent argument in 4:14–21 that since it was he who begat, he expected to be accorded among the Corinthians as well the right to render fatherly direction. In 3:6 Paul is stating not the terms of his commission but the actual historical experience of the Corinthian church in its earliest phase.

¹⁰1 Cor 2:6; 3:2; 4:15, 17; 9:7; 2 Cor 11:28; 12:14; 13:9–10; Gal 4:19; 1 Thess 2:7, 11.

¹¹1 Cor 4:18–19; 16:5–7; 2 Cor 2:1; 12:14; 13:1.

¹²Acts 19:21; 20:1–6; 1 Cor 16:5–7; 2 Cor 1:15–16; 2:13; 7:5; 9:4–5; 12:14, 20–21; 13:1–2, 10.

¹³Phil 1:24–27; 2:24; Phlm 22.

but rather a methodical progress concerned both with initiating work in new areas and at the same time with bringing the emergent groups in those areas to stable maturity.

This aspect of Paul's missionary practice is evident not alone in the pattern of his own movements but also in the use he made of the team of helpers who participated in his work. Remarkably, in the data available to us, whenever members of the team are found dispatched by Paul on a tour they are engaged not in a new evangelistic thrust but in confirming the already existing churches. Timothy and Silas act in this capacity for Paul in Macedonia when he himself is forced to leave (1 Thess 3:1-8). Titus and Timothy are Paul's emissaries in the Corinthian developments.¹⁴ Timothy is dispatched to the church at Philippi (Phil 2:19-24). Tychicus is sent to Colosse.¹⁵ Doubtless various helpers were employed as well in evangelistic ventures away from Paul, as surely they were when accompanying him. Epaphras at Colosse may be such an instance. But Paul's team as it is visible in his letters is a church-nurturing team.

Paul's attention to the nurture of churches that he had founded is most directly demonstrated by the very letters themselves. This literature would never have come into existence had Paul been concerned only with winning converts and generating communities. The letters are not evangelistic pieces. The Paul who is available to us at first hand is available almost exclusively in his pastoral missionary role. Thus while his evangelistic preaching must be approached through secondary accounts or hints and asides, for his mission of nurturing emergent churches we have immediately, extensively and in detail how he operated and what he said.

But if we grant that a ministry to existing churches was integral to Paul's missionary activity, we may yet legitimately inquire how this accorded with his inner orientation.

2. *Paul's priorities.* Paul has been described as one "always pressing on to find new fields to conquer, leaving the new converts to fend for themselves after the minimum of instruction."¹⁶ Such an assessment is probably influenced by our familiarity with the modern missionary endeavor with its rather ponderous mobility, which contrasts so sharply with Paul's rate of movement. A comparison of these variant tendencies, which cannot but make Paul appear in a hurry, has its points of interest no doubt. But what is important for our present inquiry is not what we think of Paul's rate of movement but how he perceived it, whether the resulting impression about Paul corresponds to Paul's own outlook on his task. Did he feel himself in haste to evangelize? Does he manifest anxiety to be free from nurturing churches in order to press forward in the spread of the gospel? How do the task of evangelism and the task of confirming churches relate within Paul's own urgent sense of vocation?

¹⁴1 Cor 4:17; 16:10-11; 2 Cor 2:13; 7:6-7, 13-15; 8:6, 16-17, 23; 12:18.

¹⁵Col 4:7-9 (cf. Eph 6:21-22). Cf. also 1 Tim 1:3-4; 2 Tim 4:10, 12; Titus 1:5.

¹⁶M. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970) 169.

John Knox has described Paul as irritated by the petty but necessary ecclesiastical chores that fitted so poorly his own true inner urgings: "It is clear that this pastoral and administrative work irked him and that he wanted to be free of it. One can readily sense his relief when he writes Rom 15: at last he can take up again the work he was really called to do!"¹⁷ But was the care of the churches for Paul secondary to his evangelistic interests? Indications are not lacking in Paul's letters of his disposition and his priorities when faced in his mission at once with an opportunity for evangelism and a need for edification.

