

MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS OF DAVID J. HESSELGRAVE

(A Series on “The Apostolic Faith in the Book of Acts”)

The Legacy of the Apostle Paul to Apostolic Faith and Mission Today

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As we have seen, Acts is a book of “new beginnings” as well as a “single thread.” In Acts 9 we discover a new beginning for both Saul of Tarsus and for the world mission of the early church. Saul the persecuter is about to become Paul the apostle—miraculously converted and divinely sent to deliver a singularly important message and do a uniquely important work. And that is going to make “all the difference in the world” when it comes to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Paul and his ministry constituted a real conundrum for liberal scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries. They questioned the significance of his conversion and call; the chronology of his writings and ministry; and his views with respect to the Law, justification and eschatology. The results for both church and mission have been sad indeed.

Here we want to affirm the fact that Paul’s message and ministry were Holy Spirit-inspired; that Paul played a crucial role in the mission of the early church; and that his legacy is still crucial to apostolic faith and mission today.

It is crucial in at least three ways.

First, Paul’s missionary *methods* are crucial. As recorded in Acts his methods are descriptive, not necessarily prescriptive. Speaking historically, however, missiologists have been in basic agreement that all missionaries do well to emulate Paul’s methods. For example, in his classic *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (*Eerdmans*), Roland Allen compares the methods of Paul with the missionary methods of his day (early 20th century) and finds Paul’s to be superior. Though I take a quite different approach, I would basically agree that the same is true today (cf., Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: The Pauline Cycle*, 2nd ed., Baker).

Second, the *man* Paul is depicted in the New Testament as a model missionary—in fact, as a model Christian! Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul actually urges his converts to “imitate” him “just as I also imitate Christ” (cf. I Cor. 11:1 NKJV). There is something to be said for asking in any situation, “What would Jesus do?” But Jesus’ mission was different than Paul’s and ours as well. So when it comes to carrying out Great Commission mission *per se*, we do well to look to the man Paul as a model missionary.

Third, Scripture is univocal in insisting that, in whatever time or place, Paul’s *message* is absolutely normative and prescriptive. Jesus said, “He is a chosen vessel of mine to bear *My name* among the Gentiles” (Acts 9:15; italics mine). Paul himself wrote, “The gospel which was preached by me is not according to man . . . it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12). I want to underscore the importance of this latter point because it has to do with that “single thread” that is critical to apostolicity. In our postmodern culture there is general disdain for the kind of absolute truth, propositional revelation, systematic theology and doctrinal reflection characteristic of Paul and his writings. Paul’s more philosophical and logical message is sometimes contrasted with the simple, “down-to-earth,” narratives characteristic of Jesus’ preaching. Beware! They do not conflict. They complement each other. East and West, North and South, both are needed. Both are bound together. Paul’s message encapsulates both the reason for Christ’s coming and the reason for the missionary’s going.