1 *Thess* 2:17–3:13. The first indication comes from the period when the ministry in Achaia had just begun. Opening to Paul's ministry was a whole new region where Christ had not been named. But Paul, one discovers, was at this very time anxiously attempting to depart from his new mission territory in order to return to the already founded community at Thessalonica.¹⁸ After leaving Macedonia, as he recalls, "with great desire we made every effort to see you face to face, because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again" (1 *Thess* 2:17–18). When he could stand the separation no longer he dispatched Timothy in substitute "to establish you and to comfort you concerning your faith" (3:1–5). Timothy's return with good news left Paul relieved, but he still wished to return, "night and day praying most earnestly that we may see your face and may perfect what is lacking in your faith." And he prayed that God would therefore yet "direct our way to you" (3:10–11).

Here is not someone trapped in pastoral work and eager to be released for the mission territories beyond but, rather, a man in new mission territory strikingly anxious to return to work still incomplete within an already existing community.

2 *Cor* 10:13–16. Writing to the Corinthians Paul, contrasting himself with others, speaks of his practice of keeping strictly to his own assigned sphere of labor, not encroaching on the territories of others. Thus when in the mission

¹⁷J. Knox, "Romans 15:14–33 and Paul's Conception of His Apostolic Mission," *JBL* 83 (1964) 7. Knox also raises the point in *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (London: A. and C. Black, 1954) 106–107. He recognizes that Paul was "unwilling to be merely the evangelist," that Paul felt he must "remain near his churches long enough really to establish them firmly and to determine the general lines of their further growth" (Knox attributes this to Paul's disinclination to be displaced by others in the life of his churches). At the same time Knox stresses that Paul "was at heart the itinerant, the pioneer." "Paul did not particularly relish this role of superintendent of churches, either in its administrative or in its teaching and counseling aspects. . . . He says that he has not wanted to build on another's foundations; it seems clear that he did not really enjoy building even on his own. . . . One can sense his deep relief as he turns his back upon money-raising, petty peacemaking, trying to answer all sorts of, to him, rather unimportant questions, and faces toward the open west again" (p. 107). Similarly Knox, *The Epistle to the Romans* (IB; New York: Abingdon, 1954) 358–359. Compare G. Bornkamm (*Paul* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971] 54–55): "It is perfectly astonishing to see . . . how quickly he left scarcely founded churches and traveled farther, instead of taking time to care for them and train them. . . . Paul was most certainly not indifferent to the churches he left behind. . . . And yet he could do no other. . . . The great goal of carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth kept him always on the move and gave him no rest."

¹⁸For the evidence that 1 Thessalonians comes from the period immediately following Paul's initial mission to that city and not from a later period see the discussion in I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1983) 20–23, and the literature there cited.

of the gospel he reached as far as Corinth he was, he says, operating within his own sphere. And he expresses to the Corinthians his hope "that, your faith increasing, we may attain with you a greater enlargement, still within our assigned limits, namely the proclamation of the gospel in lands beyond you" (2 Cor 10:15-16). The relation of the clauses in the passage is poorly articulated, giving rise among commentators to some uncertainty in interpretation.¹⁹ But in any case the presence of the participial clause "your faith increasing" indicates clearly that Paul's hope of proclamation beyond Corinth is for him conditional upon a growth in faith at Corinth—in sequence to, rather than abandonment of, his Corinthian ministry. The possibility of a new Pauline missionary thrust in the future is tied directly to a prior development of faith in the existing Corinthian community, a community that in the apostle's mind was anything but firmly settled at this time.

2 Cor 2:12-13. Following Paul's mission in Ephesus he arrived in Troas to find an open door for the gospel. But, as he tells the Corinthians, this opportunity for evangelistic mission was superseded in his attention. Not finding Titus with news of the evolving Corinthian situation he restlessly left Troas, going on into Macedonia in quest of information and renewal of contact. In this case his concern over an already existing church takes direct precedence over his interest in initiating a new work.²⁰

The sense of priorities demonstrated in these three instances is instructive. In one case Paul wished to abandon new work in favor of completing existing work; in another case he did abandon new work for this reason; and in a third case he refused to abandon existing work to take up a new venture.

With these examples should be coupled the striking negative fact that no-

¹⁹The rendering offered here is based on H. Lietzmann, *An die Korinther, I-II* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1949) 142-144, who takes the two aorist infinitives "enlargement" (2 Cor 10:15) and "proclamation" (10:16) as appositive, so that the hoped-for enlargement of 10:15b is nothing else than the proclamation beyond Corinth of 10:16a. However, Lietzmann then takes the problematic phrase *en hymin* with the preceding "growth in your faith" (10:15). This, though possible, leaves that phrase awkwardly redundant. I take *en hymin* with the "enlargement" that follows, as suggested by the word order, and understand it instrumentally (as in the text above): "that we may attain with you (i.e. by you, with your help) a greater enlargement" (cf. 1 Cor 6:2). It is entirely possible that Paul was hoping that the Corinthian church, once matured and stabilized, would cooperate with and support him in the extension of his ministry beyond them. Compare 1 Cor 16:6: "Perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may speed me on my journey, wherever I go" (see also 2 Cor 1:16). Paul's relations with Philippi would be analogous, as would be his hope that the Roman community would furnish a base for the Spanish mission. However, the presence of the participial phrase "your faith growing" alone, without use of Lietzmann's rendering, or my own, is sufficient to establish the fact that Paul makes a new evangelistic outreach conditional upon spiritual growth at Corinth. The alternative rendering proposed here simply makes this clearer.

²⁰In contrast, in 1 Cor 16:7-9 a "new door" seems to take precedence over a revisit: "I do not wish to see you now just in passing; . . . I will stay in Ephesus, . . . for a great door for effective work has opened to me." But, first of all, the context makes clear that here it is a question not of priorities but of timing, a timing governed by the shifting developments at Corinth (cf. 2 Cor 1:23-2:13). Paul is saying, "I don't want to see you just now, so I will stay at Ephesus, where a door is open." He is not saying, "Because a door is open at Ephesus, I will stay here rather than come to see you." And second, one must not assume that the "open door" is for evangelism; it probably combined evangelism with the sort of church-nurturing ministry that characterized Paul's extended residencies, including that at Ephesus, as discussed above.

where either in the letters or in Acts are we offered examples of Paul ever leaving a newly emerging church expressly for the purpose of undertaking a mission into yet unreached territory. Paul's recorded departures from newly emerging churches are for the purposes either (most frequently) of fleeing persecution, or of returning to the home base, or of revisiting already existing work, or no clear explanation being offered. In "exceptions" that might come to mind, either there is no evidence that churches were founded (e.g. Cyprus on the first tour), or the departures were not in order to initiate new work (e.g. leaving Cilicia at the beginning for Antioch), or no information is given on the reason for departure (e.g. Athens on the second tour).

This important body of evidence is, however, not to be sorted out in terms of a preference by Paul for edificatory over against evangelistic activity, simply reversing the usual placement of accents. Rather the explanation is to be sought in the unity of Paul's sense of assignment. He has one task, a task proceeding through preaching and converting to the founding of churches and through the founding of churches to their firm establishment. Circumstances permitting, the completion of such a task in one area took precedence for him over beginning such a task in a new area.²¹

3. *Paul's description of his assignment.* While a review both of Paul's missionary practice and of his missionary priorities is significant for exploring the relating in Paul's understanding between his personal missionary commission and the task of nurturing churches, ultimately the question must be addressed from within the context of Paul's own description of his assignment. A crucial deposit of such material occurs in the letter to Colosse.

Col 1:24—2:7. The primary focus of the Colossian letter, and of its modern students, is on the Colossian heresy and its Christological antidote. Our interest at this point is rather in the less familiar passage on Paul's own vocation, located between and intimately related to the theological and polemical materials—namely, *Col 1:24—2:7*. Though the passage is replete with exegetical complications and ambiguities,²² the general tenor is nevertheless recoverable from several elements of the passage that are themselves quite free of uncertainty.

It is clear that Paul is engaged (at least in part) in a commentary on his vocation assigned by God (1:25a). This vocation involves him (at least in part) in admonition and teaching about Christ, directed toward bringing people to maturity in Christ (1:28). Paul considers this personal vocation to have some specific bearing on his Colossian readers (2:1). In the face of a danger that the

²¹Compare the different assessment of Bornkamm (*Paul* 57): "His letters reveal an unmistakable tension between the wide sweep of his missionary plans and care for his churches. . . . For the sake of his great, distant objective he could never stay long in any particular church, but had to hurry on elsewhere. On the other hand, his responsibility for his churches more than once compelled him to change or postpone the great plan. Thus, his whole activity was determined by two opposed currents, one driving him onward and another holding him back."

²²See e.g. P. Bowers, "A Note on Colossians 1:27a," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 110–114, and the discussion of this in P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word, 1982) 85–86.

Colossian Christians might be diverted from carrying through on their initial reception of the gospel, Paul is anxious that they become firmly grounded and built up in Christ (2:4, 6, 7).

These particular elements are straightforward in the passage. If we then connect them together, a single line of thought emerges. Paul explains his vocation as designed to attend to just the sort of need present among the Colossian believers: The growth and stability they require in the present crisis corresponds to a fundamental aspect of his own assignment—namely, to bring people to maturity in Christ. This simple theme, based on evident elements in the otherwise often obscure paragraph, has the merit not only of offering the rest of the paragraph a workable coherent scheme but also of permitting the paragraph to fit meaningfully into the structure of the letter as a whole.

In the opening paragraph of the letter Paul refers to the mission of Epaphras, which brought the Colossian community into being. Paul deliberately treats this event as part of the universal expansion of the gospel (1:3–6). And he is concerned for the perfecting of this mission. Recalling his close connection with Epaphras, he explains: We on our part are now engaged in prayerful concern for your spiritual growth (1:7–11). The prayer blends imperceptibly into a Christological pericope shaped to furnish a positive theological base for the polemic to come (1:15–20). This hymnic affirmation is then turned back expressly upon the Colossians themselves, who are described as taken up within the cosmic scheme of redemption, made objects of the reconciling ministry of Christ in his death, and granted thereby a confident expectation of ultimate acceptance—if (reverting to the concern of 1:7–11) they remain firmly established (1:21–23a).

And precisely at this last point Paul reintroduces himself within the larger scheme. This, Paul says, is where I and what I have to say to you in this letter fit in. It is in that same divine program of which you have experienced the salvific benefits that I hold my commission (1:23b). It is this that binds us together, that makes this communication between us appropriate. I function for the church's sake, proclaiming and admonishing so as to bring each person right through to the mature stability that assures of glory (1:24–29). And so my letter to you is but a part of my function for you within the divine scheme (2:1–7). In the light then of God's Christ-plan (1:12–20), your place in it (1:21–23), and my place in it (1:24–29) for you (2:1–7), let me minister to you in the particular dangers you are facing (2:8 ff.).

The major thrust of the Colossian letter is the communication of the mystery of the total Christ and its application to the Colossian situation, in order to bring the community to a mature stability in face of the threatening heresy. The passage under consideration demonstrates that Paul desired not only to carry out this program through his letter but also to be understood by his readers to be so doing. In writing this church with which he had no personal acquaintance he felt especially called upon to account for that intended ministry of his toward them that the letter represented. Therefore he makes a point of locating his own vocation directly within the divine plan, which has through the work of Epaphras embraced the Colossians. In 1:24—2:7 Paul places in a theological setting, of a piece with the doctrinal content of the letter, his own ministry within the larger redemptive plan of God now being carried out for

them by his letter. That ministry—attending to the mature establishment of believing communities, such as that at Colosse—Paul declares to be integral to his assigned role in the divine economy.

Rom 1:1–15; 15:14–16. The same outlook may also be observed, in more dispersed form, in Paul's letter to Rome. Paul is faced with the need to account for his interest in a church with which he has had no direct personal involvement, an interest now made apparent both by his letter and by his plans to visit. As in Colossians, Paul here explains his seeming forwardness by reference to his own vocation assigned by God.

Embedded in the structure of the opening salutation itself (Rom 1:17) is an important perception in this respect. Paul identifies himself to the Romans as one who through Christ has received apostleship "for obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, among whom are you also" (1:5–6). It should be noted that this self-identification is not part of the salutation proper. Rather it is part of the remarkably developed insertion between two of the fixed elements of that salutation, between the formal reference to the writer, "Paul" (1:1a), and the formal reference to the readers, "to all who are in Rome" (1:7a), an insertion of which the Christological formula is the prominent but by no means only feature. Following upon the (not abnormally elaborated) reference to the writer (1:1) are four successively dependent points of reference: the gospel long promised (1:2), concerning Christ (1:3–4), through whom Paul has his assignment (1:5), which includes the Roman Christians (1:6).

Thus before Paul comes within his salutation to the formal specification of the addressees he offers a theological rationale for such addressing. He first relates writer and reader within the scheme of the gospel of Christ. The link between the two, between Paul and the Romans, is furnished by Christ himself. Through him and for him Paul has an assignment (1:5), and this assignment includes the Romans within its scope (1:6a), who like Paul belong to Christ by divine summons (1:6b). They not only have a common Lord but, more to the point, by that Lord's design one party has a commission to serve the other party. It is precisely because of Paul's divine assignment for the Gentiles that he may therefore carry through the formalities of his salutation, that he may continue by writing: "Paul . . . to all in Rome" (1:1a, 7a).

The specific aspect of commissioned ministry that Paul envisages toward the Romans surfaces in the paragraph that follows (1:8–15). After expressing thanks to God for their faith, assuring them of his continuous prayers, and adding that these prayers have included a request to be allowed to visit them, Paul continues: "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, for your establishment" (1:11). Here Paul discloses the heart of his proposed role for the Roman Christians within his divine assignment. It is an edificatory function that he expressly envisages.

Immediately upon confessing this wish to assist them Paul, sensible to the delicacy of the situation, shifts the reference to a reciprocal ministry of encouragement (1:12). But this does not displace the fact that he does desire to affect as well as to be affected, for he continues that his interest in coming has been "that I might have some fruit among you, as I have had among the rest of the Gentiles" (1:13). This "fruit" is expected, it must be observed, not in Rome generally but "among you"—that is, it concerns results not within the general

population of the capital but within the Christian community there, not attainments therefore of an evangelistic nature but of the sort, apparently, that he has just mentioned in 1:11: attainments in the establishment of the church. Just this sort of ecclesiological "fruit" is considered, in addition, to be comparable to that for which Paul works among "the rest of the Gentiles." He is, 1:11–13 suggests, after results in his general Gentile ministry, which as at Rome derive from service to emerging churches for their secure establishment. This is integral to his vocation.

When Paul goes on to declare that he is ready now "to proclaim the gospel also to you in Rome," one must entertain the impression that he refers in such a phrase not to the prospect of a future evangelistic mission to win converts in Rome but to a ministry of edification within the Roman church of just the sort embodied in the letter. What Paul says he is ready to do (1:15) he proceeds, in effect, in the remainder of his letter to do: He proclaims the gospel to the Christian community in Rome (1:16 ff.). Both the proposed visit and the proffered letter are of an edificatory character entirely consonant, he feels, with his missionary assignment in the gospel of Christ.

As Paul concludes the Roman letter the same set of explanations reappears (15:14–16). In the first place, Paul tells the Romans that as Gentiles their welfare falls within the compass of his own evangelic mission. He has written specifically "because of the grace given me by God that I should be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, in the priestly service of the gospel of God" (15:15b–16a). Second, he represents the letter thus justified specifically as an edificatory act. The Roman believers are, he is sure, well able to provide for their own admonition. Nevertheless the letter has been written as a reminder, in keeping with Paul's assignment in the service of the gospel, to reinforce their own internal ministry (15:14–15).²³ Thus in 1:1–15 and in 15:14–16 Paul both characterizes his intended ministry to the Roman congregation as one of edification and nurture and at the same time explicitly presents such a ministry in terms of his missionary vocation in the gospel.²⁴

²³It is just this theme of Paul's concern with the firm establishment of the Roman congregation by his evangelistic ministry that the much-disputed doxology of Rom 16:25–27 picks up from the outer framework of the letter and repeats: "Now to him who is able to establish you according to my gospel. . . ."

²⁴One might question whether it is legitimate to use the evidence from Romans to demonstrate that edification is basic to Paul's sense of mission, since any ministry by Paul toward the Roman Christians lies outside the terms of reference he states for his mission, when he says it is directed only to lands where Christ has not been named (Rom 15:20–21; cf. 2 Cor 10:12–16). The short answer to this (and a sufficient one for our purposes) is that, nevertheless, Paul does present his intended ministry to the Romans as falling directly within the terms of his commission, whatever tension that may create with his adjacent statement that his ambition is to preach not where Christ has already been named and to build not on another's foundation. The tension, which has long exercised the commentators, is mitigated by recognition that Paul does not state a definitive law for his mission but rather a strong desire: "It has been my ambition" (15:20). As C. E. B. Cranfield states: "There is no suggestion that he felt himself under an absolute obligation to refrain from ever visiting a church which had been founded by someone else"; *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1979) 764–765. This may be contrasted with JB, "I have made it an unbroken rule," and with E. Käsemann's reference to "the Pauline 'canon' according to which his task is only

Phil 1:3–26. Finally we may consider briefly the evidence of a similar perspective in Paul's letter to the Philippian church, this time not expressly but by direct implication. As Paul opens the letter he recalls with thanksgiving the partnership the Philippian believers have maintained with him, from the beginning, in the defense and confirmation of the gospel (1:3–11). Reporting to them on his present circumstances he reflects with joy upon the advance of the gospel through the proclamation of Christ that is taking place even in the midst of his imprisonment (1:12–18).

As to the immediate future, his earnest desire is that Christ will be honored in him, whether he dies or continues to live. He would welcome the opportunity to depart and be with Christ, "for that is better by far." But he would also accept remaining in this life, for "that means fruitful labor for me" (1:19–23). Indeed, remaining in this life is needful for the Philippians. He is convinced therefore, he tells them, that he will remain "for your progress and joy in the faith" (1:24–27). It is striking that here, amidst a deeply personal reflection on his role in the advance of the gospel, Paul equates the prospect of continuing "fruitful labor" for him in this life not with a new evangelistic outreach but directly with a ministry to the Philippian believers for their "progress . . . in the faith."

The indications already derived from our survey of Paul's missionary habits and Paul's missionary priorities are therefore fully confirmed by explicit statement in Colossians and Romans, and by direct implication in Philippians, that the nurture of emerging churches is in Paul's understanding an integral feature of his own missionary task. Paul understood his mission not simply as a broadcasting of seed but also as a cultivating of seedlings into sturdy plants.

IV. SUMMARY

Paul frequently described his missionary activity by a simple formula: "proclaiming the gospel." We have, through a survey both of what Paul did and of what he said he was doing, built up a cumulative picture of the sort of activities that fell for him within the scope of his missionary vocation, beginning with the activity most immediately implied by that formula (the act of evangelistic preaching), extending through concern for positive response to the message (for conversions), and reaching on to the founding of Christian communities and beyond that to their firm establishment. The latter features have been more

to work as a missionary where others have not yet come"; *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 395. Paul is stating not a prohibitive "canon" but a principal aspiration that guides the overall direction of his mission. The precise wording may be important in this respect. The negative is attached not to the infinitive "to proclaim" but to the adverb "where." Paul does not say "Where Christ has been named my ambition is not to proclaim" but "My ambition is to proclaim not where Christ has been named" (the same distinction applies to the following statement about laying foundations). It is a matter not of prohibiting where he will preach but of selecting where, a matter of strategic choices. The circumstances required Paul to clarify for his Roman readers, with a certain degree of delicacy and deference, both why he was passing through *Rome*, and at the same time why he was only *passing* through *Rome*. His resulting explanations may at first glance appear incongruous, but on closer viewing they are not. Paul mentions his ambition to reach new territories in order to explain why he will not settle down in *Rome* but will be passing on from there to Spain. He refers to his call to Gentile mission, on the other hand, in order to explain the propriety of his ministry to the Roman congregation, at present by letter and soon by visit. The one does not exclude the other.

closely developed because they have not been so readily or consistently recognized as integral to the Pauline sense of mission.

In Paul's overview of his mission as it stood at the close of the Aegean period he speaks of having "fulfilled the gospel" from one place to another in such a way that he had no more room there for his ministry (Rom 15:19-21). We have taken as the basic question of our inquiry in what sort of activity Paul would need to engage in order to arrive at this sense of accomplishment. What did he think he had been doing, which now he considered done in certain territories?

The answer developed in this study has been an ecclesiological one. Paul's missionary vocation finds its sense of fulfillment in the presence of firmly established churches. What lies, in effect, within the compass of Paul's familiar formula "proclaiming the gospel" is, I suggest, not simply an initial preaching mission but the full sequence of activities resulting in settled churches. All of this involved the application of the gospel and its full elaboration. For this reason a letter of reinforcement to the Roman congregation (Rom 1:15), as well as an initial evangelistic thrust at Corinth (2 Cor 11:7), can be described by Paul under the same common heading. When therefore Paul states that from Jerusalem to Illyricum he has "fulfilled the gospel of Christ," it is a formulary equivalent of an affirmation that, within the range of territories specified, churches have been brought into being and firmly set on their way "in the gospel." In the presence of such an evangelic accomplishment Paul could well feel the scope of his missionary task fulfilled.